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OP-ED OP-ED OPINION

How to secure the border. Spoiler alert: A wall won't do it

By SONIA NAZARIO
APR 23, 2017 | 4:00 AM



U.S. Border Patrol security lights illuminate Zacate Creek on the Laredo side of the Rio Grande on the night of May 21.

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number of immigrants crossing our sou

place that work. But few politicians promote these efforts. And funding for them soon could be cut.

First, let's get real about what *doesn't* work.

For 40 years, our leaders on the left and right have pushed three solutions to the problem of migrants who are here illegally: border enforcement, guest worker programs and legalization.

Border enforcement cost a staggering \$19.4 billion in 2016, and even as we've ramped it up in recent years, studies show 97% of border-crossers who try repeatedly do get in. Current estimates are that taxpayers — you and me — will shell out \$12 billion to \$66.9 billion if President Trump's barrier is built at the U.S.-Mexico border. To be clear: Walls don't work. Ask the Chinese. They built the mother of all walls, and it didn't keep out the Mongols.

Honduran violence-prevention programs cost the U.S. about \$100 million a year. That's pocket change compared with the cost of the wall.

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Guest worker programs admit migrants legally and supposedly require them to go home by a certain date. But more than half of the Bracero Program guest workers who came to the U.S. from the 1940s to the 1960s, never left, creating a foundation for the wave of Mexicans that followed. In 2014, the latest year of available data, it was estimated that 66% of those added to the rolls of immigrants living unlawfully in the U.S. arrived here legally, often with temporary work visas, and overstayed. They didn't wade across the Rio Grande.

As for legalization, in 1986, we granted amnesty to millions who then illegally sent

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It sounds radical, but this is what works: Instead of adding fire power, fencing and drones at the border, we must deal directly with powerful forces pushing people out of their home countries and toward the U.S. The majority of the border-crossers in the Southwest come from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala — all three are among the most dangerous nations on Earth.

In 2002, I wrote a series titled "Enrique's Journey" for this newspaper. Enrique's mother had left him in Honduras when he was 5 to work in the U.S. At 16, he set off, by himself, to find her. I spent three months following Enrique's route — making my way through Mexico, riding on top of seven freight trains, seeing firsthand what migrants faced: gangsters, bandits, corrupt cops. Children were robbed, raped, beaten and killed; they lost arms and legs train-hopping.

Now, the journey north is even harder. The U.S. shamefully pays tens of millions of dollars to Mexico to keep migrants from reaching our border. Kidnapping is rampant. Each year, thousands are held for ransom, enslaved or prostituted. Recently, 20 mass graves were discovered in the Mexican state of Veracruz. Buried along with hundreds of corpses were Honduran and Guatemalan coins and identity cards.

Despite the mounting obstacles, the data show a tenfold increase in immigrant children coming to the U.S. alone since Enrique's journey. In 2002, 6,800 minors were detained alone at the border by U.S. agents. In 2014, the count was 68,000, and last year, even with Mexico deporting more Central Americans than the U.S., it was 60,000.

The reason is simple, as one expert who tracks child migration told me: "When your house is on fire, you find a way to get out." Enrique wanted to find his mother; today's migrants are running for their lives.

The U.S. has helped fuel some of the mayhem that pushes migrants north. Since the mid-1990s, we have deported more than 300,000 criminals, mostly gangsters, to Central America. In the past decade, we spent billions to stop the flow of drugs

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Don't build a wall. Do this instead

Last year, I went to Rivera Hernández, the most violent neighborhood in San Pedro Sula, Honduras — the world's murder capital for four years running. Bodies dotted the streets in the morning; six gangs brazenly exerted control. One day, according to local police, gangsters were casually playing soccer with the decapitated head of someone they had executed.

And yet, Rivera Hernández shows clearly how positive change is possible. In 2014, the U.S. implemented pilot violence-prevention programs there, based on efforts in Los Angeles and Boston, organizing courageous residents to counter gangs and bring about change.

Outreach centers were set up where kids could find mentors, vocational training and help getting jobs, effectively cutting off the lifeblood of gangs: new recruits. Another program, modeled on L.A.'s Gang Reduction and Youth Development program, known as GYRD, used nine risk factors to identify children likely to join gangs. After a year of family counseling, they were 77% less likely than their peers to commit crimes or abuse alcohol or drugs.

The U.S. also went after killers. In 96% of Honduran homicide cases, no one is ever convicted. Witnesses know that if they testify, they're dead. The U.S. helped fund the Assn. for a More Just Society, which investigates killings in Rivera Hernández and six other violent neighborhoods. They coax witnesses to testify, anonymously, cloaked in a black burqa. Now prosecutors are getting guilty verdicts in more than half of the homicides in these neighborhoods. In two years, killings in Rivera Hernández plummeted 62%.

These efforts are riddled with problems, and Rivera Hernández is still crazy violent. But the data are compelling: In 2014, before these pilot violence-prevention programs took hold, 18,000 Honduran kids showed up at our border. In 2016, that number was almost cut in half.

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The United States has every reason and building a wall and militarizing it is a foolish waste of money. We must do something better. We must offer compassion for vulnerable children running from harm and work to reduce unlawful migration to keep more children and families safe in their home countries. Honduran violence-prevention programs cost the U.S. about \$100 million a year. That's pocket change compared with the cost of the wall or the billions we spend dealing with migrants and refugees when they arrive at our doorstep.

Don't let Trump target these programs as unnecessary foreign aid. Insist instead that the State Department expand them. Instead of "Build the wall!" try a different chant: "Do violence-prevention programs!"

It's not much of a jingle. But it actually works.

Sonia Nazario won a Pulitzer Prize for "Enrique's Journey," which is now a bestselling book. This piece is based on her recent TED talk. enriquesjourney.com

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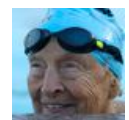
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