



Migrants at the U.S. border with Mexico, San Luis, Arizona, 2021

Fotos: Nick Ut/Getty Images; privat

What's happening at the U.S. border?

Joe Biden versprach eine humanere Immigrationspolitik als die von Donald Trump. Trotzdem werden immer mehr Menschen an der Grenze zu Mexiko zurückgehalten. Was geht dort wirklich vor? ELIZABETH ZACH berichtet.

MEDIUM US

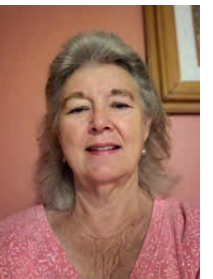
When Joy Tucker retired in 2017 from the local food bank where she'd worked for 30 years, she might have celebrated by enjoying her newfound leisure. As a program coordinator at the food bank in Tucson, Arizona, she had served the poorest of the poor in many ways. She had packed food boxes and helped clients find accommodations and work, and had been the food bank's vice president of operations.

But at the time she retired, it was impossible to ignore the state of chaos and crisis around the city. Tucson lies less than 100 kilometers from the Mexican border, and millions of migrants were flowing into the U.S.

Escaping violence and poverty

It was a time of extreme need in her community, says Tucker. Mexican, Honduran, Guatemalan, Cuban, Brazilian, Indian, and Venezuelan citizens were seeking asylum in the U.S. Many were trying to escape drug wars or environmental disasters such as hurricanes and flooding, or gang-related violence and poverty in their homelands. More recently, Haitian immigrants have followed the trail northward via Mexico, fleeing political violence and natural disasters.

"I wanted to work with these refugees," Tucker says, noting that she herself is of Venezuelan descent. In 2019, she began to volunteer at Casa Alitas, a Catholic charitable organization. "I simply saw that there was a great need," she says, adding that many of the migrants she sees suffer from extreme exhaustion and health problems.



Joy Tucker, volunteer

descent [di'sent]

• Herkunft

exhaustion [ig'zɔ:stʃən]

• Erschöpfung

food bank

• Tafel, Essensausgabe

operations

• Betrieb

seek asylum

[,si:k ə'saɪləm]

• Asyl suchen

trail

• Spur, Weg

Tucson ['tu:zɔ:n]

• (wegen Aussprache)

volunteer [ˌvɔ:lən'tɪr]

• ehrenamtlich arbeiten



A migrant child gets a medical check-up at the detention center for unaccompanied children in Donna, Texas

INFO TO GO

The U.S. Border Patrol reported nearly 200,000 encounters with migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border in July 2021. This was the highest monthly total in more than 20 years. (Source: [pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org))

abuse [əˈbjuːs]

• Misshandlung

airy

• luftig

border patrol

• Grenzschutz

corporate donation

[ˌkɔːrpəˈreɪt ˈdoʊneɪʃən]

• Unternehmensspende

custody [ˈkʌstədi]

• Gewahrsam

customs [ˈkʌstəmz]

• Zoll

detain [diˈteɪn]

• inhaftieren

detention [ˌdiˈtenʃən]

• Arrest, Haft

drop off

• absetzen

encounter [ɪnˈkaʊntər]

• Begegnung

enforcement

[ɪnˈfɔːrsmənt]

• Vollzug; hier: Ermittlungsdienst

facility [fəˈsɪləti]

• Einrichtung

funding

• Fördergelder

lure [luːr]

• locken

military service

• Armeedienst

minimum wage

[ˌmɪnɪmə ˈweɪdʒ]

• Mindestlohn

monastery [ˈmɒnəstəri]

• Kloster

mural [ˈmjuərəl]

• Wandbild

offender

• Straftäter(in)

official [əˈfɪʃl]

• Beamte(r)

potted plant

• Topfpflanze

reinforced [ˌriːnˈfɔːrst]

• verstärkt

total [ˈtoʊtəl]

• Summe

When Tucker started working there, Casa Alitas was housed in a Benedictine monastery, but that same year, it moved to a building originally designed to detain young offenders. Today, the corridors of “cells” are airy and light, painted in bright colors and decorated with murals. Wall mosaics, sofas, potted plants, coffee tables, and toys make the community room look welcoming.

Since Casa Alitas opened in October 2018, it has helped more than 15,000 migrants. Many have complicated medical histories or stories of abuse; many, if not most, have sponsors in the U.S. who have agreed to help them make the journey. At Casa Alitas, all have received medical care, healthy meals, clothing, and travel assistance for the rest of their journeys.

A humanitarian crisis

Meanwhile, immigration policies have changed in the past few years to prevent people seeking asylum from crossing Mexico’s southern and northern borders. While many of the cross-border migrants have been single adults, border officials say they’re now seeing more families and children. Indeed, in early March 2021, there were more than 5,000 children in U.S. custody, housed in jail-like facilities and being kept for longer than the 72-hour legal detention limit.

With various U.S. agencies involved in the crisis, coordination can be difficult. Tucker says she’s in WhatsApp groups that monitor how many

refugees are dropped off in Tucson on any given day by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), or local and state law enforcement agencies.

Efforts to help the refugees have been further complicated by the Covid pandemic. Although Casa Alitas was able to get federal funding to quarantine refugees with Covid in two hotels early in 2021, the hotels didn’t offer to feed everyone, so volunteers had to think of ways to provide meals for the patients. Fear of the virus meant that fewer people than usual were willing to volunteer, but many private and corporate donations came through.

“We’ll get a message that ICE is dropping off 50 people, so we’ll plan for them,” Tucker explains. “CBP will then let us know they’ve got 40 people, but then ICE will message us that they have another 50 single men, and then we have to recalculate.”

Making the deadly journey

Migration from south of the U.S. border has been a difficult economic and social issue for decades. In August 1942, Mexico and the U.S. agreed to allow Mexican farmworkers to work in the U.S.

The Bracero Program, as it was called, guaranteed acceptable living standards, a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour, and protection against forced military service. But illegal migration was a problem almost from the start, and the U.S. began to introduce restrictions step by step. This was partly also in response to complaints from U.S. labor organizations about competition. Although later studies showed that there was no negative effect on the U.S. labor market, the Bracero Program was stopped in 1964.

Meanwhile, illegal migration continues, often with deadly consequences. Reinforced border infrastructure has made the journey more dangerous, forcing migrants to make longer treks across the Sonora Desert. Criminal teams lure would-be migrants with empty promises of safe passage. In 2020, the group Humane

Borders reported 227 deaths along the border, and at least 7,000 deaths since 1998.

Inconsistent border policies

In October 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that a program initiated by his predecessor, Donald Trump, would continue. This forces asylum seekers to wait in Mexico until U.S. courts decide whether they can legally enter the country.

Biden had initially reversed the Trump policy, so migrants thought that his administration would be more humane. But experts say the so-called Remain in Mexico policy makes the mix of immigration policies at the Mexican border even more confusing. It does little to improve the humanitarian and national security crisis. Some migrants have waited years for entry into the U.S.

Since 2019, CBP agents have detained mostly families and unaccompanied children from Central America. According to CBP Acting Commissioner Mark Morgan, the numbers rise and fall but are slowly climbing every year. In 2019, his agency stopped 970,000 migrants from crossing the border.

“This is a staggering 88 percent higher than the fiscal year 2018,” he said. “These are numbers that no immigration system in the world can handle, not even this country.”

The U.S. Department of Justice said that by early 2021, more than 600,000 asylum claims were waiting for a decision, although only one in 13 was approved. The overwhelming numbers have meant that the CBP now often simply drops off asylum seekers in border towns, including Yuma, Somerton, and Tucson. The lack of an organized response has outraged many Americans, particularly those living along the border. So, too, have images from September 2021 of Border Patrol agents in the city of Del Rio, Texas, chasing Haitian migrants on horseback along the Rio Grande as if they were runaway slaves.

Focusing on immediate needs

All of this is perhaps why volunteers such as Joy Tucker believe that the best



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way to help is to focus on the most immediate needs of those migrants who reach Casa Alitas.

“They need a shower,” she says. “They need to use a toilet. They need clothes. They can spend however many nights here that they need. We can coordinate medical care if they need that. We can help them arrange their onward travel, and we have volunteers who will get them to the bus station or airport.”

The bureaucracy and paperwork, she adds, can be daunting. The U.S. has placed ever more restrictions and requirements on migrants seeking asylum – although it’s obvious that most people can’t comply with either.

“If they’re going to come here,” says Tucker, “we need to find a better way.”

acting commissioner

• amtierende(r)
Kommissar(in)

approve

• genehmigen

asylum claim

[əˈsaɪləm kleɪm]

• Asylantrag

bureaucracy

[bjʊəˈkrəsi]

• Bürokratie

chase

• verfolgen, jagen

comply [kəmˈplaɪ]

• die Auflagen erfüllen

daunting [ˈdaʊntɪŋ]

• abschreckend

fiscal year [ˈfɪskəl]

• Geschäftsjahr

inconsistent

• unbeständig

lack

• Mangel

onward

• Weiter-

outrage

• entrüsten

overwhelming

[ˌoʊvərˈhweɪlɪŋ]

• überwältigend

predecessor

[ˈpredəsəsər]

• Vorgänger/in

reverse [rɪˈvɜːs]

• rückgängig machen

runaway

• entlaufen

staggering

• überwältigend

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