TALKING POINTS ON

Border Security & Immigration Policy

As the situation at the United States’ southern border continues to attract headlines, the Truman Center is providing talking points for how to respond to demand to immigrate to the United States and how to reform immigration policy, all with the goal of enacting a more humane and strategic immigration system. These points are geared toward all audiences, including progressive audiences and center-right audiences.

For more in-depth resources and tools to talk about immigration and national security, please visit the Truman Center’s issue page on immigration: https://www.trumancenter.org/issues/immigration-and-national-security.

TALKING POINTS FOR ALL AUDIENCES

• The Biden administration has inherited a broken and dysfunctional immigration system. A long-term plan to safely and humanely manage migration at the southern border is urgently required. Less than two years ago, voters rejected nativist, anti-immigrant policies at the polls. Yet, at its core, immigration is not a political issue, but rather a matter of human dignity.

• A safe and orderly migration system should allow migrants an opportunity to exercise their rights at the border without risking their lives or putting themselves in the hands of criminal organizations.

• An effective, long-term strategy for border security and border enforcement must include in-country processing of migrants and allow potential migrants to seek protection without taking on the risks of the trip to the border. US strategy must recognize that seeking asylum in the United States is legal, but that turning asylum seekers away is not.
In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, under pressure from the White House, put in place Title 42 restrictions ostensibly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect was to further the Trump administration’s restrictionist, anti-immigration policies. Title 42 is squarely under the purview of the CDC, which has found that public health considerations no longer require such limitations. Their authority on this subject should not be subverted for political reasons.

**TALKING POINTS FOR PROGRESSIVE AUDIENCES**

- Much of the current concern and “crisis imagery” about immigration that news outlets are featuring is not about the arrival of migrants at the border, but rather how the US border-control system treats these migrants. Most migrants arriving at the border are turned away because of COVID-related border closures. And unaccompanied children who have been the topic of many news stories in recent years are, by and large, traveling to the United States to reunite with family.

- The pace of recent arrivals at the border is not new and is not an unexpected spike in migration. Migration is the result of decades of instability around the world, particularly in South and Central America and the Caribbean, as well as lack of economic opportunity, exacerbated by climate change, successive hurricanes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers at University of San Diego have noted that the increase in migrants to the US from month to month this year is not unexpected, but rather a seasonal influx similar to pre-COVID years, with the addition of migrants who delayed their travel because of COVID.

- Detention should not be a central part of a border-security plan, especially long-term detention of asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations. It is extremely concerning to see that shuttered detention facilities, particularly those with problematic records, are reopening. The Biden administration should implement strict standards and monitoring in order to limit the amount of time individuals must remain in detention. Any custodial arrangement should be viewed as a temporary measure only.

- In the short term, an agency trained in disaster relief, such as FEMA, a multiagency task force assembled under the National Incident Management System, or a non-governmental partner such as the Red Cross, is best positioned to manage the high numbers of individuals needing assistance at the border. Immigration-enforcement agencies should not be charged with housing and caring for migrants. The Biden administration should expand FEMA’s role in welcoming those who have exercised their right to seek asylum at the border.

- In the long term, we need to reimagine how the Department of Homeland Security is funded and operates. This includes a focus on strategies that de-escalate what happens at the border. Today’s inflamed rhetoric surrounding the current situation at the border is the most visible proof of how broken our immigration system has become, but it is not the cause.

- No amount of investment in enforcement tactics at the border will increase security. Research has shown that additional security does not stop migration; it only delays it. Policymakers should embrace comprehensive immigration reform (such as the one that President Biden and Congressional Democrats put forth soon after Inauguration Day 2021) and make substantial investments in addressing the driving forces, or root causes, behind migration.

- The use of Title 42 restrictions as part of border management represents a return to pre-civil rights-era immigration policies that discriminated based on national origin and contributes to the false narrative that migrants are dangerous or carriers of disease.
TALKING POINTS FOR CENTER-RIGHT AUDIENCES

• Border-enforcement resources should focus on individuals and groups who intend to threaten public safety or the national security of the United States, not on individuals fleeing harm and seeking protection. This focus will let law enforcement do the job of making us safer by preventing criminals and terrorists from entering the US, rather than playing cat-and-mouse with scared families crossing the desert.

• Telling a story about immigrants that plays on people's otherwise legitimate concerns about safety is misleading. The reality is that studies have shown that cities with more immigrants are safer and have higher property values than those without.

• Part of why we often see unacceptable situations at the border is that we haven’t built a system designed to respond to the type of immigrants that are frequently arriving now (many of them children and families from Central America) versus those we used to see more of (often men from Mexico looking for work). The US needs a coherent immigration system designed to meet today’s dynamic, rather than to address patterns of the past, and an inclusive immigration policy that enhances America's standing in the world and promotes national security. Part of that system will be apprehending and turning people away. Part of it will be processing and welcoming people that are coming legally, for example by seeking asylum. Building a stronger immigration system that is reflective of the economic, civic, and cultural needs of our country will result in less chaos at the border.

• The migrants who seek to enter the US are often fleeing the same terrorist and transnational organized criminal groups the US seeks to combat. Once integrated into US communities, these immigrants can be allies in efforts to counter terrorism by sharing linguistic, cultural, and social insights and by showing that the US is a generous and welcoming country.

• Smarter border enforcement requires the use of technologies that can identify illegal activity without infringing on privacy rights, in combination with intelligence gathering to identify and isolate threats to the US that are coming across the border, rather than casting a wide net and hoping the overburdened and understaffed immigration courts will be able to effectively triage migrants into those who pose a risk and those who are legitimate asylum seekers.

• Policymakers need to invest resources strategically, including increasing capacity of asylum officers and immigration judges at the border as well as increasing legal-access programs, so as to reduce protracted detention and allow arriving migrants a clear pathway to applying for asylum. This will allow for more orderly processing at the border and ensure that individuals do not get lost in the system once they travel on to their receiving communities.