

Securing our Border and Fixing our Broken Immigration System

February 27, 2024



Top Line

1. Border encounters have increased rapidly in recent years. There are many causes, including:
 - a. The strong economy in the US
 - b. Increased immigration from countries outside of Mexico and Central America, because of turmoil in those countries.
 - c. Biden Administration changes in border policies
2. Voters are concerned about this high level of illegal immigration, and with good reason. It needs to be addressed.
3. Republican efforts, including state-level actions by Governor Abbott, are harmful and ineffective.
4. Securing our border effectively will require a comprehensive approach, including better border protections and actions to fix our broken immigration system.
 - a. Stop the ineffective and costly interference in border enforcement by Governor Abbott
 - b. Increase border security resources.
 - c. Fix our asylum system and address the backlog.
 - d. Improve the guest worker program, which will provide needed labor to grow our economy and reduce illegal crossings.
 - e. Address root causes in the countries immigrants are fleeing.

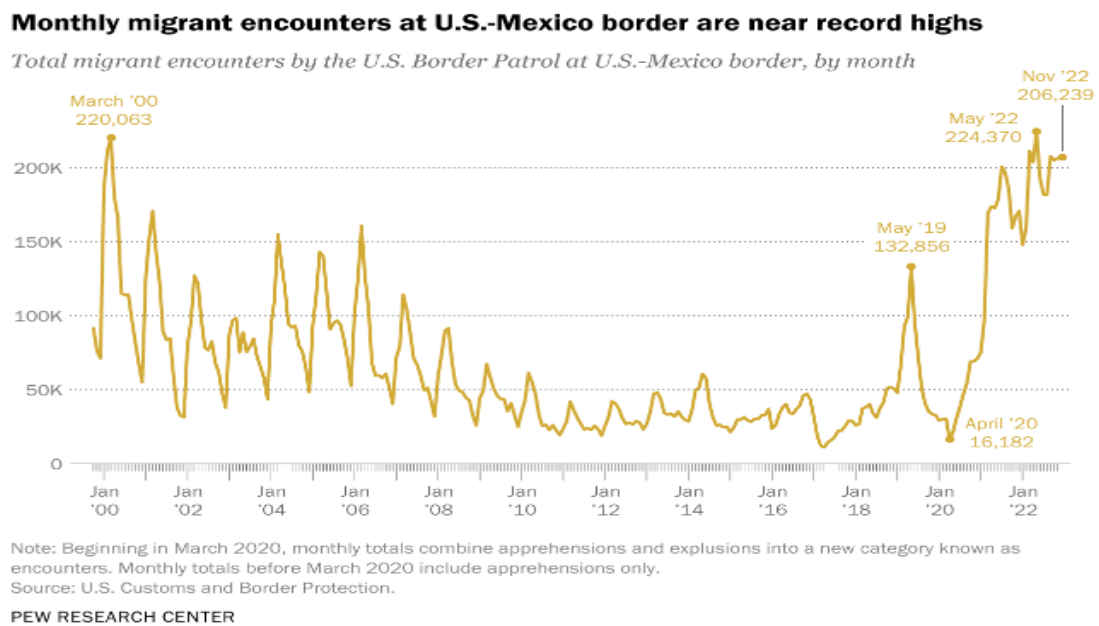
Protecting our border and fixing our broken immigration system are critical priorities, and will remain so as long as our economy remains strong and other countries in our hemisphere experience poverty, violence, and disruption. Republicans have shown that they are both incapable and unwilling to address this issue.

Progressive candidates should take a strong position, based on what is consistent with our country's values and beneficial to our economy.

Backup

1. Border encounters have increased rapidly in recent years, for multiple reasons, including a strong jobs market, surging asylum claims, and the Biden Administration's more humane immigration policies.

- a. Taking a long-term view, immigration is now at a high level, comparable to peaks in the early 2000's.



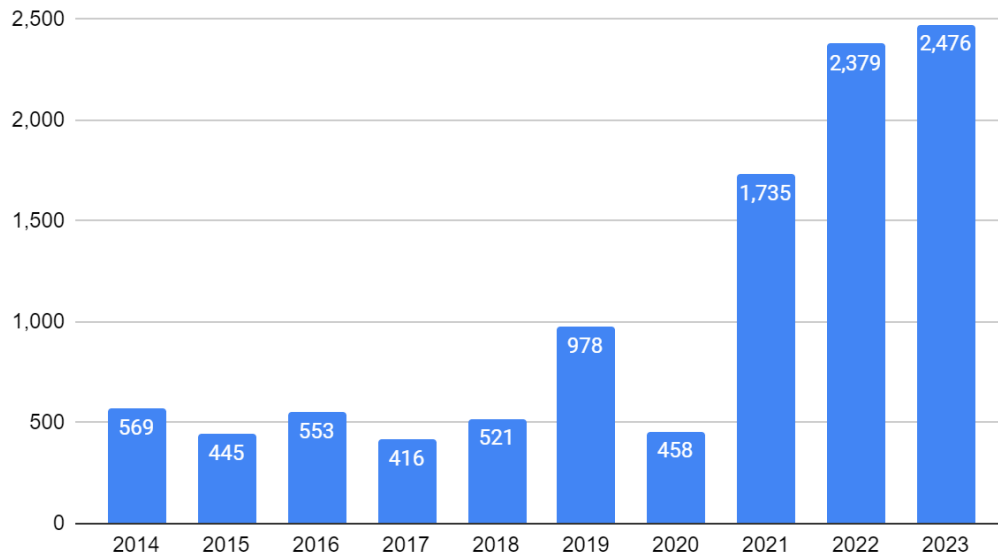
Note: "Encounters" include

- **Apprehensions**, in which migrants are taken into custody in the US, at least temporarily, to await a decision on whether they can remain in the country legally, such as by being granted asylum. Apprehensions are carried out under Title 8 of the U.S. code, which deals with immigration law.
- **Expulsions**: Migrants are immediately expelled to their home country or last country of transit without being held in U.S. custody. Expulsions are carried out under Title 42 of the U.S. code, which was used extensively during COVID but was ended in May 2023.

Source: Pew Research, 1/13/23, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/01/13/monthly-encounters-with-migrants-at-u-s-mexico-border-remain-near-record-highs/>

- b. Looking at the last several years, border encounters along the Southwest border increased during the Trump administration, until the onset of COVID, and have increased rapidly since 2020.

Southwest Border Encounters (in thousands)



Source: Customs and Border Protection, (CBP)

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters-fy22>

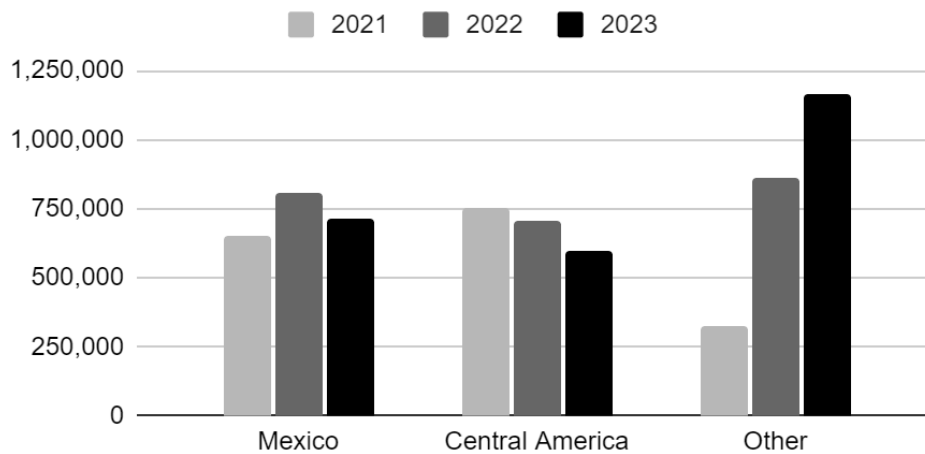
Note: these figures represent fiscal years starting October 1.

- c. There are multiple causes for the rapid increase since 2020:

- i. **Our strong jobs market** - The most significant factor is the strong US economy and the demand for labor in a strong jobs market. Analysis by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that **the strong job market explains most of the increase in illegal immigration**. Cato points out:
- The number of non-farm job openings in September 2023 is higher than at any point during the Trump, Obama, or Bush administrations.
 - The wage gain for immigrants in the United States is already between about a four-fold and a ten-fold increase compared to labor in most Latin American and Caribbean countries, even accounting for the higher cost of living in the United States. Since legal migration is very restricted, many come illegally to work.

- There simply are not enough temporary work visas available in enough sectors of the US economy for legal migrant workers to meet the demand, so illegal migrant workers meet it. (1)
- ii. **Disruption and chaos in several countries in our hemisphere**, including Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba.
- Prior to 2020, most illegal immigrants came from Mexico or Central American countries including Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. However, since 2021 the increase in illegal immigration has been driven by other countries.

Southern Border Encounters by Country of Citizenship



Source: Customs and Border Patrol encounters database, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

- **Countries other than Mexico and Central America account for all of the increase in illegal immigration since 2021.** The exhibit on the next page shows that while total immigration increased by about 740,000, the increase from countries other than Mexico and Central America was over 800,000.
- The reasons for the sharp increase in illegal immigration from other countries vary, but generally relate to severe poverty, violence and political disfunction.

- In **Venezuela**, a collapse in oil production led to a severe decrease in the economy and rapid inflation. This, along with brutal repression from the government, has led to more than 7 million people leaving the country. Initially they went to other countries in Latin America, but as conditions in those countries deteriorated many of them started coming in larger numbers to the US beginning in 2021. (2)
- **Colombia** - Since 2018, the number of people leaving Colombia has steadily increased, driven in large part by the consequences of the country's prolonged armed conflict and economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. (2)
- **Cuba** - The sharp uptick in Cuban migration comes as Cuba's economy has stagnated over the last few years, leading to widespread blackouts, shortages of food and medicine and deteriorating quality of life for the country's inhabitants. It also follows continued dissatisfaction toward Cuba's communist government. (2)

Exhibit 1 - Change in Southwest Border Encounters by Country of Citizenship

Country	2021	2022	2023	21 - '23 Change
Mexico	655,594	808,339	717,333	61,739
Nicaragua	50,109	163,876	99,496	49,387
El Salvador	98,690	97,030	61,515	-37,175
Guatemala	283,035	231,565	220,085	-62,950
Honduras	319,324	213,023	213,686	-105,638
Total Central America	751,158	705,494	594,782	-156,376
Venezuela	48,678	187,716	266,071	217,393
Colombia	6,202	125,172	159,536	153,334
Cuba	38,674	220,908	142,352	103,678
Peru	3,197	50,662	75,719	72,522
India	2,588	18,308	41,770	39,182
Haiti	47,255	53,910	76,130	28,875
China	450	2,176	24,314	23,864
Other	180,890	206,259	377,662	196,772
Total Other	327,934	865,111	1,163,554	835,620
Total	1,734,686	2,378,944	2,475,669	740,983

Source: CBP database, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

- d. All people have a right to seek asylum in the United States, which is the reason many people are coming to the US. To claim asylum, people must make the claim in the US – i.e., they need to cross the border. (3)

- i. There has been a huge increase in asylum claims in recent years - from less than 50,000/year during most of the Obama Administration, this grew to 258,000 in 2022 and 325,000 through just the third quarter of fiscal 2023. (4)
 - ii. The backlog of pending asylum cases was less than 300,000 in 2016; it is now over 850,000, almost tripling in 7 years. (4)
- e. **Given these factors, illegal immigration would have increased regardless of who was in the White House.** This is evidenced by the increase in encounters that occurred in the Trump Administration, prior to the onset of COVID, at a time when Trump was imposing draconian measures such as family separation to deter illegal immigration.
- f. **However, Biden Administration policies have contributed to the increase.**
 - i. Brookings points out that “When he took office, Biden implemented a more "progressive" immigration policy. For example, he issued a presidential proclamation ending the Trump-era "national emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border” and stopped the Trump policy of diverting Defense Department funds to border enforcement. He repudiated Trump allegations that undocumented immigrants are "largely rapists, murderers, and drug dealers", and that "immigrants contributed nothing to the American economy" (both are false). Biden also ended Trump's "Muslim ban" and harsh interior enforcement policies.” (5)
 - ii. Biden ended Trump’s "Family Separation" policy, which may have deterred illegal immigration, but which has now been prohibited by the courts because it violates US law. The Biden administration reached a court settlement which bans the Trump family separation policy for eight years. And the Biden Administration created a task force to reunite separated children with their families. (6)
 - iii. Biden is also criticized for sending "mixed signals", in contrast to the Trump administration which was clear about its intent to discourage illegal immigration.

Biden’s more humane immigration policy is admirable, but when combined with the strong pull of the US jobs market, and the strong push of violence and poverty in many of our neighboring countries, illegal immigration has surged. This indicates that we need an immigration system that clearly deters illegal immigration, while recognizing the need for immigrant labor in the US and the rights of people to seek asylum.

2. Voters are concerned about this high level of illegal immigration, and with good reason. It needs to be addressed.

a. Multiple surveys show that Border Security and Immigration are top issues for Texas voters. For example, a January 2024 poll by Emerson College Polling found that “Immigration/Border Security” is the top issue for Texas voters, at 29%, followed by the economy at 22%, healthcare at 12%, education at 9%, abortion access at 9%, “threats to democracy” at 7%, and crime at 6%. **It is also the top issue for Independents.** (7)

b. Interestingly, the respondents who chose “Immigration/Border Security” as their top concern indicated a greater likelihood to vote in the March 2024 primary.

What do you think is the most important issue facing Texas?

Survey of Texas Registered Voters, January, 2024

	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Total
Immigration/border security	7.50%	47.70%	25.00%	29.00%
Economy (jobs, inflation, taxes)	17.30%	25.60%	20.20%	21.40%
Healthcare	18.00%	5.90%	13.30%	11.70%
Education	13.50%	5.40%	8.50%	8.70%
Abortion access	16.80%	1.50%	10.40%	8.70%
Threats to democracy	12.30%	3.70%	7.70%	7.50%
Crime	7.50%	4.10%	5.30%	5.50%
Housing affordability	4.50%	3.70%	6.40%	4.70%
Something else (please specify)	3.00%	2.20%	3.50%	2.80%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Emerson College Polling, 1/18/24, <https://emersoncollegepolling.com/texas-2024-poll-allred-leads-democratic-senate-primary-plurality-are-undecided/>

c. The Cato Institute identifies many of the concerns that people raise about illegal immigration (8). Cato points out that many of these are not accurate or are exaggerated. However, many Americans believe them, causing them to prioritize stronger immigration policies. These include concerns that illegal immigration will:

- take Americans’ jobs
- increase crime

- increase the flow of drugs into the US
- allow terrorists to enter the US
- increase the strain on state budgets, and on educational and health care infrastructure
- reduce the respect for observance of other laws

These concerns have some validity, and more importantly, are held by many voters.

3. Republican policies (at the Federal level and in Texas) are harmful and ineffective

a. Immigration should by law be managed at the Federal level. (9)

- The U.S. Congress controls all immigration-related regulations. But the White House is in charge of enforcing immigration laws.
- The U.S. Supreme Court has consistently upheld the federal government's jurisdiction over immigration law. SCOTUS has overruled attempts by state legislatures to single out immigrants.
- The Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution generally means that federal laws trump state laws.

b. At the State level, efforts by Texas Governor Greg Abbott to interfere with Federal authority have been ineffective, costly to Texas, and harmful.

- As stated in the conservative Wall Street Journal, "Texas has spent two years and billions of dollars on the most aggressive attempt by any state to take control over federal border security. There's no indication it has worked." (10)
 - Operation Lone Star, a top priority of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, has inundated the U.S.-Mexico border with thousands of Texas state troopers and National Guardsmen, started work on a state-controlled border wall and built a new skeleton justice system with its own courts, judges, and jails to lodge misdemeanor state trespassing charges against migrants.
 - Despite the flood of resources, the added arrests by Operation Lone Star personnel in that section of the border amount to about 1% of the encounters there by Border Patrol in the same time frame, or about 11,000 added to the Border Patrol's 850,000.
 - **The area of the border most heavily targeted by Operation Lone Star has seen the most rapid increases in illegal border crossings in the state since the operation began.**

- ii. The Houston Chronicle observes: “Between FY 2022 and FY 2025, Texas will spend **\$9 billion** on Operation Lone Star. This is wasteful and ineffective” (11).
- iii. **Interference by Abbott is impeding the ability of CBP to do their job**, putting lives at risk. As reported by the Texas Tribune, state actions may have contributed directly to the deaths of three people: (12)
 - In January 2024 Texas officers took control over Shelby Park (in Eagle Pass, Texas) against the city’s wishes and have since blocked U.S. Border Patrol agents from entering.
 - A woman and two children drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande, near the Eagle Pass park that Texas troopers have taken control over.
 - The Border Patrol officers made unsuccessful attempts to contact the Texas Military Department, National Guard and Department of Public Safety via telephone about the distress call. When the officers went to the park entrance to verbally notify the state, Texas Military Department personnel denied them entry, U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar said in a written statement. “This is a tragedy, and the state bears responsibility,” Cuellar, a ranking member of the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, wrote.
 - U.S. Custom and Border Protection condemned the state actions in a statement to The Texas Tribune.
- iv. Governor Abbott has also wasted Texas taxpayer’s money to send asylum applicants to other states.
 - As part of Abbott’s Operation Lone Star, Texas began busing migrants to other areas, including New York and Washington DC. The program started in April 2022, and as of early 2024 had bused 102,000 people and cost the state of Texas over \$148 million. (22)
 - The program has been helpful to some migrants, enabling them to find jobs and start a new life. (22)
 - However, Abbott has sent busloads of people to other locations without any notification, dropping them off in the middle of the night, and this past winter sending them to areas experiencing harsh winter weather without appropriate clothing. (22)

The way Abbott is doing it, busing immigrants from Texas to other states is a cruel policy. While it has increased attention on the immigration issue and given Abbott some political capital, that comes at the expense of people who are sent without notification to places that do not have the facilities to house them, often during harsh winter weather. Abbott could have worked with other states to move

migrants in a coordinated manner, to places that would value their labor. But he has chosen to do it in a way that maximizes chaos and does nothing to address the root causes of the problem.

- c. **At the Federal level, Republicans in Congress have blocked effective action.** They would prefer to maintain the chaos at the border in 2024 to use as a political attack against President Biden.
- i. A bipartisan bill developed by Democratic and Republican Senators was presented in early February 2024. Although the bill was far from perfect, it represented a compromise between Republican and Democratic priorities. It did nothing to address the root causes of immigration in the countries from which immigrants are fleeing. However, it was an important step in the right direction and would have helped to improve the situation.
 - ii. The American Immigration Council points out that this "would be the most sweeping immigration bill of the twenty-first century. It would overhaul the process for seeking asylum in the United States—and impose an “emergency authority” that would leave asylum fully out of reach for those crossing between ports of entry for much of the next three years. It would attempt to address issues like work permits and years-long waits for asylum seekers, and also raise the initial standard a person must pass in order to access our asylum system. It would expand additional visas and future green card availability and offer a pathway to citizenship to Afghans, while also significantly increasing detention capacity. (13)
 - iii. The bill allows the Federal Government to implement “Border Emergency Authority”, which would enable the administration to summarily deport migrants who enter between ports of entry without permitting them to apply for asylum. This new emergency authority could be activated if border “encounters” reach a daily average of 4,000 over a period of seven days and would become mandatory once border encounters reach over 5,000 over a period of seven days or 8,500 over a single calendar day. (13)
 - iv. Appropriations in the bill include funding to hire up to 4,300 new asylum officers to take on the additional workload of the bill’s new asylum processes. This would help to address the huge backlog in asylum claims. (13)
 - v. The bill would have provided \$20.2 billion for improvements to U.S. border security. (14)
 - vi. The bipartisan bill had strong support from people on the front line of border security:

- **Border Patrol Union:** The union that represents front-line Border Patrol agents supports the Senate immigration reform bill, saying the new authorities it gives agents to turn migrants away are a key step in the right direction. (15)
 - **Border Patrol Chief:** “This proposed legislation would provide the strongest set of tools we have had in decades to effectively manage migration and enhance our nation’s border security,” acting CBP Commissioner Troy Miller said in a leaked internal memo to employees acquired by Fox News. (16)
 - **Immigration Lawyers:** The Executive Director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) said that while the bill is far from perfect (for example, no protection for Dreamers), it is a step in the right direction. "In the current environment, a bipartisan, compromise immigration bill is the only path to reforming our immigration system and providing it with the tools and resources needed to meet the challenges at the southern border. This Senate bill is far from perfect, but we commend those involved for doing the hard work of building consensus around this critical issue. This bill should be the beginning, not the end of that effort." (17)
- vii. Policy analyst Mary Ellen Klas points out that since October (2023), the (Biden) administration has requested supplemental funding of about \$14 billion to add more border agents, immigration judges and deportation officers. It has gotten nowhere. (18)
- d. Republican proposals for a massive deportation of undocumented immigrants are impractical and would harm our economy.**
- i. At rallies, Trump has said he would launch "the largest deportation operation in American history". (19)
 - ii. According to the conservative American Action Forum, a mass deportation would be infeasible and would harm the US economy. It would **cost \$400 - \$600 billion** to round up and transport them and would **reduce GDP by over \$1.5 trillion**. (20)
 - iii. The Center for Migration Studies points out several other reasons why mass deportations are infeasible and harmful:
 - It would separate families. Many families consist of both documented and undocumented people.
 - It would reduce the incomes of mixed-status households, plunging millions of people into poverty.

- Many children who are US citizens have undocumented parents. What happens to them?
- Many undocumented people are working in important jobs and would be difficult or impossible to replace. (21)

Republican policies are only making the problems worse. State interference is ineffective and harmful, and is wasting trillions of Texas taxpayers' dollars. At the Federal level, Republicans in Congress have blocked effective legislation, and Donald Trump's pledge of massive deportations is impractical, expensive and would harm our economy. We need better answers.

4. Securing our border effectively will require a comprehensive approach, including better border protections and actions to fix our broken immigration system.

There is widespread support among voters for effective, comprehensive action. A survey in early 2023 by the National Immigration Forum found that 76% of registered voters said they'd support *"Republicans and Democrats working together on immigration reforms that strengthen border security, allow immigrants brought to the United States as children to earn citizenship, and ensure a legal, reliable workforce for America's farmers and ranchers."* Only 14% opposed. Support was strong across parties, with 85% of Democrats, 71% of Independents, and 74% of Republicans in favor. **America is ready for constructive, practical, and comprehensive solutions to border security and immigration.**

Five specific policies will help to secure our border and fix our broken immigration system:

- a. Stop the ineffective and costly interference in border enforcement by Governor Abbott**
 - i. Operation Lone Star has cost Texans \$4.4 billion in its first two years and continues as of early 2024 at over \$2 billion a year.
 - ii. State interference in immigration enforcement is inconsistent with Federal law and Supreme Court precedent (9).
 - iii. Abbott has intentionally created chaos to score political points, by busing migrants to other states without notification, putting people at risk.
 - iv. His actions have done nothing to reduce illegal immigration into Texas or to address the root causes of the problem.

- v. **Texas should work in coordination with the Federal government, not against them.** For example, a coordinated plan to bus asylum seekers to places where their labor is needed could reduce the strain on Texas border areas, help immigrants while they are here, and provide our economy with needed labor.
- b. Increase border security resources and authority.**
 - i. In October 2023 President Biden requested \$14 billion in emergency funding for the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies to hire additional border patrol agents and staffing to more effectively process asylum seekers. It would also provide funding to increase immigrant temporary housing in border areas. (23). Congress has refused to act on this request, intentionally continuing the border crisis for political gain.
 - ii. The 2024 bipartisan border bill would have increased funding for border security and given the President the authority (which he does not currently have) to enforce tougher border policies if immigration exceeded specified levels. (24)
 - iii. As of December 2023, CBP and Homeland Security have warned that they do not have the resources to handle existing immigration levels. (25)
 - iv. **Congress should act on the President’s request to provide CBP with the resources to do their job.**
 - c. Fix our asylum system and address the backlog.**
 - i. The backlog of asylum seekers has nearly tripled in the past 7 years and is now over 850,000 people, and continues to grow rapidly.
 - ii. When their claims are eventually heard, they are either removed from the US (if the claims are determined to be without merit) or they are allowed to remain. But in the meantime, they remain in the U. S., in limbo.
 - iii. The bipartisan border bill that Republicans rejected in February 2024 would have helped by increasing asylum processing capacity. (26)
 - iv. Creating more orderly, secure pathways for people to work in the US would also help, by reducing the temptation to use asylum claims as a way to enter and remain in the US. (26)
 - d. Improve the guest worker program, which will provide needed labor to grow our economy and reduce illegal crossings.**
 - i. As the Cato Institute points out, most illegal immigration is caused by supply and demand – supply of people wanting to work in the US, and demand in the US for their labor. (1)

- ii. Instead of a problem, this could be turned into an opportunity, helping people, growing our economy, and reducing illegal immigration.
- iii. The Wall Street Journal reports that the US is experiencing huge labor shortages in service industry jobs such as restaurants, hotels, and construction. Employers say that existing visa programs don't provide nearly enough workers. (27)
- iv. Under current policies, in which undocumented workers have virtually no rights, migrant workers are essentially a captive workforce, exposing them to workforce abuses. (28) An improved guest worker program should address this weakness by providing more protection for migrant workers.
- v. There are many proposals for improving and expanding the guest worker program. The proposal by the Migration Policy Institute is a good example. It would *"help meet employers' demand for workers in a wide range of industries and across skill levels, be flexible enough to accommodate both circular migrants and those wishing to stay in the United States permanently, ensure protections for both U.S. and foreign workers, and grow and shrink in scale over time, as needed to meet economic and other imperatives."* (29)

e. Address root causes in the countries immigrants are fleeing.

- i. The increase in illegal immigration over the past few years has come entirely from countries outside of Mexico and Central America, including Venezuela, Cuba, and Columbia.
- ii. These people will come here regardless of who is President because they have a legal right to seek asylum.
- iii. As long as the US job market is strong, and our neighboring countries are experiencing poverty and violence, people will come to the US.
- iv. An analysis published by the American Enterprise Institute points out that "U.S. assistance programs to the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras address a wide range of "push factors" that lead individuals to migrate to the United States. These programs combat insecurity, governance issues, and economic drivers of illegal migration by leveraging best practices and public-private partnerships to ensure maximum impact." These programs involve far less taxpayer expense than border enforcement. (30)

Illegal immigration is a serious and growing problem. Instead of interfering with Federal authority, which is ineffective and expensive for Texas taxpayers, Texas should work with the Federal government to implement common sense solutions to secure the border and fix our broken immigration system.

More Information

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