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The facts about the humanitarian crisis in Mexico and Central America

February 5, 2019 • Share



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US Administration officials are sounding the alarm about a humanitarian crisis along the border with Mexico to justify building a border wall. As a medical humanitarian organization treating people in Honduras, El Salvador, and along the migration route

through Mexico, we can be absolutely sure of this: a wall will do nothing to address the [humanitarian crisis in Central America](#) driving large numbers to flee north in search of safety and security.

A humanitarian crisis demands a humanitarian response.

In a surprising twist, the president, vice president, and the secretary of homeland security have recently seized on data from a [2017 report](#) by Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which reveals the extreme violence suffered by our patients in their home countries and along the migration route, in order to make the case for tough border enforcement. Administration officials are essentially cherry-picking our data to justify policies that would trap vulnerable people in places where their lives are at risk—and they are ignoring our recommendations about how to address the very real medical needs of migrants and asylum-seekers.

For example, on January 19, [President Donald Trump](#) highlighted this alarming statistic during his address to the nation presenting the need for a border wall: “One in three women is sexually assaulted on the dangerous journey north.” He again cited this statistic during the [State of the Union address](#) on February 5.





DESPERATE JOURNEY: FLEEING INVISIBLE WARS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

In a *USA Today* op-ed published on January 16, [Vice President Mike Pence](#) wrote, “According to Doctors Without Borders, 70 percent of illegal immigrants report being victims of violence along the journey at the hands of human traffickers, drug smugglers, and vicious gangs. About a third of women are sexually assaulted on their way to America.”

Even earlier, on January 7, [Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen](#) highlighted the danger of sexual violence during a media briefing: “We have 30 percent of women who are raped on this journey, and that’s actually not our stat; that’s Doctors Without Borders.”


By highlighting the dangers facing migrants, the Administration is trying to make the case that a border wall would reduce the threat and strengthen US national security. They are now distorting and [mischaracterizing the data](#) from our report to push for policies that run counter to everything we believe in.




Doctors w/o Borders 
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Good explainer by [@washingtonpost](#) on how the Administration is using our data to justify harmful asylum restrictions.

Policies that criminalize asylum seekers will do nothing to protect vulnerable people along the migration route.

washingtonpost.com
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4:50 PM · Jan 23, 2019 

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In fact, our 2017 report on the threats Central Americans face along the migration route revealed the significant unmet medical and humanitarian needs people have, and the dangers they face while in Mexico. The data are drawn from surveys and patient records from 2015 and 2016. This was not a representative survey of the thousands of people traveling north each year, and the information only applied to MSF medical projects in Mexico, which at the time were nowhere near the US border. (As of 2019, we are providing care in various locations along the border—including [Tijuana](#), Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros.)

Our report found that a staggering 68 percent of patients treated at MSF sites reported an incident of violence after crossing the border into Mexico. One-third of the women surveyed and 17 percent of the men reported “sexual abuse” while in transit. (To be clear, for the narrower category of rape and other forms of sexual violence, 10.7 percent of women and 4.4 percent of men surveyed were affected during their transit through Mexico. Patients reported that the perpetrators of violence included members of gangs and other criminal organizations, as well as members of the Mexican security forces responsible for their protection.)

When citing our figures, Administration officials generally do not mention that almost 40 percent of patients surveyed said that they fled their countries due to violence, and that close to 44 percent of them had experienced the murder of a family member over the prior two years. Many of our patients along the migration routes through Mexico are refugees with a reasonable fear of

death or violence if sent back to their countries. No wall, nor even the threat of violence along the journey north, will prevent people from fleeing if their lives are in danger back home.

For years, MSF has spoken out about the dangers facing Central Americans along the migration route in Mexico and in their home countries. Since 2012, we've provided care to tens of thousands of patients in our migrant programs in Mexico. We treat their injuries and illnesses and offer psychological support in the midst of this difficult journey.

The Trump Administration is now selectively using data from our reporting to scare Americans about violence at the border and to make a "humanitarian" case for its wall. What the White House fails to acknowledge is that the chaos and suffering at the southern border are the direct results of US policies designed keep out migrants and asylum-seekers at all costs. The US is not only failing to address the humanitarian crisis in Central America but is fueling a wider crisis in Mexico.

As an organization providing medical care and counseling to thousands of people along the migration route, we have a responsibility to [speak out](#) against laws and policies that inflict greater harm. We have called for an end to so-called [zero tolerance policies](#) against migrants. We have opposed the US government's decision to no longer recognize [gang violence and domestic violence](#) as legitimate grounds for asylum. We have warned about the danger of [forcing asylum seekers to wait in Mexico](#) as their asylum claims are processed in the US.

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Unacceptable policies that restrict & deter:

- Elimination of gang & domestic violence as grounds for asylum
- Family separation
- Repeated efforts to declare Mexico safe for asylum seekers awaiting claim decisions. (It's not...read why)

The list goes on 

doctorswithoutborders.org
US asylum restrictions are deepening the humanitarian crisis along the Mexican border

12:42 PM · Dec 13, 2018 

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Building walls and blocking safe routes to asylum do nothing to protect the security of people whose lives are most at risk.

Apprehensions at the southern border are at the lowest levels we've seen in decades. However, a greater proportion of arrivals are fleeing violence and requesting asylum, a fully legal act under US and international law. The issues we see at the US border due to an influx of children and families can be resolved with a different approach, one that treats all people with dignity and humanity, and guarantees the protection of asylum-seekers. We are calling on the United States and Mexico to protect vulnerable people, to uphold the legal right to seek asylum, and to ensure that people are not sent back to countries where they are at risk of violence or death.

It is illogical to invoke a humanitarian crisis but not to offer a single humanitarian solution. Walls and punitive policies increase risks for an already vulnerable population, and will only make a regional crisis worse.

Doctors w/o Borders 🌟

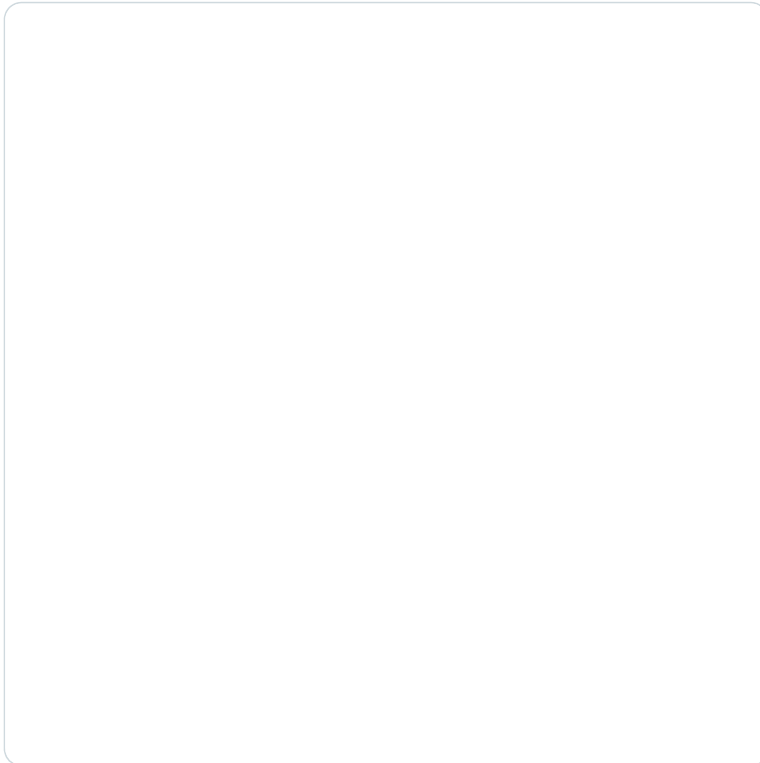
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Yes, the migration route is extremely dangerous.

But it's crucial to understand that many people are willing to take the risk because they're fleeing the kind of violence we usually see in war zones.

The US must uphold its own laws to protect the right to seek asylum.



3:05 PM · Jan 25, 2019



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We work with Central American migrants directly, and we also work with people who cross borders all around the world. We have witnessed refugee reception in a variety of contexts for decades. We know that nothing—not a wall or even an ocean—will ever stop people who are simply trying to survive.

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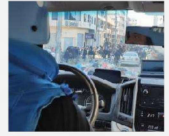
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