

# POLICY *focus*

RECIPES FOR RATIONAL GOVERNMENT

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## Crisis at the U.S. Border

by Sara Carter, Visiting Fellow

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### Introduction

Based on recommendations from border patrol professionals, the Trump Administration requested \$5.7 billion in funding to improve and extend physical barriers along the southern U.S. border. Congressional Democrats denied this request, resulting in a shutdown of the federal government lasting more than four weeks in early 2019.

### IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Why Care
- 2 More Information
- 2 A Long, Dangerous Journey
- 3 Special Interest Aliens
- 3 Hidden in the Brush
- 4 Bangladeshi Illegal Migration Increased 300 Percent from 2017
- 4 Trafficking Illegal Immigrants from Countries Associated with Terrorism
- 5 Seeking Asylum—or Coached to Say So
- 6 What You Can Do

The porous southern border poses a national security risk to Americans as well as a safety risk to the hundreds of migrants who attempt to enter the country daily. **One in three women** who travel across Mexico in hopes of reaching the U.S. is sexually assaulted along the way. And many migrants bring children with them on this perilous journey, posing a safety threat to these children and creating a challenge for U.S. policy on family and child detention.

Immigrants at the southern border do not all originate in Latin America. Foreign nationals from all over the world attempt to enter the U.S. via the border, sometimes from countries with significant ties to terrorism. Often, it's clear that migrants have been coached to seek asylum as refugees. Migrants and traffickers know of and exploit the weaknesses in our border security, as well as our immigration laws.

In this special policy focus, IWF Visiting Fellow Sara Carter provides original reporting and firsthand observations from her trip to the U.S. border. Through her conversations with government officials, border patrol agents, and migrants, Sara depicts the gruesome reality of the humanitarian crisis at the southern border. This crisis will only be alleviated when the U.S. acts to secure the border.

## Why You Should Care

The United States has a legal duty to protect our citizens and a moral duty to protect those who travel to our shores and borders. We are failing in these duties, as an unsafe border invites abuse.

- **Humanitarian Crisis:** Migrants who believe they will gain entry to the U.S. undertake a dangerous journey from their countries of origin (many of which are fraught with corruption, chaos and gang violence). Many pay large sums to traffickers; many also suffer harm, abuse, or exploitation along the way. An insecure border invites more migrants to attempt this perilous trek.
- **National Security Risk:** A porous border makes it impossible for U.S. border patrol officials to accurately track who has entered the country and where they are from. Other countries with lax migration policies become layover sites for foreign nationals whose ultimate destination is the U.S.
- **Solutions:** It doesn't have to be this way. The U.S. can secure our southern border by allocating sufficient resources for increased physical barriers to deter migrants from crossing undetected. As a future goal, the U.S. can pursue comprehensive reform that better enforces current laws and fixes our broken immigration system.

Read on to learn more about the situation at the border.

## More Information

### A Long, Dangerous Journey

All migrants take serious risks to travel to the U.S.-Mexico border, but women face particular challenges as they are more likely to be sexually victimized and exploited by smugglers, cartels, and even police.

Overall, the number and share of female migrants who arrive at the **southern U.S. border** has increased significantly since FY 2012. However, the migrant “caravans” or waves from Central America were overwhelmingly male, increasing the risk of sexual violence for the relatively small number of women travellers.

Along the arduous journey, women, men, and their families travel without access to medical services or other critical resources. Often, they arrive with serious health **issues, infections or injuries** they've suffered along the way. The lack of medical services is particularly hazardous for women migrants who are pregnant.

Understandably, many of these women migrants are fleeing corruption, violence, and chaos in their home countries, which have failed to maintain basic public safety. Border control agents are often the first line of help for desperate migrants when they reach the U.S., but our failure to maintain a secure border invites criminal behavior and propagates an unsafe environment for migrants, both women and men.

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## Special Interest Aliens

When I visited the U.S.-Mexico border, I encountered several migrants: First, two Bangladeshi men made their way down an old dirt road that buttresses land owned by a private citizen, just 500 yards from the border. The men, who are considered Special Interest Aliens, because they originated from a nation associated with terrorist organizations, had been smuggled that day from Reynosa, Mexico, to McAllen, Texas. They will be counted against the Department of Homeland Security's 2019 total for Special Interest Aliens.

The numbers for 2018 have not been officially released but several U.S. government officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told me that Border Patrol apprehended roughly 1500 Special Interest Aliens, known as SIAs, last year. SIAs are illegal aliens from countries with significant ties to terrorism, have a criminal history and have unusual travel patterns to enter the United States. People being smuggled from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, like Bangladesh, are some examples of illegal immigrants the DHS considers a higher security risk when attempting to enter the U.S. illegally.

For this reason, said Derek Maltz, a former Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the DOJ, DEA, and Special Operations Division (SOD), the dangers increase when considering the number of Special Interest Aliens attempting to cross the U.S. southern border.

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“The safety and security of America must be the top priority,” said Maltz, who advocates for stricter border security. “There are evil people around the world with very dangerous agendas that are trying to hurt our country. We can't allow SIAs to illegally come into this great country, we need security now...We must secure the border and update the laws before it too late”

## Hidden in the Brush

At first the two Bangladeshi men were hidden by acres of rough thorny brush and trees that make up the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge. They were difficult to see until they rounded a bend in the road. The pair had traveled nearly three months and over 9,000 miles from Bangladesh by plane, car, bus and foot. By the time they spotted me on the road they had no idea they had already crossed the American border.

They had no backpacks or identification. They were simply hoping to get into the United States to declare political asylum, they said.

An ICE officer, who frequently encounters people smuggled from Bangladesh, told me that the cost is usually \$60,000 to smuggle them into the U.S. The ICE official noted because they are SIAs the cost of smuggling them is significantly higher. By no means is the crossing of the Bangladeshi men an aberration, said a Border Patrol official in the McAllen sector, “we see them all the time.”

## Bangladeshi Illegal Migration Increased 300 Percent from 2017

According to a January 2019 Homeland Security Report, “DHS Border Patrol Agents routinely encounter SIAs at the border. It was recently reported that, as of September 2018, 630 Bangladeshi nationals have been arrested in Fiscal Year 2018 trying to enter the U.S. illegally in Laredo, Texas alone—a 300 percent increase from FY2017.”

The roughly 1500 SIA’s apprehended in 2018 “highlight the very real threat we face in determining who is entering the country,” a senior Federal Law Enforcement official said. In 2017, that number was just over 1200 individuals and in 2016, approximately 1400 SIAs were apprehended, according to DHS statistics.

A January 2019 report from the House Homeland Security Staff referenced the crisis, stating that tens of thousands of SIAs have traveled from their nation of origin through South America, Central America and Mexico attempting to gain entry into the United States.

“On a recent Committee staff delegation trip to Latin America, Panamanian officials communicated to Committee staff that tens of thousands of SIAs have entered Panama since 2014. Colombian officials communicated similar numbers to Committee staff, stating that hundreds of SIAs have entered Colombia each year for the past few years. In both countries, nearly all the SIA migrants were headed to the United States and originated from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa—including Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Bangladesh, India, Eritrea, and many others. Additionally, encounters with these special interest individuals resulted in the seizure of tens of thousands of fraudulent documents—including passports and visas—that facilitated travel from their countries of origin through the Americas.”

## Trafficking Illegal Immigrants from Countries Associated with Terrorism

The man from Bangladesh who spoke a little English said his name was Pream, to the best of my understanding. He attempted to explain to me the route he took to arrive in McAllen, Texas. He said that he and his companion had traveled from Bangladesh by plane to Dubai. After reaching Dubai, they eventually made their way to Brazil. There are significantly less travel restrictions in Brazil for those traveling from abroad, ICE officials told me.

“Brazil is a main first hub for people traveling from overseas who are attempting to enter the United States illegally,” said a federal law enforcement official, with direct knowledge of the issue. “Once they are in Brazil, many SIAs make their way to Panama and then through Central America, Mexico and final destination the United States.”

As stated in the Homeland Security report, many of the SIAs go through Panama or Columbia before being trafficked through Central America. And a long standing agreement with Panama to help track those attempting to travel to the U.S. illegally has helped identify and stop some dangerous illegal migrants from making their way to the U.S., a U.S. government official said.

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The Panamanian government tracks SIAs through a Biometric records system. Foreigners entering Panama are put into the system, which is located throughout various checkpoints in the country. That system has resulted in the enrollment of 33,000 individuals, mainly traveling to the U.S. illegally, from Fiscal Year 2011 to Fiscal Year 2018. Of those individuals recorded, 25,000 have been deemed Special Interest Aliens and roughly 8,000 have had a criminal history.

More importantly, 60 individuals that Panamanian authorities have registered since 2011 in the Biometric system “were known or suspected terrorists,” the U.S. government official added.

“These are the ones we catch,” the government source said. “What about the hundreds or thousands of SIAs that slip through the cracks and what about those tied to terrorism?”

In fact, there are no real metrics to gauge how many illegal immigrants make their way into the United States without being detected and more importantly where they are from, the official added.

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## Seeking Asylum—or Coached to Say So

On another encounter, I met a group of eight illegal immigrants with small flashlights, making their way down the very same dirt road. There were two children with them, a woman and several men.

This group was actually looking for Border Patrol agents to turn themselves in. When I asked them why they were coming they said in Spanish what the Bangladeshi men said in English, “asylum.”

“Asylum from what?” I asked, in Spanish.

“From the gangs,” they said.

That night Border Patrol apprehended more than 240 illegal crossing illegally into the Rio Grande Valley.

“They have been told by the smugglers what to say and how to get around our legal system,” said the ICE officer, on condition that he not be named. “There isn’t a person we don’t take into custody that doesn’t claim asylum. We let them go with an order to report to court. They almost never appear and disappear into our country.”

“It’s a dangerous situation,” a border patrol agent told me. “One of these days, our government is going to regret doing nothing but by then it might be too late for some people. Even now, sometimes it feels like it already is.”

# What You Can Do

## Get Informed

Learn more about the crisis at the U.S. border. Visit:

- [SaraACarter.com](http://SaraACarter.com)
- [Immigration Questions](#)
- [Department of Homeland Security](#)

## Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

## Become a Leader in the Community

Get a group together each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

## Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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## ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility.

IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.

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