

Margaret Mims: Fix our immigration system

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By Margaret Mims

The recent surge in violence and murder rates in Central America — particularly in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — is causing thousands of children to flee. Many are making the treacherous journey to the United States.

As a law enforcement official, my priority is, above all else, the safety of our communities. Oftentimes, our main focus is to ensure the safety of our children — especially those who are most in need of protection during chaotic and dangerous circumstances.

Unquestionably, our priority to protect children is even greater when criminal operations are taking advantage of them.

A June 23 article in The Daily Beast (www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/23/how-mexico-s-cartels-are-behind-the-border-kid-crisis.html#) outlines how drug cartels and smugglers prey on vulnerable populations, including unaccompanied children, to advance their own trafficking operations. Some people even speculate that these cartels triggered the flow of unaccompanied migrant children from Central America in the first place.

Children are susceptible to exploitation each step of the way — from the dangerous trek to the border to the temporary holding centers where they await deportation proceedings to a new displaced life, without their families.

We cannot continue to sit back and allow criminal operations to dictate the level of safety and security on our border and within our own communities.

Law enforcement officials are facing a troublesome situation in which resources are spread thin, making it even more difficult to target criminal smugglers. In order to effectively ensure border security, we need an immigration process that allows for additional control via workable legal channels of entry. Our current system ensnares us in the ambitions of criminal activity.

The focus of law enforcement should be on capturing criminals, not children and families who are fleeing violent situations. It is not unreasonable that, out of desperation, unaccompanied minors are willing to risk dealing with a treacherous journey and a chaotic system in the United States to escape the violence of the criminal operations within their home countries.

Our current, dysfunctional immigration system is exacerbating the problem. Cartels and smugglers are capitalizing on the opportunity our own broken system provides for rumor and misinformation.

The shortage of efficient legal immigration opportunities has facilitated the black market for these cartels and criminal organizations. Reforming our broken immigration system is the most effective way to promote legal channels of entering the United States and to keep our communities secure by undermining criminal enterprises.

Reform needs to include the following components: border security; an efficient way to allow entry only to those who have received permission legally; and a corresponding method to identify and efficiently process those who have resided here for an extended period of time, without criminal activity, and who are

employed.

Legalization needs to be earned but needs to be attainable in a reasonable period of time. It is time for an efficient guest-worker program to be implemented with employers hiring only those who have valid immigration credentials.

Year after year, the immigration issue keeps getting punted, and the delay has resulted in the situation we have now with thousands of immigrant children dependent on already stretched social-service and law-enforcement systems.

Further delay will undoubtedly make a bad situation worse. It's time to stop kicking the proverbial can down the road.

We must work together toward solutions that will keep desperate migrant children from serving as bait for some of the world's most dangerous criminals. In short, we need a new legal immigration process that provides an efficient and orderly way of determining who is eligible to come to or remain in our United States — including children.

Let's replace doubt and misinformation with the certainty of an immigration process that works.

Margaret Mims is the Fresno County sheriff.