

10-28-2024

WSJ Print Edition

The U.S. economy needs to import humans. We don't make them anymore.



AMERICAS

America's Immigration Conundrum

A caravan of some 2,000 migrants left southern Mexico last week, headed for the U.S. border. The Associated Press reports that two other migrant groups, numbering 800 and 600, left the same area bound for the same destination earlier this month.

The groups are expected to break up once they hit central Mexico. Along the way, they'll have to pay off cartels that own the routes. Crooked Mexican officials must also be bribed. The groups risk hunger, disease, assaults and accidents. But they're going anyway because if they don't, they're stuck indefinitely in Mexico's poorest state, Chiapas, with tens of thousands of other migrants. It's the upshot of an agreement that Mexico made with the U.S. in December to deter a rush at the border. Some are being repatriated. But since Venezuela and Cuba won't take migrants back, Mexico is piling them up as far from the U.S. as it can.

Some of the migrants setting out this month told reporters that they have been waiting for "asylum appointments" via the Customs and Border Protection phone app, known as CBP One, but the process is too slow. Running low on money with no prospects for work locally, they've decided to take their chances.

Immigration is a hot-button issue in the Nov. 5 U.S. election, and the Biden administration's failure to secure the border over four years is making life difficult for Kamala Harris. She needs to convince voters that as president she would restore the national security that has been lost since her administration came into office in 2021.

The Harris campaign likes to talk about a drop in border "encounters" (both at U.S. ports of entry and between them) to 107,000 in August from more than 233,000 in August 2023. The all-time monthly high was 302,000 in December 2023. Yet as the recent caravans show, this problem is far from solved.

A first step toward a solution is to acknowledge the role of a soft labor market in bringing the numbers down. During times of high demand for employees in the U.S., the word goes out on migrant communication channels. These networks function extremely well. A young man in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, knows the restaurant in Chicago, Phoenix or San Francisco where he will find an opening for a busboy. When opportunities dry up, the word also goes out. The U.S. economy needs immigration, and the ebb and flow of humans is the market responding to demand. *

The Biden administration's decision to use legal parole to accept 30,000 migrants a month from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti and Nicaragua is a common-sense and humane approach to managing migration. Applicants file with Homeland Security, not the State Department, for lawful U.S. entry from their home countries and if approved can live in the U.S. for two years. They must have a U.S. sponsor who can show adequate assets and income to support them. Contrary to nativist claims, those accepted pay their own airfare. Ukrainians also qualify for parole. *

The program hasn't been perfect. Vetting errors were made in its initial rollout, and it needs to be refined. In a September 2023 paper, the Cato Institute's David Bier noted that applicants aren't asked to cover the cost of processing and the cap is too low. The number of countries is too narrow. But it allows the government to screen applicants and know who comes in and whether they are lawabiding, information that is important in approving permanent residency if they later decide to apply. Mr. Bier noted that by July 2023 "parole had already redirected about 316,000 people away from long, perilous treks through Mexico."

Yet rather than improve and expand the program, the government puts the empha--sis on enforcement. It isn't the first time. Monthly encounters of people crossing illegally between ports of entry began increasing in 2017 and spiked to 133,000 in May 2019. President Trump says he threatened Mexico's then-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador with tariffs and got AMLO to put his military on the Guatemalan border. Encounters bottomed out in April 2020 but then started going back up even before Mr. Trump left office.

The Biden administration is trying other Band-Aid solutions. In June, Homeland Security announced that it would "restrict asylum eligibility, and significantly increase the consequences for those who enter without authorization across the southern border." Panama signed a bilateral agreement with the U.S. in July to repatriate migrants— using U.S. financing— who are caught crossing the Darien Gap. But the numbers are small relative to the flows.

Those who qualify as refugees can apply at Safe Mobility Offices in Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and Guatemala. The Migration Policy Institute told me that as of Sept. 30 "more than 245,000 people had registered with the SMOs online and more than 40,400 had been approved for U.S refugee status." But economic migrants aren't eligible, and the caravans keep coming because the ambitious smell opportunity. Politicians and policymakers ignore markets at their own peril.

Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Copyright (c)2024 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 10/28/2024
Powered by TECNAVIA

The following is a digital replica of content from the print newspaper and is intended for the personal use of our members. For commercial reproduction or distribution of Dow Jones printed content, contact: Dow Jones Reprints & Licensing at (800) 843-0008 or visit djreprints.com.
