



The Real Crisis at the Mexico-U.S. Border: A Humanitarian and Not an Immigration Emergency

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Misguided U.S. policies since 1980 have created a large undocumented population within the United States. Border militarization curtailed circular undocumented migration from Mexico, and Cold War politics precluded the acceptance of refugees from Central America fleeing violence and economic turmoil unleashed by America's intervention in the region. Although undocumented migration from Mexico has ended, resources devoted to border apprehensions and internal deportations continue to rise, pushing an ever larger number of Central Americans into an immigrant detention system that is ill-equipped to handle them. Although the Trump administration portrays the situation as an immigration crisis, what is really unfolding along the border and within the United States is an unprecedented humanitarian cross that in so many ways is one of our own making.

KEYWORDS: economic instability; humanitarianism; immigration; policy; Trump; xenophobia.

INTRODUCTION

The election of Donald Trump confirmed that the United States is in the midst of powerful resurgence of what his supporters call “white nationalism” but which is more accurately described as racist xenophobia. The present moment is not the first outbreak of virulent nativism in U.S. history. At least three times in the past, the United States has been gripped by a wave of anti-immigrant hysteria brought on by the concurrence of two key conditions: increasing economic instability and a surge in immigration from new sources. Economic instability naturally creates insecurity and anxiety among citizens caught in the throes of powerful market forces, yielding feelings of vulnerability that are further aggravated by rapid sociodemographic changes stemming from immigration.

The resulting combination of economic vulnerability and social insecurity creates a toxic milieu that is ripe for exploitation by demagogues. Lamentably, in the course of U.S. history there has been no shortage of selfish manipulators willing to step forward to placate native fears through the scapegoating of immigrants in order to mobilize power and accumulate resources for themselves. After putting the current surge of racism and xenophobia into historical perspective, I consider the specific characteristics of the present nativist moment and move on to describe gratuitous nature of Trump’s harsh immigration and border policies and how they have transformed a soluble refugee issue into a full-blown humanitarian crisis.

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NATIVISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY

To situate the current moment historically, Fig. 1 shows the annual number of legal immigrants arriving in the United States from 1820 to 2018. Surges of immigration in the 1850s, 1880s, and the early twentieth century were each associated with a distinctive pattern of nativism. During the 1850s, Catholic immigration from Ireland and Germany rose rapidly, with total arrivals peaking at 428,000 in 1854 with 70% coming from these two countries. The surge in foreign arrivals coincided with the onset of a recession during which the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 2.3%, creating a panic that led to the "know nothing" movement and the founding of the nativist "American Party" (Anbinder 1992). Initially created in 1849 as a secret society, its virulently anti-Catholic members were instructed to say "I know nothing" when asked about their beliefs. The party eventually moved out of the shadows and in 1856 won 22% of the presidential vote while carrying the state of Maryland after earlier capturing the Massachusetts legislature.

The know-nothing era was soon eclipsed by the crisis over slavery and civil war, and the next era of nativism erupted in the early 1880s when immigration reached a new peak of 789,000 just as the nation again fell into another sharp recession during which GDP fell by 2%. This time, however, nativist sentiment focused on the "yellow peril" of Chinese immigrants (Tchen and Yates 2014). Although China accounted for only around 5% of immigrants arriving at the time, they were overwhelmingly concentrated in California, which was then roiled by labor conflicts in which Chinese "coolies" were portrayed as a threat to the wages and working

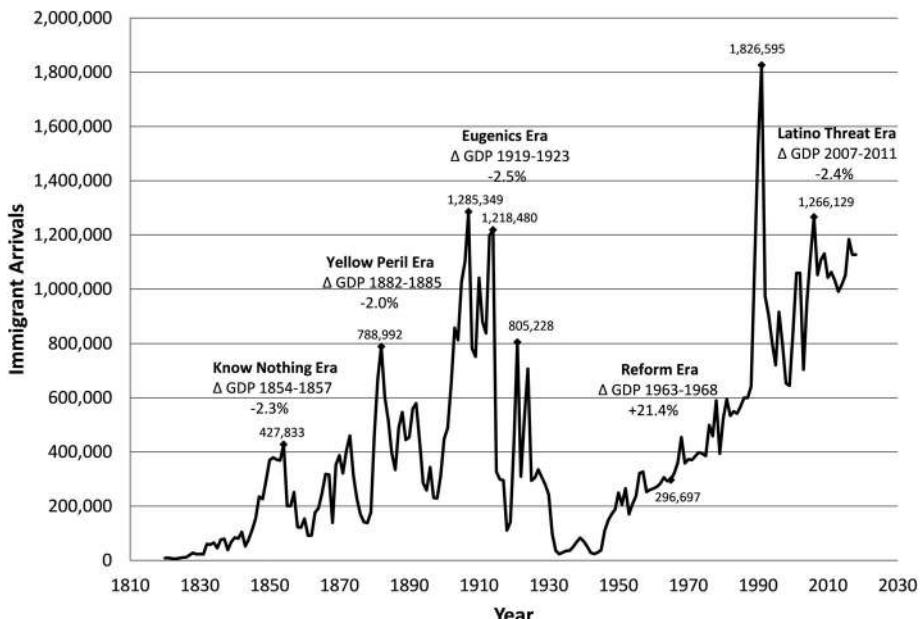


Figure 1. Legal Immigration to the United States 1820-2018

conditions of native workers, prompting the state's congressional delegation to lead the way in passing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

With Chinese immigrants barred from entry, xenophobic attention increasingly focused on new arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe—Jews from the Russian Pale, Catholics from Italy and Poland, and Orthodox Slavs from Austria-Hungary. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. industrialization was driven by inflows of capital and labor from Europe (Thomas 1954), and between 1900 and 1919, immigration averaged more than a million entries per year, with 82% coming from Southern or Eastern Europe (Hatton and Williamson 1998). The rapid shift in immigrant origins coincided with the rise of social Darwinism and eugenics, prompting nativists to call for restrictions on immigration to prevent the “mongrelization” of the “Nordic peoples” by presumed racial inferiors (Grant 1916).

Although immigration reached 1.2 million in 1914, calls for restriction were muted by the outbreak of World War I, which abruptly brought global immigration to a standstill. With the signing of the Armistice in 1918, however, immigration revived just as the U.S. economy fell into a postwar recession, with GDP declining by 2.5%. In this unsettled economic context, racist sentiments that had been building for decades came to the fore and led to the passage of the National Origins Quota Laws of 1921 and 1924, which capped total immigration at 155,000 persons per year and reserved all but a few of the entry visas for immigrants from Northern and Western Europe (Higham 1988).

RISE OF THE NEW NATIVISM

The quotas ushered in a long hiatus in U.S. immigration that extended through the Great Depression and World War II (Massey 1995). Thereafter, immigration revived, but arrivals remained insufficient to offset departures and deaths, bringing about a steady decline in the nation’s foreign-born percentage from 14.7% in 1910 to 4.7% in 1970, the lowest share ever reached in U.S. history, a nadir that occurred during a time of unprecedented prosperity. Indeed, from 1963 to 1968, America’s GDP per capita increased by a remarkable 21.4% in real terms, creating a context precisely opposite that associated with earlier episodes of xenophobia. With incomes steadily rising, inequality declining, and a small foreign-born population composed mostly of graying grandparents, Americans felt confident enough economically and socially to confront the nation’s historical legacy of racial prejudice and discrimination.

In 1965, Congress responded to the zeitgeist by passing legislation to end restrictions on immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and to repeal prohibitions on entries from Asia, actions that were seen more as civil right reforms than as changes in immigration policy *per se* (Hutchinson 1981). The number and composition of immigrants nonetheless changed dramatically after 1970. Whereas total immigration had averaged only 250,000 persons per year in the 1950s with 56% coming from Europe, by the 1990s average entries had jumped to 987,000 per year with three-quarters coming from Asia or Latin America.

The 1965 amendments are often cited as the reason for the radical shift in immigrant origins away from Europe, but this is only partly true. First, by the 1970s, Europe had transformed from a region of emigration to one of immigration, and Europeans had little interest in migrating to the United States (Massey et al. 1998). Second, although repealing the ban on immigration from Asia did lead to a steady increase in entries from that region, the rise in Latin American immigration occurred *in spite of* rather than because of the amendments. Racial fears in the 1920s had focused on sources the Old World and nations in the New World were not covered by the restrictive quotas.

With immigrants from Europe nowhere to be seen and labor demand rising, U.S. employers turned to Latin America for workers. In response to lobbying from agrarian interests, Congress expanded what had been a temporary wartime labor agreement with Mexico in the late 1950s to enable the short-term entry of some 450,000 Mexican workers per year (Massey et al. 2002). At the same time, employers began to sponsor trusted temporary workers for permanent resident visas (Massey et al. 1987), yielding an inflow of some 50,000 Mexican legal immigrants per year during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the context of a burgeoning civil rights movement, the labor agreement with Mexico had come to be seen as exploitative and discriminatory, while the national origins quotas increasingly were perceived as intolerably racist. In early 1965, therefore, as part of a broader package of civil rights legislation, Congress terminated the temporary labor agreement with Mexico, rescinded the national origins quotas restricting immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and overturned the ban on immigration from Asia. Although Congress did not end numerical limits on immigration, it did increase the annual cap from 155,000 to 290,000 persons.

Under the new system, instead of racist quotas, visas were allocated according to a set of immigrant “preferences” that addressed perceived labor force needs and promoted family reunification. This system initially applied only in the Eastern Hemisphere, however, and entries from that region were capped at 170,000 per year with a maximum of 20,000 coming from any single country. The cap for the Western Hemisphere was set at 120,000 beginning in 1968—the first ever numerical limitation on immigration from the Americas. Although the preferences and country-level caps initially did not apply to that hemisphere, this exclusion ended in 1976, and in 1978 the separate hemispheric caps were fused into a single worldwide ceiling of 290,000 with each country limited to just 20,000 immigrant visas per year.

As a result of these changes, Mexican access to legal entry was drastically curtailed between the late 1950s and late 1970s, moving from 450,000 temporary work visas and 50,000 residence visas per year to zero work visas and just 20,000 residence visas. The conditions of labor supply and demand had not changed, however, and the migratory flows quickly reestablished themselves under undocumented auspices (Massey and Pren 2012a). In practical terms, little had changed since the late 1950s. The same migrants were leaving the same communities and going to the same U.S. destinations to work at much the same sorts of jobs, with the vast majority returning home seasonally. In symbolic terms, however, much had changed, since now the migrants were “illegal” and thus by definition “criminals” and

“lawbreakers” who could be framed as a grave threat to the nation, giving rise to a “Latino threat narrative” in the U.S. media (Chavez 2001, 2008).

Through 1985, unauthorized migration remained overwhelmingly circular, with 85% of entries offset by departures (Massey and Singer 1995), and the undocumented population grew slowly, rising only to around 3.2 million over two decades, as shown in Fig. 2. Over time, however, references to Latino immigration as a “crisis,” “flood,” and “invasion” proliferated and pushed public opinion in a more conservative direction, leading to the enactment of ever more restrictive immigration policies and border operations (Massey and Pren 2012a). The rising enforcement effort generated more apprehensions, of course, and each annual increase was cited by politicians and pundits as proof of the ongoing “alien invasion,” thereby justifying further increases in enforcement, which inevitably produced even more apprehensions.

The end result was a self-perpetuating feedback cycle in which apprehensions increased year after year (Massey and Pren 2012b). Beginning with the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and accelerating with the launching of Operation Blockade in El Paso in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994, the Mexican border was steadily militarized despite the fact that the volume of undocumented in-migration had stabilized in the late 1970s and was no longer rising. Figure 3 shows trends in the relative size of the Border Patrol’s budget (in 2019 dollars) and the volume of undocumented entries, indexed roughly by dividing total border apprehensions by the number of Border Patrol officers, with both series scaled so that 1986 equals 100.

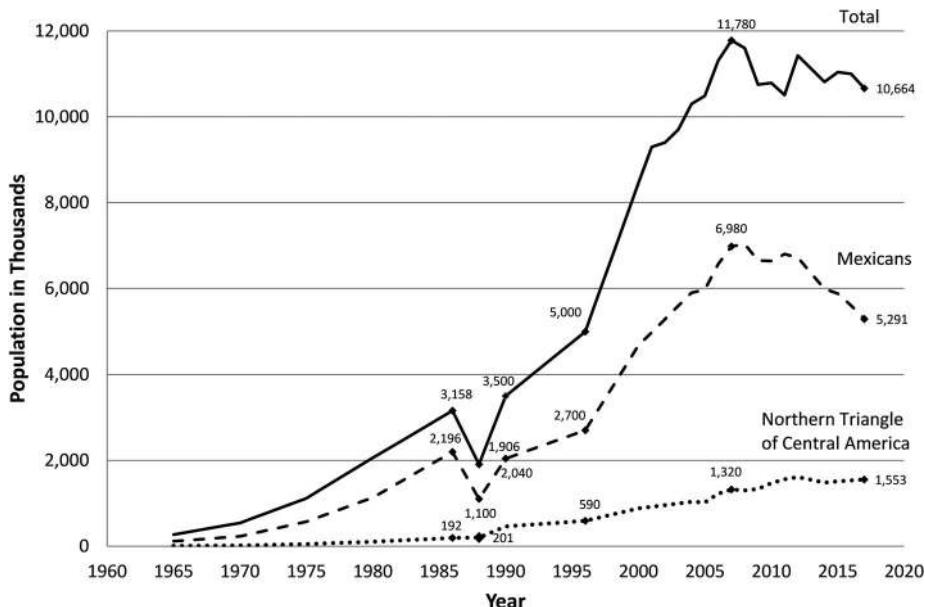


Figure 2. Estimated Size of the Undocumented Population of the United States 1965-2017

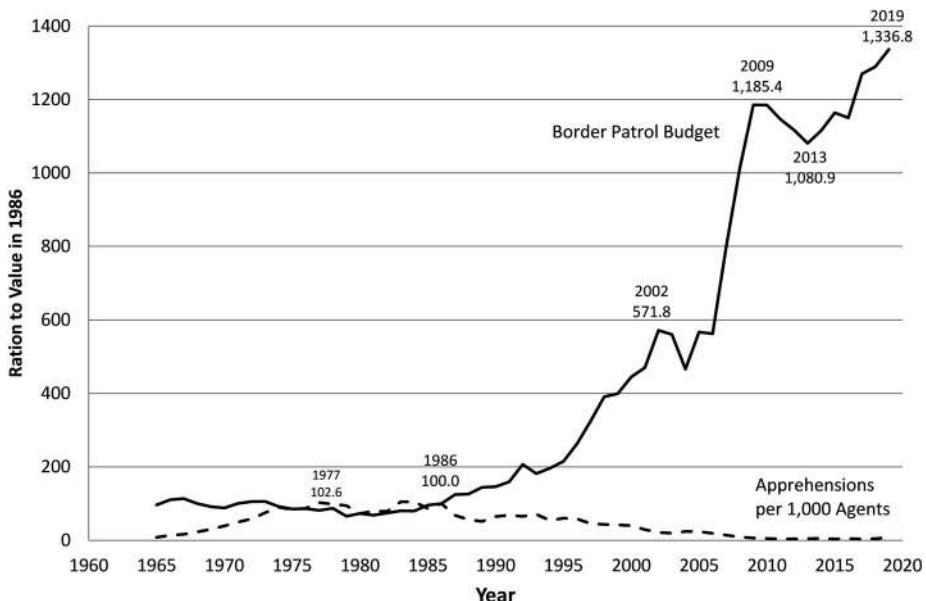


Figure 3. Relative Size of the Border Patrol budget and apprehensions per 1,000 agents 1965–2019 (1986=100)

As shown in the figure, the relative volume of undocumented migration increased from 1965 through 1977, but thereafter, it fluctuated around an index value of 100 before dropping to a lower plateau of 65–70 through the mid-1990s. Thereafter, it declined slowly to very low levels in 2010 and beyond. In contrast, the relative size of the Border Patrol budget remained flat from 1965 through 1985 and rose exponentially by 472% from 1986 to 2002. After stalling briefly, the budget curve shot up to a level of 1,085% of its 1986 value by 2009 and ended at a record 1,237% of its 1986 value in 2019.

Paradoxically, this exponential increase in border enforcement had no significant effect on the likelihood that a Mexican would choose to initiate unauthorized migration to the United States, and it had little influence on the probability of being apprehended at the border or the odds of ultimately achieving a successful U.S. entry (Massey et al. 2016). The border buildup did, however, sharply raise the costs and risks of unauthorized border crossing. In response, migrants quite logically minimized border crossing, not by staying in Mexico as the policy's architects had imagined, but instead by remaining longer in the United States once entry had been achieved, dramatically reducing rates of return migration (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015).

With migrant returns in decline and entries continuing apace, the net volume of undocumented migration increased through the 1990s and early 2000s, producing a sharp acceleration in undocumented population growth. As indicated in Fig. 2, the number of unauthorized residents grew from around 2 million in 1988 (just after IRCA's legalization was completed) to around 12 million in 2008. The ironic effect

of U.S. border policy was thus to produce *more* rather than *fewer* Latino migrants living north of the border, as demonstrated in Fig. 4, which shows the increase in the percentage Latino under two scenarios.

In the *observed* scenario indicated by the solid line, the Latino percentage rises by 0.2% per year from 1970 to 1990. Thereafter, however, the rate of growth then nearly doubles to 0.39% per year through 2010, an acceleration that enabled Latinos to overtake African Americans as the largest minority group around 2000 and move on to a percentage of 16.4% in 2010. Thereafter, the growth rate fell back to the earlier level of around 2% per year (0.22%), with the Latino share finishing at 18.4% in 2019.

The *alternative* scenario indicated by the dashed line imagines what would have happened in the absence of border militarization if the pre-1990 rate of 0.2% per year had continued to prevail. In this case, the Latino percentage would have reached just 14.5% in 2019, 21% below the observed figure. In other words, by pressuring their elected representatives to implement more restrictive immigration and border policies, natives threatened by immigration ironically ended up *increasing* Latino immigration and thereby *accelerating* rather than slowing the pace of racial/ethnic change in the United States.

MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN

With the onset of the Great Recession in late 2007, the economic context changed quite dramatically. Between 2007 and 2011, the nation's GDP fell by 2.4%, and unemployment peaked at 10%, sweeping Republicans from power and electing

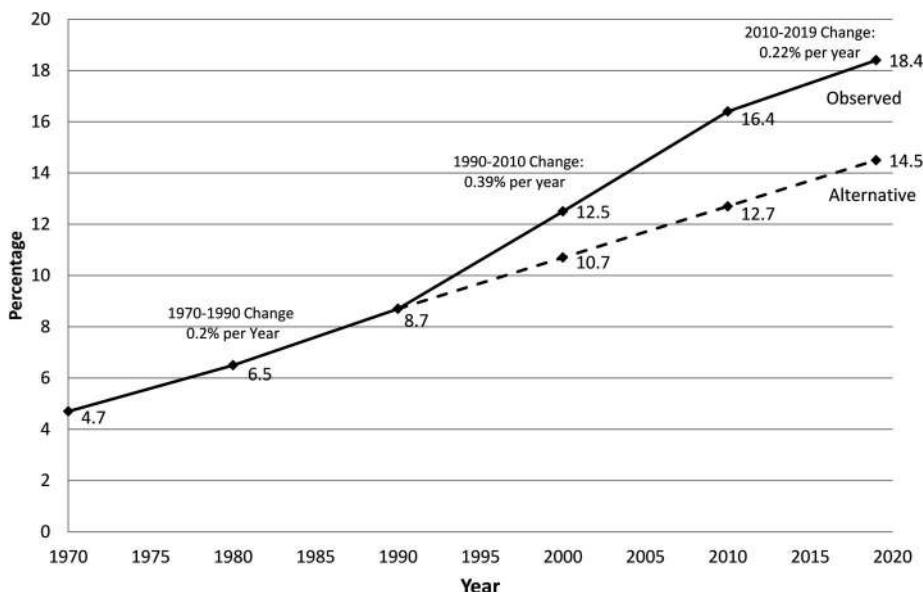


Figure 4. The percent Latino in the United States under two scenarios 1970-2019

Barack Obama as America's first black president in 2008. With immigrant entries totaling 12.4 million between 2000 and 2011, rapid sociodemographic change through immigration was once again paired with a sharp increase in economic insecurity, ushering in a new era of reactionary backlash triggered by the rapid growth of the Latino population (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Kibria 2019), one that was exacerbated by forecasts of a coming white minority (Frey 2014) symbolized materially by the nation's first black presidency (Parker and Barreto 2013).

By 2016, native opinion about immigration had divided sharply along partisan lines, with 47% of Republicans saying it was "very important" to increase deportations of illegal migrants compared with just 15% of Democrats. Adding in those who thought increasing deportations was "somewhat important" yielded a total of 81% of Republicans in favor of increasing immigrant removals, compared with just 41% of Democrats (Daniller 2019). The stage was thus set for the rise of a demagogue willing to blame the nation's economic woes and social malaise on Latino immigrants, situating them symbolically alongside African Americans as objects of fear and apprehension.

As already noted, Trump's framing of Latinos as a grave threat to U.S. society was nothing new. Indeed, it culminated a decades-long shift of the Republican Party toward white nationalism. Beginning with the Goldwater campaign of the 1964 and continuing through the presidential administrations of Nixon, Reagan, and the Bushes, Republicans had long deployed a "dog whistle politics" of racially coded language to incite white racial fears and mobilize voter support (López 2014). What was unique about Trump is that he threw away the dog whistle, bluntly telling Americans in his declaration of candidacy that "our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. When do we beat Mexico at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity. . . . They are not our friend, believe me."

In his remarks, he devoted more time to the purported threat posed by immigrants from south of the border than any other issue, coming back to it again and again:

The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. . . . When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. . . . It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America. . . . Because we have no protection and we have no competence. . . . And it's got to stop and it's got to stop fast. . . . I will build a great, great wall on our southern border.

With a campaign declaration like that, one might forgive his supporters for interpreting his words not as a call to "Make American Great Again" but as a proposal to "Make America White Again."

THE NEW REALITY AT THE BORDER

The irony is that Trump's promise to build "a great, great wall" came nine years after undocumented migration from Mexico had effectively ended. Adding to the irony is the fact that undocumented migration ended not because of border enforcement but because Mexico's fertility decline had aged its population out of

the migration-prone years (Massey et al. 2016). All available information suggests that the net flow of undocumented Mexicans across the border turned negative after 2007, including that marshaled by the Pew Research Center (Passel and Cohn 2018), that developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Baker 2018), and that derived from the Mexican Migration Project (Massey et al. 2015).

The new reality along the Mexico-U.S. border is evident border apprehensions statistics. Figure 5 shows trends in the percentage of apprehended migrants from Mexico, Central America's "Northern Triangle" (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), and all other regions combined. Until quite recently, the vast majority of those detained at the border were Mexican. From 1990 through 2009, the share of Mexicans among detainees averaged 96%. Thereafter, the share began to fall, slowly at first and then quite rapidly until by 2019, the Mexican percentage stood at just 19.5%. Over the same period, the share of apprehensions originating Northern Triangle countries climbed sharply from 7.2% to 73.7%.

The increase in the share of arrivals from the Northern Triangle stemmed less from the rapid increase in attempted entries by migrants from that region than from a sharp decline in arrivals from Mexico. Whereas in 2000, some 1.6 million Mexicans and just 28,000 migrants from the Northern Triangle were apprehended at the border, by 2019, Mexican apprehensions had fallen to 166,000 (the lowest number since 1968) while Northern Triangle detentions had risen to 628,000 (the largest number ever). In essence, as the twenty-first century unfolded, what had been a massive inflow of undocumented Mexican workers entering the United States for

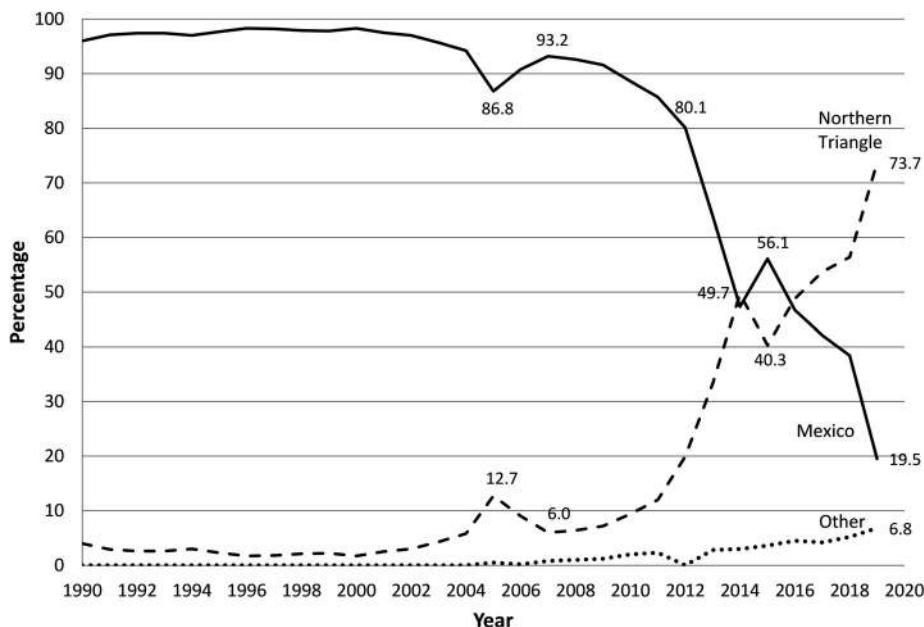


Figure 5. Share of apprehensions by regional origin 1990-2019

employment became a much smaller inflow of undocumented Central American families and children seeking not jobs but refuge.

The changing composition of those arriving at the border is indicated in Fig. 6, which shows trends in apprehensions by month and year in three categories: single adults, members of family units, and unaccompanied minors. As recently as October 2018, the inflow of migrants was dominated by single adults traveling alone, but after that date, migrants traveling in family units surged ahead. From October 2018 to May 2019, the apprehensions of people in family units rose from 23,000 to 84,500, while the number of single-adult apprehensions climbed only from 23,000 to 37,000. Over the same period, apprehensions of unaccompanied minors rose from 5,000 to 11,500. As a result, whereas in February 2018, two-thirds of those apprehended were single adults and just one-fifth were traveling with family members, by May 2019, nearly two-thirds of those apprehended were traveling in family units and only 28% were adults traveling alone.

These shifts in family status correspond to changes in regional origins of those crossing the border. This transformation is documented in Fig. 7, which cross-tabulates the regional origins of migrants apprehended between 2016 and 2019 by family status at the time of arrest. Whereas migrants apprehended as single adults during this period were nearly 60% Mexican, those apprehended as minors were only 18% Mexican and those captured in family units were less than 2% Mexican. In contrast, among those apprehended in family units, 92% were from the Northern Triangle (37% from Honduras, 39% from Guatemala, and 17% from El Salvador), while among detained minors, 79% were from the Northern Triangle (22% from

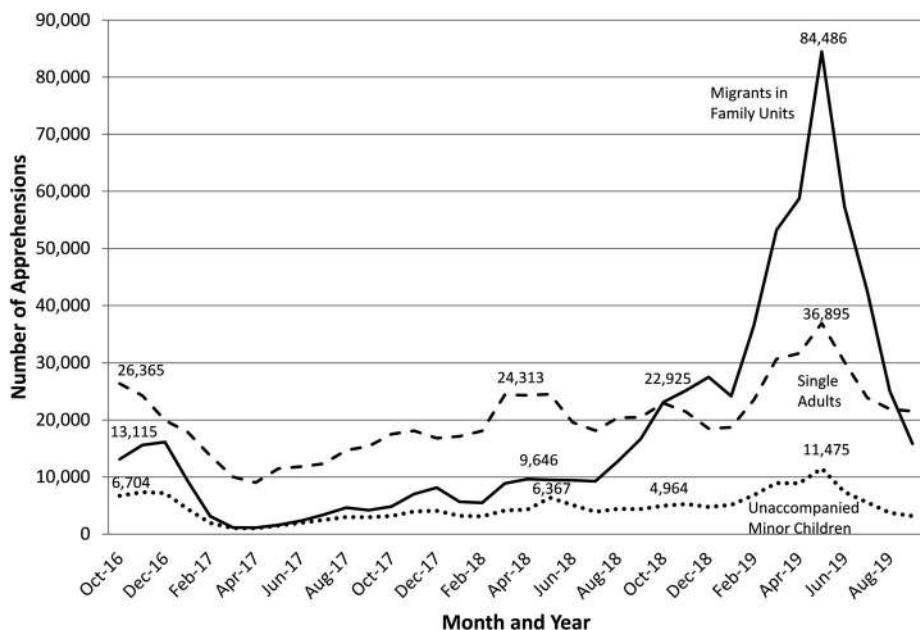


Figure 6. Monthly border apprehensions by family status FY2016-FY2019

Honduras, 38% from Guatemala, and 18% from El Salvador). In other words, whereas undocumented migrants who continue to exhibit the characteristics of workers (i.e., single adults) remain predominantly Mexican, those arriving with the characteristics of refugees (i.e., families and children) are overwhelmingly Central American.

This contrast is consistent with studies done using data from the Latin American Migration Project (LAMP), which point to America's Cold War intervention into Central America as the principal cause of mass displacements from the region (Lundquist and Massey 2005; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014). After the leftist Sandinistas ousted the U.S.-backed Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979, Ronald Reagan assumed office in 1981 with a vow to curtail the "spread of communism" in the Americas by providing covert support for paramilitary operations in El Salvador and Guatemala while arming and training a clandestine army of "Contras" to attack the Sandinistas from bases in Honduras (Cruden 2013; Mazzei 2009; Moreno 2016).

Precise estimates of the number of deaths from the resulting violence are not available, but Seligson and McElhinny (1996) estimate that some 88,000 persons were killed in El Salvador and 80,000 died in Nicaragua. Among survey respondents in those countries, 34% of Salvadorans reported that a family member had been killed, 36% had become internal refugees, and 27% had sought refuge abroad. Among Nicaraguan respondents, the respective figures were 35.0%, 38.9%, and 29.0%. In Guatemala, an estimated 200,000 people lost their lives during the violence and one million were displaced (Hernández Bonilla 2017).

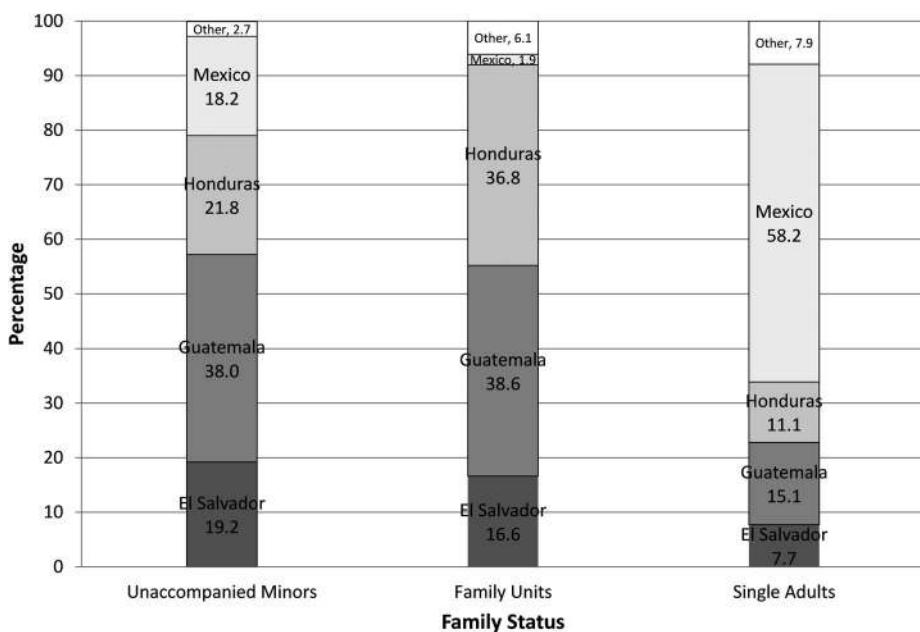


Figure 7. National origin of apprehensions by family status 2016-2019

The solid line in Fig. 8 is based on Massey et al.'s (2014) estimates of the annual probability of taking a first undocumented trip from Central American nations between 1970 and 2007, and the dashed line in the figure is based on the number of legal immigrants who entered the United States from 1970 to 2018 taken from official statistics. Both series are divided by the value observed in 1980 to put them on the same scale and to illustrate trends before and after the U.S. intervention. Both series indicate little movement out of Central America prior to 1980 followed by a significant increase over the course of the subsequent decade, with the line for undocumented migrants rising to 2.6 times its 1980 value by 1989 and that for documented migrants increasing to 10 times its 1980 value by 1990, roughly about when the intensity of the U.S. intervention peaked.

Thereafter, both data series decline sharply, but they do not return to their pre-1980 values. The line for undocumented migrants bottoms out at 1.4 times its 1980 level and that for documented migrants at 1.8 times its 1980 level. Both curves later surge back to new peaks in 2006, reaching values 2.6 times the 1980 value in the case of undocumented migrants and 5.2 times the 1980 value in the case of documented migrants. Multivariate analyses by Lundquist and Massey (2005) and Massey et al. (2014) indicate that it was the American intercession itself that caused the initial upsurge in out-migration. After active combat ended, however, the violence did not disappear and the economy remained depressed, creating an ongoing incentive for migration northward that aspiring migrants were able act upon because of their ties to friends and relatives who had been displaced to the United States by the earlier waves of violence and economic disorder.

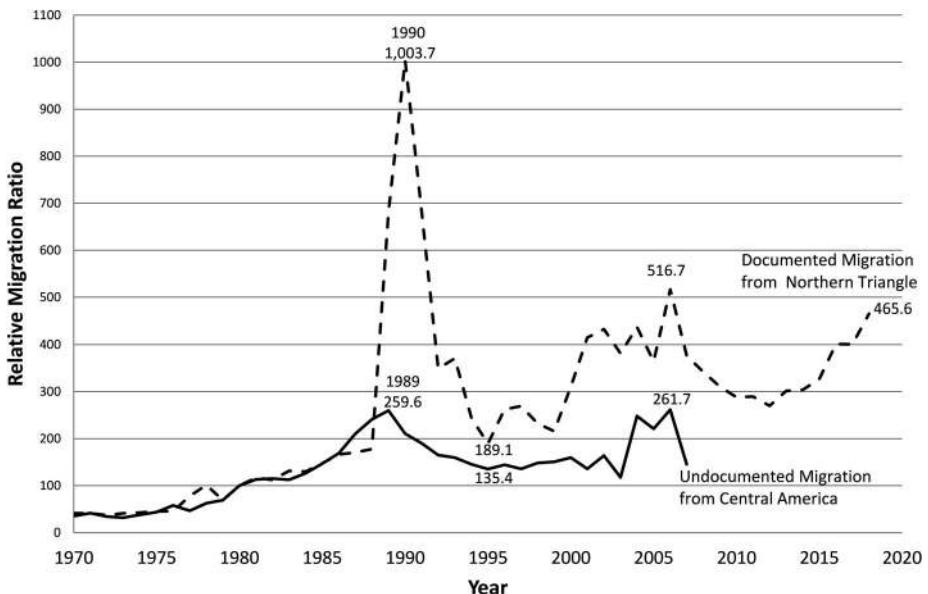


Figure 8. Undocumented and documented migration from Central America to the United States 1970-2018 (1986=100)

The continued potency of economic stagnation as a cause of migration from Central America is indicated by Fig. 9, which plots trends in the real value of GDP per capita in nations that were in the frontline of warfare during the 1980s and early 1990s (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) and those that were spared from this violence (Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama). As can be seen, in the frontline nations, GDP per capita peaked in 1978, the year before the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua. Thereafter, GDP declines through 1989 and does not begin to rise again until 1992 and does not recover its 1978 level until 2011.

In contrast, while the non-frontline nations experienced stagnant economic growth during the 1980s, GDP did not decline in real terms, and growth resumed earlier and proceeded at a much faster pace compared with the frontline nations. Whereas the gap in GDP between frontline and non-frontline nations was just \$1,342 in 1978, by 2017 it had widened to \$6,420, nearly a fivefold increase. If growth in the frontline nations had proceeded at the pace observed between 1970 and 1978, the gap would have been only \$4,094 in 2017; and if they had shared the increase in growth rates observed in the non-frontline nations after 1990, the gap would have been even smaller. Thus, the U.S. intervention created a permanent, long-term degradation of the economy in the Northern Triangle, creating a persistent incentive to migrate in search of greater material well-being.

Although we lack reliable data on annual levels of violence in the region prior to 1995, Fig. 10 plots homicide rates observed in frontline and non-frontline nations from that date onward to indicate the degree to which violence has persisted long after the U.S. intervention ended. When reliable data of the homicides first become

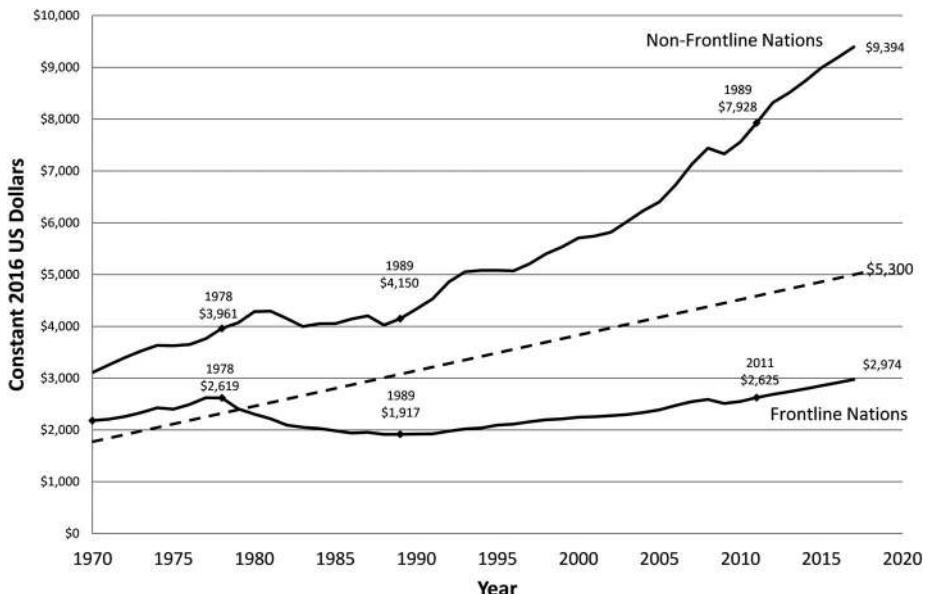


Figure 9. GDP per capita in constant \$2016 dollars for frontline and non-frontline nations in Central America

available in 1995, we see that the rate of lethal violence was 4.5 times greater in the frontline than in the non-frontline nations (53.9 compared with 11.9 per 100,000 persons). Although the gap narrows thereafter, it never comes close to disappearing, and as of 2017, the murder rate in the frontline nations (37.5 per 100,000 persons) was three times that in the non-frontline nations (12.2 per 100,000 persons).

In sum, the available evidence suggests that out-migration from Central America to the United States was initially caused by the U.S. political and military intervention of the 1980s, that it persists because the region has never recovered from the lethal violence and economic havoc that the intercession unleashed, and that people are able to make the trip northward by drawing on migrant networks that were another by-product of the U.S. intervention. As a result, undocumented migrants from the Northern Triangle continue to arrive at the nation's southern border seeking refuge from harsh economic circumstances and asylum from ongoing threats to life and limb. Although Nicaraguans also suffered from the intervention and departed for the United States in its wake, they are not among the migrants arriving at the border today because fleeing a left-wing regime, they were accepted as Cold War refugees and granted an easy path to legal permanent residence in the United States (Massey et al. 2014).

As a result, the population of undocumented migrants from the Northern Triangle nations has steadily expanded from small numbers in 1980 to become an ever larger share of the undocumented population in the United States as the share of Mexicans had progressively declined (see Fig. 2). Warren and Passel (1987) estimated that only 51,000 undocumented Salvadorans, 28,000 unauthorized Guatemalans, and a trivial number of irregular Hondurans were present in the United States

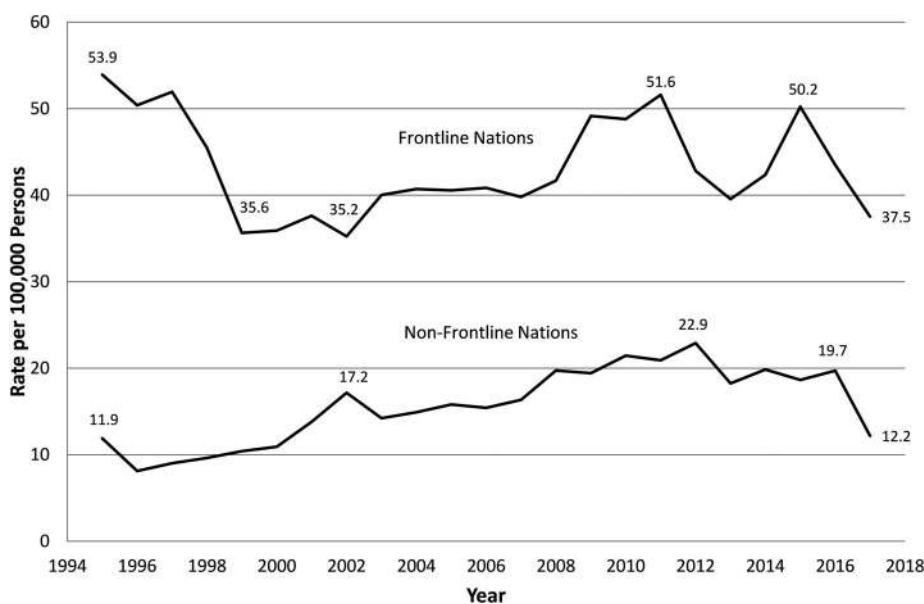


Figure 10. Homicide rate in frontline and non-frontline nations of Central America

as of 1980. By 2000, however, the respective numbers had grown to 430,000, 290,000, and 180,000, rising to 620,000, 520,000, and 330,000 in 2010 and to 750,000, 620,000, and 440,000 in 2015 (Baker 2018; Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2011). As a consequence, the share of migrants from the Northern Triangle is rising both among apprehensions and deportations.

THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS ON THE BORDER

In 2020, the United States finds itself in the midst of a profound resurgence of racism and xenophobia reflecting, as in prior nativist epochs in U.S. history, the concurrence of two powerful structural conditions: heightened economic insecurity and rapid sociodemographic changes stemming from mass immigration. Unlike prior eras, however, when immigration was not subject to numerical limitation, the current era is one of restrictive immigration and border policies, which perversely increased the volume of undocumented immigration from Latin America to accelerate the rate of Latino population growth.

Rather than dampening immigration, the U.S. policy of militarizing the Mexico-U.S. population transformed a circular movement of undocumented Mexican workers commuting to jobs in a handful of states into a growing settled population of mixed-status families living in 50 states. At the same time, the U.S. intervention in Central America destroyed local economies and inculcated endemic violence throughout the region, displacing hundreds of thousands of migrants northward to the United States. Rather than accepting these people as refugees, they met with the same restrictive policies as their Mexican counterparts and contributed to the growth of the undocumented population.

Despite the perverse effect of prior policies, political leaders in the United States have doubled down on the regime of restriction and exclusion, paired under President Trump with an explicit rhetoric of racist nativism. The militarization of the border continues with the extension of the border wall, the hiring of more agents by the Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and increased budgets for apprehension and detention both along the border and in the U.S. interior. These enhancements to immigrant repression move forward despite the fact that undocumented migration from Mexico has ceased and the only traffic along the border now consists of families and children seeking refuge from conditions directly caused by American Cold War policies.

Images of chaos, suffering, and misery along the border have failed to move leaders in Washington, DC, to moderate their program of restriction and exclusion, leading to a growing humanitarian crisis of broken families, orphaned children, and deported parents. Under President Trump, the number of Border Patrol agents has increased by 18% since 2016, and the agency's budget has risen by 16% while border apprehensions are up 76%, driven by refugees from the Northern Triangle. At the same time, deportations from within the United States have increased by 17% overall (26% for Northern Triangle citizens) while ICE budgets for removal, detention, and custody have risen by 60%.

As a result of these trends, the number of people languishing in detention has skyrocketed, well beyond even the huge number engineered by President Obama. As shown in Fig. 11, under President Trump the number of migrants in detention has soared by 69%, rising from 353,000 to a record 596,000 between 2016 and 2019. To a great degree, these detentions serve not to protect the country but to maintain the profits of private corporations such as Geo Group and CoreCivic, which own and manage around two-thirds of all spaces in the immigrant detention system (Luan 2018).

The present detention system was not built to hold large numbers of Central American families and children over the long term but to detain and remove Mexican migrant workers quickly and expeditiously. Unlike Central American migrants who cross the border seeking to be captured so they can claim asylum, Mexican workers wished to be returned back across the border as soon as possible so they could attempt another crossing and hopefully move onto a U.S. job. The inevitable result is an overcrowded, strained system characterized by unhealthy conditions that only serve to deepen human misery.

The rising tide of apprehensions and deportations not only harms those without legal status in the United States. It also compromises the health and well-being of a growing number of U.S. citizens. To the sum quantity of human suffering, we must also add the 430,000 to 600,000 U.S. citizen minor children who are living in Mexico with their deported parents, removed from the U.S. education system to a country where they don't speak the language or understand the culture while trying to navigate a social world they do not fully understand (Cruz 2018). Also

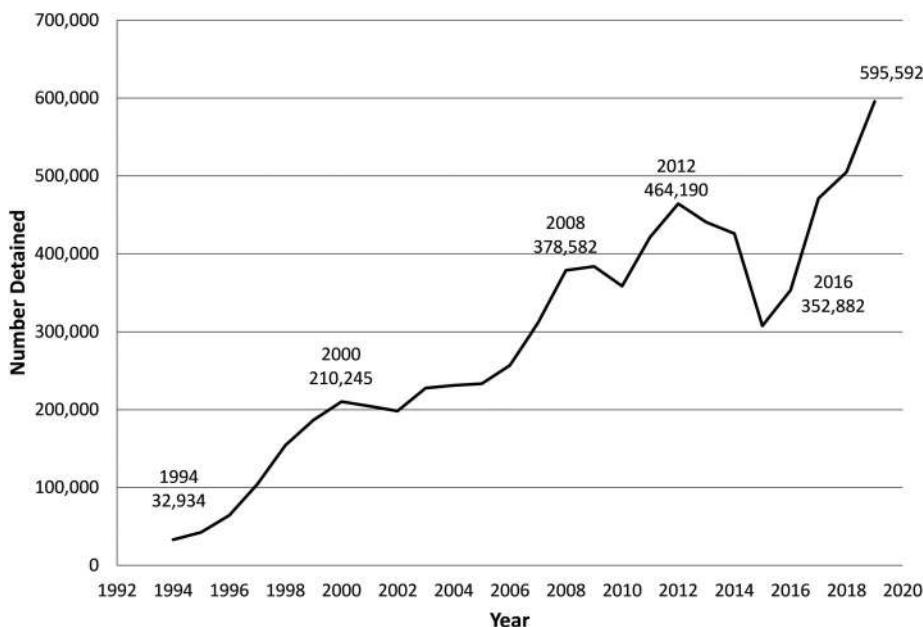


Figure 11. Total immigrant detentions 1994-2019

included in the tally of suffering are an unknown number of U.S. citizen children fostered out to family, friends, or total strangers when their undocumented parents are deported. At present, an estimated 5.1 million children under the age of 18 live with at least one unauthorized parent, 4.1 million of whom are U.S. citizens, children who are severely disadvantaged compared to those of legal immigrants or U.S. citizens (Capps et al. 2016).

The way out of this humanitarian nightmare is straightforward and has two pillars. First, create a pathway to legal status for the 11 million undocumented residents of the United States who lack a criminal record, and second, accept migrants arriving from the Northern Triangle as asylum seekers and refugees that the United States has a clear moral obligation to take in. The 1.6 million undocumented migrants from the Northern Triangle who live in the United States today are themselves a product of the U.S. intervention, and legalizing them would create potential sponsors for family members now languishing in detention facilities at government expense. Processing those arriving at the border as refugees and asylum seekers would not be difficult. From 1978 through 1998, the United States took in 1.3 million refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam whose descendants are now well-integrated into U.S. society as Americans. The population of the Northern Triangle today is half that of Southeast Asia during the 1970s and the potential number of refugees is much smaller.

Unfortunately, at the present time humanitarian policies of acceptance and incorporation appear to be quite unlikely, as the Trump administration is unwilling even to accept responsibility for refugees from the Bush-era invasion of Iraq, much less a U.S. intervention that occurred decades ago. Only 48% of Republicans favor creating a way forward for migrants present without authorization to remain in the country legally, compared to 82% of Democrats (Daniller 2019). For the time being, the suffering of the Central American migrants appears destined to continue, and the humanitarian crisis will only grow worse as more families and children are swept into the maw of a privatized detention system. It's not a pretty picture.

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