



Testimony

Border Cities in Crisis

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About this time last year, I visited a migrant respite center in McAllen, Texas, run by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, the charitable arm of the Diocese of Brownsville. Sister Norma Pimentel helped established the center in 2014, at the height of the unaccompanied minor crisis, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was overwhelmed with thousands of children and teenagers turning themselves in to Border Patrol agents.

When I visited last March, the center was receiving between 60 and 120 migrants a day, nearly all of them families from Central America.¹ Here's how it worked. Every afternoon, ICE dropped off migrants at the Greyhound bus station downtown, about a mile from the respite center. Greyhound employees would then call the center to let them know the migrants were there, and the center would send vans to pick them up. Once at the center, the children would be sent to another room for a hot meal while the parents took turns working with center volunteers to get in touch with family members all over the country. The goal was to get them all bus tickets and get them on their way that same day, usually later that evening, because the next day there would be another group of families coming in, and there simply wasn't space for more than a couple dozen people to spend the night there.

It's important to note that this wasn't some gleaming facility. The center occupied one half of a somewhat run-down commercial building, consisting of a large multipurpose room, a bathroom and a shower, a small kitchen and a separate room for a makeshift cafeteria. There was an area in the corner cordoned off for young children to play and a large stack of blue plastic mattresses in the corner. It wasn't designed to be a shelter. Staffed by a dozen or so volunteers daily, the center was a non-stop hive of activity, operating at capacity nearly every day.

In December, the diocese moved the center to a larger location, a former nursing home, about 16,000 square-feet—many times larger than the old respite center. That's because the number of migrants turning up at the bus station skyrocketed. Today, the new respite center is receiving about 800 people a day, sometimes more.² Last Sunday, 1,300 people were dropped off there and at shelters throughout town by ICE³ (Greyhound, overwhelmed by the number of migrants, no longer allows ICE to drop people off at the station)⁴.

McAllen, a city of fewer than 150,000 residents, is now facing the prospect of thousands of migrants discharged from ICE custody, wandering the streets and sleeping in doorways and on park benches—the city's mayor has said as much.⁵ What's more, in February the city ordered Catholic Charities to vacate the former nursing home and find a new location within 90 days, citing complaints from neighbors about constant traffic and strangers wandering nearby streets where children play. By any measure, the situation in McAllen is an emergency.

But that's just one border town in Texas. Something similar is playing out all up and down the U.S.-Mexico border. In El Paso, thousands of migrant families are turning themselves in to Border Patrol every day, overwhelming federal facilities and personnel. In a five-minute stretch one day in late March, Border Patrol apprehended two different groups totaling 400 people.⁶ On the night of President Trump's rally in El Paso in February, a group of 300 turned themselves in to the Santa Teresa Border Patrol station, which sits on an empty stretch of New Mexico scrubland 22 miles west of El Paso. Agents had to move all the ATVs out of the garage just so a hundred or so migrants would have someplace warm to sleep that night.⁷ Since then, things have been getting worse.

Even smaller and relatively remote communities are seeing large groups of migrant families turn themselves in. Recently, a group of nearly 60 was apprehended near the port of entry in Eagle Pass, Texas.⁸ In February, a group of 90 was

apprehended in the tiny town of Quemado, Texas, population 230.⁹ That group included children as young as one year old, as well as a pregnant woman who, upon arrival, went into labor and later gave birth.

As mass numbers of migrants are being released from federal custody along the border, cities further inland have also begun to feel the effects. During the third week of March, about 1,000 migrants arrived in San Antonio after taking buses north from various points in the Rio Grande Valley.¹⁰ Catholic Charities and other non-profit groups are struggling to house and feed these people, and in many cases have appealed to municipal authorities for assistance.

It's important to understand what the reality is on the ground in these places. The migrant shelters now going up in Texas border towns are in most cases makeshift and temporary. The process and logistics are haphazard and fluid. No one is really in control.

Among Migrants Seeking Asylum, An Unmistakable Pattern

If you spend enough time talking to migrants themselves, a pattern begins to emerge. Most of them have similar stories about why they left their home countries, and they report a similar experience of how they made their way through Mexico to the southern U.S. border. A few common characteristics stand out:

- A majority of the “family units” are men traveling with one or more children;
- Many of these men say they have a wife and other children back in their home country and that they intend to secure work in the U.S. and send money back to support them;
- They are headed for all points across the U.S. and have family members or friends in those places. Many of them also have jobs already lined up;
- Nearly all of them say they left their homes because it is dangerous, citing gang violence, threats, extortion, etc. They are all claiming asylum;
- At the same time, many of them will admit that they don't plan to remain in the U.S. permanently and in fact have a set amount of time they plan to live and work here before returning home;
- All of them say they paid a smuggler to secure safe passage to the border (the amount varies from \$2,000 to \$6,000 per person, sometimes more).

Despite the challenges and dangers they face in their home countries, the vast majority of these people are, strictly speaking, economic migrants; very few of them have valid asylum claims. Nevertheless, a wall or a physical barrier will do nothing to stop them from crossing the border. Because they are family units seeking asylum, they are not trying to evade U.S. authorities. In fact, they are seeking Border Patrol agents out in order to turn themselves in.

In El Paso, where the Rio Grande River is shallow and easy to walk across, the limits of a physical barrier are plain to see. All migrants need to do is walk across the river, continue a hundred yards or so through a no-man's land between the river and the border fence, and then follow the fence until they reach one of the gates situated on top of a flood levy system. If you drive through certain areas of downtown El Paso near the levy and fence, you can see migrant groups on the south side walking toward these gates. There, they simply wait for Border Patrol to arrive with vans to pick them up. This is now happening on a daily basis, in broad daylight.

Previously, when these migrants were processed and released by ICE, the adults would be outfitted with an electronic ankle monitor. If they failed to check in at designated times or traveled outside a certain radius where they told ICE they would be staying, immigration authorities would be

notified. The ankle monitors are a major piece of ICE's Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP), an alternative to detention for those in immigration proceedings.

The problem with the ankle monitors, though, is that many migrants simply cut them off and throw them away once they're released from ICE custody. A former Border Patrol agent who now works with a non-profit group that assists migrants in the Rio Grande Valley, told me that in his experience almost everyone released with an ankle monitor cuts it off at some point and absconds, effectively abandoning their asylum claim.

The Migration Pipeline Is A Vast Money-Making Machine

No discussion of the border crisis is complete without noting that, from the moment Central American migrants cross Mexico's southern border and begin their journey north, the entire process is a massive, multifarious, black-market, money-making machine.

A complex network of smugglers, corrupt local officials, truck drivers, lookouts, loan sharks, and Mexican drug cartels exert absolute control over the migration flows in Mexico and have, over the past decade or so, refined it into a lucrative business enterprise. Although exact figures are unknown, and likely unknowable, any back-of-the-napkin calculation will give you an idea of the amount of money changing hands along the migration pipeline.

For example, Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan said last week that the agency was on pace to apprehend more than 100,000 migrants in March.¹¹ Assuming each migrant pays, on average, \$4,000 for safe passage over the border, that's about \$400 million—just for those apprehended crossing illegally in March. When we talk about the migration pipeline through Mexico, we're talking about a smuggling industry worth billions.

Some of the chief beneficiaries of this pipeline are Mexican drug cartels, which exert iron-fisted control over their territory. Cartels generally require every man, woman, and child who pass through their territory on the way to the U.S. border to pay a tax, which is often included in the total fee smugglers quote to Central American families. Without paying this tax, migrants cannot cross the Rio Grande, and in many cases are at risk of being kidnapped or otherwise exploited. One of the reasons the large caravans that formed last year in Central America arrived at the border in Tijuana, and not in the Gulf region near the Rio Grande Valley, is because they had not paid off cartels in the Gulf region. For those without resources to pay this tax, traveling in a large caravan—and avoiding cartel-controlled territory—is the only way they can make the journey north with any modicum of safety.

The amount of money cartels are now making off migrant smuggling is substantial. For example, 162,000 people were apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley sector in FY2018. Assuming that each of these people paid an \$800 tax—a conservative estimate—that means the cartels and cartel factions in this region made nearly \$130 million just off taxing people moving through their territory. For context, consider that funding for the Merida initiative, which is aimed at combating these cartels, is \$145 million for the current fiscal year.¹²

The black market for migration is remarkably sophisticated. At its inception point, in villages and towns across Central America, the market works mostly through word of mouth. If you want to migrate, you get ahold of someone whose family member or neighbor migrated, and they put you in touch with a local smuggler who will quote you a price or sometimes a range of prices contingent on certain conditions. For example, one Honduran man was quoted a price of \$7,000 on the condition he bring his 6-year-old daughter with him and they agree to surrender to Border Patrol once they cross into the U.S. Otherwise, the price would be \$10,000.¹³

The reason for this difference in price is that it's much easier for smugglers to transport migrant families intending to claim asylum in the U.S. than migrants who want to enter the country

undetected. Instead of crossing with the migrants and trying to evade Border Patrol, both at the border and at checkpoints further inland, smugglers transporting asylum-seekers need only to take them up to a crossing-point on the Rio Grande and tell them when to go over. There is zero risk for the smugglers themselves, hence the cheaper price if an adult brings a child with them.

Smugglers generally have a working knowledge of U.S. asylum policy, and they tell potential migrant families that if they claim asylum once in the U.S., they will be allowed to stay and work.¹⁴ This of course is true, due to the immense backlog in U.S. immigration courts, with wait times for a hearing of up to three years.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, there is a crisis at the southern border, but it's a deeply misunderstood crisis that's being driven by specific factors and disproportionately affecting specific regions of the border, primarily the Rio Grande Valley and El Paso. In general, the growing numbers of migrants now crossing the border are being driven by three major factors:

- If you're a minor or a family, it's even easier to enter the U.S. now than it was during the Obama administration for the simple reason that there is no capacity at detention facilities and families can expect to be released soon after being detained.
- Smugglers are now marketing to people —women, families—who don't want to undertake an arduous or dangerous journey. They have put in place a sophisticated and efficient busing package that has proven very popular with families,¹⁵ and word has gotten back to communities in Central America that they will not be detained for long once they enter the U.S.
- Conditions in Central America have not improved enough to induce people to remain in their home countries. Persistent poverty, violence, and corruption, combined with the fear that it's not going to be this easy to get into the U.S. forever, is prompting families to come now.

There is no easy solution to this crisis. Border security is part of the solution, but so is congressional action. As long as Central American families know they can gain entry to the U.S. by initiating asylum proceedings upon crossing the border, this will continue. As long as cartels and criminal networks know they can profit from trafficking migrant families to the border, they will do so. And as long as conditions in Central America continue to fester, families in those countries who can pay for it will seek a better life for their children by traveling north. ★

Endnotes

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- 3 Mitchell Ferman, "[McAllen Mayor Jim Darling candid on immigration issues facing the city](#)," *The Monitor*, March 26, 2019.
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- 5 Ferman, *The Monitor*.
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