

Policy 360 – Episode 78 - 'Migrants are Not a National Security Crisis' - Transcript

- Judith Kelley: Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of Sanford School of Public Policy.
- Judith Kelley: We've all likely heard the news that a group of people are walking towards the U.S. Estimates range in three to four thousand, but in reality we don't really know the exact size of the group. They're walking towards the U.S. and they've been dubbed the "migrant caravan." And they've grabbed worldwide headlines.
- Judith Kelley: The caravan appears to have originated from Honduras. And the travelers say they're headed north for many different reasons, like they're scared of violence and gangs in their home countries. Many have said that they hope that whatever awaits them in the U.S. is better than what they've left behind. And they also say that traveling in a big group is safer and that's why they're doing it that way, even though the trip has drawn international attention.
- Variety of voices: Reporter1 : President Trump is considering taking executive action to stop people in the caravan of migrants from entering the U.S. even through legal means.
- Reporter 2: The migrant caravan, yep it's still headed to our southern border, this as we're finding out that the military plans to deploy 5,000 additional personnel.
- Donald Trump: they have a lot of everybody in that group, it's a horrible thing. And it's a lot bigger than 5,000 people, and we've got to stop 'em at the border.
- Judith Kelley: President Trump has said, without any evidence, that the group includes gang members, or "very bad people"; and that criminals and unknown Middle Easterners are mixed in. And of course, all this is happening just before the midterm elections on Tuesday.
- Judith Kelley: Sarah Bermeo is here to sort fact from fiction. Sarah is a faculty member at the Sanford School and she is a political economist with expertise in foreign policy, development and migration. Welcome to Policy 360.
- Sarah Bermeo: Glad to be here.
- Judith Kelley: I'm going to start with your op-ed that you wrote for the Brookings Institution, where you said that it's an outdated notion that people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are primarily looking for economic opportunity in the U.S.
- Judith Kelley: Why did you say that? What do you mean by that?

Sarah Bermeo: Right. So previous waves of migrants that we would see coming from these three countries, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala ... which are often referred to as the Northern Triangle countries in Central America ... have often been a single member of a family coming north in search of economic opportunity, so that they can make money and send that money back home, in the form of migrant remittances and help their family out there.

Sarah Bermeo: What we've seen really ramping up around 2014, but we were starting to see it before that, was this surge of both unaccompanied minors and entire family units that were coming. And this is where we start to trace the type of migrants as those who are not just looking for someone to make money and send it back home, but people who are fleeing because they say it is unsafe for them to remain in their homes.

Sarah Bermeo: People fleeing because they're told that their son has to join the gang or the family will be killed; people fleeing because they've actually had family members killed by drug cartels, or gangs; people fleeing because they're told that their 15-year-old daughter has to marry one of the criminal leaders in the area, or else the family will be killed.

Sarah Bermeo: Is there still economic hardship in these countries? Absolutely. But we're seeing that the primary reason for the types of migrants that we're seeing now has much more to do with violence, and violence particular to the individuals, than what we saw in the past.

Judith Kelley: But there are lots of people who argue ... And we still continue to refer them to as migrants, right?

Sarah Bermeo: Yes.

Judith Kelley: So there are lots of people who argue that they don't really fit the traditional definition of a refugee. And do you agree with that, and why is that? And if you don't agree, why is that?

Sarah Bermeo: Right. So the traditional definition of the refugee that came about after World War II does not have reference to fleeing things like gang violence as a protected category. And so in the very narrow reading of that rule, that could be true, that people fleeing from gang violence would not count as refugees.

Sarah Bermeo: However the United Nations Refugee Agency has deemed that these people are fleeing situations like those that generate refugees, and should qualify for protection under international refugee conventions, even though they might not fit that narrow definition that was set out after World War II.

Judith Kelley: And that matters, because that protection piece is meaningful.

Sarah Bermeo: It does matter because ... So anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the United States. The United States has signed both international and domestic law that give people the right to seek asylum here. Any of these migrants is within their legal rights to walk up to a U.S. border and ask for an asylum hearing.

Sarah Bermeo: Where it matters, then, is in determining whether or not they actually ... So once you have the asylum hearing, then it is determined whether you actually qualify as a refugee.

Judith Kelley: Right.

Sarah Bermeo: And that's where that would make a difference because, as you likely know, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, earlier this year, made a blanket ruling that people fleeing from gang violence would not be considered refugees from the United States Government's standpoint.

Judith Kelley: It seems that in general we have a problem labeling people who are on the move in the international system. I notice it too. As you know, I work on human trafficking. Sometimes people talk about people like migrants; sometimes they talk about smugglers; other times they talk about traffickers. And these populations become vulnerable to all these things.

Judith Kelley: And how we label them though matters, even in the discourse before they get to the border.

Sarah Bermeo: That's right. It does matter from a legal standpoint. And it matters for what protections they are automatically granted within the United States. That being said, it is possible to grant things like temporary protected status to a group, without labeling them refugees; and so thereby allowing them to live and move freely within the United States, but without granting them a path to citizenship while they're here.

Sarah Bermeo: It's just recognizing that the situation is too dangerous for them to return to, at the moment. And so they are allowed to live and work ,and remain legally, in the United States. So you don't have to declare someone a refugee for them to be afforded protection. That's up to the government.

Judith Kelley: So let's talk about the caravan itself. I remember, at least once before, when we've heard the term "caravan"; certainly in Europe a couple years ago, when we had the refugee flows. And they were refugee flows coming out of Northern Africa, talking about caravans that were walking on the freeways, and things like that.

Judith Kelley: But is that a more recent phenomenon? Is that something we've had before, for a long time? Or?

Sarah Bermeo: So I can only speak to the Central American case.

Judith Kelley: Right.

Sarah Bermeo: And here it seems to be a newer phenomenon. So we did have a group that was, earlier this year, called a migrant caravan, that ended up dwindling significantly in numbers. So it was only a couple hundred people by the time it reached the United States border. So the coverage of that kind of died out.

Sarah Bermeo: It's unclear what the numbers of this current group of people will be by the time they reach the U.S. border which is, in the nearest term, a few weeks ago. Right?

Judith Kelley: Right.

Sarah Bermeo: So that we won't know that for some time. But there does seem to be an increase in people's desire to travel in groups; in part because the route is so dangerous, when they travel alone. So-

Judith Kelley: And they do become vulnerable to trafficking and other things, yeah.

Sarah Bermeo: They become extremely vulnerable to trafficking-

Judith Kelley: Especially the children.

Sarah Bermeo: ... and extortion along the way. So Doctors Without Borders has produced reports that show high percentages of people are subject to armed robbery or sexual violence along the way, kidnappings along the way. And so traveling in groups, and with media attention on you, does decrease the likelihood of that happening.

Judith Kelley: Right, right. But on the other hand, some would say that we just can't take everybody who shows up at the border, especially when they start showing up en masse. So the country would be inundated, from a certain perspective, if we think about just opening the doors. So what's your reaction to that?

Sarah Bermeo: Right. So my reaction to that is that we want to separate ... we want to think about crises individually. So this particular crisis that we're talking about right now ... which is originating from violence that is prevalent in these countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador ... is happening in relatively small countries.

Sarah Bermeo: Honduras has a population of only nine million people. And the entire population of these three countries is less than one tenth of the population of the United States. The numbers of people who came in 2016 from these three countries was, I think, around 250,000 people. If we were to maintain that rate of migration for 10 years from these countries, it would still be significantly less as a percentage of the U.S. population than previous waves of migrants that

were initially met with suspicion and ending up being huge contributors to the United States.

Sarah Bermeo: So people from, say, Ireland or Italy; or Jews migrating from Russia ... We're talking about much smaller portions of the United States population than we were in any one of those waves. And we were able to absorb those waves, and migrants from those previous waves of migration were able to become ... Nobody says now, "Oh, we shouldn't have let the Irish in"; "We shouldn't have let the Italians in."

Sarah Bermeo: They've become contributing members of society, even though there was huge backlash about taking them at the time it happened.

Judith Kelley: Donald Trump has threatened to cut foreign aid and close the border with Mexico. And you say that those actions are not going to actually stop the migration, and might make the U.S. less secure. How so?

Sarah Bermeo: Right. So there are two different issues. So one is cutting foreign aid. The foreign aid that the United States spends in these three countries, we could put it in two main buckets. One is security and the other is economic development. And it is lack of security and lack of economic development that is causing people to migrate.

Sarah Bermeo: So cutting back on the funds that are supposed to tackle those underlying reasons for migration would, almost certainly, be counterproductive. And it's not only ... These foreign aid funds are also targeting things like drug traffickers which are operating in these regions.

Sarah Bermeo: So we're providing these countries with money to help combat drug trafficking. Many of these drug traffickers also become human smugglers in the migration chain, and so these things are very interconnected. And cutting off the foreign aid that is supposed to helping in this area would be more likely to increase migration rather than decrease it.

Sarah Bermeo: On the other, on closing the border, which we hear a lot about ... either going back to building a wall or currently, right now, with the use of U.S. troops to go to the border. Given how well established smuggling networks are for things like cocaine in these regions; and given how easily they have shifted to smuggling people, when we think about the United States' southern border with Mexico, it's about 2,000-mile land border.

Sarah Bermeo: Our sea borders are about 12,000 miles. So closing that 2,000-mile land border, when you have a well established smuggling network in place, is only going to cause people to take different routes into the country; be willing to pay more for smugglers. More people may die along the way, so we may cut down on migration that way. More people may not be able to pay the smugglers.

Sarah Bermeo: But in the end, we would be increasing the power of these smuggling groups that are also trafficking 90 percent of the cocaine that comes into the United States. And so we'd be increasing the security threat both to ourselves from drugs coming in, as well as these armed groups that are operating not far south of our border and are creating some of these violent conditions to begin with.

Judith Kelley: So from your perspective, what policy would you recommend? Both towards the immediate caravan and sort of overall?

Sarah Bermeo: Right. So I think that any approach that the United States, or any country facing a situation like this, takes has to be two-pronged. One is that you have to think about the underlying causes. The only real solution is to tackle the underlying causes of the violence that is driving people to migrate, and that's on multiple fronts.

Sarah Bermeo: According to people like Chief of Staff John Kelly, one of the main ways to do that is to decrease demand to the United States for the drugs that are causing these cartels to be able to operate through these countries. These countries started as just pass-through countries. The drugs are coming from South America, so the supply is from South America. The demand is in the United States.

Sarah Bermeo: And these countries were just caught on in the middle. Any long-term strategy has to address drug demand. It also has to address ways to tackle corruption within these countries, where these criminal networks have been able to really gain footholds with government officials there.

Sarah Bermeo: And you have to tackle economic development. You have to help these countries develop which has been a policy of the United States going back for quite some time, and was significantly increased during the George W. Bush administration. We gave a lot more aid, as well negotiating a trade deal with these countries; and then, again, during the Obama administration.

Sarah Bermeo: So this has been a bipartisan recognition, with bipartisan support in Congress, that helping these countries was in our own best interest. That will not solve the short-term problem. We won't solve that problem in six months. We won't solve that problem in a year. We probably-

Judith Kelley: These people are-

Sarah Bermeo: Because people are coming.

Judith Kelley: Do we have a sense of how long before they should reach a border?

Sarah Bermeo: I think the estimates vary widely on that; but say, somewhere around a month from now, I think seems to be-

Judith Kelley: So about a month from now, here they are.

Sarah Bermeo: Right. Now this is a very small number of people. A few hundred thousand people come from these countries every year to the United States. And we're talking ... at its height, this caravan was 7,000 people. It's probably closer to about 3,000 people now. So this is a very small number, compared to the number that will come even in the course of the year. Right?

Judith Kelley: Right.

Sarah Bermeo: So this not the huge surge that we're being made to think that it is. But we will need to come up with a way to confront the fact that people faced with desperate situations at home will find a way to leave. And Mexico is not a safe place for them to stay, so they will continue on to the United States. And they will face very harsh odds to do so and we're already seeing that.

Sarah Bermeo: So we need a way to process people when they get here, and we have two stark alternatives with some shades of gray in between. We can either find a way to offer them legal entry into the United States and some form of legal protected status while they're here, so that they can become contributing members to society; so we have a better handle on who's coming in because people aren't afraid to come up to the border and say, "We're here." Right?

Judith Kelley: Sure.

Sarah Bermeo: We know who's here. We know how many. We can target resources in the most efficient manner. We can try to help with where people are settling, so they're not becoming too much of a strain on individual communities.

Sarah Bermeo: Or we can say, "We're going to try to shut the border," and we could have no idea who's coming into our country, because they're going to use smugglers to get here. We won't know where they're settling. We won't be able to screen them. And they won't be able to be out in the open, contributing to the economy.

Sarah Bermeo: Those really are the two choices that we face right now, because people are not going to remain in these countries given the violent situation that there is now.

Judith Kelley: Well Sarah, thank you very much for joining me today.

Sarah Bermeo: You're welcome. Glad to be here.

Judith Kelley: Sarah Bermeo is a faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy and she's a author of Targeted Development: Industrialized Country Strategy in a Globalizing World. And we're going to be talking about that book in an upcoming episode.

Judith Kelley:

In the meantime, we'll have a link to the op-ed that we were talking about before on our website at policy360.org. Thanks for joining us. I'm Judith Kelley.