



There is No Immigration Security Threat That Reform with an Earned Path to Citizenship Cannot Address

Ernesto Castaneda, American University

People on the left, right, and center agree that America's current immigration system is broken, and mounting evidence from academia, policy centers, religious groups, and chambers of commerce underscores the many benefits of bringing undocumented immigrants out of the shadows for good. The majority of U.S. citizens favor comprehensive immigration reform that includes an earned path to citizenship for most of the currently undocumented. Yet in Congress immigration reform remains at an impasse.

Current versions of comprehensive reform envisage legal normalization and ultimate opportunities for citizenship not as a "reward" for people who did not follow immigration laws, but as an opportunity to ensure that millions of people already working and raising families across the country pay local and federal taxes, including making Social Security contributions and getting credited for doing so. The idea is to fully incorporate over 11 million people who already have a place in American society.

Anti-immigrant advocates appear to want to deport all of the undocumented, not just reduce the number of future unauthorized arrivals. But mass deportation is not feasible, and attempting to induce it either by rounding people up or encouraging them to "self deport" would be antithetical to longstanding American ideals of welcoming and incorporating immigrants. Deportation of youthful immigrants would also result in huge demographic and economic losses for an aging United States. Ideological isolationism and nativism have ebbed and flowed through American history, but in today's globalized world where countries are so interdependent, any notion of perfectly sealed borders amounts to pure fantasy.

Some politicians and anti-immigrant activists demand that federal authorities must make the border safe and airtight before reforms can be considered for those already here. However, all evidence indicates that the border is tight and quite safe. In terms of crime, the border region has some of the safest large cities in the country. The frontier between Mexico and the United States is also intensively patrolled, after a huge surge in border patrol agents. It is harder than ever for migrants to cross the border without being detected. Adult immigrant detentions have decreased in recent years because, for many reasons, Mexican emigration has slowed down to a trickle. The latest claims that the border is "not secure" hardly stem from successful breaches of security. Instead, thousands of Central American children have voluntarily turned themselves in to Customs and Border Patrol agents in the hope of finding refuge from poverty and drug-war related violence. These children and teenagers take long and dangerous trips, many in the hope of reuniting with their parents or other family members. Because so many earlier Central American adult immigrants have arrived without documents, there is no legal way for their children to reunite with them in the U.S.

This again raises the issue of Congressional unwillingness to pass immigration reform, a situation that has persisted for years now. Not only are Central Americans left without ways to bring children here, millions of people in communities across the country are working and living under the radar, anxiously looking over their shoulders, fearing and increasingly facing sudden deportation. As the Central American crisis illustrates, the current system also divides families across borders and forces parents to live thousands of miles away from their relatives, including children, without opportunities for regular visits.

As the population of undocumented Central Americans in the U.S. has grown in the last decade, so have the children left behind – in violent, economically distressed Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Many young adult men and women made the hard decision to leave spouses and children and go to the United States alone in order to send remittances. For many, what was originally seen as a short sojourn abroad turned into prolonged time away from the families left behind. For many, going back to their part of rural Central America can literally mean suicide.

With many working adults gone, demographic dynamics shift in the communities of origin, creating voids easily filled by gangs and organized crime. Many children now migrating have gone years without seeing one or both of their parents. They have lived with older family members, in towns with no law enforcement, vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, poverty, with little access to education or healthcare. Historically, a refugee is a person escaping a place plagued by violence. In that sense all these children and their parents are refugees and should be given asylum whether or not they present "individual credible threat" testimonies, or whether they are part of a narrow "social group" documented to be targets for violence. Congress should write a humanitarian law saying so, or executive action should provide administrative protection status to eventually provide legal asylum.

There is no border immigration crisis. U.S. border cities are not the final destination of the current Central American child arrivals, as they are on their way to meet family members in Houston, Los Angeles, DC, or New York. If they arrive, they become invisible and look like any other young Latina/os living in countless towns and neighborhoods. With adequate social and legal support, they can transition successfully from environments where their lives are constantly in danger, to making progress in American schools and becoming productive U.S. workers. Congress has been slow to act to deal with these new arrivals, yet as has been clear since Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831 that American civil society is ready to step up when government is not. In El Paso, Tucson, San Diego, New York, and across the country, legions of volunteers have offered their resources and unpaid time to aid these children and their families.

In short, there is no real security threat, either from current Central American minors or from earlier waves of unauthorized immigrants now woven into the fabric of American life. Rather, in political circles especially, there is a shortfall of understanding and compassion and an unfortunate amnesia about a core American value: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door." Before long, we must hope that progress toward comprehensive immigration reform will enable this authentic America to find itself again.