

At the Border

Crouched low in the brush along the riverbank, Border Patrol agent Robert Rodriguez watched the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, waiting. A *norteño* ballad drifted from a radio somewhere on a nearby farm, and two pigs cooled themselves at the water's edge, wading to their bellies. For a moment, one of the border's busiest places for illegal crossings looked placid.

Then a raft appeared. Within seconds it was in the water, a teenage guide steering the current while his boss, an older man, stood watch on the bank. In less than a minute, the teenager delivered a woman and a boy to the U.S. side and they climbed out, shoes sinking in the wet silt.

Rodriguez stepped onto the path to stop them, but the woman and the boy did not run. They wanted to be captured. This is how it works now.

The era of mass migration by Mexican laborers streaming into California and the deserts of Arizona is over. Billions spent on fencing, sensors, agents, and drones have hardened the border and made it tougher than ever to sneak into the United States. The migrants coming today are increasingly Central Americans seeking asylum or some form of humanitarian protection, bearing stories of torture, gang recruitment, abusive spouses, extortionists, and crooked police.

They know the quickest path to a better life in the United States is now an administrative one — not through mountains or canyons but through the front gates of the country's immigration bureaucracy.

Last year, U.S. immigration courts received nearly 120,000 asylum claims from migrants facing deportation, a fourfold increase from 2014. Those filings have pushed the number of pending cases before U.S. immigration courts to more than 750,000, collapsing the system and upending President Trump's sweeping promises to lock down the border.

This past spring, Trump fixated on a caravan of asylum seekers traveling through Mexico, about 300 of whom eventually crossed into the United States. Now, a much larger procession of as many as 7,000 Central Americans is trekking north toward the border, despite threats from the president to stop them with U.S. troops and sever aid to their countries.

Families are coming in caravans and on their own because it works. Only 1.4 percent of migrant family members from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador who crossed the border illegally in 2017 have been deported to their home countries, according to Department of Homeland Security officials.

There is a sinking feeling, among DHS officials, that more caravans are yet to come and that they will only get larger.