

Analysis: The migrant caravan and the crisis along the border

November 28, 2018

EDITOR'S NOTE: The original article was posted to the Texas Baptist Life [blog](#) on Nov. 21, 2018.

As followers of Christ, we should not bear false witness in our speech. Therefore, it is important to understand some basics about the immigration system. Over the last several weeks, we have been bombarded with news stories about “diseased” migrants, “invading hordes,” “terrorists” and “drug dealers.” These news reports have sensationalized this issue to stoke fear on this side of the border.

Why do migrants travel in caravans?

Migrant caravan refers to a large group of migrants. The word has been in the news in recent weeks because a new caravan of about 5,000 migrants set out from the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula on Oct. 12. They are traveling mostly on foot toward the U.S. southern border. Some have arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, where they plan to wait for an opportunity to present themselves at a port of entry to claim asylum.

While this is not the first migrant caravan to set out from Central America, it may be the largest. Last spring, a group of [1,500 migrants](#) set out from Central America, but by the time they reached the United States, the group was less than a third of its original size.

Traveling as a caravan provides some safety from traffickers and gangs. For the women, traveling with the group may reduce the likelihood of physical or sexual violence.

Why are migrants traveling so far?

According to reports from Immigration and Enforcement, most of those headed to the southern border are coming from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Some migrants are fleeing in search of better economic opportunities. Others are fleeing political instability, violence and conscription into gang activities.

According to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras consistently rank among the most violent countries in the world. Due to corruption, there is little protection from extortion, and 95 percent of crimes reported go unprosecuted in some areas. MS-13 and MS-18 are the region's largest gangs. Both were formed in Los Angeles, but their presence grew in Central America in the mid-1990s after large-scale deportations from the United States.

The number of asylum seekers coming from Northern Triangle countries has exploded in the last ten years. According to *Time Magazine*, the number of asylum seekers apprehended by border agents has skyrocketed to about 97,000—a 2,000 percent increase from 2008.

The decision to migrate is personal and complicated. Some will decide to stay in their home countries or seek asylum in Mexico, but most are facing circumstances in their home countries most Americans cannot imagine.

What happens when migrants reach the border?

First, it's important to distinguish those seeking asylum from traffickers and those migrating for purely economic reasons without proper documents. Seeking asylum is a legal form of immigration. Those migrating for purely economic reasons are not eligible for asylum and once

apprehended can be deported for crossing our border illegally.

[Asylum](#) is sought by a person inside the United States who is seeking to avoid returning to their home country based on their need for protection from persecution in their country of origin based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group.

There are two ways to claim asylum—affirmatively or defensively. To claim asylum affirmatively, the applicant must have entered the United States on a valid visa. A defensive claim of asylum is made once a migrant is in immigration court while in deportation proceedings or when presenting themselves at a port of entry without a valid visa.

Most of those arriving from Central America are making defensive applications for asylum and are detained. They must explain to an immigration officer how they have a credible fear of persecution based on the criteria listed above. The immigration officer then determines whether there is a significant possibility they will be eligible for asylum.

Those who do not pass the “credible fear” test are scheduled for deportation proceedings. Those who pass the “credible fear” test may be detained or released while waiting to go before an immigration judge who makes the final determination on the validity of an asylum claim. In 2017, almost 62 percent of asylum cases were [denied](#).

Current policy means most are detained until they can see a judge, but applicants can be released if there is a lack of available detention space. For example, there are currently no detention facilities that can hold fathers and their young children and only three in the country for mothers with young children.

It can take six months to several years for a migrant’s case to be heard by an immigration judge. Once asylum has been granted, asylees can work legally in the United States and can apply for permanent residency after

they have resided in the United States for one year.

The current global refugee crisis

We currently are living through a global refugee crisis. According to the Office of the U.N. Commissioner on Refugees, 68.5 million people have been forcibly displaced as they flee war, gang violence or other life-threatening circumstances. This is the largest number of displaced people at any time in modern history. Many countries are grappling with the same issues as the United States, the Northern Triangle being just one global hotspot around the world.

There are no easy answers, and certainly, the United States cannot take every refugee and asylee who would seek to come here, but there are some possible policy solutions—to be discussed in a second article—that enhance border security and improve the asylum process for migrants.

Kathryn Freeman is the director of public policy for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.