

United States: The Children at the Border and the Question of Immigration

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How should the United States respond to the issue of immigration? It's a question that divides Republicans from Democrats and progressives from socialists. Is an issue that fueled former President Donald Trump's rise to power and also contributed to his fall. At the moment it's a hot political issue, the center of President Joseph Biden's first press conference and the motive for delegations of Republican congresspeople to the border. At the very center of the problem are the child migrants, unaccompanied minors, almost 10,000 of which arrived in the United States in February, with 18,000 in custody at present.

Trump virtually dismantled the U.S. immigration system while strengthening the Border Patrol and mobilizing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to arrest and deport undocumented immigrants. He separated children from their families and caged them, shocking most Americans. But before him, President Barack Obama won the reputation of "Deporter-in-Chief" for deporting more immigrants than any president before. Democrats have generally supported a regulated immigration system, a guest worker program, and a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Most Republican and Democratic politicians, including Sanders, argue that immigration must be restricted and regulated because immigrants compete for jobs and also lower wages. The Democratic Socialist of America (DSA), has called for "open borders," though that demand finds little if any positive response in progressive circles.

No other nation has as large an immigrant influx. In 2018 the U.S. foreign-born population reached a record 44.8 million, making up 13.7 percent of the total population, the highest since the 1880s. Some 77 percent of all immigrants are legal, most coming from Mexico, China, and India, though many come from Central America. The 23 percent who have no documents may be subject to arrest and deportation. One million immigrants enter legally each year and about 400,000 are apprehended at the border each year, while tens of thousands of others enter without papers. There were 10.7 million undocumented immigrants in the United States in 2017, making up 3.2 percent of the population.

With Biden's election as a candidate who had talked about "a more human" immigration policy, immigrants immediately flocked to the border. At present, because of the coronavirus pandemic, Biden has asked that migrants not come and they are not being admitted, but fleeing political or criminal violence and abject poverty, many feel that they have no choice.

When desperate families reach the border, they sometimes send their children across the line alone, knowing that they cannot be deported and will be sent to live with relatives in the United States. This has led to the large increase in unaccompanied minors from infants and toddlers to teenagers being detained at the border where they are being held in overcrowded facilities not appropriate for children. Republicans then claim that Biden has caused an immigrant invasion.

Many of these migrants are coming from Central America and Mexico, the former region devastated

by the U.S. support for rightwing governments in civil wars of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the latter still suffering from the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994 that transformed the Mexican economy without providing adequate employment. In both regions, drug cartels and criminal gangs have made life unbearable for many. And now climate change has brought new problems for farmers there.

Last week at Biden's urging, the House of Representatives passed two bills, one establishes paths to citizenship, while the other offers legal status for millions of undocumented immigrants. These may not pass in the Senate. While these reforms deserve critical support, they do not stop the inequalities of capitalism or the violence of imperialism that drives migration, nor do they liberate the immigrants from exploitation.

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P.S.

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