

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“Securing the Border: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Central American Migration to the United States”
March 25, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good afternoon and welcome.

Today, we continue our border series hearings with an examination of both the push and pull factors that led to the apprehension of more than 68,000 children and family units at the southwest border last year.

During fiscal year 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehended 51,705 unaccompanied minors from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. For the first time since FY2009, the number of Central American children exceeded the number of Mexican children attempting to enter the U.S. illegally. The vast majority of those attempted to enter the U.S. through the Rio Grande Valley sector in Texas.

Last month, while I was in the Rio Grande Valley, border patrol agents told me stories of families coming across the river, setting campfires on the U.S. side, and waiting for a border patrol agent to pick them up. When agents responded, it was not uncommon for them to hear, “What took you so long?” What does this say about our immigration policies when people entering this country unlawfully *want* to be caught?

Many of those who entered the U.S. illegally last summer remain here today. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 60,387 unaccompanied children have been released to relatives or sponsors living in the United States awaiting an immigration judge to determine their fate. The question is, how many will comply with their “notice to appear” and actually show up at their court hearings?

We learned last summer just how dangerous the trek through the Central America-Mexico corridor was. By enticing people to make that journey, we need to acknowledge that our laws and actions incentivize individuals to subject themselves and their children to a dangerous, horrific and sometimes deadly journey. There is no doubt that violence and poverty drive many to flee their home countries – the “push factors.” But an El Paso Intelligence Center report stated that for 219 of the 230 children and migrant families interviewed, the primary reason for illegally migrating to the U.S. was the belief that they could stay. In other words, our broken immigration laws and ineffective enforcement actions incentivized their illegal entry.

This hearing examines the root causes of Central American migration to the United States. Our government witnesses will explain what the U.S. government is doing to address the root causes of illegal immigration from three Central America countries, specifically Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. I am also interested in learning what Congress can do to reduce some of the incentives, or “pull factors.”

I look forward to the testimony of all of our witnesses today.