

National Foundation for American Policy

January 31, 2023

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New Research: A Historic Refugee Crisis in the Western Hemisphere Has Been Labeled a Border Crisis

Report Recommends Focusing on Humanitarian Protection Rather Than Questionable Border Metrics

Arlington, Va. – The United States is experiencing a historic refugee crisis in the Western Hemisphere that has been cast as a border crisis, according to a [new study](#) from the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP). Criticism of the increase in Border Patrol encounters has implied that individuals would not come to the United States if U.S. immigration policy were sufficiently harsh. However, the countries from which people are seeking refuge or employment in America have experienced economic and political upheavals. These upheavals or continuing violence and repression have created a large number of refugees.

The report, “The Historic Refugee Crisis in the Western Hemisphere,” can be found at <https://nfap.com/>.

“Treating people humanely is not a sign of weakness,” said Stuart Anderson, the author of the study and NFAP’s executive director. Anderson was head of policy and counselor to the Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in President George W. Bush’s administration. “Allowing for orderly entry is a smart policy consistent with America’s best tradition as a nation of immigrants and refugees.”

The best way to address illegal entry is to treat the current situation at the border as a historic refugee crisis and provide legal pathways for work and human rights protection. The Biden administration has taken steps in this direction with new parole programs and efforts to funnel asylum seekers to ports of entry. Unfortunately, the administration has been slow to label the problem a refugee crisis and, until January 2023, focused less on ways to expand the ways individuals could enter or work legally. Relying on Title 42 to expel migrants proved to be a costly mistake: It increased the number of encounters at the border by encouraging repeating crossings and illegal entry and allowed critics to use an inaccurate measurement since apprehensions at the border, the usual historical measure, are not the same as the more numerous “encounters.”

If Title 42 had not been in effect, the number of Border Patrol apprehensions at the Southwest border likely would have been about 1.2 million in FY 2021 and less than 1.6 million in FY 2022, according to a National Foundation for American Policy analysis. (This assumes, for the analysis, no other changes.) Due to Title 42, NFAP estimates there were approximately 471,000 more encounters at the Southwest border in FY 2021 and about 627,500 more encounters in FY 2022 than if the policy had not been in place.

Among the findings of the report:

- Venezuelans have experienced a historic economic collapse and widespread human rights violations that have caused more than [7.1 million refugees and migrants to leave the country](#) since 2015. That number is similar to the number of refugees who left Ukraine after

Russia invaded in 2022. [U.S. Border Patrol encounters](#) at the Southwest border with Venezuelans increased from 1,227 in FY 2020 to 47,752 in FY 2021 and 187,286 in FY 2022, an increase of 15,164% between FY 2020 and FY 2022.

- Advocates of harsher immigration policies have ignored that refugees leaving Venezuela and elsewhere have settled in or traveled to several countries across the Western Hemisphere—many in much larger numbers than in the United States. Approximately 1.8 million Venezuelans have gone to Colombia and 1.3 million to Peru. In other words, people did not leave Venezuela because of the Biden administration's immigration policies. Most refugees from Venezuela left their country long before Joe Biden became president. According to a UNHCR [report](#) on Venezuelans, "Half of all refugees and migrants in the region cannot afford three meals a day and lack access to safe and dignified housing. To access food or avoid living on the streets, many Venezuelans resort to survival sex, begging or indebtedness."
- The situation in Nicaragua also has caused people to flee. "The election of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega in 2006 began a period of democratic deterioration marked by the consolidation of all branches of government under his party's control, the limitation of fundamental freedoms, and unchecked corruption in government," writes Freedom House. [U.S. Border Patrol encounters](#) at the Southwest border with Nicaraguans increased from 2,123 in FY 2020 to 49,841 in FY 2021 and 163,552 in FY 2022, an increase of 7,604% between FY 2020 and FY 2022.
- Cubans have fled their country and its communist government for over 50 years. "Cuba's one-party communist state outlaws political pluralism, bans independent media, suppresses dissent, and severely restricts basic civil liberties," according to Freedom House. "The government continues to dominate the economy . . . The regime's undemocratic character has not changed." [U.S. Border Patrol encounters](#) with Cubans increased from 9,822 in FY 2020 to 38,139 in FY 2021 and 220,321 in FY 2022, an increase of 2,143% between FY 2020 and FY 2022.
- The story is similar for individuals from other countries in the hemisphere. Between FY 2020 and FY 2022, U.S. Border Patrol encounters increased 560% for Haitians, 465% for Salvadorans, 397% for Hondurans and 383% for Guatemalans.
- Providing the legal means of seeking relief by at least partly opening ports of entry and recently establishing [parole programs accepting up to 30,000 Venezuelans, Cubans, Nicaraguans and Haitians a month](#) (with U.S. sponsors) has reduced illegal entry. "Encounters of Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan non-citizens attempting to cross the southwest border unlawfully has decreased drastically since President Biden announced an expanded parole program for these individuals," according to Department of Homeland Security statistics [released](#) on January 25, 2023. "Preliminary numbers from January show that encounters of Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans crossing unlawfully between ports of entry at the southwest border declined 97% compared to December."
- Donald Trump's policies did not reduce illegal immigration or discourage people from applying for asylum. Pending asylum cases rose 300% between FY 2016 and FY 2020 (from 163,451 to 614,751), according to Syracuse University's TRAC. Apprehensions at the Southwest border (a proxy for illegal entry) rose more than 100% between FY 2016 and FY 2019 (from 408,870 to 851,508). Apprehensions fell for several months at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, but by August and September 2020, apprehensions returned to the approximate level of illegal entry for the same months in FY 2019.

Addressing the situation at the border as a refugee crisis shifts the focus to helping people. Providing more opportunities to work legally with visas and implementing a widescale refugee

program with circuit rides and camps organized by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, would be reasonable additional steps. Congress has not enacted measures to provide more options to work legally or greater refugee protections, or even sufficient funding for the U.S. asylum program.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. Over the past 24 months, NFAP's research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major media outlets. The organization's reports can be found at www.nfap.com. Twitter: [@NFAPResearch](https://twitter.com/NFAPResearch)

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