



The Impact of Trump-Era U.S. Migration Policy on Humanitarian Protections, Global Inequalities, and International Legal Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Migration is a fundamental aspect of human history, driven by the search for survival, security, and opportunity. From the earliest movements out of East Africa to contemporary global flows, migration patterns have always reflected deeply embedded political, economic, and environmental dynamics. In the modern era, migration is shaped by “push” factors such as conflict, poverty, and climate change, and “pull” factors like economic opportunity and safety. However, these movements are not merely personal choices, they symbolize persistent global inequalities, particularly between the Global North and South. Statistics reveal that while 37% of migration occurs between Southern nations, corridors such as Mexico–U.S. and Africa–Europe underscore the influence of geopolitical alliances, policy disparities, and entrenched systemic inequalities.

The study of U.S. migration policy offers a powerful lens into these broader forces. Recent years have witnessed profound shifts, especially under the Trump administration, which implemented sweeping rollbacks on humanitarian protections. Policies like the “Zero-Tolerance” family separation initiative, the “Remain in Mexico” protocol, travel bans targeting Muslim-majority and African countries, and narrowing of asylum eligibility marked a stark departure from prior commitments to refugee and asylum rights. These measures resulted in widespread family separation, increased deportations, and fueled an atmosphere of fear and exclusion for migrants and asylum seekers.

Moreover, the Trump administration’s approach has had long-term reverberations, weakening institutional capacity, fueling backlogs, and politicizing immigration agencies. Even as the Biden administration has attempted to reverse some of these policies, structural barriers and the legacy of enforcement-first strategies persist, complicating efforts toward humane migration justice and reform. The implications extend beyond the U.S., altering global attitudes and contributing to a backlash against multilateral cooperation on migration issues. As migration remains a key site of contestation and negotiation, achieving genuine change will require not just policy reversal but structural transformation to address the deep-rooted inequalities, uphold human rights, and rebuild trust in migration governance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. How did Trump-era U.S. migration policies affect humanitarian protections, asylum processes, and migrant communities?
2. How do global inequalities between the Global South and North shape migration flows and policies, especially in key corridors like Mexico-U.S. and Africa-Europe?
3. What impact do U.S. migration policy changes have on international legal frameworks and global cooperation on migration?

METHODOLOGY:

This research uses a mix of two approaches looking at numbers and facts (quantitative) and exploring stories and experiences (qualitative). We will study migration data, government policies, and also include interviews and document reviews. Combining these methods helps us understand both the big picture of migration trends and the personal experiences of migrants, giving us a clearer and fuller view of the situation.



Thematic Literature Review

The provided research overviews the multifaceted and complex dynamics of global migration, focusing on the U.S. and its policy shifts. The introduction and core findings establish a theoretical foundation for understanding migration, highlighting it as a historical constant shaped by "push" and "pull" factors, but also as a reflection of deep-seated global inequalities. The literature, including works by Georgiana Florentina Tataru and Jennifer Hyndman, positions migration within a geopolitical context, with disparities between the Global South and North driving significant flows. The mention of the Migration Policy Institute's statistics on South-South versus South-North migration corridors reinforces this point, underscoring the influence of economic disparities and geopolitical alliances. The review of Trump-era policies, drawing on various sources like AP News and The Guardian, provides a detailed account of specific measures such as the "Zero-Tolerance" and "Remain in Mexico" policies. These sections emphasize the severe humanitarian consequences of these policies, including family separations and the erosion of asylum protections. The Long-Term Legacy and DEI implications sections extend this analysis, citing sources like the Brookings Institution and the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) to argue that these policies have had a lasting, detrimental impact on institutional capacity and the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). The final section, International Legal Frameworks, broadens the scope to international relations, detailing how U.S. policies influenced other countries and weakened global cooperation on migration, with references from Amnesty International and the American Immigration Council. Overall, the literature collectively paints a picture of migration as a political and social phenomenon, deeply affected by policy choices that have far-reaching humanitarian and international consequences.

CORE FINDINGS:

The Politics of Migration

Migration is as old as humanity itself, but it has always been rooted in survival, whether it is for food, security, or opportunity. From early human movement out of East Africa to the transatlantic slave trade, migration has long been shaped by political, economic, and environmental factors. Today, migration refers to the movement of people within and across borders, driven by "push" factors (conflict, poverty, climate change) or "pull" factors (economic opportunity, safety). But migration is not merely individual, but it reflects deep structural inequalities between the Global South and Global North.

World-systems theory explains how core countries prosper at the expense of peripheral ones, fueling South-North migration and inequalities. It is important that we have a clear understanding of global migration as not just the movement or mobility from Global South to the Global North but a more complex system shaped by history, geopolitics and economic disparities.

The Migration Policy Institute states that South-South migration accounts for 37% of global migration, followed by South-North (35%), North-North (19–23%), and North-South (6%). Migration corridors like Mexico to the U.S. or Africa to Europe, which has continuously highlighted the geopolitical alliances preferences and the various inequalities. The Henley Passport Index shows vast disparities in travel freedom across countries, detailing how one's predetermined origin determines their travel liberty, with many countries in the Global South remaining restricted from going to all destinations. Visas favour the wealthy and educated while criminalizing other migrants. Migration policies also reveal a moral complexity in global immigration.



Under the Trump administration, U.S. policies, for instance, have welcomed white immigrants (i.e. 59 white South Africans accepted in 2025) while criminalizing migrants from Latin America and Africa (PBS News, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025; DW, 2025). Family reunification processes were disrupted, and travel bans were implemented for citizens of several Muslim-majority and African countries. These policies were subject to legal challenges and were briefly reversed and reinstated across the Trump and Biden administrations. The use of tactics by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), such as mass raids and detention without legal counsel, has been criticized by organizations like Human Rights Watch. Their findings suggest that enforcement has disproportionately targeted Black, Asian, and Hispanic individuals, raising questions about compliance with SDG 10, Target 10.7, which aims to facilitate safe and responsible migration. This raises a crucial question: where is the line between national security and the principles of justice and human rights?

Ultimately, migration is a geopolitical issue, where countries use immigration policies to shape alliances, economic strategies, and foreign policy. Borders and immigration policies are not neutral; they reflect a nation's stance on refugee acceptance, visa approval, and the travel freedom of migrants from the Global South. These borders are often racialized and militarized, reflecting deep-seated biases based on a migrant's wealth and country of origin. While SDG 10 seeks to reduce these gaps, current migration frameworks often reinforce them, leaving the "American Dream" more of a myth than a reality for many.

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Asylum and Refugee Policy Rollbacks under Trump

The Trump-era roll backs on asylum and refugee protections marked a sharp departure from longstanding U.S. humanitarian commitments. A centerpiece of this shift was the "Zero-Tolerance" policy, which led to mass family separations at the southern border. Intended as a deterrence strategy, it resulted in thousands of children being forcibly separated from their families. Subsequent court findings and psychological research highlighted enduring mental health effects such as PTSD, anxiety, and disrupted attachment—often persisting long after reunification.



The “Remain in Mexico” policy (Migrant Protection Protocols) further intensified the crisis by requiring asylum seekers, including vulnerable families to wait in dangerous, unsanitary camps along the U.S.–Mexico border while their claims were processed. Many were denied legal representation, severely undermining their right to due process. Simultaneously, policies denying claims based on gang or domestic violence and restricting access for migrants who traveled through third countries further narrowed asylum eligibility. Additionally, the administration drastically slashed refugee admissions and enforced travel bans that targeted several Muslim-majority and African countries, even attempting to block refugees already cleared for resettlement. Many of these actions were blocked by courts, reaffirming the primacy of congressional mandates over executive overreach. Legal challenges also arose over expedited removals and mass arrests of asylum seekers. These policies drew sharp criticism from human rights organizations, legal experts, and the public. Surveys now show that 79% of Americans support immigration and favor more humane reforms. Critics argue that the rollbacks were less about national security and more about advancing an ideologically driven, racialized immigration agenda. Ultimately, these measures reshaped U.S. asylum and refugee policy, raising urgent questions about executive power, legal protections, and America’s global role in upholding human rights. The legal and moral battles sparked during this era continue to influence contemporary immigration reform discourse.

The U.S.–Mexico Border Crisis: ICE and Deportation

The study of contemporary American politics and policy confirms that borders do indeed matter. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States closed its land borders and airspace, asserting control over US territory while concomitantly disrupting continental trade relations. This event highlighted the need to develop “smarter” border security policies that would allow goods to continue to flow freely. Given the recent prominence of US–Mexico border security in American electoral politics, and given that cognate issues such as immigration policy and defense spending have been researched extensively, it is surprising that public opinion research has paid little attention to America’s borders. Even though scholars have noted that the map-image of the state and the lines that demarcate the limits of state territory are imprinted on public consciousness. The dynamics and scale of migration in and throughout the Americas have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of migrants and displaced people are arriving every year to the U.S.-Mexico border, hailing not just from Mexico and northern Central America, but also from countries further south and from across the globe. Although the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, likely contributed to a significant drop in immigration that year, undocumented immigration at the US-Mexico border surged and broke records in subsequent years, with unauthorized border crossings reaching over two million in both 2022 and 2023.

So far, in 2024, encounter numbers have decreased overall, but they remain high for certain countries. In the first five months of the year, CBP agents encountered more than nine hundred thousand migrants and asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border. The majority hailed from just six countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Colombia, in descending order. A 2022 UN International Organization for Migration survey found that 90 percent of Mexican migrants left the country due to violence, extortion, or organized crime. The United States and Mexico have historically cooperated on countering organized crime, but during the six-year term of outgoing Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico’s federal government often took a hands-off approach to cartels and gangs, allowing them to expand their territorial presence. Meanwhile, bilateral security cooperation has faltered.

Long-Term Legacy of Trump-Era Migration Policies

The Trump administration’s immigration policies left a lasting mark on the American system, systematically dismantling humanitarian protections and aggressively expanding enforcement. Measures like the “zero tolerance” policy, which led to family separations at the border, the “Remain in Mexico” program, and the broad application of the “public charge” rule, were designed to deter immigration and create a more precarious existence for undocumented individuals in the U.S. (Hacking Law Practice, n.d.). This period saw a dramatic increase in deportations and a deliberate erosion of due process for asylum seekers, fostering an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within immigrant communities nationwide (NILC, 2025).



Upon assuming office, the Biden administration pledged to reverse these restrictive policies and move towards a more humane and orderly immigration system. Indeed, Biden halted border wall construction, rescinded the controversial travel ban targeting Muslim-majority countries, and affirmed protections for DACA recipients (American Journal of International Law, n.d.). However, a complete reversal has proven difficult. While some policies were swiftly overturned, others, like the institutional capacity for expedited deportations and deeply embedded enforcement mechanisms, have been harder to dismantle. The Biden administration has, at times, faced pressure to maintain aspects of the previous administration's stricter border control, as demonstrated by its recent executive order to shut down the border if crossings exceed a certain threshold (White House Briefing, 2024).

The enduring impact of the Trump era extends beyond individual policies to the institutional damage inflicted upon agencies such as U.S.

Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Staffing reductions, a focus on enforcement over service, and the politicization of immigration processes have resulted in backlogs and diminished the capacity for fair and efficient case adjudication (Brookings Institution, 2025). This institutional scarring presents a significant obstacle to the future of migration justice—a framework that champions

the rights, dignity, and fair treatment of all individuals, regardless of their migratory status (Human Rights Law Centre, n.d.).

Moving forward, achieving genuine migration justice demands not only the reversal of harmful policies but also a fundamental rebuilding of trust and capacity within the immigration system. It necessitates addressing the root causes of migration, investing in humane reception and processing and establishing accessible pathways to legal status. Without a concerted effort to repair the institutional damage and prioritize human rights, the shadow of Trump-era policies will continue to loom large, complicating efforts to build a truly just and equitable immigration system.

U.S. Immigration Policy Under Trump in 2025 and its Implications for DEI

President Trump's 2025 administration marks a harsh shift toward restrictive and punitive measures on immigration policies.

This narrative not only affects humanitarian protections but also the broader landscape of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in American society.

Policy Landscape

Policies like the end of safe passage, the mass deportations with reduced oversight by courts, have created humanitarian crises and exclusion of vulnerable groups seeking asylum or refuge. The elimination of categorical humanitarian protections such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and DACA leave populations with long-lasting community ties on the margins while ending direct support for victims of violence and persecution. The use of ideological vetting of visa applicants closes the door on those whose prospective entry is based on an assumption of their political stances and threatens civil liberties for those fleeing from authoritarian regimes or other forms of oppression.

DEI Implications

These actions reflect a dismantling of DEI values that have shaped U.S. immigration over the last few decades. By limiting not only who can enter the U.S., but also who is provided any of the protections afforded by the U.S., the administration rolled back momentum toward the goal of increasing racial, ethnic, and ideological diversity.

Diversity: Limitations on entry for certain nationals, and the elimination of diversity components, undermine efforts to grow, sustain and maintain a diverse and multicultural society and decreases global representation within the U.S. population.

Equity: The opposite of equity, the reductions in humanitarian protections target low-income, marginalized, or high-risk communities and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage in reference to existing race, ethnicity, and national origins.



Inclusion: The hostile environment for immigrants, enhanced interior enforcement, increased raids in sensitive places, and targeting of mixed-status families generates fear and exclusionary practices, and disrupts the social fabric in the community by reducing the opportunity for integration.

International Legal Frameworks and Institutional Backlash

As a result of Trump's harsh migration policies, a number of countries have put in place similar migration policies that also serve to discriminate against migrants and hamper their welfare. These countries' policies sometimes differ in the sense that some of these policies are a result of direct compulsion by the US government, while some others are simply in existence due to the ideological similarities between Trump and the countries' heads of state. For example, the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in 2019, were pressured by the Trump administration to sign what were called "safe third country agreements" (Amnesty International, 2020). These agreements, one could say, formed part of these three countries' migration policy as they were in essence supposed to open their borders and let in thousands of deportees (who are citizens of the other countries) from the United States. Thankfully, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, stopped the agreement from being implemented, although, that with Guatemala was put into effect for some months (American Immigration Council, 2021). On the other hand, countries with right-leaning governments such as Hungary, Italy, Germany, Austria have followed the lead of Trump and put in place similarly harsh migration policies or have engaged in Trump-like anti-immigration rhetoric.

Asides from influencing specific countries, Trump has also done damage to existing international norms and frameworks. From the 2017 decision to end US participation in the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) which dealt a big blow to global efforts towards multilateralism in global migration policy decisions, to views concerning undocumented migrants which serve to criminalize them and associate them with violence (Chavez, et al., 2023). This has made the efforts of well-meaning governments and institutions a lot less effective as many people in the global north are becoming anti-immigration.

Conclusion

The research makes it clear: migration is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound human story, one deeply scarred by policy choices. The Trump administration's measures, from "Zero-Tolerance" family separations to the "Remain in Mexico" protocols, did more than just change laws; they actively dismantled humanitarian protections, inflicting lasting trauma and widespread suffering. These policies were not isolated events but were born from a geopolitical landscape of deep global inequality, where the Global North's prosperity often comes at the expense of the Global South. The reverberations of this era continue to echo. The institutional damage to agencies like USCIS and ICE has created a backlog of cases and fostered a climate of fear that persists today.



This legacy complicates every attempt at reform, making the pursuit of a humane and just immigration system a uphill battle. Furthermore, these actions set a dangerous precedent on the international stage, weakening global cooperation and encouraging other nations to adopt similar anti-immigration stances. Ultimately, this period serves as a stark reminder that policy decisions have immense human consequences. Moving forward requires more than simply reversing past mistakes. It demands a fundamental commitment to migration justice, a vision that addresses the root causes of displacement, rebuilds trust in our institutions, and affirms the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals, regardless of their origin. Without this transformation, the shadow of past policies will continue to loom, making the American Dream a hollow promise for those who seek it most.



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