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Reform needed: U.S. Customs and Border Patrol

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Founded in 2003, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is the parent organization of the of the Border Patrol and the agency tasked with maintaining borders and ports of entry of the United States. The agency performs a vital function, but it currently faces serious problems due to a mission and recruiting process ill fitted to changing border conditions, and poor management under federal policy.

On CBP's website, the first responsibility described is terrorism prevention. Recruitment videos feature action shots of vehicles and armed officers, and "*typical assignments*" are listed as counterterrorism and catching illegal immigrants and drug smugglers. But today, agents who signed up for this action-packed job spend most of their time processing and providing humanitarian aid to refugees.

In the past, the majority of illegal immigrants were single men, attempting to sneak into the U.S. to find work. CBP could process and often deported these individuals relatively quickly and easily. Although current total immigration rates are much lower than historical levels, record numbers of migrant families are now entering the country. These immigrants are frequently asylum seekers who surrender to CBP agents as soon as they arrive. Family members often need medical attention and young children require special care. The changing demographics of immigrants has created new challenges that CBP is failing to meet, with frequent reports of migrants held in squalid cages for extended periods of time without basic amenities like clean water. The CBP's recruiting process and culture is not suited to these new demands of border security work.

CBP also suffers from internal corruption and frequent policy violations by officers. From 2006 to 2016, CBP's recorded misconduct and disciplinary infractions surpassed those of all other federal U.S. law enforcement agencies (CATO Institute). There were over 1,700 allegations of excessive force, more than 100 shootings, and numerous charges of bribery, sexual abuse, and drug and weapons trafficking. In 2008, the agency changed its definition of corruption, reducing the number of reported incidents. Under the new definition, sexual assault of detainees was no longer considered corruption worth reporting to Congress.

CBP's problems are not all internal. Recent federal policy has failed to provide the agency with the necessary resources and personal. President Trump promised to strengthen border security, and signed a 2017 executive order calling for the hiring of an additional 5,000 Border Patrol agents. But two years later, no progress has been made and the agency has 2,000 fewer agents since 2013 (US GAO).

The administration has also ended "*catch and release*," the practice of releasing detainees considered safe and likely to appear in court. CBP facilities are now stretched beyond capacity to accommodate an average of 45,200 detained migrants every day, the highest number ever (cnn.com).

Determining a long-term strategy for the U.S. immigration system is an important topic for further discussion. What is clear today, is that families seeking U.S. aid must be treated with humanity and compassion. It is unacceptable for people to experience abuse at the hands of any U.S. agency. CBP's problems can't be solved overnight, but reforming hiring practices, preparing agents for the changing nature of their work, and providing adequate funding and staffing would be good first steps to fixing a failing border system.

