

The Immigration “Crisis”

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The United States is experiencing what some refer to as a migration “problem” or “crisis” due to a lack of cross-cultural education and understanding. The diction choices and xenophobic propaganda utilized to explain this phenomenon exacerbate the perceived problems and further alienate and dehumanize migrant populations, particularly Mexican migrants. Current United States immigration policies focus on building walls and restricting numbers of migrants, but these policies have proven to be dangerous and ineffective. However, solutions such as: increasing national education, providing immigration court resources, improving ICE holding facility conditions, and subscribing to comprehensive immigration reform policies could be a humanitarian approach to shifting the currently broken immigration process.

Issue #1: Xenophobic Language

One of the driving forces for the broken immigration system in the United States is the lack of education and understanding surrounding migrant populations. Many people have preconceived notions about migrant populations because of diction utilized to describe them. For example, current United States politicians utilize the term “alien” as a title for migrant populations, ‘other’ing them and rendering them unwanted and unwelcome (Luiselli, 2017). Along with this, politicians describe the process of immigration as a “crisis” or “problem” in the United States, intensifying the dehumanization and blaming of migrant populations. Simple diction choices may seem insignificant in the larger scale of the immigration debate, yet these changes in language have had detrimental impacts on migrant populations. For example, prior to the declaration of an “immigration crisis” in 2014, minors who were detained at the border had twelve months to find a lawyer for their case. However, with this declaration, the window for finding a lawyer was reduced to 21 days (Luiselli, 2017). Additionally, since this declaration, the United States government has

funneled money into tightening borders and deporting illegal immigrants, yet these policies have not deterred illegal immigrants and instead have made immigration more dangerous (Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2012). The labeling of vulnerable populations as “alien” and describing their journeys as a “crisis” or “problem” has exacerbated the mistreatment of migrant populations and created further divides and misunderstandings between cultures.

Issue #2: Misunderstanding Migrant Populations

Additionally, many Americans are currently misinformed about individuals’ reasons for immigrating. Some believe that immigrants are entirely unskilled and are coming to steal jobs or to smuggle drugs (Harsanyi, 2019). Others believe immigrants are purposefully illegally immigrating because of catch-and-release loopholes in the system, which enable them to bypass the legal process and live in the United States with no penalty (Biggs, 2018). However, the reality is that many migrants are coming to the United States in attempts to flee gang violence, which does not legally qualify them for refugee status (DeParle, 2018). For example, Markham (2017) tells a story of two brothers, Ernesto and Raul, who are running for their lives after witnessing gang violence and war close in around them in their home country. The two brothers run from El Salvador, a country whose murder rate is twenty times higher than the United States (DeParle, 2018). The brothers could attempt to legally immigrate, but unfortunately, this is a lengthy and unrealistic process for those fleeing violence. In 2018, the number of backlogged immigration cases reached 1.1 million, yet the number of completed cases was only 200,000 (Immigration Prof., 2018). This makes legally immigrating a lengthy process that is unattainable for many migrant populations who need a speedy arrival, because the average case now takes about 578 days to complete (Lu & Watkins, 2019). Yet, many Americans misunderstand this reality due to a lack of proper education and a surplus of xenophobic propaganda surrounding illegal immigrants.

Issue #3: Inhumane ICE Holding Facility Conditions

Due to this lack of understanding and tendency to dehumanize migrant populations, conditions in ICE holding facilities are inhumane and dangerous for migrant populations. On the outside, these facilities may appear ethical because they meet the standards of the Department of Health and Human Services, but in reality, families suffer immense psychological impacts from these camps. For starters, children are forcefully removed from their families and are quickly moved into facilities by themselves. Then, when the children are inside the camps, they must adhere to strict rules such as: not touching, not sitting on the floor, not sharing food, not crying, and more (Alameddine et al., 2018). The numbers of families and children detained continuously increases, causing overpopulation inside the camps, making matters even more dangerous and inhumane. As of 2018, the United States government had detained 13,000 migrant children and subjected them to these conditions (Alameddine et al., 2018). The United States government is, however, able to justify this environment because of the lack of empathy and human connection cross-culturally, allowing for dehumanization and ‘other’ing of migrant populations.

Issue #4: Increased Border Security

One of the most popular arguments surrounding the immigration debate is that border security must be increased in order to protect the country from illegal immigrants. Current policies have tightened borders, but have not stopped or discouraged immigrants from entering the country. Instead, tighter borders have created more safety hazards as migrants attempt to find alternate, dangerous routes and they have created more people-smuggling opportunities as individuals pay people-smugglers at exponential rates to attempt to cross the border in numbers. Additionally, in attempts to deter immigrants from coming to the United States, intense border security has actually

promoted longer stays among migrant populations because the risk of leaving and returning is too high to chance. Ironically, while United States citizens worry that migrants might take their jobs, intensified border security has actually created a higher demand for illegal immigrant workers because the work is pushed further underground, allowing for poor working conditions and wages. In turn, companies demand for these low-paid workers because they are able to profit off this unauthorized labor (Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2012). Yet, despite these unforeseen consequences of increased border security, the United States government still pushes for restrictions and barriers on immigration due to the previously described xenophobic and misinformed narratives.

Solutions

At the root of all of these issues is a lack of cross-cultural understanding and education, which allows for the inhumane treatment of migrant populations. The United States government could mitigate this problem by increasing national education requirements surrounding immigrant populations, particularly in school settings. Xenophobic ideology does not just randomly appear, it is learned and inherited through miseducation and socialization. Unfortunately, many schools in the United States do not build current events or global studies into the curriculum, and in turn, students absorb the ideology they are exposed to on television. Yet, the ideology they are absorbing is often misinformed, which further perpetuates xenophobia generationally. If the United States government ensured that students were being exposed to accurate global studies, individuals may lose the tendency to “other” migrant populations and instead see them as holistic human beings.

In addition to increasing national education standards, the United States government should make immediate changes in the conditions of immigration courts and ICE holding units in order to better serve migrant populations. Although the number of immigration cases is steadily increasing, the spending on immigration courts remains consistent (American Immigration

Council, 2016). Because of this, the courts are not properly staffed in relevance to the number of cases they must review. An immediate change that could help mitigate this issue would be shifting the funding spent on tightening borders to instead funding immigration courts so additional immigration judges could be hired. Additionally, the requirements for refugee status in the United States should be reevaluated and shifted in order to create more opportunity for refugee status. Right now, even when individuals are fleeing violence and trauma, they are not necessarily eligible for refugee status, and therefore need to apply for citizenship. Yet, the backlog on the immigration courts makes it nearly impossible to legally gain citizenship, further perpetuating the illegal immigration phenomenon. If the United States government immediately shifted their focus on repairing immigration courts, many of the issues surrounding illegal immigration could be lessened.

Additionally, the United States government could repair the ICE holding units to create more humane conditions for migrant populations. When I studied abroad, I was able to tour Germany’s holding facilities and although they were not entirely perfect, they were a just and humane way of integrating migrant populations into the nation. These holding facilities were actually apartment complexes, suitable for 5-6 person families. Trained social workers monitored the area and assisted individuals who were experiencing psychological impacts of immigration. Additionally, individuals within the facilities had permission to leave, so long as they came back at the end of the day. The United States government could benefit from developing a model similar to this one. Families should not be separated at the border because this has harsh and detrimental psychological impacts on children. Additionally, families should be allowed to exist as they would in any other setting; if a brother and sister hug when they are not being held in these camps, they should be eligible to do so when they are inside. Furthermore, these units should be staffed with

psychologists and social workers in order to ensure that the individuals enduring the psychological and traumatic impacts of immigration receive the help they need. As of now, this generation is allowing for the creation of these inhumane camps and will be remembered as the generation that allowed concentration camps to exist in the “land of the free and home of the brave,” (Alameddine et al., 2018).

Additionally, the United States government could adopt a comprehensive immigration reform policy in order to solve the current migrant influx. Comprehensive immigration reform would allow illegal immigrants to pay a fee and then earn legal status, which would reduce the number of current illegal immigrants. Although some individuals fear the economic consequences this legalization would bring, this reform would actually yield the United States \$1.5 trillion in GDP over a ten-year period (Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2012). This can be juxtaposed to the method of mass deportation, which would cost the United States government copious money in resources needed to deport four million migrants. According to Hinojosa-Ojeda (2012), mass deportation would reduce GDP by 1.46% annually because wages would rise for less-skilled native born workers, but decline for high-skilled natives, leading to widespread national job loss. Because the United States heavily relies on the work of immigrant populations, the only way to ensure the economy remains consistent while also addressing the immigration phenomenon is to enforce a comprehensive immigration reform policy.

Conclusion

Overall, a lack of cross-cultural understanding has allowed for the perpetuation of xenophobic and ultimately inhumane treatment of migrant populations in the United States. The lack of cross-cultural understanding manifests in harsh diction choices and xenophobic propaganda, further alienating migrant populations and leaving the most vulnerable without

resources. In turn, the United States government has increased border security and subjected migrant populations to inhumane treatment at the border in attempts to deter their desire to migrate. However, these approaches have proven to be ineffective and in order to successfully address the immigration phenomenon, the United States government must increase national education surrounding global studies, provide immigration court resources, improve ICE holding facility conditions, and subscribe to comprehensive immigration reform policies.

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