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The Body Count at the Border

Deaths are rising even as apprehensions are going down.

Every so often comes a dark reminder of the human costs of immigration dysfunction, and last month 10 people suffocated in an 18-wheeler in Texas while trying to move to the United States from Mexico and Central America. Congress could prevent similar tragedies with more legal visas for guest workers, as a new report details.

The National Foundation for American Policy in a report out this week notes that “more than 7,000 men, women and children have died along the Southwest border” over the past two decades. More than 200 people have died so far this year, and last year the count topped 300. This year there have been 7.8 deaths for every 10,000 apprehensions of illegal border crossers.

The number of deaths increased by about 80% between 1999 and 2012, even as apprehensions—a reliable proxy for illegal immigration—plummeted by more than 75%. As a result, a person picking their way across the border is now “5 times more likely to die in the attempt than 18 years ago,” the report notes. One reason is that an enforcement crackdown has encouraged people to slip across more treacherous or remote areas of the southwest.

Most immigrants come to the U.S. for work and opportunity, so the solution is to allow them to find jobs legally. The paper notes that the U.S. doesn't have a visa program that permits immigrants to work legally in “year-round industries like construction, hotels and restaurants.” In the 1940s and '50s the Bracero program allowed workers to enter legally from Mexico, and illegal immigration apprehensions dropped 95% between 1953 and 1959.

Some who make it across the border stay in the U.S. illegally because they can't risk multiple crossings. A visa holder who could travel home freely might be less likely to venture a dangerous crossing with his entire family. By the way, more work visas would be a fillip for the economy; agriculture, construction and many other industries report labor shortages despite rising wages.

Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly, who has since decamped for the White House, put out a statement that the Texas smugglers “have no regard for human life and seek only profits.” But smugglers make money when politicians slap on new restrictions on immigration, and the way to

bankrupt them is a system that allows safe, legal entry and exit. Ron Johnson (R., Wis.) has a bill in the Senate to let states experiment with guest-worker programs, which would be a place to start.

The recent deaths are gruesome but hardly unprecedented: The policy brief recalls how a dozen men died in the Arizona desert in the 2000s, one of whom was Lorenzo Ortiz Hernandez, a father of five who took out a loan at 15% interest to underwrite an illegal crossing. He was looking to support his family. Such casualties will continue until Congress finds the political will to reform the broken U.S. immigration system.