

Five Ways to Support Asylum Seekers

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Montes**

Abstract:

This of the juridical and legislative border policies that contribute to the creation of inhumane conditions for asylum seekers in the United States. It offers recommendations that can be taken to mitigate these policies. The essay highlights the plight of recently arriving immigrants who lack institutional support. It concludes with a set of recommendations to support asylum seekers including legal aid mechanisms and vocational capacity building opportunities.

Keywords:

Asylum, Border Policies, Detention Centres, family separation

On Saturday, July 15, I returned to Philadelphia from Houston. As I walked to baggage claim, I hoped to see the little boy who had sat behind me on the flight and who had asked the attendant in Spanish, “hay baño aquí” (is there a bathroom here?).

I couldn’t find him. My gaze fell instead on a young, dark-haired woman carrying a toddler and turning in all directions as if looking for someone. I walked over to her and asked, in friendly Spanish, “Do you know where you’re going?” With a look of relief, she replied, “No.” She had no luggage except a small, black plastic bag from which one could see some papers peeking out. She also carried on her back a small, bright orange polyester bag, like those given to runners during a marathon. The thinness of the bag revealed a few belongings within. I asked if someone was coming to pick her up. After hurriedly replying, “Yes,” she asked me, “Do you have internet?”

That’s how I met Carmen, a Honduran woman in her 20s, and her toddler daughter, Maritza. Carmen was among the thousands of women, men, and children from Central America crossing the U.S.–Mexico border in search of asylum in the United States. *USA Today* reported on July 17 that border agents encountered 100,000 asylum seekers in June, a 42% drop from the number encountered in May (Jervis, 2023). According to the Washington Office of Latin America (WOLA), – an advocacy organisation for human rights in the Americas – since 2021, Eagle Pass has been a prime crossing point for people seeking to turn themselves in to U.S. authorities and apply for asylum (Isacson, 2023).

Carmen had crossed the U.S.–Mexico border and turned herself and Maritza in to U.S. authorities on July 11, following a perilous journey across Mexican territory. Carmen was fortunate enough to spend only three days, the maximum time set by a U.S. government policy, in the custody of Customs Border Protection (CBP). A CNN column reported that during the first week of July, of the 10,000 people in CBP’s custody, more than 1,000 had been held in border facilities for more than 10 days after crossing (Alvarez, 2023).

Not only had Carmen been lucky to be released so quickly, but both she and little Maritza had been exceptionally fortunate to have reached the border before the recent escalation of the cruelty and human suffering of Operation Lone Star, a policy launched by Texas Governor Greg Abbott more than two years ago. The *New York Times* reported that the operations latest tactics include fortifying riverbanks with concertina wire, denying water to some immigrants, installing razor “traps,” and deploying a 1,000-foot floating barrier of buoys into the Rio Grande (Goodman/Sandoval, 2023).

In April 2022, as part of the long history of using immigrants as political hostages, Gov. Abbott began loading buses with asylum seekers from the border and dropped them off in Democrat-led cities throughout the United States (Montes, 2023). The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that on November 16, the first bus arrived in Philadelphia, and to this day, buses with immigrants continue to arrive in the city (Gammage, 2022). It also reported that as of May 10, 833 immigrants have arrived in the city (Conde/Gammage, 2023). While most come to Philadelphia just to connect to other cities such as Chicago or NYC, about 50 of them have chosen to make their home here. How did these people find their way to settle in Philadelphia?

A coalition of organisations — New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia, HIAS Pennsylvania, and Casa de Venezuela, among others — welcomes them. Volunteers offer water, clothing, and medical checks. Those not picked up by family board a bus to a temporary shelter, where local government workers and immigrant assistance groups provide food, temporary housing, legal services, and other logistical support.

The volunteers' most important role is to make immigrants feel that they are not alone — something that Carmen did not receive. Like Carmen, an undetermined number of immigrants, mainly women and children, arrive to Philadelphia via flights. Without the kind of institutional support immigrants arriving in buses receive, it can be challenging to survive.

Here are five recommendations to support asylum seekers:

First, **create an accessible and multilingual brochure for the** immigrants with the legal steps to follow so that when they leave the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, they can continue with their asylum cases. The brochure should also include a list of grassroots organisations that serve immigrant communities in other cities where these immigrants will arrive.

Second, **make work permits available for these immigrants as soon as possible** so they can support themselves. According to the Migration Policy Institute, asylum seekers wait four years on average for their first hearing. In the meantime, immigrants need to make a living to support their families.

Third, **create a local job bank** so companies and businesses that want to support these immigrants — like Uncle Paul's pizzeria in NYC — can hire them.

Fourth, **create learning centres where immigrants can learn not only English as a second language but also how to pursue vocational careers.** After the pandemic, there have been labour shortages across different labour markets, and many of these immigrants bring valuable human capital that can fill vacancies.

Lastly, following what other cities and states — Los Angeles, New York City, and Arizona — have done to support immigrants in their asylum cases, Philadelphia could **allocate a budget to support legal clinics.** Without legal representation it's very difficult for an asylum seeker to win his or her case. (Human Rights First).

Although, implementing any of these recommendations could make a big difference in the lives of people like Carmen and her daughter Maritza. Carmen's case is just the tip of the iceberg of a much more complex phenomenon in terms of immigration policy in the U.S., which has worsened since 1986 when the Immigration Reform Control Act (IRCA) was implemented. IRCA was the last immigration reform that legalized 2.7 million immigrants (Immigration and Ethnic History Society, 2023). Therefore, there are bigger questions to ask if we want to address the current situation. Why do women like Carmen decide to undertake this journey? What can be so terrible that it is preferable to emigrate, even if, in undertaking that uncertain and dangerous journey, one could lose one's life? What desperation is one experiencing to embark on that perilous migration journey, especially carrying small children? What has been the role of the U.S. government in contributing to the current socioeconomic conditions in those countries where these people come and from which they seek to flee?

Until these questions are not answered, what is happening at the border will become not only more and more acute but also more frequent and more inhumane for thousands of men, women, and children for whom life has become unbearable in their countries of origin.

Veronica Montes is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of Latin American, Iberian, and Latina/o Studies at Bryn Mawr College. At the age of 18, she migrated to the United States from Mexico, City after three years of having been physically separated from her mom. On November 13, 1988 she and her older sister surreptitiously crossed the border, carrying out with them their five-year old sister. After 25 years in the U.S., in July 2013, she completed her Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with specialization in the fields of globalization and migration/immigration. From 2013 to 2015, she was an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at the University of Southern California in the Department of Sociology and with the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration. As a feminist ethnographer,

her research falls in two areas: on immigration from Mexico and Central America to the United States and on the intersection between gender, belonging, and migration. Currently, her research revolves around: the activist nature of transnational motherhood into the domains of migration, maternal activism, and gender, specifically, by looking at the family separation due to the US deportation regime and the collective mobilization of deported mothers in Tijuana, Mexico; the precariousness of the social services provided to the Latino migrant community in Philadelphia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic; as well as examining the intersection between social inclusion, citizenship, culture production and Latino immigrants in South Philadelphia.

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