

Why are we calling the predictable seasonal shift at our border a *surge*?

Pretending we don't expect something gets us off the hook for not being prepared.

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U.S. Border Patrol agents conduct intake of border crossers at the Central Processing Center in McAllen, Texas, in 2018. (Photo by U.S. Customs and Border Protection)

It has become commonplace to refer to any rise in numbers of border crossers at the US-Mexico border as a “surge.” Recently on the *Washington Post* website, two headlines underscored a sense of crisis: “Biden team searching for new ways to slow border surge,” read one. “‘No end in sight’: Inside the Biden administration’s failure to contain the border surge,” read the other. The casual reader would likely picture a mob of people overwhelming border patrol agents and government resources.

But on the same day in the same newspaper, three University of California researchers concluded that there is no surge. Analyzing data over almost ten years, they described what is taking place as “a predictable seasonal shift.”

The distinction is about more than semantics. A predictable seasonal shift could be addressed by sober and humane policies in which people attempting to cross the US

border are treated with dignity and respect. A surge tells us that there is potential danger and certainly chaos outside our control. The word *surge* often refers to unexpected emergencies like viruses and storms. Under the logic of a surge, we must put people in cages or detain them—because we are overwhelmed.

The troubling conditions at our southern border have been created and maintained by one presidential administration after another. In 1994, the Clinton administration's Operation Gatekeeper enacted military-style control of the border in an attempt to present Democrats as tough on undocumented migration. That policy has been worsened by every subsequent administration.

These failures have added up to more than 10,000 known deaths at the border since 1994, the detention of children and families in ill-equipped facilities with poorly trained staff, and children separated from their parents. Now thousands of people are camped on the border in inhumane conditions because of a policy, created by Trump and left in place by Biden, that requires asylum seekers to wait in Mexico. It's a clear violation of international law.

We can do better. Each administration has wide latitude over how it allocates resources at the border. The Trump administration spent \$15 billion on a largely symbolic wall. The Obama administration gave billions of dollars to private prison corporations to build and maintain detention centers. Imagine what those billions could have done to create an orderly and humane system: one that anticipates predictable seasonal shifts, accounts for economic and social conditions, emphasizes the training of agents, and prioritizes following our own laws. Nongovernmental resources are also available. Many faith-based groups that have the experience and expertise to help the government with undocumented minors say they are being underutilized.

The foundation of our legal system demands that each person crossing the US border be treated as a human being who deserves a hearing. As we are cyclically fed a false sense of crisis, we lose the opportunity to build the just and humane system that would support this underlying ideal.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Surge or shift?"