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Creating the exclusionist society: from the War on Poverty to the war on immigrants

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Abstract

A series of policy decisions beginning in 1965 produced an exclusionist climate in the United States. Lyndon Johnson sought to eliminate prejudice from the nation's immigration system but inadvertently curtailed opportunities for legal entry from Mexico that created a large undocumented population. In waging the Cold War, Ronald Reagan launched an intervention in Central America that displaced many more thousands who also became undocumented residents. The Wars on Crime and Drugs of Presidents Nixon and Reagan created a prison industrial complex that imprisoned blacks and Hispanics. George Bush's War on Terror unleashed a rising tide of deportations swept Latino migrants into the immigrant detention system. Finally, President Trump transformed a humanitarian problem affecting Central American families and children into a manufactured immigration crisis for the nation as a whole. The result is among the most repressive and exclusionist context of immigrant reception in American history.

Keywords

Immigration; borders; deportation; enforcement; context of reception

Politicians in the United States display a remarkable fondness for martial metaphors. When they seek to address a social problem, they don't just promise vigorous efforts to solve it; they declare all-out war on it. Thus Lyndon Johnson famously declared a War on Poverty, Richard Nixon a War on Crime, and Ronald Reagan a War on Drugs while all three simultaneously prosecuted a Cold War (Hinton 2016); and beginning with George W. Bush, of course, U.S. Presidents began to wage a never-ending War on Terror (Mayer 2008). The resulting symbolic (and all too often real) "warfare" did little to mitigate the problems of poverty, crime, drug abuse, and terrorism. More often than naught, these self-declared wars served to assuage the partisan grievances of favored constituencies so politicians could achieve domestic political goals that bore only the most tenuous connections to the purported problems being addressed.

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Decades of symbolic and at times more concrete warfare may not have solved the nation’s problems, but they did have profound consequences for certain vulnerable segments of the U.S. population. The succession of America’s politically-inspired “wars” brought the repressive power of the state down upon poor women, minority men, and immigrants, especially migrants from Latin America. In this article I document the forces of exclusion and repression that have successively been unleashed in the name of the nation’s putative wars and describe how they have accumulated to create an unprecedentedly harsh context of reception for first and second generation Latino immigrants in the United States today.

The War on Poverty

Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty sought to combat the racial and class foundations of disadvantage on two fronts, simultaneously pursuing an aggressive civil rights agenda while also creating federal programs to transfer power and resources to those left behind in America’s otherwise affluent society. The War on Poverty was officially declared in 1964 with the passage of two pieces of legislation: the Civil Rights Act and the Economic Opportunity Act. These landmark acts were followed in 1965 by the passage of the Voting Rights Act and amendments to the Social Security Act that created the Medicare and Medicaid Programs (Quadagno 1994). In that same year, Congress also passed amendments in an effort to eliminate prejudice from the Immigration and Nationality Act.

At the time, these amendments were not seen as a significant shift in immigration policy so much as a long overdue civil rights reform. Just as Johnson sought to deracialize the social welfare system that had been constructed in the 1930s to exclude blacks and Hispanics (see Katznelson 2005), he sought also to deracialize an immigration system that earlier had been fashioned to exclude presumed racial inferiors from the United States (Zolberg 2006). Thus the 1965 Hart-Cellar act repealed national origin quotas that for decades had discriminated against Southern and Eastern Europeans while also lifting long-standing bans on the entry of immigrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In addition, at midnight on January 1, 1965 Congress let a binational labor accord with Mexico known as the Bracero Agreement expire, having come to see it as an exploitative system on a par with southern sharecropping

The new immigration system legislation sought to admit only legal permanent residents selected impartially on the basis of family ties to U.S. residents and U.S. labor needs. Total immigration was capped at 290,000 visas annually, with 170,000 reserved for immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 allocated to persons from the Western Hemisphere (i.e. the Americas). Beginning in 1968, visas allocated to the Eastern

Hemisphere were capped at 20,000 per country, and starting in 1976 these country caps were applied to nations in the Western Hemisphere as well.

These reforms were enacted with the noblest of intentions: to end racism in immigrant admissions and curtail the exploitation of Mexican farmworkers. However, lawmakers paid little attention to what would happen to existing migratory flows when the new limits took effect. Prior to 1965, there was no statutory quota regulating the number of Mexicans who could enter the United States as legal immigrants. At the same time, Mexicans also enjoyed access to an expansive supply of temporary work visas under the Bracero Program. In 1957, legal entries from Mexico totaled 485,000 persons, with 49,000 entering on permanent resident visas and 436,000 arriving on temporary work visas. However, by 1977 after the end of the Bracero Program and the imposition of country quotas, the legal inflow of Mexicans to the United States stood at just 47,000 persons (a figure that exceeded the annual 20,000-visa quota because immediate relatives of U.S. citizens are exempt from the law's numerical limits).

The conditions of binational labor supply and demand had not changed, however, and over the 22 years of the Bracero Program millions of Mexicans had established strong ties to employers and job markets in the United States. As a result, migratory inflows from Mexico did not stop after 1965; they simply reestablished themselves under undocumented auspices, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Whereas total legal entries from Mexico were quite large before the new restrictions, averaging around 346,000 per year from 1955 to 1965, they dropped to an average of just 57,000 per year from 1965 to 1979. After 1965, legal entries were steadily replaced by undocumented entries, here proxied by the number of border apprehensions per 1,000 Border Patrol officers (creating a serviceable index that adjusts total apprehensions for temporal variations in the enforcement effort). As can be seen, this index rose from 37,000 in 1965 to 464,000 in 1977 after which the increase ended and the level fluctuated around an average value of 407,000 through 1985.

In one sense little had changed in the Mexico-U.S. migration system. Migrants still followed the same routes northward from the same communities in Mexico, crossing the border at much the same places, and generally going on to the same jobs in the same destination areas. In another sense, however, everything had changed because now the entries were “illegal” and so by definition the migrants could be portrayed as “criminals” and “lawbreakers” (Chavez 2001). After 1965, migration from south of the border was increasingly framed as a profound threat to the United States, portrayed in the media either as a *rising tide* of “illegal aliens” that would “flood” American society to “drown” its culture, or as an *alien invasion* of migrants who would “overrun” border defenses to “conquer” and “occupy” the nation (Santa Ana 2002; Massey and Pren 2012a).

Year after year, each annual increase in the number of border apprehensions was trumpeted by immigration officials, politicians, and pundits as proof of the ongoing alien invasion, steadily solidifying a new “Latino threat narrative” in public discourse (Chavez 2013). The propagation of this narrative pushed popular opinion in an ever more conservative direction, leading to rising demands for more restrictive immigration and border policies, which then produced more apprehensions, which justified even more enforcement actions. The ultimate

result was a self-perpetuating cycle of rising enforcement, apprehensions, more enforcement, and still more apprehensions (Massey and Pren 2012b). This militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border occurred despite the fact that the underlying volume of undocumented migration had stopped rising around 1977 (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014).

The escalation of border enforcement began slowly after the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, accelerated with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990, and rose again with the launching of Operations Blockade in El Paso in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994. Border enforcement accelerated further with the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 and climbed exponentially after the passage of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act.

The effect of these measures in militarizing the border is shown in Figure 2, which plots trends in the number of Border Patrol agents, the size of the Border Patrol's budget (in \$2016), and the number of linewatch hours spent patrolling the border. Each series is expressed relative to its value in 1986, thereby putting the trend lines on a common scale. The resulting graphs reveal little change in the level of border enforcement effort prior to 1986 followed by a steady trend upward over the next quarter century. By around 2010 the real value of the Border Patrol budget had increased by a factor of nearly 12 (the solid line), the number of officers had risen nearly six times (the dotted line), and linewatch hours (total person-hours spent patrolling the border) had grown over five times (the dashed line).

Research shows that the militarization of the border had little effect on the likelihood of apprehension along the border, even less effect on the odds of ultimately achieving an unauthorized entry, and no effect whatsoever on the likelihood that Mexicans would decide to head northward with intent of becoming undocumented migrants (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014, 2016). Nonetheless border apprehension *did* have other powerful effects on the behavior of undocumented migrants. It diverted them away from traditional crossing points in the San Diego and El Paso sectors and channeled them instead through the Sonoran Desert into Arizona as well as toward more remote locations in the Rio Grande Valley (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016). These shifts geographic were accompanied by a sharp increase in the financial costs and physical risks of unauthorized border crossing. Since 1985 at least 8,644 migrants have died along the Mexico-U.S. border and the average cost of an unauthorized entry has risen from around \$825 in constant 2016 dollars before 1986 to over \$5,000 today (Massey 2018).

Given that the costs and risks undocumented border crossing had increased dramatically but the odds of gaining entry to the United States remained unchanged, migrants did the logical thing. They minimized border crossing—not by remaining Mexico but by staying longer in the United States once they had run the gauntlet at the border. As border militarization increased in intensity and spread geographically, the likelihood that an undocumented migrant would return to Mexico fell at an accelerating pace during the 1990s and 2000s (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015, 2016). With the volume of in-migration holding steady but the level of return migration to Mexico falling, the net inflow of unauthorized migrants increased and the rate of undocumented population growth accelerated (Massey and Pren 2012b; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014). From 1988 to 2008, the population of

undocumented Mexicans grew from 1.1 million to 7 million (Wasem 2011). At the latter date, around 7% of all persons born in Mexico were living without authorization in the United States.

The Cold War

In 1979, a leftist guerilla faction known as the Sandinistas toppled Nicaragua's longtime dictator Anastasio Somoza to establish a left-wing regime friendly with the Soviet Union and Cuba. At the same time, leftist insurgents were challenging repressive right-wing governments in Guatemala and El Salvador backed by the United States. In 1981, Ronald Reagan ascended to the Presidency with a promise to confront the Soviet Union's "evil empire" politically and militarily on all fronts. Upon assuming office, he immediately scaled up political and military support for the region's right-wing governments while turning a blind eye to the death squads they supported and the murders they committed. Reagan then went on secretly to finance and arm a clandestine army known as the Contras with bases in Honduras whose goal was to drive the Sandinistas from power.

As a result of Reagan's political and military intervention, waves of civil violence swept across frontline nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua and crippled their economies. From 1978 to 1989, average GDP in these four nations dropped by 27% in real terms and did not climb back to its 1978 level until 2011 (Massey 2018). Although open warfare gradually died out in the early 1990s, levels of violence never returned to pre-intervention levels. In 1995 when reliable statistics first become available, the homicide rate in the four frontline nations averaged 53.9 per 100,000 compared to a value of just 11.9 per 100,000 in the neighboring non-frontline nations of Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama. Although the murder rate in frontline nations fell to 35.6 in 1999, thereafter it rose to peak at 51.6 in 2019; and as of 2016 the murder rate in the frontline nations remained very high at 43.5, compared to 19.7 elsewhere in Central America (Massey 2018).

The combination of economic decline and civil violence displaced tens of thousands of people from their homes, many of whom headed northward to the United States looking for refuge. Although Nicaraguans were welcomed as refugees fleeing communist tyranny under the Sandinistas, those fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were labeled economic migrants rather than political refugees and denied asylum in the United States (Lundquist and Massey 2005). Whereas the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act authorized undocumented Nicaraguans to apply for legal permanent residence if they had been in the U.S. since December 1, 1995 and forgave any legal infractions related to their unauthorized entry, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were allowed only to apply for a *temporary* suspension of deportation or cancelation of removal, not legal permanent residence; and Honduran migrants received no benefits under the legislation (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014).

The result was predictable: a surge of undocumented Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans joined their Mexican counterparts north of the border. According to estimates developed by Massey, Durand, and Pren (2014) undocumented migration to the United States from Central America prior to the downfall of the Somoza regime was rare, but

afterward the likelihood of taking an undocumented trip steadily rose and by 1989 was seven times the likelihood observed in 1977 before the Sandinista takeover. In the end, the combination of America's Cold War intervention in the region and its restrictive stance towards Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran refugees increased the number of unauthorized Central Americans from around 100,000 in 1980 to around 2 million today.

Although the signing of the Central American Peace Accords in 1987 and the Sandinista's loss of political power in 1990 reduced the likelihood of leaving for the U.S. without documents, departure probabilities never returned to the *status quo ante*. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans who faced endemic violence and economic stagnation in the region were by then socially connected to many thousands of compatriots living without authorization in the United States, whose presence gave them access to an important source of social capital they could draw upon to escape to the United States (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014).

The effect of Reagan's intervention on out-migration from the region is not only apparent in the likelihood of undocumented migration but is also seen in official statistics on legal immigration. As shown in Figure 3, prior to 1979 few legal immigrants entered the United States from the frontline nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. However, beginning with a total of 10,545 legal immigrants in 1979 the number rose steadily to reach 25,381 in 1988 before skyrocketing to 136,602 in 1990. Although the number fell to 27,861 in 1995 by 2001 it had risen back up to 71,350. As with undocumented migration, after the end of the Contra War the trend in legal immigration did not return to the *status quo ante* because of the social capital that had by then accumulated through connections to the large population of legal immigrants living in the United States. Whereas legal immigration from frontline countries averaged 7,834 per year from 1970 to 1979, from 1995 to 2016 it averaged 48,100 and at the latter date the number of legal entrants stood at 53,239. The effect of the U.S. intervention is underscored by the lack of a similar trend in out-migration from Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama. In those nations, the level of migration remained flat throughout the period.

Figure 4 shows what happened to the size of the undocumented population as a result of the United States' militarization of the border and its military and political intervention in Central America. In the case of Mexico, the number of undocumented migrants grew from around 114,000 in 1965 to 2.2 million in 1986 when IRCA's legalization cut the number down to reach 1.1 million in 1988. By 1990, however, it had once again crossed the two million mark and reached 2.7 million in 1996. At this point, growth accelerated as declining rates of return migration served to increase the size of the net inflow. The Mexican undocumented population ultimately reached a maximum of a little over seven million persons in 2008 before declining to around 5.9 million in 2015.

In contrast, the undocumented population of Central Americans rose very slowly through the 1970s and 1980s, reaching a total of just 201,000 in 1990. Thereafter, the rate of growth accelerated and continued even after the undocumented Mexican population began to decline, reaching 1.5 million persons in 2015. Since 2008, the *total* number of Central Americans living in the United States has steadily risen and by 2015 reached around three

million persons, about half documented and half undocumented (Cohn, Passel, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2017).

The War on Terror

The U.S. intervention in Central America during the 1980s was the last major battle of the Cold War. However, no sooner had the communist threat disappeared with the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 than a new threat appeared, heralded by the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. This terrorist attack was followed in 1995 by the bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, and finally by the airborne attacks on targets in New York City and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001. In response, President George W. Bush declared a War on Terror, telling the nation that "our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated" (Bush 2001).

In reality, the first salvo in the war on terror had been fired much earlier, with the passage of the Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in 1996. Its provisions were then augmented by enforcement provisions contained in the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. The former law, in concert with the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, increased deportations dramatically by criminalizing acts and behaviors that theretofore had been treated as civil violations or misdemeanors, a process now known as "crimmigration" (García Hernández 2015). It also expanded the range of offenses meriting punishment by deportation and gave the federal government expanded powers for detention and removal while deputizing state and local authorities to assist in immigration enforcement. The PATRIOT Act, in turn, authorized enhanced surveillance procedures and expanded the police powers of federal authorities (Golash-Boza 2015).

The end result of these legislative changes was a massive expansion of deportations from the United States. Ironically the new deportation regime had its most powerful effect on immigrants from Latin America, not on migrants from nations that actually launched the terrorist attacks of 2001 and earlier. Paradoxically, although the hijackers on September 11 came from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Lebanon, the United States chose to demonstrate its resolve in combatting Al Qaeda by deporting its Latinos. The scale of the deportation effort is indicated by Figure 5, which plots the trend in total deportations from 1965 to 2016. From 1965 to 1995 the annual number of deportations rose slowly, going from 10,572 to 50,924 over the course of 30 years. Over the next six years removals from the United States jumped by some 138,000 to reach 189,026 in 2001. After a brief decline in 2002, the number shot upward to peak at 434,015 in 2013 before dropping back to 340,156 at the end of the Obama administration.

The brunt of this massive deportation effort fell not Arab terrorists, but instead swept up ordinary Latino migrants with no conceivable connection to Islamic terrorism. Between 1996 and 2016, some 5.8 million persons were deported from the United States, with 94% originating in just ten nations, nine of which were Latin American (with the tenth being Jamaica). Mexico led the way with around 4.2 million removals, followed by Guatemala

with 431,212, Honduras with 372,960, and El Salvador with 267,599. These four nations by themselves comprised 80% of all deportations over the period. Of all those forcibly removed from the United States after 1996, just 6,995 were from nations associated with the 9–11 attackers, constituting 0.1% of all removals after 1996.

The Wars on Crime and Drugs

Although the Cold War gave way to the War on Terror after 1991, throughout the period under study the United States was also busy pursuing its twin wars on crime and drugs. Lyndon Johnson's effort to create a "Great Society" coincided with a precipitous rise in crime and a wave of urban riots, provoking a white backlash that gave Richard Nixon the political capital he needed to begin dismantling Johnson's War on Poverty (Perlstein 2008) and to replace it with a racialized War on Crime (Alexander 2010). Although Nixon's hardline efforts at policing faltered during the Watergate scandal, the anti-crime juggernaut returned under Ronald Reagan who in 1986 amplified the War on Crime with a new War on Drugs, labeling drug trafficking as a threat to national security and authorizing the military to cooperate with civilian authorities in anti-drug enforcement along the border and elsewhere (Andreas 2000).

Over the course of the 1980s and into the 1990s, U.S. incarceration rates increased to unprecedented levels, creating a racialized carceral state that not only imprisoned record numbers of African Americans but also a disproportionate number of Latinos (Alexander 2010). At present nearly a third of all federal prisoners are Hispanic, almost double their share of the U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of Prisons 2018). Although the incarceration boom was initially driven by the imposition of ever-harsher punishments for drug-related crimes and violent offenses, over the last decade the fastest growing portion of the nation's prison industrial complex has been the immigrant detention system.

Consistent with the portrayal of "illegal" migrants as criminals, lawbreakers, and a threat to public safety, infractions of immigration law that formerly were treated as civil offenses in the 1970s and 1980s were criminalized and prosecuted as felonies during the 1990s and 2000s (Meissner et al. 2013; Ewing, Martínez, and Rumbaut 2015; García Hernández 2015). As already noted, the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act expanded the number of acts punishable by deportation and streamlined removal proceedings (Juárez, Gómez-Aguíñaga, and Bettez 2018). At the same time, profits increasingly came to incentivize the arrest and detention of immigrants, with around two thirds of all spaces in the immigrant detention system now being owned and managed by private corporations such as the Geo Group and CoreCivic (Luan 2018). In 2009 lobbyists for the private prison industry successfully prevailed upon Congress to set a quota of 34,000 detention beds to be filled each day (Gilman and Romero 2018).

As a result of these shifts in policy and practice, the immigration detention system grew rapidly. Figure 6 shows the average daily number of persons in the U.S. immigrant detention system from 1979 through the first 11 months of 2018. As indicated by the graph, in 1979 the detention system was very small, holding only 1,563 persons on an average day. This average rose slowly until 1989 when it suddenly jumped to 6,563 and then rose further to

reach 9,011 in 1996. At this point the curve bends sharply upwards to plateau briefly at 21,298 in 2004. It then dips slightly to 19,309 in 2006 but in the following year the daily number of detentions shoots almost straight upward to reach a local maximum 32,098 in 2009. It was at this point that Congress enacted the daily 34,000 bed quota, which was achieved in 2012 when the average daily detainee population hit 34,260 persons. Although the average number of detainees dropped to 28,449 in 2015, by 2018 the average had soared to a record 40,520 under the aegis of President Donald Trump.

The War on Immigrants

Unlike the Wars on Poverty, Crime, Drugs, and Terror, and the Cold War, the War on Immigrants remains undeclared by any prominent political leader or government official, though Donald Trump perhaps came close when announcing his candidacy for President of the United States. In his speech, he told Americans that “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with them. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” He then went on to assure his audience that to fix that problem he would “build a great, great wall on our southern border... [and] have Mexico pay for that wall.” Although he may not explicitly have declared a War on Immigrants, reporters and the media have accurately labeled his immigration policies as such (see Collinson 2018; Gessen 2018; Suarez 2018).

As described earlier, the War on Immigrants emerged out of the various other declared “wars,” symbolic and real, that U.S. political leaders have launched since the 1960s (Massey 2007). Today’s large undocumented population grew out of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and Ronald Reagan’s Cold War actions in Central America. Johnson sought to eliminate racism from the U.S. immigration system, but in the process curtailed opportunities for legal entry from Mexico, giving rise to an unauthorized circular inflow that was later converted into a settled population by an unprecedented militarization of the border. In his prosecution of the Cold War, Reagan funded a rebel army and murderous paramilitary units to check the spread of communism in Central America, unleashing waves of violence that wrecked the economy and sent waves of people fleeing northward. Unfortunately most were escaping nations led by right-wing governments allied with the United States and therefore could not be admitted as refugees or asylum seekers for ideological reasons. The ultimate result was the growth of a large population of undocumented migrants living north of the border, one composed overwhelmingly of Mexicans and Central Americans.

The War on Poverty ended in the early 1970s when Nixon replaced it with his War on Crime and Reagan later piled on with a War on Drugs. Together these “wars” led to a regime of mass incarceration that swept young black and Latino men into the nation’s prisons. When Bush declared the War on Terror in the aftermath of 9–11, deportations rose to record levels and the immigrant detention system emerged as the fastest growing component of the prison industrial complex. Although the War on Terror was launched to combat Islamic terrorism, the vast majority of those caught up in the deportation machine are from Mexico and Central America. The War on Terror also brought about increases in border enforcement despite a

sharply declining inflow of undocumented migrants. Trump's adoption of a "zero-tolerance" policy of vigorously prosecuting all those who appear at the southern border without authorization, irrespective of their claims for asylum refuge, has further expanded the immigrant detention system to record levels.

The scale of exclusion and repression is indicated by a simple comparison of data points in 1988 and today. In 1988, the number of undocumented migrants was estimated at around 1.9 million persons, but after two decades of border militarization the number peaked at nearly 12 million in 2008 and today it fluctuates at around 11 million persons, with the number of Mexicans slowly declining and the number of Central Americans slowly rising. This population is now subject to intense policing both internally and along the border. From 1988 to 2018 the Border Patrol's budget increased from \$411 million to \$3.6 billion in real terms and the number of officers rose from 3,700 to more than 19,000 to become the largest arms-bearing agency in the U.S. except for the military itself. Over the same period the internal enforcement budget went from \$1.6 billion to \$6.2 billion in real terms, and deportations rose from 26,000 to 340,000 while average daily detentions grew from 3,600 to nearly 41,000 (Massey 2018).

Ironically, today's massive anti-immigrant effort occurs at a time when undocumented migration from Mexico has effectively ceased, though Mexicans continue to play an important role in the U.S. economy (Blau and Mackie 2017). At this writing, the net volume of undocumented Mexican entries has been negative for twelve years, with very few people arriving and many more departing (often through deportation). In 2017 the number of apprehensions along the Mexico-U.S. border reached a 46 year low, dropping from a peak of 1.6 million in 2000 to just 304,000 in 2017. Over the same period the share of Mexicans among those apprehended dropped from 98% to 42%. Although the net inflow from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras remains positive, the numbers are modest and those arriving at the border are increasingly not workers but children and families.

The new reality at the border is indicated by trends in the number of people apprehended as members of family units or as unaccompanied minors. Although the available data only go back five years, Figure 7 reveals that from 2013 to 2018 the number of persons apprehended as part of a family unit rose from around 15,000 to 107,000 persons. Over the same period, the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended fluctuated between 40,000 and 70,000 and stood at around 50,000 in 2018. As a share of total apprehensions, the percentage of unaccompanied minors rose from 9% to 13% over the same period and the number apprehended in families grew from 4% to 27%.

Unlike single undocumented migrants travelling alone, those arriving at the border in family groups or as children are overwhelming from Central America rather than Mexico. As shown in Figure 8, in 2018 only 20% of the unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border came from Mexico, whereas 45% come from Guatemala, 22% from Honduras, and 10% from El Salvador. Likewise, among those apprehended while traveling with other family members, 47% were from Guatemala, 37% were from Honduras, and 13% came from El Salvador, with just 2% originating in Mexico. Thus the current situation at the border is not an immigration crisis, but a humanitarian crisis, one that ultimately derives

from the America's military and political intervention in the region. A very large inflow of Mexican workers seeking jobs in the United States has been replaced by a much smaller inflow of families and children seeking not jobs but refuge.

Conclusion

What used to be a very large annual flow of undocumented Mexican male workers before 2000 has now become a much smaller flow of Central American women and children seeking to escape horrendous social and economic conditions growing out of the armed U.S. intervention in the region as part of the Cold War. During the 1970s and 1980s the United States took in and successfully integrated a much larger inflow of refugees from Indochina. Between 1975 and 1985 some 761,000 refugees entered the United States from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, seeking to escape the chaos that engulfed the region in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam (Gordon 1987). Currently we face a much smaller number of Central Americans arriving at our southern border seeking refuge from collateral damage linked to another U.S. intervention to stop the spread of communism.

The current exodus stems from economic stagnation and endemic violence that has come to characterize the region since 1980. As noted earlier, income in the frontline nations of Central America declined in real terms after the U.S. intervention and did not return to the *status quo ante* for three decades, dramatically increasing the income gap relative to other countries in the region. From 1977 to 2017 the size of the gap in GDP per capita between frontline and non-frontline Central American nations rose in real terms from \$1,027 to \$6,420. In a very real way, the permanent economic stagnation of the region is a direct result of the damage to infrastructure and markets caused by America's Cold War intervention.

Although political violence in the region diminished in the 1990s, it was soon supplanted by gang-related violence also linked to the U.S. intervention. The infamous Mara Salvatrucha gang formed in the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles during the mid-1980s, incorporating young undocumented Salvadoran males who, unlike their Mexican counterparts, had no access to established institutions and networks connected to employment and assistance (Menjivar 2000). Lacking a clear pathway to advance in the United States, these young men turned to street gangs for mutual support and were subsequently swept into the U.S. criminal justice system and deported (Wolf 2012). Although criminal deportations into frontline nations remained small through the early 1990s, they accelerated rapidly thereafter and as of 2017 a cumulative total of 161,000 criminals had been repatriated, jump-starting gang activity in the region and exacerbating the exodus of refugees northward (Massey 2018).

Rather than meeting these new arrivals at the border with humanitarian aid and asylum, the Trump administration instead is funneling them into the maw of an expanding gulag of detention centers (see Dow 2005). Since 1996, the United States has only admitted 28,500 refugees and asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras instead of the hundreds of thousands of Indochinese taken in earlier. The grudging acceptance of Central American and their harsh treatment in the detention system prevails despite the fact that circa 1980 the demographic potential for out-migration from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

was much greater (with a combined population 64 million) than in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras today (with a total population 32 million).

In policy terms, it would not be very difficult to address the current humanitarian crisis at the border by enacting the same policies and procedures used earlier to incorporate a much larger number of arrivals from Indochina. However, one distinctive barrier to the smooth integration of Central Americans today is the fact that half of their potential sponsors living in the United States are unauthorized; but this problem also could be solved if Congress were to create a pathway to legal status for the nation's 11 million undocumented residents. The legalization of presently undocumented Central Americans would create a firm platform for the social support and integration of newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. Such a policy, however, would require Americans to recognize their ultimate responsibility for the current exodus from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, just as they accepted responsibility for the exodus from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam two generations ago. Unfortunately the current surge of nativism and xenophobia in the United States, which is both cultivated and accommodated by political leaders in the Republican Party, renders that scenario rather unlikely, at least for the time being.

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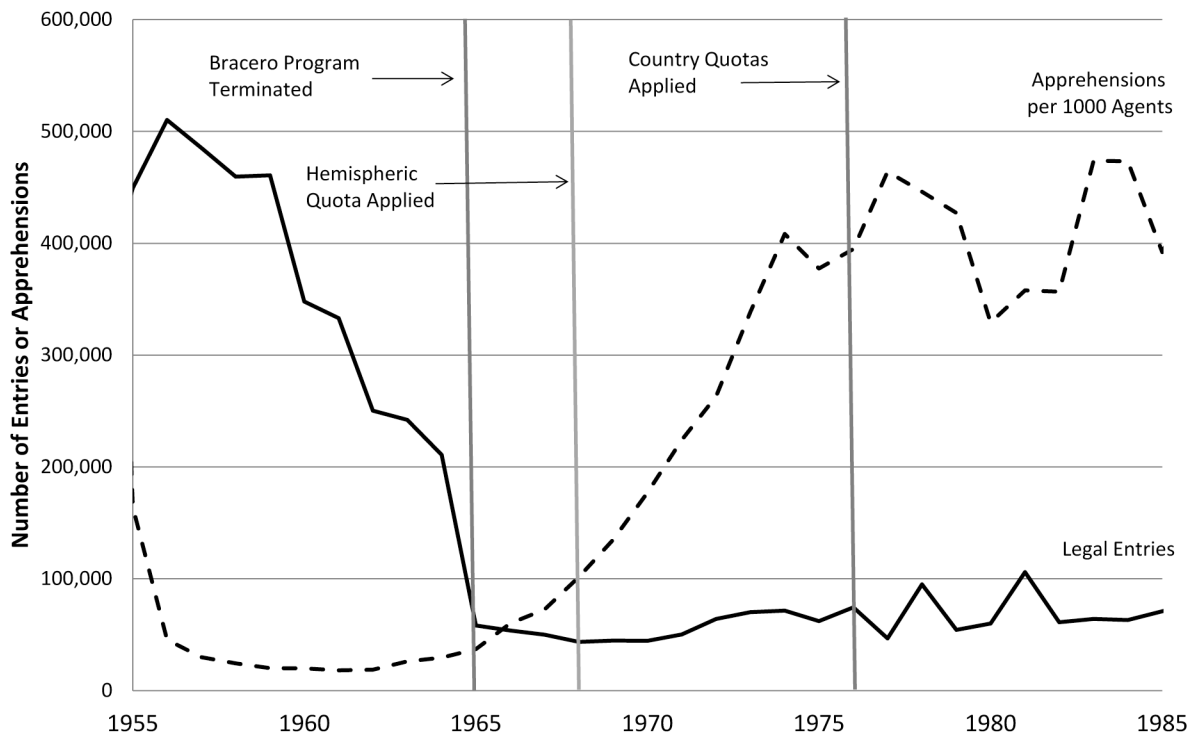


Figure 1. Total legal Mexican entries for U.S. work or residence and border apprehensions per 1,000 agents 1955-1985
Source: Mexican Migration Project (2018)

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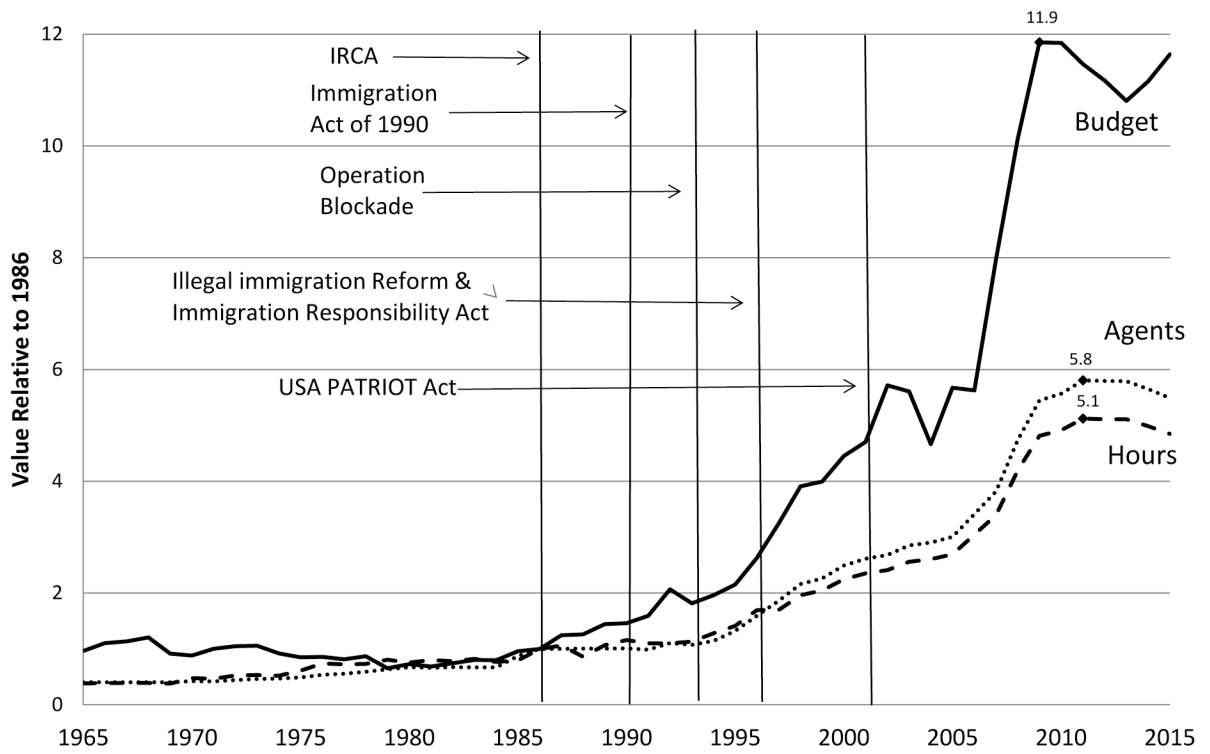


Figure 2. Border Patrol agents, real budget, and linewatch hours 1965-2015 (1986=1.0)
Source: Mexican Migration Project (2018)

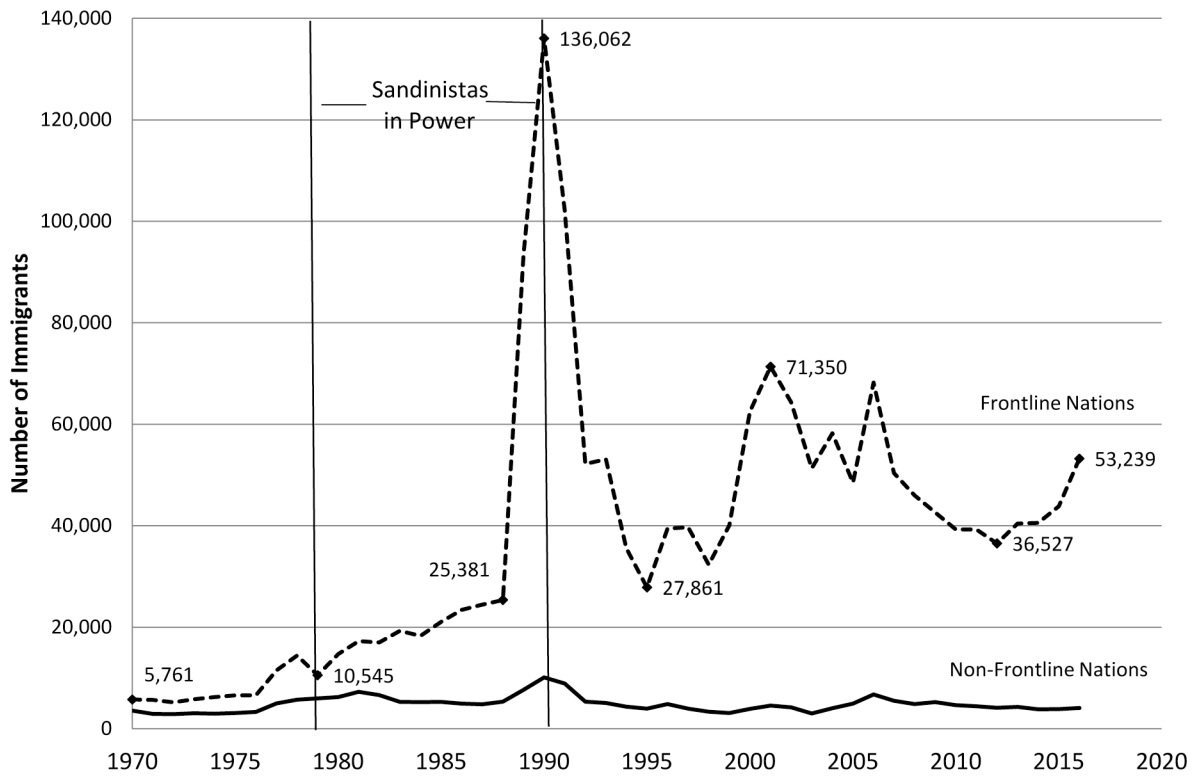


Figure 3.
Legal immigration from Central America to the United States 1970-2016
Source: U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics (2018)

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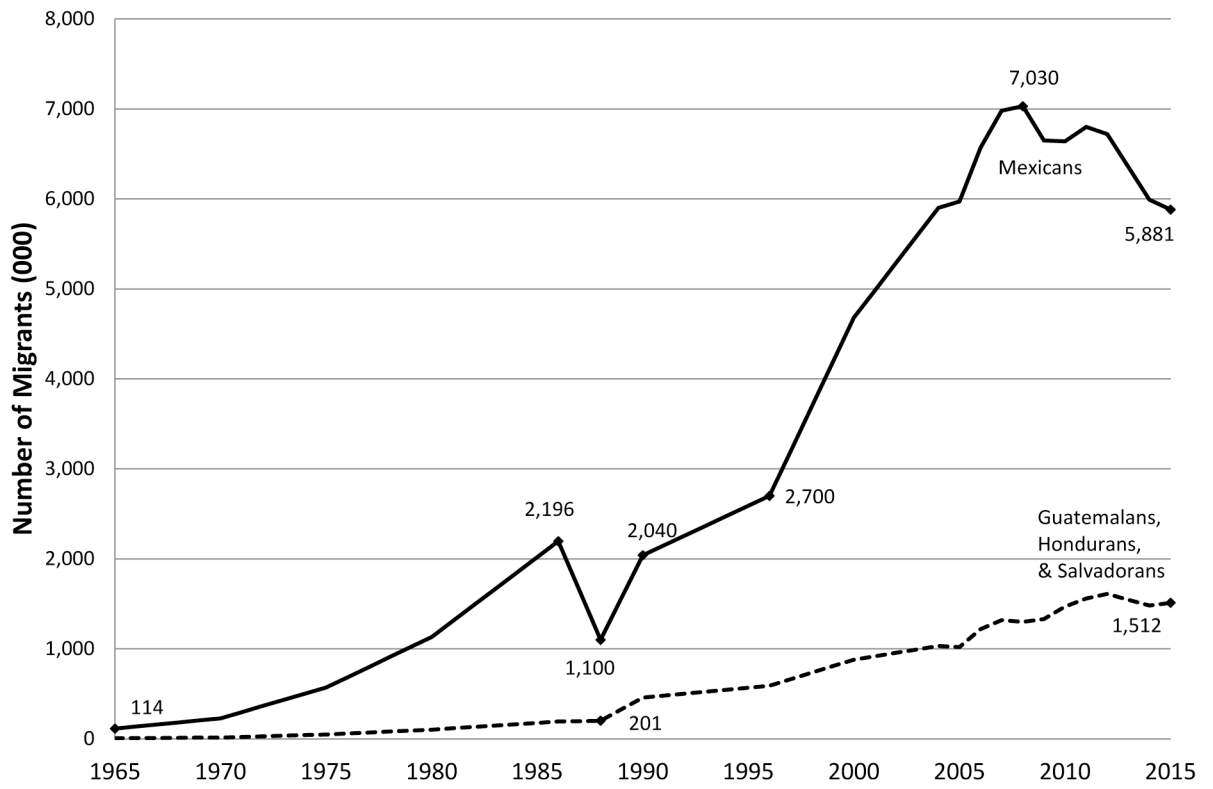


Figure 4.
Estimated number of undocumented migrants in the United States 1965-2015
Sources: Wasem 2011 and Cohen et al. 2017

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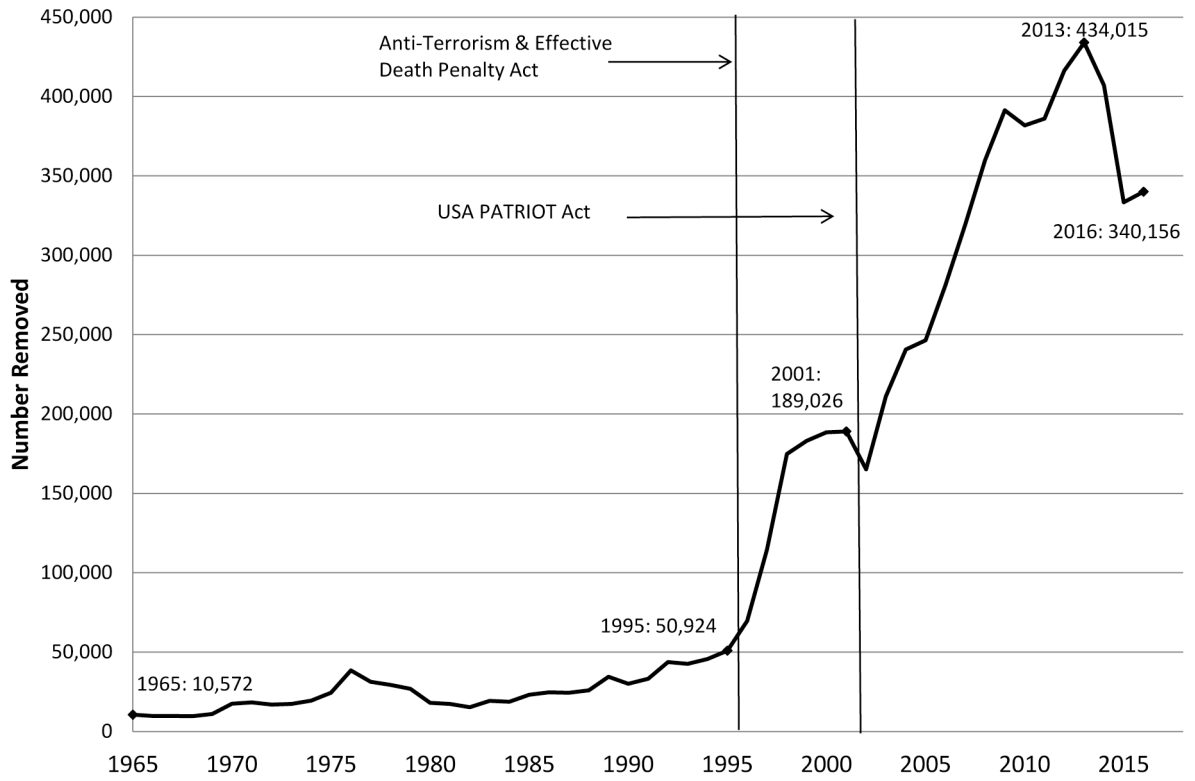


Figure 5.
Number of deportations from the United States 1965-2016
Source: U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics (2018)

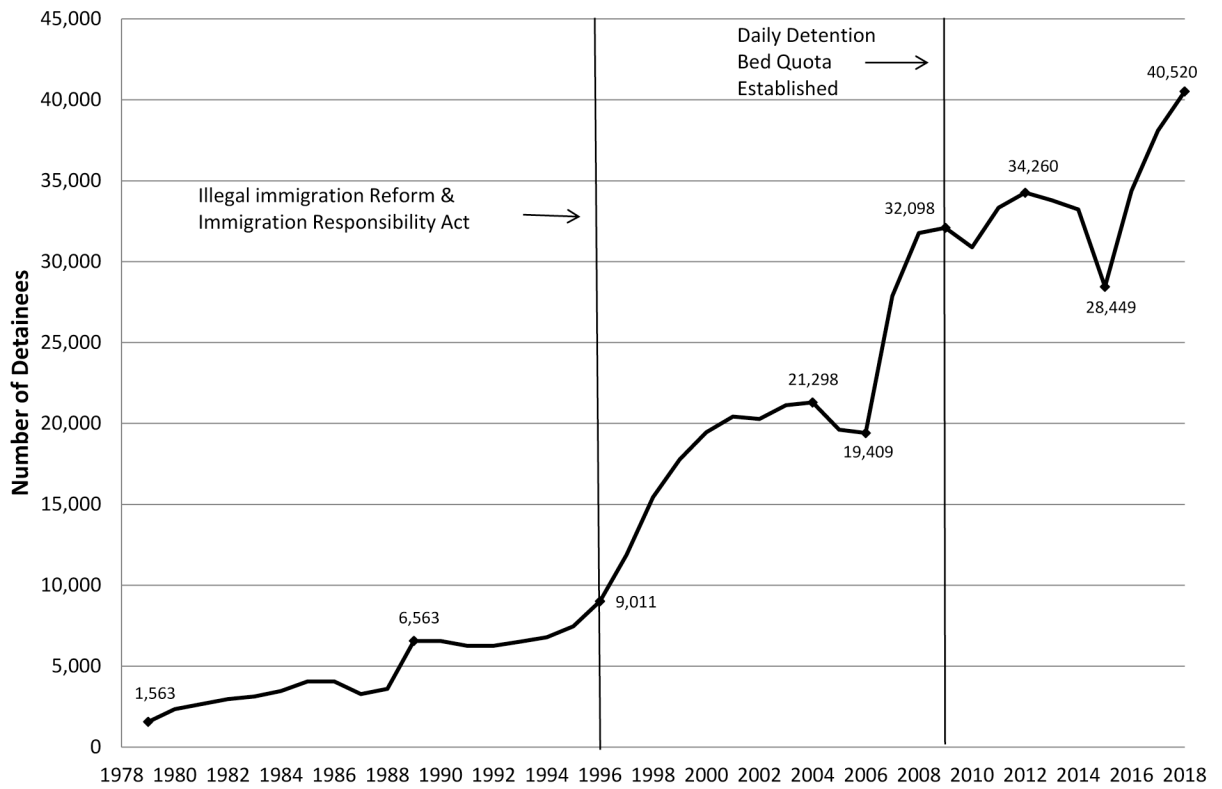


Figure 6.
Average daily population in the U.S. immigrant detention system 1979-2018
Source: Reyes (2018)

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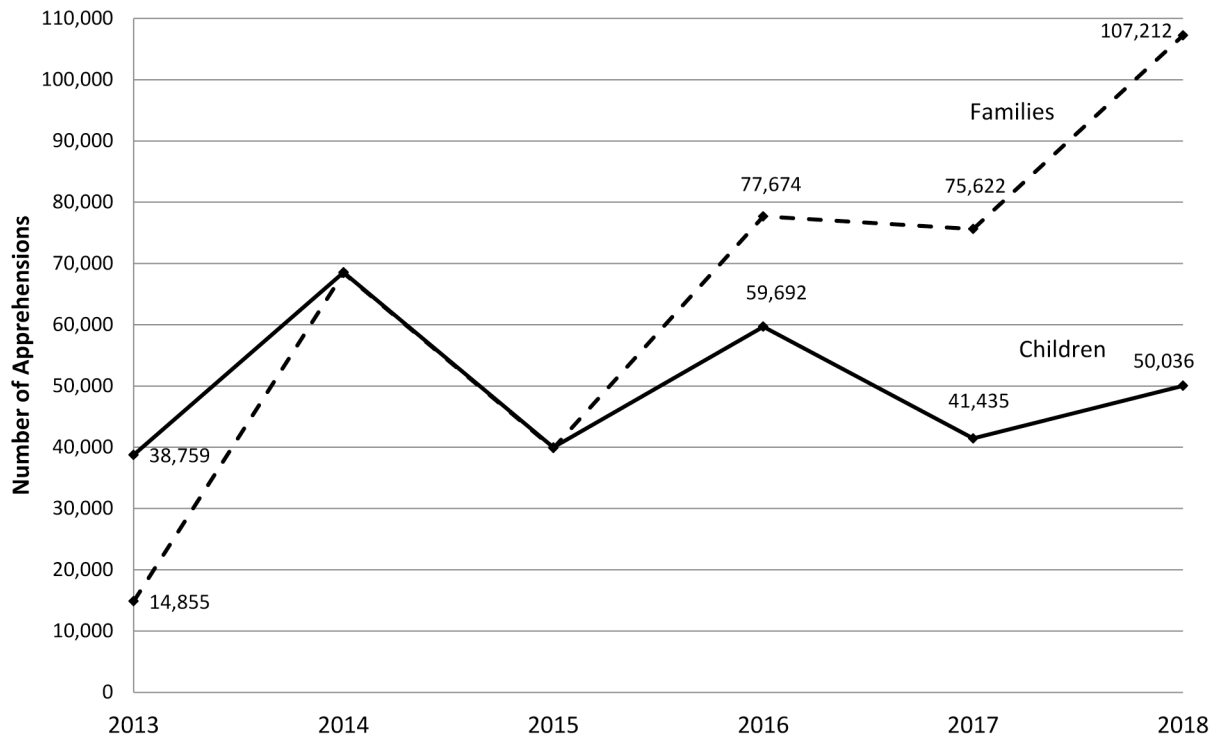


Figure 7.
Apprehensions of children and families at the Mexico-U.S. Border 2013-2018
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement (2018)

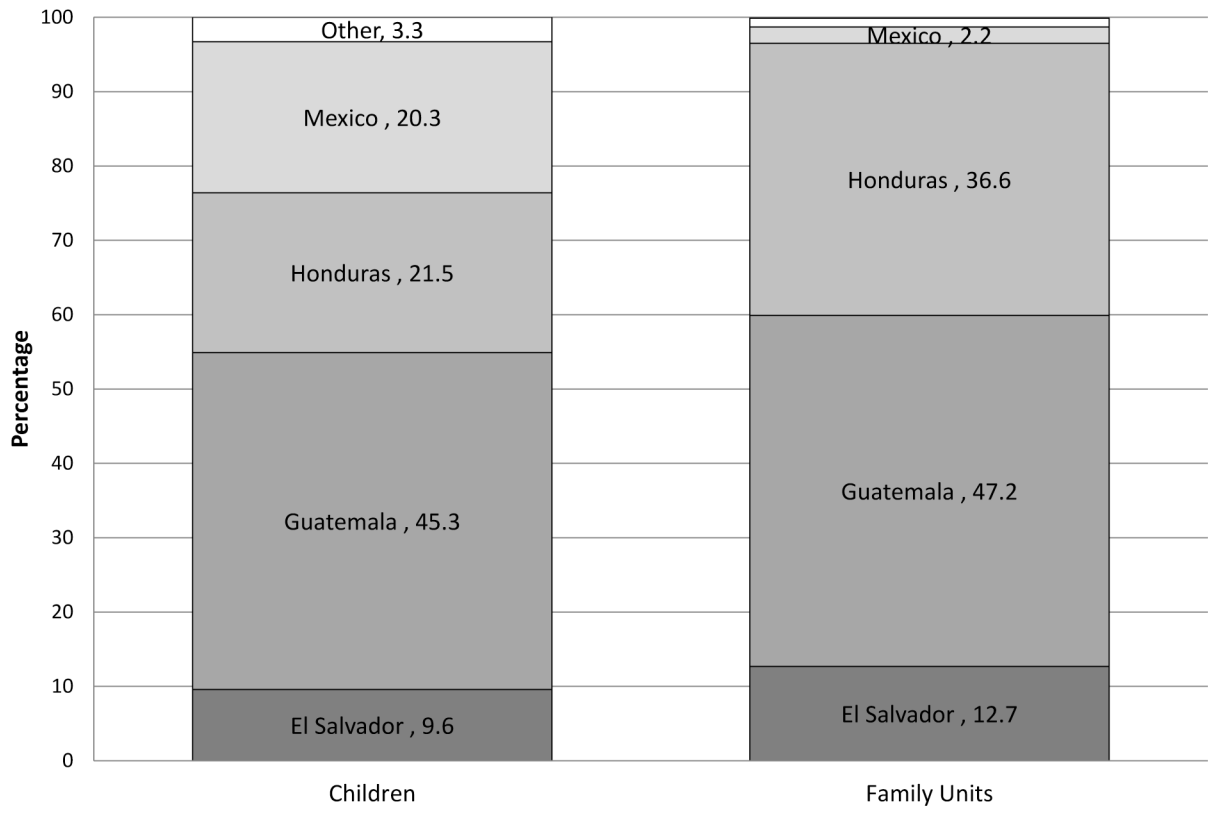


Figure 8.
Origins of families and children apprehended at the Mexico-U.S. border in 2018
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement (2018)