



Five reasons why US faces chronic crisis at border

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Conditions on the southwest border represent a serious political challenge to President Biden, with illegal crossings and asylum requests increasing significantly in March.

The situation mirrors immigration flashpoints such as the unaccompanied minor crises faced by former President Trump in 2019 and former President Obama in 2014.

Here are five reasons why the United States faces a chronic state of crisis at the southwest border.

Conditions in Central America

Living conditions in Central America and Mexico have historically been the biggest driver of human migration in the Western Hemisphere.

While Mexican migration has mostly ebbed over the past five years — with the notable exception of a pandemic-driven spike — the number of people fleeing the Northern Triangle of Central America has consistently risen.

Each of the three Northern Triangle countries — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — faces its unique set of environmental, economic and governance challenges, but the overwhelming cause of migration to the United States remains economic opportunity.

“A Central American working [in the United States] can earn three to six times as much as in Central America, even accounting for the cost of living,” said Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute.

Added to the economic demand are various governance and environmental factors that can trigger an individual’s decision to leave the region or a family’s decision to send its children to the United States.

José Villalta, a Salvadoran migrant who came to the United States as a 17-year-old in 2006, told The Hill he made the dangerous trek through Mexico shortly after his father died in 2005.

Villalta said his mother approved the move despite its dangers, spurred by the worsening security

situation in El Salvador and the promise of economic betterment in the United States.

“The overarching condition here is that America remains a powerful magnet,” said Daniel Garza, executive director of the Libre Initiative, a group within the political network of GOP mega-donor Charles Koch.

“Throughout the arc of history, the lives of immigrants that have come before them have in fact improved. That's the draw. There's nothing we can do about that other than to improve on it,” added Garza.

El Salvador's security situation has improved on paper since the election of President Nayib Bukele in 2019, but the gang violence has been replaced by what opponents say is an increasingly authoritarian government.

Bukele last week traded barbs on Twitter with Rep. Norma Torres (D-Calif.) that concluded with Bukele calling on Hispanics not to vote for the four-term congresswoman.

Guatemala has long faced governance issues, and climate change-driven droughts in its highlands have pushed out migrants, many of whom speak Mayan languages, rather than Spanish, making their interactions in Mexico and at the U.S. border more difficult.

And the Honduran government is the constant target of accusations of corruption and coalition with transnational drug gangs, including accusations that President Juan Orlando Hernández is directly involved in international drug trafficking.

His brother, Juan Antonio Hernández, was last month sentenced to life in prison in the United States for drug trafficking.

“I'm back again here today to continue on this process of addressing the symptoms of the problems we have in the Northern Triangle of Central America,” said Torres on a trip to the border Tuesday organized by Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.).

“We're never going to alleviate the problem we see at our southern border until we begin to see improved conditions — quality-of-life conditions — in the Northern Triangle,” said Torres.

Human smuggling is a business

Biden administration officials have endlessly repeated the phrase “the border is closed” in English and in Spanish at nearly all forums where immigration is discussed.

The advisory has fallen on deaf ears even among the administration's allies, as it has done little to stave off Republican criticism of Biden's border policies and has had no discernible effect on messaging used by smugglers to recruit potential clients.

“These are cold, calculating criminals who are out to make billions. They're going to hustle their customers, and they'll lie and manipulate to build their business,” said Frank Sharry, the founder

and executive director of America's Voice, a progressive immigration advocacy group.

“There's a silly debate in Washington about Biden's messaging. Trump's messaging was as cruel as could be and you had the highest spike in border apprehensions in recent history,” added Sharry.

According to a study commissioned by the Rand Corporation, human smuggling networks in the region vary from large transnational criminal organizations to local groups that can sometimes outsource work to the larger groups.

The 2017 study found little evidence that the smuggling groups are directly linked to drug cartels, but they do commonly pay cartels a tax to operate in their territories.

The Northern Triangle's human smuggling business in 2017 netted between \$200 million and \$2.3 billion, according to the report.

No legal pathways

Despite the regional demand for immigration pathways to the United States, the number of legal permanent residency permits given to citizens of the Northern Triangle remains relatively low.

In 2019, 27,656 Salvadorans, 13,453 Guatemalans and 15,901 Hondurans were granted green cards by the United States, out of 1,031,765 green cards granted in total, according to data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute.

“They have virtually no visas on which to come legally, so they come illegally or try to game the asylum system. We can't stop this flow, nor should we try, as immigrants make America more prosperous. Only more visas for these people will channel this illegal flow into a legal and regulated market,” said Nowrasteh.

While Biden has some executive options at his disposal to grant legal status or deportation deferral to certain groups of migrants, a permanent change in the visa process will require legislative action.

And it's unlikely that any immigration proposal will clear the 60-vote threshold of the Senate, particularly while immigration remains Biden's top political liability.

Decades of stunted negotiations on the issue have also taken their toll, leaving immigration as one of the most partisan and divisive issues in Washington.

“There have been opportunities for the last 15 years for Republicans to work with Democrats to fix the broken immigration system, and every single time the number of Republicans who want to block a solution to score political points is far more than the John McCains and Jeff Flake,” said Sharry, referring to former Arizona GOP Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake, both of whom supported immigration reform.

Garza blamed Democrats for an unwillingness to reach across the aisle on the issue.

“They're playing the good guys, but we're getting tired of that schtick,” he said. “We're getting tired of that [Republican] schtick too of just pure security.”

Border infrastructure

Biden has faced charges of hypocrisy over his criticism of Trump's policies as his administration has been forced to process unaccompanied minors in Border Patrol facilities designed to detain adults.

Republicans have called for a return to Trump's policies, including reinstatement of the controversial Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as the "Remain in Mexico" program, where asylum-seekers from third countries waited out their asylum cases in Mexico.

The Biden administration has shifted its border priorities to quickly process minors out of Customs and Border Protection custody to the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Still, reforming border infrastructure to more family-friendly environments would require huge investments and provide only temporary relief.

“The main question is, what are we doing to improve the system and the process so people can know quickly what their asylum situation is?” said Garza. “We need to improve legal channels. It's a balance of security and how we improve our entry system.”

Regional enforcement

Biden last month assigned Vice President Harris the task of coordinating relations with the Northern Triangle countries to address the root causes of migration.

The task has turned Harris into a political lightning rod, with activists on the right and left making demands of the vice president on all facets of immigration policy, not just her assigned portfolio.

“We need to hear from Kamala Harris. The more she's absent, the more we get the feeling they have nothing,” said Garza.

Harris on Wednesday held a call with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who was accused of having a transactional approach to immigration in his dealings with Trump.

In a readout of the call, the State Department said Harris and López Obrador discussed targeting human smuggling and trafficking, an issue that's been given little more than lip service in the past.

“We don't have a border crisis. The crisis is in Central America. Kamala Harris's job is to focus on the source of the crisis, which is in Central America,” said Sharry, who praised the administration's root-causes approach.

“We'll see if they follow through. They could panic and do stupid things like every other administration has always done,” said Sharry.