Is There a Humanitarian Crisis on the Border? If So, What Should be Done?

Date: Wednesday, April 23, 5:00 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.
Location: NAU Franke College of Business, Gardner Auditorium
Facilitated by: James Joiner, NAU Department of Philosophy

5:00 p.m. Welcome and Introduction
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

5:15 p.m. James Joiner, NAU Department of Philosophy

- What conditions, if any, suggest that there is a humanitarian crisis on the border?
- What is a humanitarian crisis? How is this distinguished from other types of crises? What is especially problematic about a case of this kind?
- What are the possible courses of action that could be taken? What are the costs and benefits of those solutions?
- Does a nation have a right to prevent immigration? Under what conditions? How do economic, cultural, and humanitarian factors affect this right?

6:20 p.m. Recap of discussion
What specific conditions, if any, suggest that there is a humanitarian crisis on the border?

In 1994, the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement allowed the US to import massive amounts of cheap corn into Mexico. Mexican corn producers could not compete and 6 million people were left jobless. United States immigration law currently allows a finite number of permanent immigrants each year and most of these spots are reserved for highly skilled workers. There are temporary visas available for low-skilled workers but it is nearly impossible for low skilled workers to legally enter the country, driving many to attempt to do so illegally.¹

Since 1994, the remains of 7,000 deceased migrants have been found in the southwestern borderlands.² A report by the organization No More Deaths interviewed nearly 13,000 migrants who spent time in the custody of Border Patrol. According to the report, only 20% of people in custody for over 2 days received a meal, 863 people reported being denied water, and 10% reported physical abuse. The most commonly reported forms of abuse were overcrowding (5,763 reports), unsanitary conditions (3,107), extreme cold (2,922), and extreme heat (2,349). The report also identifies three common Border Patrol practices that increase the risk of death in the southwestern borderlands: intentionally funneling migrants to deadly desert regions, impeding search and rescue efforts, and vandalizing life-saving resources such as food, water, and blankets. The report analyzed Border Patrol standards and found that there is apparently no prohibition of physical abuse, psychological harm, or separation of family members, and that the standards that do exist are commonly ignored.³ Another report by researchers at the University of Texas-El Paso and the University of Arizona surveyed over 1,000 deported migrants and also found that 10% reported physical abuse. Of these, 70% reported being either pushed, pulled, spat on, lifted, placed in a stressful position or dragged. The report also noted that immigrants are often times stripped of belongings that are never returned. They are often deported to cities far from their homes without cellphones, ID cards, or money. In response to the report, the Department of Homeland Security issued a statement: “DHS takes seriously the safety and welfare of detainees and those in our custody and our facilities are maintained in accordance with applicable laws and policies. Every DHS employee is held to the highest standard of professional and ethical conduct. Accusations of alleged unlawful conduct on or off duty, are investigated thoroughly and if substantiated, appropriate action is taken.”⁴

What is a humanitarian crisis? How is this distinguished from other types of crises? What is especially problematic about a case of this kind?

Immigration is a complex issue that involves inextricable economic, political, cultural, and humanitarian considerations. It is important to distinguish among these issues when one is trying to determine if a humanitarian crisis is present. The word humanitarian is an adjective used to describe something that is concerned with people’s welfare or human suffering.⁵ The Humanitarian coalition defines a humanitarian crisis as “an event or series of events which represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or well being of a community or other large group of people, usually over a wide area.”⁶

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¹ This informational handout was prepared by Anthony Wallace, a philosophy major and finance minor at Northern Arizona University.

² United States Border Patrol.

³ This informational handout was prepared by Anthony Wallace, a philosophy major and finance minor at Northern Arizona University.

⁴ This informational handout was prepared by Anthony Wallace, a philosophy major and finance minor at Northern Arizona University.

⁵ This informational handout was prepared by Anthony Wallace, a philosophy major and finance minor at Northern Arizona University.

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Legislation to Encourage Humane Treatment of Migrants

Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) has proposed legislation that would provide minimum standards for the treatment of migrants being held in federal facilities. This could provide more reason for authorities to curb their mistreatment of detained migrants, but as the No More Deaths report points out, these standards are not always followed.

Pathway to Citizenship

President Obama supports a program that would provide the 11 million illegal immigrants in the US with a legal way to earn citizenship. The program would require participants to pass a background check, pay fines and taxes, and learn English. This would address the humanitarian crisis in that there would be fewer deported immigrants and therefore fewer incidences of abuse. Some argue that these newly legalized citizens would be a burden on our economy, that such a law would send the message that breaking the law is okay, or that it could threaten homeland security.

Legislation Similar to SB1070

In 2010, Arizona passed SB1070, directing law enforcement to ask for immigration papers on “reasonable suspicion” that a person could be an illegal immigrant. Services to illegal immigrants cost Arizona $2.7 billion each year. Theoretically, such legislation could reduce the amount of illegal immigrants and subsequently, their strain on the economy. However, it gives further power to law enforcement and may increase the potential for the mistreatment of detained illegals and migrants.

High-Tech, Virtual Walls

Multiple propositions have been made to build high tech walls along the border to deter attempts at illegal entry and detect such entries when they do occur. These walls employ underground sensors, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and mobile command towers to create a virtual wall that covers 6,000 miles of border. Ideally, such a wall would make illegal entry so difficult that it would prevent attempts. However, the project has proved too ambitious, difficult to manage, and too expensive in its current state.

Does a nation have a right to prevent immigration? Under what conditions? How do economic, cultural, and humanitarian factors affect this right?

It is often taken for granted that a country has the right to prevent people from immigrating in certain situations. What exactly are the conditions that must be present for this to be justified? Immigration is an issue that involves a complex web of difficult considerations. Economic, cultural, and humanitarian concerns are heavily involved in conversations about immigration legislation. Each of these areas of concern is well represented in the modern debate around American immigration. Some feel that the poor English skills of immigrants diminish productivity in America. Their presence in the work force causes a rise in the unemployment of Americans. They strain education and energy and contribute to overpopulation. It is difficult but necessary to weigh these considerations against each other when making decisions or participating in debates related to immigration policies.

Sources

The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by NAU students that represent diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

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