

## Migration, immigrants, the border, and the need for long-lasting solutions

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Since the fall of 2020, the number of individuals and families, including children, who have been forced to flee their nations of birth has been increasing. This trend is the result of the combination of two critical factors:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating economic and social consequences in Caribbean and Latin American nations. Prior to the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean was one of the most unequal regions on the planet. COVID-19 has made this condition significantly worse. Tens of millions of jobs were lost to the pandemic, and most of them are yet to come back. Unlike enriched and industrialized countries, most of these nations did not have the capacity to provide adequate economic aid to ameliorate the negative impact of the pandemic in millions of households.
2. Latin American and Caribbean nations have experienced a shift towards more autocratic and dictatorial governments. Support for democratic opposition has rapidly declined in a number of countries. In some instances, dissent voices have been violently silenced. The compounded effect of this trend leads many people to conclude there is no hope for improving their nations, and to believe that resettlement in a new country is the best alternative for them.

Even before COVID-19 became a global health crisis, the Trump administration enacted, in January of 2019, a program intended to prevent nationals from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other Spanish speaking nations to apply for asylum and to pursue their cases in U.S. territory by implementing the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), widely known as “Stay in Mexico.” Additionally, other measures such as Safe Third Country Agreements and Transit Bans were adopted by the U.S. and several governments in the Western Hemisphere. The intention behind these agreements was to deter migration and to limit the number of people seeking asylum in the U.S. As an extension of the same logic, and considering the likely compounded effect the global pandemic would have in forced migration patterns from Latin America and Caribbean nations, the Trump administration invoked public health reasons under Title 42 to the U.S. Border Patrol granting them authority to immediately expel individuals and families arriving at the U.S. southern border, effectively denying the right to seek humanitarian protection in the U.S.

An underlining factor to all of the above is the long-standing narrative that has successfully created the perception of Latin American and Caribbean migrants as undesirable individuals, often presented as a burden to the nation. Nothing can be farther from the truth, as these immigrants have demonstrated to be a true economic and social blessing for the U.S., and for millions of households in their nations of origin who received financial support sent by their relatives residing in the U.S. As long as the lies-based and hate driven narrative continues to dominate our airwaves, television networks, and social media channels, it is going to be very difficult for the U.S. government and its counterparts abroad to enact

truly innovative policy solutions to manage migration in a wise, visionary, and humanitarian manner, as well as to attend the many factors driving so many people out of their countries now.

MPP and later Title 42 contributed to create a stopgap for individuals and families who were trying to enter the U.S. and rightfully pursue asylum applications. The compounded effect of implementing MPP and Title 42 was to amass large numbers of people stuck in Mexico waiting to try, repeatedly, to enter the U.S. It is worth remembering that U.S. humanitarian protection laws are grossly obsolete. Their theoretical foundation was crafted in 1951, in a world profoundly different from the one we live in today. The consistent omission of this essential fact in the way the U.S. news media covers the current state of human mobility in the Western Hemisphere and in the rest of the world adds to the lack of understanding of current events, and therefore, the lack of meaningful and viable solutions.

### **Why do people continue to want to come to the U.S.?**

In addition to all of the above, the United States of America continues to project itself as the place on earth before paradise. This image is constantly promoted as a matter of official policy, but it is also reinforced by mass media outlets in the forms of written, audio, and multimedia content disseminated throughout the world. In the case of Latin American and Caribbean nations, the U.S. has become part of an imaginary construct often associated with ideas of prosperity and success. The fact that nearly 22 million people born in Latin American and Caribbean nations are now part of the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the U.S. only amplifies the attraction for many people who see in the U.S. the place they would like to be, if forced to leave their own countries.

To top it all off, the larger demographic dynamics -namely, the shrinking population, particularly from working age and employment-seeking segments- become an additional and powerful attraction factor. According to recent reports by the U.S. Department of Labor, there are about 10 million vacant jobs in the U.S. labor market. However, according to Jerome Powell, Chair of the Federal Reserve Board, the adjusted number of vacant jobs is close to 3.5 million, in all segments of the U.S. labor market. Regardless to the actual number of vacant jobs in the U.S. now, this is another powerful factor often omitted by U.S. news outlets reporting about immigration matters, particularly those describing what is going on at the U.S. southern border. If the U.S. government were to incorporate coherence in its public policy responses, foreign nationals arriving to the U.S. should be welcome as essential contributors to the vitality of its economic engine.

While MPP and Title 42 have been primarily effective at keeping many Mexicans, Haitians, Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran nationals from entering the U.S., the last year brought about a change. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans, Cubans, Nicaraguans, and other nationalities from nations with whom the U.S. does not have deportation agreements in place have been arriving to the border. Since they cannot be expelled, nor are they accepted in Mexico, many of them have been allowed to enter the U.S., with many applying for asylum and being released after brief detention periods at U.S. Border Patrol facilities. These are the individuals that racist and xenophobic forces identified as cannon fodder to advance their hate-driven agenda. The governors of Texas, Arizona, and Florida became the executioners of the busing and flying strategy taking these newly arrived individuals and families into Washington DC, New York City, Chicago, Martha's Vineyard, and several other Democratic Party-dominated urban centers. It is very clear that Republican Party leaders will continue to use immigrants

and immigration policy as a political and electoral wedge issue in their way towards the 2024 electoral cycle, just as they have consistently done so since 1994.

As we have come to know, many of these newly arrived asylum seekers do not have family or other types of social connections in the U.S. As a result, these individuals need basic integration support (housing, education, health care, etc.) upon their arrival. This situation has brought at least two critical realities into focus. The first one is the fact that as a society, we have been gradually reducing funding and not really caring about strong social protection/welfare systems for people in need. This is a trend that was spearheaded by the Reagan administration in the 1980s and was brought into full force by the Clinton administration in the 1990s. Therefore, even prior to the recent arrivals of asylum seekers to several urban centers, the welfare systems in place were, at best, inadequate.

The second issue brought into focus is the lack of a nationally coordinated immigrant integration policy, including asylum seekers. The generous response by individuals, as well as by local, and in some cases state government officials, is not part of a well-designed and longstanding policy. In many ways, local government responses have been improvised. This explains why local officials in Washington DC, New York City, Chicago, and more recently El Paso and Philadelphia have resorted to state of emergency declarations. This is a mechanism that allows local government to access logistical and financial resources that are not part of their standard planning. Inevitably, ad-hoc responses lead to tensions between local level governments, and the federal government.

This is exactly what racist and xenophobic forces sought to generate by using newly arrived asylum seekers as cannon fodder. Sadly, the federal government's response is also largely an act of improvisation. FEMA and other agencies are trying to respond in the best way they can, but there is no overarching agency or federal policy guiding the necessary articulation and execution of an immigrant integration strategy specifically focused on individuals in need of support. An effective public policy would ensure that its implementation does not create tensions with residents in receiving cities who are also experiencing hardship and have no or extremely limited access to public welfare resources. One recent positive development has been an \$800 million request included by the Biden administration in the context of the proposed federal budget for Fiscal Year 2023, which is being considered by the U.S. Congress. However, even this effort falls short from the kind of a well-thought-out and nationally coordinated immigrant integration solution the country so desperately needs.

### **Policy Solutions:**

**Address the root causes of migration.** This is a tall order challenge, even if properly defined and executed, it is not likely to produce overnight results. However, it is the only way to advance towards a healthy equilibrium reconciling the right to stay and live dignified lives in the nations of birth of all individuals, and a practical and humane way of managing international migration. Even in desperate times like the current one, it is crucial to note that most people do not want to leave their countries. Individuals love their places of birth, love their families, love their culture, and strive to do everything they can to stay there. However, the economic, social, and political systems now in place must be profoundly transformed in a way in which most people find practical ways to fulfill their aspirations for a good life. U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean must come to grips with the fact that almost all that has been done so far, has contribute to keep rotten systems in place. Therefore, it

must be profoundly reformed. Only a brand-new public policy paradigm designed to ensure economic and social wellbeing for the majorities, that is also sustainable in the long haul, and that is based on ever better democratic systems, will bring about new results.

**Gradual approach to a new international migration policy system.** Despite the human cost generated by punitive policy frameworks dominant today, evidence consistently shows that migration and migrants have had an enormously positive impact in nations of destination, as well as in millions of households in the countries of origin. However, changing policy approaches must be a gradual process. In the short to medium term what is needed is to update humanitarian protection schemes in a way that addresses the contemporary drivers of forced migration. A second factor would be to create a robust new mechanism for authorized migration, including a realistic growth in employment-based, as well as family-based migration. A third factor would be to resolve in a speedy manner all pending applications for immigration benefits, from Employment Authorization Documents to Legal Permanent Residency Visas, and U.S. Citizenship applications, wait periods are simply too long, and too expensive. When securing an immigrant visa takes forever, and administrative fees are out of reach for many people, irregular migration becomes more attractive. A fourth factor would be to find the political courage to provide individuals residing in the U.S. without authorization, especially those who have been in the country for more than three years, with a regularization program that enables them to be legally recognized for what they already are: permanent residents of the United States of America. This last factor is particularly needed in the case of populations who have been granted different forms of temporary immigration protection (TPS, DACA, DED, etc.) over many years and even decades.

**A nationally harmonized immigrant integration/inclusion policy.** While it is true that immigration policy remains a federal domain, foreign nationals who have settled in the U.S. do so in specific communities across the nation in every state of the Union. Therefore, a nationally coordinated policy designed to support the economic, social, and cultural settlement process of newcomers is long overdue. While the transportation of migrants who are asylum seekers in the U.S. into several urban centers has not been motivated by positive intentions, this incident has created an opportunity to have a deeper conversation about the need to rethink our society from the perspective of how much of a caring nation we want to be. There are millions of people in the U.S., born and raised in the U.S. who constantly experience hardship in multiple ways. And yet, we often lack adequate caring and support systems. The arrival of several tens of thousands of immigrants, many of whom are asylum seekers, has brought this issue to the surface. The only way for the richest nation on earth to come out of this challenge is to work together in the articulation and implementation of truly national system that allow us to become a better society, by creating better ways to protect and support people in need, including immigrants. We need to work at different government levels (city, state, and federal) and involve civil society organizations, including immigrant led organizations.