

The Migrant Crisis

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Since my very impressive September 13 trip with the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), I have been to the Juárez area seven times to observe how migrants seeking asylum are being processed. It has been a grim experience that has gotten more and more politicized and less fair and humane.

On September 13, I was able to observe how efficiently the CBP processed a sudden influx of Venezuelans. Then in early October, Title 42 was invoked and Venezuelans seeking asylum didn't dare cross the Rio Grande from Juárez to El Paso, Texas for fear of being immediately detained and then deported, often from another border crossing. I saw the tent city on the Juárez side grow from about 400 migrants on October 28 to roughly 1,500 on November 3.

Then Mexican officials tore down the tent city and scattered the migrants. Who knows where they went because shelters like La Casa del Migrante and Respettrans were full.

Finally a week ago, I saw the long line of soldiers from the Texas National Guard with their Humvees and concertina wire lined up along the Rio Grande as if our country was going to be invaded by a foreign army. In the meantime, migrant families were sleeping on the streets of El Paso because the shelters there like the Opportunity Center were also full.

What can be done as we enter a New Year?

Generally speaking, I see five categories of migrants.

1. Guest workers. Our farmers and construction companies need workers but the numbers allowed to come into the country on temporary seasonal permits are way too low. As a result, many of those who do come do so illegally and then stay here because it is too difficult to go back and forth. Increasing the number of permits would allow them to return home after a season of work here and would reduce the number who are here illegally. Resolving this issue should have strong support in the American business community.
2. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA). These are kids who were brought here by their parents when very young. For the most part, they have absolutely no ties to the countries from which they came and to send them back there would be shameful. This is an issue of fairness and humanity. Why should we punish young people who have done no wrong?
3. Migrants here illegally. The numbers are huge and most are migrants who came legally and simply overstayed their visas. Many have been here for years or decades, have families, jobs and businesses. Why not treat them as we treat the hundreds of thousands of other Americans who disobey the law? Define a penalty, have them register and pay it, weed out those with serious criminal records and then let the remainder get on with their lives.

4. Those arriving illegally. I have seen how efficiently yet humanely the CBP apprehends those attempting to cross illegally. This “human wall” is much more effective than the steel one where “coyotes” can cross in seconds using lightweight but sturdy ladders. The question is a staffing one; the CBP simply needs more personnel.

Even though these migrants – mostly young men who would not qualify for asylum – are coming illegally, they are for the most part looking for work, not smuggling drugs. All studies show that the overwhelming majority of drugs entering the US come through ports of entry in big trucks. Although we cannot allow them to enter illegally, keep in mind the economic pressures they face in their home countries. The minimum wage per day in Mexico is less than half the hourly minimum wage in Denver. Per capita income in countries like Guatemala and Honduras ranges from roughly \$5,000 to \$8,000 a year as compared to about \$36,000 here.

5. Asylum seekers. This is clearly the major issue and a twofold one. First, for years there has been a lack of focus on the growing number of migrants awaiting their final asylum hearings before a judge and now the backlog is well over a million cases. Again, this is a matter of resources, more judges to be specific.

More immediate is the plight of the thousands who are arriving at the border; some but certainly not all are finding their pathway blocked by Title 42. The question is where do these migrants go once they have been screened and what preparations are being made for them in other parts of the US.

The situation is worse on the Mexican side because the existing shelters are full and cities like Juárez are extremely dangerous. Establishing a joint -Mexico-USA Border Task Force should be high on the agenda of President Biden’s upcoming trip to Mexico, a task force that would beef up shelters on both sides of the border.

This will be a test of both our humanity and our ingenuity but several of the issues I’ve mentioned can easily be resolved if we tackle them in a spirit of practicality not partisanship. That’s the challenge for 2023.

Morgan Smith has been traveling to the border to document conditions there and to assist several humanitarian organizations at least monthly for the last decade., He can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.