

USA: Immigration Crisis Continues, Causing Suffering for Millions

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The United States faces a complicated immigration crisis. The current crisis revolves around Title 42, a regulation invoked by former president Donald Trump to expel migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. While President Joe Biden has recently attempted to end Title 42 expulsions, the rightwing U.S. Supreme Court voted to force the government to continue to use it. So far 2.5 million asylum-seekers have been turned away.

The current crisis began in March of 2020, the Trump administration, claiming it was fighting the COVID pandemic, issued a public health order based on a longstanding law called Title 42, Section 265, originally adopted in 1944 to prevent the spread of communicable diseases, but not to enforce immigration restrictions.

Beginning in March 2020, Title 42 was used to turn away refugees seeking asylum and refusing to allow them into the United States to present their case. Asylum is generally offered to people who fear violence in their home country because of their religion, political opinion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity and whose governments will not protect them. Under Title 42 asylum-seekers were now pushed back into Mexico where they waited in cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez in squalid, dangerous, and unhealthy conditions. All of this violates both U.S. immigration law and the United Nations convention on immigration.

While Title 42 exacerbated the U.S. immigration crisis, it did not create it.

The crisis has existed for decades. At the southern border with Mexico every year about one million—more recently closer to two million—are refused entry. Some migrants attempting to enter the United States die in the Arizona desert, some 221 in 2021, while about one a day drown in the Rio Grande River. Coyotes who move the migrants across entire nations and then across the border charge thousands of dollars, and sometimes rob, rape, or abandon the migrants. In June of 2022 authorities found 51 migrants dead in a truck near San Antonio, Texas, not the only time such a thing has happened.

Throughout the nineteenth century and until the end of the twentieth, the majority of the American people prided themselves on their country as a refuge for both economic migrants and refugees seeking asylum. School children memorized the poem by Emma Lazarus written on the Statue of Liberty that stands in New York's harbor:

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-tost to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

There were, of course, always anti-immigrant organizations and politicians, and periodic waves of anti-immigrant hysteria, but in general Americans saw themselves as a nation of immigrants still welcoming others.

The political right turn of the 1980s began to change that attitude as Republican politicians claimed that immigrants were taking American jobs, threatening American identity, and bringing dangerous ideologies such as Islamic fundamentalism. In his 2016 campaign for president Trump sowed fear, saying of immigrants, "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." He vowed to build a wall at the Mexican border to keep them out while privately he talked of shooting border-crossers.

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The immigration crisis has largely been caused by U.S. foreign policies and neoliberal economic policies everywhere, especially in Central America, where they have devastated national economies, and brought to power violent, authoritarian, rightist governments linked to drug cartels. Now climate change also forces farmers from their lands and drives them to migrate.

The Democrats have put forward proposals for more humane border policies, but with Republican opposed, they are paralyzed. Some on the left call for an open border, but there is no support for that in the society at large. Clearly, we need a new immigration rights movement.

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