

How Porous Borders Fuel Human Trafficking in the United States

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Slavery is alive and well today all across the world, and it comes in the form of human trafficking.

January is National Human Trafficking Awareness Month. Human trafficking is today's form of slavery as men, women, and children are recruited and exploited by being forced into labor against their will. There are many forms of trafficking, most notably forced sex exploitation, as well as domestic servitude, and factory and agricultural work. Victims of human trafficking experience physical and psychological abuse while being isolated from the world. It's a tool their captors use to control them.

Every form of human trafficking is an atrocity, and every victim deserves to be rescued, rehabilitated, and cared for. One way in which the United States can help curb human trafficking is improving border security.

In the U.S., immigrants, especially immigrant women, make up the largest portion of trafficking victims. The Department of State estimates that in 2016, 57,700 victims had been trafficked into the U.S. annually. The true number is likely much larger and impossible to determine. In fiscal year 2021, there were nearly 2 million migrant apprehensions along the

U.S.-Mexico border, and that number only accounts for the people encountered by border agents. More than 400,000 more migrants eluded apprehension and are counted among the “got-aways.”

Last year also met another unfortunate record—147,000 unaccompanied migrant children entered into the U.S., 122,000 were taken into the U.S. custody, the previous record being 69,000.

While some minors make it into the country with information on family members they have in the U.S., others end up in the foster system. According to the Department of State, a large number of child sex trafficking survivors in the U.S. were at one time in the foster care system. Being an immigrant places these children at a higher risk since they tend to have lower levels of education, an inability to speak English, and a lack of family and friends.

Sophisticated transnational syndicates are notorious for using children to get single, adult males not just across the border, but through Border Patrol processing. Once these men are granted a stay, they smuggle the children back across the border where they will continue to be trafficked. Studies done by the Latin American branch of the Coalition Against Trafficking In Women estimates that 60% of Latin American children who set out to cross the border alone or with smugglers have been caught by the cartels and are being abused in child pornography or drug trafficking.

In 2019, the Department of Homeland Security, under the Trump Administration, launched a pilot program that allowed for ICE to DNA test families that were deemed suspicious of fraudulent activity. This program was designed to help prevent minors from being trafficked or recycled, and it resulted in criminal charges for the adults exploiting them. Yet this program was met with great disdain by activist groups and lawmakers and is not being used by the current administration.

Under the Biden administration, human traffickers are busier than ever, expediting the flow of migrants across the southern border. The president has made it abundantly clear that his administration does not wish to stop illegal immigration, nor does it wish to enable necessary enforcement of the immigration laws that are on the books. It is factors such as these that drive large numbers of people to surge the border, overwhelming federal and local agencies and—most importantly—risking the lives of millions.

With the Border Patrol overwhelmed by the large number of migrants to process, they are being compelled to get people through as quickly as possible, leading to a less rigorous vetting process. It is unknown how many victims of human trafficking have been smuggled across the border to date, but it is clear that scandalously loose border policies and inadequate federal resources incentivize innocent people to put themselves at the mercy of human smugglers, fueling human trafficking in the United States.

Human trafficking must be a fight that Americans work together to combat relentlessly, across party lines. In the U.S., almost no group is more vulnerable to falling victim than migrants recently arriving, specifically children who have no legal guardian.

The U.S. must work towards restricting human trafficking by securing and maintaining its borders. Customs and Border Protection personnel should be given every tool at their disposal to intercept and stop human trafficking efforts, both at and between ports of entry.