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BACKGROUNDER

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Managing the Central American Caravans: Immediate Enforcement Corrections and Regional Engagement Strategy Required

Ana Rosa Quintana and David Inserra

Abstract

Since early October 2018, large caravans from Central America have been making their way to the U.S. border. While small caravans have periodically been organized over the past decade, the volume and frequency of the current situation is unparalleled. Also unique to this situation are the openly destabilizing political intentions of the caravan organizers. Migrants in the caravan are mainly from crime-ravaged and economically depressed Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These vulnerable populations are ripe targets for the political and financial objectives of the caravan leaders. The U.S. should work with Mexico and its Central American counterparts to deter illegal immigration by fixing weaknesses in U.S. immigration laws, improving border security in the region, reassessing regional security assistance programs, and informing migrants of the reality of U.S. immigration and asylum laws.

Since early October, a series of large-scale caravans originating in Central America have been slowly making their way toward the U.S. border. While small-scale caravans have periodically been organized over the past decade, the volume and frequency of the current situation is unparalleled. Also unique to this situation are the openly destabilizing political intentions of the caravan organizers.[1]

Migrants in the caravan are mainly from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This is a crime-ravaged and economically depressed region referred to as the northern triangle of Central America. These vulnerable populations are ripe targets for the political objectives of the caravan leaders. This region is also the fastest-growing source for illegal border crossings into the U.S.[2]

Key Points

- Illegal immigration is a chronic problem for the U.S., with the new trend of caravans being a particularly problematic development.
- The caravans are full of desperate people who are well organized—and manipulated—by various groups and instigators. The migrants have little awareness of, or confidence in, the policies and statements of the U.S. and Mexican governments.
- The U.S. must fix its laws to be able to deter and stop illegal immigration and help those with legitimate asylum claims, while also working with, and setting higher expectations for aid to, Central American regional governments.
- U.S. policymakers must understand that managing the Central American caravans requires action on both foreign and domestic policy.
- Addressing the security, economic, and governance challenges of Central America is also a critical component to managing the outflows of people from the region.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/bg3372**

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

For decades, the U.S. has neglected to reform its immigration laws. While the U.S. has attempted to alleviate the root causes of illegal immigration in Central America's northern triangle, conditions in these countries continue to produce outflows of migrants. Caravans as a means of illegal immigration to the U.S. present a challenge not only to the U.S. but also to the source countries in Central America and local regions within Mexico. The U.S. should work with Mexico and its Central American counterparts to deter illegal immigration by fixing weaknesses in U.S. immigration laws, improving border security in the region, reassessing regional security assistance programs, and informing current and likely migrants of U.S. immigration laws.

Origins and Structure of the Caravans

The first and largest of the caravans began its arrival at the U.S.–Mexico border in Tijuana, located across the border from San Diego, on November 15. The group originated in San Pedro Sula in mid-October, a city in the northwest of Honduras. Originally, the group was in the few hundreds. At its highest, the total number was estimated to be over 7,000 migrants.[3] The numbers have trickled off as some have either returned home, broken away from the group, or accepted Mexico's offer of temporary asylum. Three other caravans are still further south, following a similar path as the first caravan, and together with the first caravan number more than 10,000.[4]

During the first caravan's journey to the U.S., the migrants were housed at Magdalena Mixhuca Olympic Park in Mexico City from November 4 to November 10. There, the two authors of this *Backgrounder* spoke to numerous migrants, caravan leaders, and American lawyers providing asylum counseling. Four notable themes stood out during their time there.

1. The caravan is full of desperate people,
2. These same desperate people are well organized,
3. The desperate people are also manipulated by various groups and instigators, and
4. They have little awareness of, or confidence in, the policies and statements of the U.S. and Mexican governments.

In many ways there is an information war going on. U.S. government efforts to get the word out about U.S. policy do not appear to have a deterrent impact. The U.S. government funds public diplomacy throughout Latin America with the goal of educating people about the dangers of migrating. Congress has even conditioned that 25 percent of U.S. assistance to the northern triangle be withheld until the Secretary of State can certify that "the governments are informing their citizens of the dangers of irregular migration" as well as "combatting human smuggling and trafficking."[5] Yet the large volume of apprehensions of Central Americans in Mexico and at the U.S. southern border reflects that the programs are not meeting their intended goal.

Word of Mouth and Effective Deterrence

There are multiple ways that a migrant may receive information about the journey to and into the U.S., but the most powerful way is by word of mouth. Family, friends, and organizers, both in the U.S. and in the caravan, serve as the primary source of information. While those with political motivations sometimes manipulate would-be migrants, the facts serve as a powerful motivator. Relatives or friends in the U.S. provide stories of their life in the U.S., or of their release into the United States by U.S. Border Patrol

1. "Honduras's Ambassador Affirms the Caravan Has Political Interests" (in Spanish), *La Prensa*, November 18, 2018, https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/1234711-410/embajador-honduras-afirma-caravana-tiene-interes-politico-electoral-migracion-honduras (accessed November 29, 2018).
2. Pew Research Center, "Rise in U.S. Immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras Outpaces Growth from Elsewhere," December 7, 2018, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/12/07/rise-in-u-s-immigrants-from-el-salvador-guatemala-and-honduras-outpaces-growth-from-elsewhere/ (accessed November 29, 2018).
3. Rafael Bernal, "Migrant Caravan Numbers Tops 7,500, Should Reach US in a Week: Report," *The Hill*, October 22, 2018, https://thehill.com/latino/412564-migrant-caravan-numbers-tops-7500-should-reach-us-in-a-week-report (accessed November 29, 2018).
4. Border Security Alert, "Mexico Caravan Bulletin," Vol. 2, No. 3, November 16, 2018.
5. Peter J. Meyer, "U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: An Overview," Congressional Research Service, October 25, 2018, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10371.pdf (accessed November 29, 2018).

MAP 1

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research, based on media reports. Dates are approximate.

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when picked up at the border. Such stories of illegal immigrants having a life in the U.S. that is far superior to their life in Central America give the migrants hope that they, too, will be able to enter and stay in the U.S. Without effective enforcement of U.S. laws at the border and in the interior, word-of-mouth messages will overwhelm any messaging campaign that the U.S. government can undertake. Similarly, strong enforcement results in word-of-mouth deterrence that can decrease illegal immigration.

The policies of the U.S. contribute to the perception. While illegal immigration has been a problem for decades, and northern triangle countries have been the leading source of illegal immigration for at least a decade, the most recent trends of illegal immigration have involved unprecedented numbers of family units and children largely from the northern triangle.

This change appears to be explained through U.S policies that require U.S. immigration officials to catch and release illegal immigrants with children. The decades-old *Flores* settlement and the well-intentioned Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) have created these restrictions and loopholes in immigration enforcement, which, when combined with ever-increasing asylum claims, have swamped the immigration system. The result is that fewer than 2 percent of non-Mexican family units and children apprehended in fiscal year (FY) 2017 have been repatriated to their home country, in comparison to 82 percent of single adults in that same time. In 2008, there were 5,100 referrals for "credible fear" interviews, and by 2016, there were almost 92,000 such cases.[6] The average wait time in U.S. immigration courts has increased from 438 days in 2008 to 718 days in 2018.[7]

6. Nadwa Mossaad and Ryan Baugh, "Refugees and Asylees: 2016," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, January 2018, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Refugees_Asylees_2016_0.pdf (accessed November 29, 2018).
7. TRAC Reports Inc., "Immigration Court Backlog Tool Pending Cases and Length of Wait by Nationality, State, Court, and Hearing Location," September 2018, http://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/court_backlog/ (accessed November 29, 2018).

Caravan Leaders Manipulate the Migrants

The journey through Central America and Mexico is full of hazards, and migrants are frequently robbed, sexually assaulted, and go for long stretches without eating. Migrants in the first caravan reported sleeping outdoors for weeks at a time, and nearly 100 were kidnapped by the violent Los Zetas cartel.[8] Despite knowledge of those conditions, caravan organizers encourage migrants to make the dangerous journey.

During the authors' field research, caravan-organizing groups, such as Pueblo Sin Fronteras (People Without Borders), said that they would act as intermediaries between the migrants and local governments as the migrants traveled illegally from Honduras, Guatemala, throughout Mexico, and eventually to the U.S. They would call local governments and let them know they were en route with the caravan and media, essentially coercing them, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society groups into providing the migrants with food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. This has become a significant financial burden on the Mexican government.

On repeated occasions, the authors heard leaders of the caravan tell the migrants that once the migrants reached the U.S., the United Nations would be obligated to intervene on their behalf. Statements echoing this sentiment were routinely told to the migrants, compelling vulnerable people to continue along the dangerous journey. The authors asked numerous migrants about whether they would accept Mexico's offer for temporary asylum, work permits, and schooling, and the answers were mixed. While many were unaware of the program, others were told by caravan leaders that it was a false promise. At the assembly led by the caravan leaders on November 7 to plan out next steps, migrants were told to reject Mexico's asylum offer. This point should highlight that caravan leaders are not interested in the well-being of the migrants, but in their own broader objectives, whether financial or political.

The authors also observed that many migrants did not seem to understand what awaited them at the U.S. border. Almost all individuals interviewed noted a desire for better economic opportunity or concern over society-wide violence—but not a fear of specific persecution—as the reason they were making the trek. This aligns with data on previous asylum claims, as less than 10 percent of asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras end up receiving asylum.[9] Family reunification, a better job or standard of living, or even getting away from societal violence does not meet the asylum threshold of persecution. It is worth noting that the U.S. State Department warned the caravans via local radio not to come to the U.S., but missed the opportunity to communicate with the caravan directly, either on site in Mexico City or along the way.

Moving thousands of people across three countries requires significant coordination and resources. Based on numerous credible media reports, it is believed that Honduras's radical leftist Libre party and other like-minded groups organized the initial San Pedro Sula caravan.[10] Libre is not just a political party but also a destabilizing movement. It was founded in 2011 by former Honduran President Manuel (Mel) Zelaya who was removed from power in 2009 after repeated attempts to undermine the constitutional order and rule of law. Zelaya is an ally of socialist governments in Latin America, such as the Castro and Maduro regimes in Cuba and Venezuela. Following Libre's losses in the 2013 and 2017 presidential elections, Libre turned to a public campaign

8. Oscar Balderas, "About 100 Members of the Migrant Caravan Were Kidnapped and Handed Over to a Cartel: Oaxaca Ombudsman" (in Spanish), *Huff Post*, May 11, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.mx/amp/2018/11/05/unos-100-miembros-de-la-caravana-migrante-fueron-secuestrados-y-entregados-a-un-cartel-ombudsman-de-oaxaca_a_23580815/ (accessed November 29, 2018).
9. Nadwa Mossaad and Ryan Baugh, "Refugees and Asylees: 2016," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, January 2018, Figure 6, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Refugees_Asylees_2016_0.pdf (accessed November 29, 2018), and Kirstjen Nielsen, Social Media Statement by the Department of Homeland Security, November 26, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/homelandsecurity/posts/2230592780286679?__tn__=K-R (access November 30, 2018).
10. La Tribuna, "Bartolo Fuentes: Organized the Caravan with Leaders of Libre," October 16, 2018, http://www.latribuna.hn/2018/10/16/bartolo-fuentes-con-dirigentes-de-libre-organizaron-la-caravana/ (accessed November 29, 2018), and Alfredo Corchado, "Honduran Denies He's the Force Behind Caravan, Says Migrants Just Want Jobs and Freedom From Violence," *Dallas News*, November 20, 2018, https://www.dallasnews.com/news/immigration/2018/11/20/honduran-denies-force-behind-caravan-says-migrants-just-want-jobs-andfreedom-violence (accessed November 29, 2018).

of generating turmoil and instability in Honduras.[11] Like-minded groups, such as Pueblo Sin Fronteras, have also supported their efforts.[12]

The Situation at the Border

With thousands of migrants arriving in Tijuana, tensions on the U.S. border have risen. As the caravan has arrived, the sheer numbers have overwhelmed the local government's ability to care and provide support. With the U.S. accepting up to 100 migrants every day to adjudicate their asylum claims, the number of those waiting in line keeps growing. While figures are constantly changing, currently around 6,800 migrants are camped out in Tijuana and 1,200 are in the nearby city of Mexicali, located 100 miles east of Tijuana.[13] While the Mexican government has been able to prevent the Mexicali group from moving into Tijuana, small groups have been able to join the Tijuana caravan.

According to Mexican government officials, there are nearly twice as many men than women and children, though exact, credible numbers are hard to come by.[14] Mexican citizens in Tijuana have protested the presence of the caravan, and the mayor states that already scarce resources are running low.[15] Tijuana's town treasurer estimates that the city is spending nearly $30,000 a day on the caravan (for services such as housing, food, and medical attention, among other things).[16] Local officials are asking the federal government for support, but as of this publication, have not received any.[17] Conditions are poor and unsanitary in the stadium being used as a makeshift camp.

On November 19, a few days after the initial wave of migrants arrived in Tijuana, U.S. officials temporarily closed the northbound lanes of the San Ysidro Port of Entry in order to add additional barriers. The Department of Homeland Security received reports that some in the caravan might try to rush through the port.[18] This worry was realized when several days later, roughly 500 migrants attempted to storm the port of entry, prompting the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to close the port to both inbound and outbound traffic. The migrants tried to cross in three different areas, including across the Tijuana River, the Chaparral crossing facility, and the train crossing at the San Ysidro Port of Entry. Some managed to breach the border barriers, resulting in several dozen arrests.[19] In the process of attempting to breach the U.S. border barrier, some migrants began throwing rocks and other projectiles that damaged U.S. vehicles and assets and hit border agents, who were not seriously injured due to their body armor.

It was in response to these acts of violence that the CBP fired tear gas into the crowd. The use of tear gas is an accepted non-lethal method of crowd control frequently used by law enforcement officials. Indeed, in 2013, the Obama Administration's CBP responded to a crowd of around 100 migrants at the San Diego border that was throwing rocks at Border Patrol agents with the use of pepper spray. That same year, the CBP used tear gas 27 times. Such non-lethal tools are the *appropriate* way to deescalate a violent situation. The CBP is not to blame for deploying such tools to stop violence, but those who threw projectiles and

11. Ana Rosa Quintana, "Caravan Activists Are Weaponizing Poor Central Americans," The Daily Signal, October 18, 2018, https://www.dailysignal.com/2018/10/18/caravan-activists-are-weaponizing-poor-central-americans/.
12. Christopher Sherman, "U.S. Agents Fire Tear Gas on Migrants Approaching Border," *Time*, November 25, 2018, http://time.com/5462886/migrants-central-america-mexico-border/ (accessed November 29, 2018).
13. Gustavo Solis, "Money, Resources Running Out for Tijuana Migrant Shelter," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 27, 2018, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-second-shelter-20181127-story.html (accessed November 30, 2018).
14. Greg Norman, "Tijuana Mayor Says $30,000-a-Day Funding for Migrants Is About to Run Out," Fox News, November 28, 2018, https://www.foxnews.com/world/tijuana-mayor-says-30000-a-day-funding-for-migrants-is-about-to-run-out (accessed November 30, 2018).
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Solis, "Money, Resources Running Out For Tijuana Migrant Shelter," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 29, 2018, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/border-baja-california/sd-me-second-shelter-20181127-story.html (accessed November 29, 2018).
18. Kirstjen Nielsen, #SanYsidro, Twitter, November 19, 2018, https://twitter.com/SecNielsen/status/1064580881099235330 (accessed November 29, 2018).
19. Anna Giaritelli, "42 Arrested in Sunday Border Swarm, But Others Sneaked Past US Agents," *Washington Examiner*, November 26, 2018, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/42-arrested-in-sunday-border-swarm-but-others-sneaked-past-us-agents (accessed November 30, 2018).

Asylum Process and Loopholes

Under current U.S. law, anyone who requests asylum must be already in the U.S. or at a U.S. port of entry, and must meet the same standard as a refugee in order to receive asylum. A refugee or asylum seeker must be "a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."[1]

Asylum seekers can claim affirmative asylum (when an immigrant or visitor to the U.S. requests asylum from the Department of Homeland Security proactively), or defensive asylum (when an individual claims asylum in the process of deportation proceedings before an immigration judge to prevent removal from the U.S.). The migrants waiting in Tijuana are an example of affirmative asylum, a process more easily managed. Both affirmative and defensive asylum claims have increased over the past decade, and while both present challenges to the U.S., it is the defensive asylum process that is currently such a problem.

Rather than show up at a legal port of entry and affirmatively claim asylum, some try to sneak or rush into the U.S.—and after being caught, placed in removal proceedings, and charged with illegal entry,[2] they claim asylum defensively. Generally, these cases are decided quickly, and the illegal migrants are often sentenced to time served before being removed from the U.S.[3] Prosecuting aliens for illegal entry acts as a deterrent: While the first conviction may only be a misdemeanor, a subsequent conviction is a felony that may result in significant jail time.[4]

But if an illegal border crosser claims asylum, the asylum claim must be adjudicated first, starting with a "credible fear" hearing to determine if there is a significant chance that the asylum seeker has a credible claim, and ending before an immigration judge, a process that can take months or years. According to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals' interpretation[5] of a settlement agreement entered into by the Clinton Administration in 1997 in Flores v. Reno, however, the government is not allowed to detain an illegally entered juvenile, even if accompanied by the parents, for more than 20 days. So, while waiting for this asylum process to finish, the government is required to release the child.

As a result, the government had the choice to either release the child and hold the parents, or to "catch and release" the entire family into the United States. As experience has shown, in the time it will take to complete this process, 31 percent of aliens released into the U.S. will not show up at their immigration court hearings and 40 percent do not even file for asylum,[6] encouraging more illegal immigration. Indeed, less than 2 percent of non-Mexican family units and children apprehended in FY 2017 have been repatriated to their home countries, in comparison to 82 percent of single adults in that same time.[7] Thus existing U.S. laws—which require the release of anyone at the border who passes an initial "credible fear" hearing for asylum with a child—are facilitating significant illegal immigration into the U.S.

1. Nadwa Mossaad and Ryan Baugh, "Refugees and Asylees: 2016," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, January 2018, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Refugees_Asylees_2016_0.pdf (accessed May 3, 2018).
2. 8 U.S. Code § 1325 (1965), https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-29/0-0-0-9025.html (accessed June 22, 2018).
3. Miriam Jordan, "Swift Frontier Justice for Migrants Brought to Federal Courts," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/us/border-immigration-courts.html (accessed June 22, 2018).
4. 8 U. S. Code § 1326 (1965), https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-29/0-0-0-9047.html (accessed June 22, 2018).
5. *Flores v. Lynch*, 828 F.3d 898 (9th Cir. 2016), https://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2016/07/06/15-56434.pdf (accessed June 22, 2018).
6. E-mail to authors from Department of Homeland Security, Office of Public Affairs, November 29, 2018.
7. E-mail to authors from Department of Homeland Security, Office of Public Affairs, October 31, 2018.

tried to cross ports of entry while reportedly hiding behind women and children are to blame. Mexico has promised to deport those involved in the incident.

Adding to the complexity of the situation, a U.S. federal judge issued an injunction against the Trump Administration's recent executive order that would have denied asylum to those crossing the border illegally. The order would have deterred asylum seekers from illegally entering by requiring they go through ports of entry. With the executive order on hold, migrants are increasingly likely to attempt to sneak across the border. Indeed, as the number of migrants in Tijuana rises and patience and resources run low, some migrants are already suggesting that they will try to cross the border illegally, while others are giving up. Similarly, there are conflicting reports that the U.S. and Mexico are working on a deal dubbed "Remain in Mexico" to keep asylum seekers in Mexico while they await their immigration proceedings, which would better manage asylum seekers at ports of entry.[20]

A Complete Solution—Possible and Necessary

Caravans as a means of migrating to the U.S. have the potential to become a leading form of illegal migration and entry. There is little up-front cost to the migrants, combined with a strong stream of left-wing organizations who are manipulating desperate and uneducated people with a false bill of goods. Combined with regional governments incapable of, and at times lacking the political will to, address the root causes, migration will continue to fill these caravans. Any policy to manage caravans and illegal immigration must fix both the U.S.'s immigration laws and address the regional challenges that drive migration. U.S. policymakers should:

- **Adjust the asylum claim process.** There are multiple ways Congress could improve the asylum system. Rather than applying for asylum at U.S. borders, asylum seekers travelling to the U.S. southern border should be required to have their asylum claims heard by a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum officer at a U.S. consulate in Mexico. Interviewers should also ask the asylum seeker why he or she did not assert asylum in other countries, such as Mexico. U.S. immigration officials should consider the failure to explain refusal to pursue asylum in other countries in their decisions. Congress could also consider new standards that make it even harder for illegal border crossers to claim asylum. The Administration should pursue safe-third-country and other agreements with countries in Latin America to better control the asylum process.

- **Close the loopholes.** Congress should reject the *Flores* settlement in order to allow accompanied children to remain with their parents while awaiting asylum adjudication or prosecution of violations of immigration law. Congress should reform the TVPRA to allow unaccompanied children from countries that are non-contiguous with the U.S. to be quickly repatriated to their home countries.

- **Increase funding for border barriers, immigration court judges, prosecutors, and associated staff.** The U.S. immigration adjudication and court system is falling further and further behind the case load from traditional immigration court proceedings and humanitarian claims, such as asylum. More immigration judges, prosecutors, and staff to assist in these proceedings, as well as more USCIS asylum officers and facilities for adjudicating cases, are essential to enforcing U.S. immigration laws in a timely and effective manner.

- **Improve U.S. government public affairs efforts at discouraging illegal immigration.** As a component of a broader regional strategy to prevent illegal immigration, a targeted public affairs campaign to inform would-be migrants about the dangers of the journey and U.S. immigration law would serve to deter caravans. While the caravan was in Mexico City for nearly a week, the U.S. government missed an opportunity to provide the migrants with information on entry requirements

20. Joshua Partlow and Nick Miroff, "Deal with Mexico Paves Way for Asylum Overhaul at U.S. Border," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/deal-with-mexico-paves-way-for-asylum-overhaul-at-us-border/2018/11/24/87b9570a-ef74-11e8-9236-bb94154151d2_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.0638104b3b69 (accessed November 30, 2018), and Amy Guthrie, "Incoming Mexico Gov't: No Deal to Host US Asylum Seekers," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/incoming-mexico-govt-no-deal-to-host-us-asylum-seekers/2018/11/24/43146a50-f04a-11e8-8b47-bd0975fd6199_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3e54e7aeead5 (accessed November 30, 2018).

into the U.S. Instead, the migrants were provided with inaccurate information and coached by left-wing activists. Clearly, U.S. government efforts to dissuade migrants about illegal immigration to the U.S. are not working.

- **Align U.S. assistance funding levels to Mexico with U.S. national security interests.** A safer and more prosperous Mexico will reduce the security threats to the U.S., alleviate the drivers for illegal immigration, and allow both countries to focus on productive matters in the bilateral relationship. Yet U.S. assistance to Mexico in the form of the Merida Initiative has decreased from the all-time high of $639.2 million in FY 2010 to $130.9 million in FY 2017.[21] If caravans continue, the Mexican government will be bearing the majority of the cost in caring for them. The U.S. should offset Mexico's cooperation in sharing the burden in next year's budget.[22]

- **Assess the efficacy of the Central American development package, the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America.** Following the 2014 unaccompanied-minor crisis at the U.S. southern border, the U.S., El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras launched this program to address the factors driving illegal migration in the region. Guatemala's northern neighbor Mexico collaborates with the U.S. on mitigating these shared challenges. The volume and frequency of the illegal immigration toward the U.S. indicates a shortcoming. Congress should request impact reports from implementing agencies that gauge whether the programs are meeting their intended objectives.[23]

- **Improve Central America's border security capacity.** Uncontrolled borders in the northern triangle have been a long-standing problem. The insecurity in these regions allows criminality to proliferate and mass movements of people across state lines. The U.S. and Mexican governments should work with their regional counterparts to improve their border security policies and programs. They should support El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in expanding border patrols to ungoverned areas, modernizing border crossings and encouraging the creation of joint border patrols. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security should host an annual high-level border-control working group to share best practices with the region.

- **Elevate the standard of cooperation with regional governments.** Foreign aid investments by U.S. partners have resulted in few tangible improvements, and continued illegal immigration is causing U.S. policymakers to question the utility of foreign aid investments by the U.S. Rather than cutting assistance, Congress and the Administration should evaluate whether current foreign assistance conditions have produced measurable improvements in the region.

U.S. Enforcement and Engagement with Regional Counterparts Go Hand in Hand

Illegal immigration is a chronic problem for the U.S., with the new trend of caravans being a particularly problematic development. The U.S. must fix its laws to be able to deter and stop illegal immigration and help those with legitimate asylum claims, while also working with, and setting higher expectations for aid to, Central American regional governments. U.S. policymakers must understand that managing the Central American caravans requires action on both foreign and domestic policy. Addressing the security, economic, and governance challenges of Central America is also a critical component to managing the outflows of people from the region.

*—**Ana Rosa Quintana** is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America and the Western Hemisphere, and **David Inserra** is Policy Analyst for Homeland Security and Cyber Security, in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

21. Clare Ribando Seelke, "Mexico: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, January 29, 2018, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42917.pdf (accessed November 19, 2018).
22. Ana Rosa Quintana, "After the Election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador: Charting the Road Ahead for U.S.–Mexico Relations," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3359, November 1, 2018, https://www.heritage.org/americas/report/after-the-election-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-charting-the-road-ahead-us-mexico.
23. Ibid.