

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / America's Broken Immigration System: An Honest Debate

I'm Camille Foster and for Barrie Weiss and this is Honestly.

Immigration is once again the subject of heated debate with Republicans and Democrats at odds over how to handle thousands of migrants arriving at the U.S. Southern border. A state of emergency at the Texas border, the mayor of El Paso making the declaration late Saturday.

Our asylum seekers are not safe as we have hundreds and hundreds on the streets and that's not the way we want to treat people.

Immigration has long been at the center of American politics.

It's baked into our national motto, e pluribus unum, out of many one people.

But it's possible our national debate about immigration has never been more contentious.

So much of our national conversation, which is not a conversation about immigration is driven by people who could not care less about immigrants and polarized.

It's real easy to say we are a sanctuary state when you're not concerned about migrants flowing into your state, right?

Hatching a secretive plot to use humans, to use women, children, families as a political pawn.

And to me, it is so cruel.

It's also never been more consequential.

We're going to build the wall.

We have no choice.

We have no choice.

After all, this was perhaps the single issue that got Donald Trump elected.

And now things feel as if they're coming to a head.

More than 15,000 migrants have arrived in the last week, and now that number is expected to explode with a Trump-era policy known as Title 42 set to be lifted on Wednesday.

In 2022, illegal migrant crossings at the southwest border surged to a record 2.76 million persons.

That's roughly the population of Chicago, America's third largest city, and it eclipses the previous annual record by more than one million.

It's a situation many conservatives have long described as a crisis.

And with the Biden administration's recent announcement of tougher restrictions...

Today, my administration is taking several steps to stiffen enforcement for those who try to come without a legal right to stay.

And to put in place a faster process, a faster process to decide a claim of asylum.

Someone says, I'm coming because I'm escaping oppression.

Well, there's got to be a way to determine that much quicker.

Alongside a much discussed presidential trip to the border, this is clearly an issue with renewed importance for Democrats, too.

Facing growing pressure, President Biden in El Paso tonight, coming face to face with the crisis at the border for the first time since taking office two years ago.

If you're trying to leave Cuba, Nicaragua, or Haiti, or have agreed to begin a journey to America, do not, do not just show up at the border.

Stay where you are and apply illegally from there.

But the odds of some grand bipartisan agreement on immigration seem very slim.

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Like so much of the rest of our politics, today's immigration debate has been subsumed by the culture wars.

Take for example, how a few months ago, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis chartered flights of migrants to the elite wealthy island of Martha's Vineyard, earning himself an incredible amount of heat from Democrats.

Who charged him with using people as political pawns and called him xenophobic.

But just when we thought busing migrants to sanctuary cities was some cruel, right-wing political stunt.

Now, another governor is planning to bus migrants to major cities like New York and Chicago, but not from a border state.

They'll be coming from the middle of the country and Colorado's Democratic governor, Jared Polis.

In the last three weeks, more than 3,500 migrants arrived in Denver from the southern border.

Governor Polis says his administration is helping migrants reach their destinations because the majority of them do not plan to stay in Colorado.

And then you have Mayor Eric Adams, who had previously declared New York open to everyone. You know, I'm proud that this is a right to shelter state, and we're going to continue to do that.

And New York is a city that has always represented the democratic values and the values of our city.

I'm showing our compassion.

That's what we're doing.

Calling Polis' busing unfair and respectfully imploring Polis to, quote, cease and desist.

Colorado says it will stop busing migrants to Chicago and New York after Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and New York City Mayor Eric Adams formed an alliance and wrote a letter to Colorado's governor.

It said in part, we respectfully demand that you cease and desist sending migrants to New York City and Chicago.

Now, the mayor is in Governor Jared Polis.

It seems to me that when even sanctuary cities are refusing migrants, there's obviously something important going on here.

But we're so busy pointing fingers and making allegations of racism that we're not able to have a serious conversation about this.

So today, a sober debate.

Our current levels of immigration helping are hurting America.

How do we balance humanitarian concerns with America's economic and security needs?

Should we be trying to enforce more restrictions on immigration or less?

And what exactly should we do to fix our broken immigration system?

My guests today are Alex Narasta and Jessica Vaughn.

Alex is the director of economic and social policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C. He's also the co-author of a book, *Wretched Refuse*, which ends with a question mark, the political economy of immigration and institutions.

Jessica is the director of policy studies for the Center for Immigration Studies, a

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think tank which describes themselves as quote, pro-immigrant, but low immigration. She's an expert on immigration enforcement and public safety and served as a foreign service officer with the State Department.

While Alex and Jessica couldn't be more opposite in their approach to immigration, Alex favors free immigration while Jessica argues for more restrictionist policies, hopefully today we can find some common ground.

Because when our political debates get locked into false binaries, that open borders people are thoughtless lunatics who want to alter the fabric of the country, or that restrictionists are necessarily racist xenophobes who hate people who don't look like them, we tend to miss a lot of the substance, points of agreement, and the broader context, all of which desperately need to be established, so that we can have a serious conversation about what really matters here.

We'll be right back.

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Now back to the show.

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Well, Alex and Jessica, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you.

Good to be with you.

Thanks for having me.

We hear a lot about the crisis at the border, especially in the past week or so.

Jessica, I wonder if we could start with you and you could just break down for me what's been happening with respect to illegal immigration over the past few years, specifically what's happening at the border right now, and how did we get here?

Well, at the current time, we are experiencing the largest wave of illegal migration probably ever in our history, certainly in the 30 years that I've been involved in the immigration issue, and it's occurring because of policy changes that were put into place by the Biden administration that essentially mean that a huge percentage of the people who are attempting to enter the country illegally and getting across the border are being processed and released and allowed to stay here for an indefinite period of time, often able to access a work permit.

And at the same time, as we are experiencing at this point about 7,000 apprehensions of illegal migrants every day, the border patrol is so overwhelmed with all of these migrants that huge parts of the border are left unguarded, and many more people are able to cross into the country illegally.

And we know that this is occurring.

This year was about half a million at least, but we don't know who those folks are.

And it's not getting better, it's getting worse and worse.

Biden inherited the most secure border arguably ever in our history, and in just two years time, we have gone to a situation that seems completely out of control.

And in Florida, especially right now, they're seeing more and more people taking to the seas from Cuba and Haiti to try to get to Florida to take advantage of these lenient policies that allow people to stay.

Well, Alex, I wonder what you make of Jessica's assessment of the situation.

And I wonder if you would agree that it is fair to describe what's happening as a crisis situation.

It's totally a crisis situation down at the border.

I mean, in terms of the numbers that Jessica talked about, those are true.

The number of apprehensions along the border is at a record high.

What I disagree with are the, in part with the causes of this, the main reason why people come unlawfully to the United States is because in almost all cases, there's no legal way for them to be able to do so.

We inherited an immigration system ravaged by efforts taken by the Trump administration to reduce immigration during the pandemic, which might have been justified in some ways, but also other reductions and increases in the cost of visas for people to come here.

So this is really sort of a predictable consequence of harsh immigration restrictions, of laws that make it impossible for the vast majority of people who want to come here to work to do so legally.

And the predictable result is a large black market, but that is created by the government

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restrictions in the first place.

There's a specific claim that Jessica made that the Biden administration inherited what is perhaps the safest border in the history of the country.

Would you say that that's a fair assessment?

No, I don't think that is a fair assessment.

I mean, it's true that illegal entries along the border were low in the last eight months or so with the Trump administration.

In large part, that is because of the COVID recession.

But if you take a look at, say, the stock of illegal immigrants, the total number in the United States, it looks pretty similar to most of the Obama administration.

There was not really a decrease in the overall numbers.

Trump's annual deportation numbers from the interior of the United States, not from the border region, but from the interior, were actually lower on an annual basis than the Obama administration.

There have definitely been some changes in Biden's policy that have probably made things along the border a little bit worse, but I don't think it's a fair characterization to say it was the most secure border due to anything the Trump administration did.

If anything, I think you want to give credit to the pandemic.

Well, Jessica, what sort of shape is the legal immigration process in from your standpoint?

Is it a fair criticism to say that it doesn't work and that that is part of the reason why people are trying to come here illegally?

I would say, first of all, that it wasn't the pandemic that shut down illegal migration.

It was really the more muscular border control policies that the Trump administration put in place that put a near stop to illegal migration at the end of the Trump administration.

But as far as the idea that this illegal migration is a result of not having enough legal pathways for people.

Well, first of all, our immigration laws are designed to control legal immigration to a level that is believed to be in the national interest by Congress, and we have categories for legal immigration, family, employment-based, humanitarian, and a visa lottery.

We also have an extensive array of temporary work visa programs.

And on average, we admit about a million legal immigrants each year, give out about a million green cards, and also admit anywhere between 500,000 and 700,000 legal new temporary guest workers.

So we have a very generous legal immigration policy, and that's been consistent.

I mean, I think there are parts of it that could be reformed, but it exists and has operated in this fashion for a long time, and so there's nothing that has changed about that that would suddenly set off new illegal migration.

I think it's pretty clear that it is the policy changes that people respond to when they're considering whether or not to come here illegally.

And we know that from talking to the migrants themselves and from seeing what happens when different policies are put in place.

For example, just recently, the Biden administration recognized that the illegal arrivals by people from Venezuela were exploding.

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They implemented a new policy that Venezuelans were not going to be allowed to enter if they crossed illegally to pursue an asylum claim or to be released into the country, and suddenly fewer Venezuelans started crossing illegally.

So I think that's a pretty good example of how the policies are what's driving what's happening now.

But again, we have to remember that we have a generous legal immigration system, but Congress has imposed limits on it, and those limits should be enforced, not just because it's the law, but because controlling immigration is important to preserve job opportunities for Americans to make sure that the level of immigration does not adversely affect wages for Americans who are competing with those immigrants and to promote assimilation so that we have a level of immigration that makes it possible for people to succeed here and become self-sufficient and become new Americans.

Jessica, what I'm hearing you say is that in your view, there is in fact too much immigration into this country, whether it be legal or illegal.

Is that a fair assessment that both legal and illegal immigration are having an adverse effect on the American economy right now?

Yes.

Our research shows that both legal immigration and especially illegal immigration are causing problems in American communities, that the level of dependence on government assistance is very high among even legal immigrants, and therefore, legal immigration is imposing a burden on taxpayers.

That's why even legal immigration levels should be moderated, or at least that we should update our legal immigration system so that we're admitting immigrants not only who are close family members of prior immigrants, but also immigrants who are going to be able to succeed here, who are well-prepared to do that, who are going to be able to support themselves and their families, and of course, reserving some spots for refugees as well.

Alex, I want you to respond to that, because I think that what Jessica's outlining is certainly a kind of pessimism that I suspect many Americans have with respect to what additional immigration into the country means for their own job prospects, for their economic prospects.

I know that there is a competing view that actually looks at immigration and imagines immigrant labor as more of a compliment to American labor as opposed to a substitute for it.

Could you help to articulate that perspective a little bit more?

Sure.

I want to begin with something a touch different.

When you talk about the million green cards are so issued a year, only 5,000 of those are for people who are low-skilled and don't have any family members in the United States, 5,000.

When you take a look at the work permits for low-skilled workers, they're extremely limited.

When you compare the United States' immigration flows today to the U.S. 100 years ago, we're letting in about the same number of people, a little bit less, actually, per year, but our country is more than three times larger.

Compared to the U.S. in the past, compared during the age of migration, when many of

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our ancestors came here, when you compare it to other OECD countries, the U.S. is one of the most restrictive countries in the world, amongst rich countries.

When it comes to legal immigration, you take a look at it compared to the size of the United States, which is an enormous country.

If you are a low-skilled worker who doesn't have the skills to work in agriculture or in some kind of seasonal occupation, there is no temporary worker visa for you.

There is no way to come here lawfully unless you're closely related to an American.

On the economic points, we recently saw this fixed-pie mentality that Jessica is talking about, this notion that there's a fixed number of jobs, there's a fixed number of resources, and if people come in, they're going to take those resources and that's going to impoverish other people.

But we know that that's not true.

In societies like the United States that have free-market economies, not as free-market as I want it to be, but still a relatively good degree, free-market immigrants are workers, they're consumers, they are more likely to start businesses than native-born Americans, more likely to patent, more likely to start large firms in the United States.

They create a lot more resources than they consume, and every criticism we hear about immigration is the same thing leveled against immigrants in the past, against the Irish, against Italians, against Germans, even at different times against the English, and it's the same thing we hear today about the immigrant groups coming today.

They were wrong in the past, they're wrong now, and the reason why people are coming illegally and causing the chaos, which I think is the big, deep root of a lot of the opposition to immigration is because the legal immigration system is so restrictive and so complex.

Second in complexity, the only portion of American law more complicated is the income tax, but the economics are enormously one-sided on this.

The economic benefits to Americans are large, the economic benefits to the immigrants and future Americans are large, it's a mutually beneficial and voluntary exchange, and I think in this area, like in most areas, the government should get out of the way and let markets work their magic.

Well, Jessica, I wonder if you could respond to that, because I'm trying to wrap my head around the nature of the disagreement here.

What is it that Alex is missing in his analysis from your standpoint?

Well, it's true that immigration does make our economy bigger, but that doesn't mean it benefits everyone.

Like every public policy, there are winners and losers to our immigration policy, and the way it's working now is there are enormous benefits for the immigrants themselves, for their employers, if it means that because of their presence, there's a surplus of labor and they can get away with paying workers less, so it's great for the employers.

But the problem is, it's not so great for that segment of our population that is competing directly with immigrants for job opportunities and also because they see wages depressed.

I mean, for people who for whatever reason don't have a college education and are looking for work and jobs that do not require that, they are disadvantaged when there is such a steady flow of workers from abroad that employers have no incentive to improve wages

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or working conditions.

It's no coincidence that real wages for people working in the construction industry, in hospitality, in restaurants, in manufacturing, and in food processing have not seen a real increase in their wages over the last few decades, and that's because there has been a steady flow of immigrants, both legal and illegal, into those occupations.

And right now, there may be a lot of job openings available, but there also are millions of Americans who have dropped out of the labor force, stopped looking for work since the pandemic especially.

About five to seven million Americans have dropped out of the workforce, and if we focused our national economic policy on getting those workers back into the labor market, I think that people would realize that we don't need to allow so much labor to come in from abroad. And the people who are crossing over the Rio Grande now are not necessarily the workers that a lot of employers who are posting jobs on Indeed are looking for.

I agree that we should reform our legal immigration system to try to address actual shortages in certain kinds of talent or to encourage the most highly skilled people in the world, especially if they've studied at U.S. universities, to stay here.

But what we're seeing now is not meeting the needs of our modern economy, and it means that because these new workers have on average less education than Americans, that they are not going to be self-sufficient, and it's going to end up being a fiscal loss to American taxpayers.

And that's not because they're bad people, it's simply a fact of their level of skills and education being a mismatch for most of the jobs that are available now.

So I do think this comes down to a fundamental disagreement.

I do not think that the government is very good at selecting workers by type or place or what the needs of the U.S. economy are.

The U.S. economy is the best at that, not want to be central planners in Washington, D.C., who think that they can figure this stuff out.

I mean, the education of immigrants is climbing, it's about 13.3 years of education on average, so a little bit more than a high school degree on average for immigrants in the United States.

But one of the big effects of immigration on wages is that it actually increases the wages of native-born Americans slightly, according to the research by George Borjas at Harvard University, but the most intense competition is actually between immigrants.

It's new immigrant workers competing against older immigrant workers, because if you think about it this way, native-born Americans have different skills, we have different language skills, this really is a monolingual labor market in a lot of ways.

We have different educations, we work in different occupations.

Immigrants don't work in these occupations, they have different skills, they're complementary to American workers, much more than they are substitutable, which is why even when you take a look at the effects of immigration on the wages of American high school dropouts or adults who are about 9% of the workforce, what you see is that their wages actually have gone up over the last 50 years if you use the proper inflation measures, they have gone up, they've gone up at a little bit slower rate than other people, but when you also take a look at what's happened over the last several years with the labor market, the group

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of people who have reduced their amount of hours worked the most are actually American native-born male college graduates.

It's not in the lower wage categories, it's not in other areas where you would expect to see labor market competition from immigrants, it's in other areas where people have very high incomes and when they have decided for various reasons to work less, and when we take a look at the welfare effects of this, immigrants are of a slightly higher labor force participation rate, slightly more likely to work in the United States than native-born Americans, and when you take a look, you compare immigrant individuals to native-born individuals, they use on average 28% less welfare benefits than native-born Americans, 28% less on an individual basis, and that is a finding that has held for a long time in the United States, but if your problem is with welfare, and I have a problem with welfare, I want to get rid of the welfare state as a good Cato libertarian, it's much easier to build a wall around the welfare state than it is to build a wall around the country and try to interrupt with central government plans how the economy actually functions.

If I could try to distill this, Alex, you have this commitment to free markets, to limited government, to allowing the free market to determine what the appropriate labor rates are, what the appropriate wage rates are, but the tension here is that Jessica is uniquely concerned about the most vulnerable Americans, people at the lower end of the economic ladder who are necessarily going to have to compete with people who may not speak English well, but can stack bricks, that can provide these services for construction jobs, and in various other parts of the economy where hard labor is demanded.

So how do you square that, Alex?

Is there any sort of protection for lower wage workers that you think is appropriate to pursue and is compatible with your commitment to free markets?

So the faked in assumption, I think, for all of this is that somehow low-skilled American workers are not adaptive, that they don't change their behavior in response to the potential of increased labor market competition.

One of the most consistent findings we see is that when low-skilled immigrants go into an area, people who are low-skilled natives are more likely to finish high school, are more likely to get an associate's degree.

One of the things that low-skilled immigrants specialize in is manual labor, like you mentioned, Camille.

Americans in these areas who have similar levels of education, maybe a little bit higher, what they do is they move into a lot of management occupations.

They move into occupations where they're managing people, where they're running the restaurant, for instance.

I mean, the low-skilled workers who work in a restaurant, what do they do?

They do the jobs that don't require communications with the customers.

They work as bus boys, as dishwashers, et cetera.

But the low-skilled Americans who otherwise would be doing those jobs, they are instead the waiter, the waitress, the hostess, all higher-paid occupations because there's not this fixed pie.

Now, in some cases, you're going to find people who don't compete well against foreign-born

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workers.

Jessica's right when she said it's a mix of costs and of benefits.

But we're talking about a very small group of Americans who are high school dropouts.

They're hurt by a large number of other government policies everywhere from licensing restrictions or zoning restrictions and other things that make it difficult for them to compete.

And again, the people who compete the most against low-skilled immigrants are not native born Americans who have different skills, but they are other immigrants.

It's just not true that there's a whole lot of competition because in order to lower wages, you're going to have to have similar skills as somebody.

If a million people who come into the United States are astrophysicists, that's not going to lower the wages or affect wages or compete at all with people who work in construction.

And vice versa.

And most Americans aren't astrophysicists and they don't work in construction, they work in the middle of the wage and skill distribution, but they are not competing with immigrants.

It's just not the way that the American labor market is working.

Well, I just don't think that what Alex is describing is how this actually plays out in the labor market.

An unlimited stream of labor is guaranteed to depressed level of wages.

And we've seen this over and over again.

When I lived in the Boston area, the Hyatt Corporation decided that they were going to replace the employees who did housekeeping in their three hotels with workers who were hired through a staffing company.

The women who had been employed by Hyatt were making about \$15 an hour.

They had paid leave, sick leave, and a normal benefits package.

They raised their families, they had been working there many of them for decades.

And they were told that they could go reapply for their job through the staffing company that had hired illegal workers who were recruited in Georgia and brought to the Boston area.

Their salaries at the time were \$7 an hour, no vacation, no sick leave, no health care plan.

It's a race to the bottom to flood a particular labor market or occupation with workers beyond what exists now.

I mean, it doesn't benefit anybody, and I can tell you those hotel rooms did not get any cheaper because Hyatt cut its labor costs in half.

But there were a lot of people whose situation deteriorated and who then struggled to support their families because they were being undercut, allowed to be undercut by illegal workers.

And we can have a generous legal immigration policy.

We can allow people to bring in family members and also allow employers to hire the workers that they want from abroad who are highly skilled.

But in a country of 360 some million people, we do not have labor shortages that will last and we do not need to be importing anymore and ideally fewer people than we are right now through our immigration policy.

Now, Alex, you are at the Cato Institute, the Libertarian think tank.

So I understand that you're not a fan of welfare policies, of redistributive policies in general,

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but we do have some of these policies in place today.

And I think I can hear Milton Friedman almost saying something along the lines of, you know, I'm generally in favor of immigration, but I also recognize that it's possible to get to a ruinously expensive place very quickly if people are streaming across the border with the expectation that they'll be able to take advantage of your more vibrant economy and find jobs here.

Even if the story that you're telling is the more accurate one, there's still the matter of whether or not this could become unsustainably expensive if in fact there is an additional burden on the entitlement system, on the schools, on the hospitals.

How do you circle that square?

So when we take a look at the totality of the U.S. welfare state in the United States, including entitlement programs and including means-tested benefits for the poor, immigrants are less likely to consume benefits and when they do, it's a lower dollar value of benefits that's part in because they have a higher labor force participation rate than natives, but it's also partly because a lot of government rules do restrict their access to these benefits for some period of time after they come here.

The Milton Friedman quote you mentioned is that he's in favor of free immigration, but not to a welfare state, but then he goes on and the second part of that quote to say that's why he favors illegal immigration because they don't have access to any benefits.

So there's a better way to do that and it's a way that is broadly consistent with current American rules which limits the access of new immigrants to these means-tested welfare benefits.

And this is what I was getting to earlier where it's much better to try to build a higher wall around the welfare state than it is to try to restrict legal immigration into the United States.

So when you take a look at the net fiscal impacts of immigration in the United States, it varies a little bit by education, it varies a little bit by where people come from, but the overall impact is positive.

In fact, when you take a look at the entitlement programs of Social Security and Medicare where the present value of the deficit projected is about \$260 trillion, which is how much money we need right now to pay off all of the benefits that we promise in the future. Immigrants in the United States actually are paying more into these systems than they are taking out in benefits.

They are, in effect, subsidizing retired Americans.

So the interesting thing is that it's more accurate to say that immigrants are subsidizing currently the welfare state by paying more in than they're taking out in benefits than they are in running down the welfare state into bankruptcy due to the way that our welfare programs are actually structured.

Now I'm in favor of eliminating the welfare state for everybody, but let's not exaggerate what the costs are in order to make an argument for restricting immigration.

Now, Jessica, I've teased some of the things that might be happening, but I suspect you could speak more directly to what sort of dynamics are actually playing out, both on the border in general, in the towns and the cities that are hardest hit, that are bearing

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the brunt of the crunch of having people come across the border illegally, but also in general with respect to schools and hospitals and these other public institutions that are dealing with increased demand for services and increased demands on the they're already strained resources.

If immigration and especially illegal immigration were such a boon to communities, we wouldn't be seeing Mayor Eric Adams complaining to the Biden administration about the thousands and thousands of new arrivals who have come to New York, either brought there or made it there themselves.

There are costs for local communities.

I mean, that really is one of the big points of this debate is that while immigration is a federal responsibility and illegal immigration is the responsibility of the federal government to control, when they don't do it, the costs are borne by states and municipalities that have to cover the things that newly arrived or migrants who are not self-sufficient need. Respectable studies have found that on an annual basis, American taxpayers have to fork out about \$56 billion a year for illegal immigrants, some of whom are working on the books, but most of whom are not paying enough into the system to cover the costs of supporting them. The reason we do a little bit different analysis than Alex does on how many immigrants are accessing welfare programs, we look at it by the household and find that well over 60% of immigrant-headed households are accessing some form of welfare program.

That is because most of these households include children who were born in the United States and who are therefore citizens and then qualify for these programs, but the programs are benefiting the household.

That's why we show a much higher rate of welfare dependency than Alex and his colleagues do. Perhaps our welfare programs need to be re-evaluated, but I don't think it's a great policy to say, as many people can come, as can get here, but you're not going to get any services or any support whatsoever.

That's not a sustainable situation either.

Yeah, so she wants to have it both ways.

She wants to complain about immigrants using benefits but doesn't want to cut the benefits.

No, what I want is to have a policy that admits people who are likely to succeed here that won't need these programs with the exception of refugees, of course.

But the intergenerational mobility is very high.

The amount of education, the second generation is greater than third plus generation Americans. We see a lot of this mobility and in your welfare studies, you don't include the largest welfare programs, Social Security and Medicare, which are the largest programs on the books. They account for almost 70% of welfare spending in the United States.

Well, again, that's kind of a definitional issue that we can argue about.

People who pay into Social Security don't see it as a welfare program.

They see it as getting back their money that they put through or another worker's funds, that it's a redistribution program, not really a welfare program per se.

Whether or not people see it that way, the fact is that if you are making payments into the Social Security system, but you can't take money out of the Social Security system because of your legal status, that does seem like it would make you a net provider to that

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system as opposed to a net recipient, which seems substantially important.

And relatedly though, and perhaps this is a bit of a shot across your bow there, Alex, I think perhaps the most salient point for a number of people will be that in a moment when we are seeing extraordinary levels of immigration, a number of the municipalities who had previously declared beating their chests, we're sanctuary cities, we're open for business, people are welcome here, they are no longer saying, give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.

They're saying stop it immediately.

I mean, folks are paying for buses, they're paying for plane flights, they are sending people across the country to some of these various cities and states, and it seems to me that at a minimum, if someone is pro-immigration and pro-free market, acknowledging that the absorption rate matters a lot and can perhaps quickly be overwhelmed, is perhaps important.

Is that what's going on?

Is that what's happening in places like New York and Chicago where they're saying, please stop, don't send any more people here?

I think you've got two things going on in those situations.

One, the increase in the immigrant population from the busing is a tiny addition to those populations and a small, small percentage of the immigrant populations that are already living in these places.

And so what you have-

Sure, but you still got the mayor coming out and saying, stop sending people here.

This is what you're doing is wrong and somehow or another, it's both bad for the immigrants who are being used as props and also bad for our city, which doesn't want immigrants anymore all of a sudden.

Yeah, but it's a way for local politicians to try to get more money out of the federal government by complaining about problems, and there are some problems with this. Problems largely created by the fact that the immigration system doesn't allow these people to come in lawfully.

It lets them go through a complex vetting procedure at the border by border patrol where they're detained, and then they're shipped around by the government to different places, and it's all controlled by the government at different steps of the way.

If these people could instead take a bus voluntarily, they could decide where to go based on labor market opportunities, based on where their families are.

What we are seeing now is the consequences, the predictable consequences of a legal system that makes it impossible for these people to enter the United States lawfully, is that the government takes control, limits their opportunities, ships them to places, says they can't work legally, makes them work in the black market, and then we're surprised that sometimes there are bad consequences to this.

The way to deal with this is to legalize these folks, allow them to work above board, allow them to be subject to the same laws that everyone else is, so that they can take care of themselves. Because now a lot of them, if they lose a job, if they have a dispute with their employer, their employer will threaten to call the government and say, you know, you're here illegally, do what I say.

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That's not something that any of us would ever have to deal with because we're legal workers in the United States, and it's something that they wouldn't have to deal with. So this is just another consequence of this massive black market created by the immigration restrictions in the first place.

After the break, how mainstream Republicans and Democrats have both moved pretty wildly on this issue in the last decade, we'll be right back.

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I want to talk about some of the social concerns with respect to immigration, which can be really hard to talk about because of the culture wars.

Advocates for restrictionist policies tend to be branded as racist and xenophobes, and we spend a whole lot of time bickering about whether or not we can use words like illegal or alien and shaming people if they don't say undocumented.

So it can be pretty hard to have productive conversations about any of this, but like the economic issues we've just discussed, there are lots of substantive concerns here.

So I want to try to see if we can get into these issues and unearth them a bit.

So let's start with crime and a very simple question.

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Does increased immigration make crime worse?

So the general finding is when you take a look at all immigration in the United States, immigrants have a much lower incarceration rate than native-born Americans.

The incarceration rate for all foreign-born people is about 600 per 100,000.

For native-born Americans, it's about 1500 per 100,000.

So it's more than double.

When you try to drill down to those numbers, there are some data problems.

The government doesn't keep great data on illegal immigrants and criminals.

There are some data sources from Texas that seem to suggest that illegal immigrants might have a crime rate about equal to non-illegal immigrants.

When you take a look at incarceration rates in Texas, though, illegal immigrants do have a slightly lower incarceration rate than native-born Americans.

On average, you take a look at all immigrants who glob them together.

They do have a much substantially lower crime rate than native-born Americans.

And that's been the case for as long as we have data going back to the 19th century.

Jessica, I wonder how you think we should be talking about the relationship between immigration and crime.

Well, it's true that we really do not have good information on this, good data, because state and local law enforcement agencies, for the most part, do not track the immigration status.

They don't have the ability to track the immigration status of people who are arrested in their communities.

And it's just not something that many law enforcement agencies are interested in tracking.

I mean, after all, they're interested in arresting criminals.

What I've learned from studying this for a long, long time and keeping up with the literature and doing my own research is that there is no evidence that immigrants are either more or less likely to commit crimes than Americans are.

And what we do know is that there are certain crimes that are more associated with illegal immigrants like forced labor trafficking, identity theft, things of that nature.

But really, this whole question of do immigrants commit more crimes or less, I think is really irrelevant to the immigration policy discussion, because what that is relevant to is developing the ability for the federal government to impose consequences on that small share of the immigrant population that has committed crimes.

In other words, making sure that there are cooperative relationships between state and local authorities and the feds, so that there can be deportation for those few immigrants who are committing crimes.

Yeah.

I just want to add just one thing.

I mean, when you do take a look at the incarceration rates, one of the things that the government does have some broad data categories to take a look at doesn't allow us to get very granular.

But when you do take a look at the foreign-born percentage of prisoners incarcerated in the United States, foreign-born incarceration rate is about two-thirds lower for immigrants than it is for native-born Americans.

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So just to put that out there, Jessica's right, the data are bad.

The data are heterogeneous across the country.

They're varied substantially due to the nature of federalism in the United States.

Data collection is generally pretty poor on a lot of these very important issues.

So it's just not possible to answer a lot of these questions to the degree of specificity that we all want to answer.

But when you take a look at the big picture, immigrants are two-thirds less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans.

But again, I keep coming back to the question of, so what?

I mean, what does that tell us?

What policy implications are there?

Are we going to start deporting Americans?

Because supposedly they're incarcerated at larger percentage?

I think this is a sterile question that I've never been quite sure what the point of it is.

Well, Jessica, I think this matters in part because of policymakers.

President Trump has the rather notorious, and I think oftentimes misrepresented quote about Mexico not sending their best.

But his assertion seems to be that there is amongst the group of people that are migrating a number of criminals.

He would often talk about MS-13, so I think there's a real sense in which a lot of restrictionist arguments are often bound up with rhetoric about the unique danger posed by immigrants to the United States with respect to crime.

And we even saw him bring folks to the State of the Union who were supposed to be representative of this general threat posed by people who are on the margins of society, who are undocumented, and who perhaps as a result are more likely, at least that seems to be the presumption, to participate in crime.

So I think that's why that ends up being a part of the conversation.

I think some of this has to do with the more polarized debate that we find ourselves in at this time and the interest in trying to cartoonize the policy positions of someone that you disagree with, we should all be able to agree that being in favor of removing immigrants who've committed crimes doesn't mean that you're against immigration or against all immigrants.

Alex, I wonder if you would describe a substantial amount of the anti-immigration sentiment that is actually out there in our politics and in the culture broadly as xenophobic.

I mean, a handful, right?

I mean, there are a handful of people on every side of every debate who are motivated by ugly motives.

I mean, there are probably people on my side of this debate who are motivated by ugly motives, but it definitely isn't a majority.

I wouldn't say it's even a large or substantial proportion.

I mean, it's a very small number of people, I think, who are motivated by that.

I think that the vast majority of the motivation, frankly, is taking a look at the chaos and

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a way understandable reaction to that chaos is to want to clamp down and to restrict.

Now, I think that's kind of productive.

I think that will lead to worse consequences.

I think making immigration more restrictive will lead to more chaos, but it is like an understandable reaction.

I get it.

I mean, I'm a libertarian.

I favor legalizing drugs, for instance.

But if I lived in a neighborhood where there's a lot of drug dealing going on, the chaos associated with that, I could understand being a little bit more hesitant about that.

But then I have to come back to the theory.

Why are people engaged in lawful behavior?

Why are they crossing the border unlawfully?

Why are these horrible images and scenes occurring?

It's because of the government restrictions in the first place.

I want to get both of your perspectives on how the shape of immigration is changing, specifically around assimilation.

Are today's immigrants assimilating?

Are they learning English in the same way as prior immigrant cohorts seem to?

And how important is it even to encourage assimilation for immigrant communities?

And does perhaps legal versus illegal immigration seem to have much of an impact on whether or not people are likely to assimilate?

Jessica, perhaps I'll start with you on that question.

Yes, assimilation is something that we should be paying attention to, and the degree to which we are creating conditions in which immigrants will assimilate and become Americans.

I think that's the most important goal of our immigration policy should be to create new Americans.

We want people that are living here and admitted as immigrants to think of themselves as Americans and become a part of our community here.

I think that some of the institutions that historically played a very constructive role in encouraging that assimilation are not doing as good a job nowadays, particularly the schools.

I think English acquisition is critical to the success of immigrants here, to the extent that our current policy is hindering the pace of assimilation.

It's probably because of the scale of legal immigration today and the fact that it is somewhat less diverse than was the case, for example, 100 years ago.

So when we compare immigrants assimilating today, and what I mean by assimilation is how similar they are to say Americans who have been here for several generations.

We see basically, on average, near complete assimilation in terms of income, in terms of education, in terms of civic participation, family size.

In terms of language, we see the second generation being nearly 100% English fluent in the United States, and it's very similar to immigrant waves over 100 years ago.

What's interesting is, on polls, when you ask people how patriotic they are, how much they think the US is the best country in the world, naturalized immigrants, that is immigrants

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who have become American citizens, are more likely to say that America is the best country in the world.

And that's probably because they have experience with other countries and see how bad things are.

I'm not worried too much about assimilation.

I do think assimilation is important.

I think linguistic and cultural assimilation is important.

But this is not something that's being encouraged by the government, and frankly they shouldn't try to encourage it.

The government does a pretty poor job of trying to do these things well.

Over years ago, the government tried to do these things through government schools, through public schools.

It's sort of an anti-German campaign during World War I and afterwards, and what we actually found was that there was a backlash by German Americans, where a lot of German Americans faced with these anti-German and sort of pro-assimilation policies a generation later were less likely to name their kids American names, less likely to enlist in the military in World War II, less likely to be patriotic, etc.

So I think this is a great example of sort of laissez-faire practices leading to very good results, which is America is a lovable place.

It's a place that people want to become a member of, that they want to like, that they do like.

No government program is going to teach them to do that.

Government schools have never been, you know, having a school teacher tell you how great America is has never been the reason why people assimilated.

It's because this is a great place, because there are enormous benefits here.

People have assimilated.

They're continuing to do so.

So I'm very optimistic about that, so long as the government stays out of the way.

Yeah, it's interesting as I'm hearing you talk, I have two sets of thoughts.

One, I suspect there is someone listening who thinks to themselves, yeah, but if the schools aren't teaching young people to be proud to be American, and if they're actively encouraging them to be skeptical of the American project and to believe that America is kind of built on hateful ideas and hateful ideology, then that may have negative repercussions.

And I will grant that that's possible, but as I think for the reasons you just illustrated, it's kind of hard for that sort of propaganda to be successful in the long run.

And I do think there's a real opportunity to tell a compelling alternative story.

I am a first generation American.

My family came to this country from Jamaica.

I am intensely glad that that was the case.

Every single time I've gone back to Jamaica and visited, and I say back because I visited a lot, not because I'm from there, I was born here, but every single time I've gone back, I've thought to myself, there, but for the grace of God, go I, I have a deep and abiding appreciation for all of the unique value that America offers.

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And in as much as there are these dominant conversations about white supremacy, I would love for people to start talking openly about the fact that there has almost certainly never been a government designed or a political process designed that was better at creating wealthy foreigners than the United States of America.

That is the number one thing that the United States has been able to do.

It leverages immigrant labor, insight, it impulse initiative and turns it into prosperity for everyone.

And I think it's extraordinary and it's unfortunate that more people don't tell this story. But I suspect part of the reason they don't is because there is this kind of bizarre kind of cloud of pessimism that seems to move from either the left to the right, depending on the time of day or perhaps the year.

We will go back and look at 1986.

President Ronald Reagan gave amnesty to about three million illegal immigrants in the United States of America.

It was a time when conservatives seemed to be pretty bullish on immigration in general.

You had George W. Bush, who was similarly fluent in Spanish and spoke it openly and came from a border state and again was also bullish on immigration.

But something seems to have flipped and I don't know if it's just kind of the populist impulses that are also there in the conservative movement now or if there's generally something else that's made them more pessimistic.

Just got to know, maybe you could weigh in on that.

Is there something about recent history that's made conservatives more skeptical of immigration and less optimistic about the possibility of accepting a lot of immigrants from other places and generally having them assimilate and become Americans?

Good question.

I have noticed over my 30 years working on the immigration issue that not only has the issue grown in prominence in terms of salience and people being aware of it and concerned about it or wanting to see changes, but that it has become more polarized and increasingly in a partisan way that did not used to be the case.

At one time, there was no such, you know, bipartisanship meant nothing in the immigration debate because there were Democrats who were in favor of less immigration and more immigration and the same was true on the Republican side that it was more organized along the lines of your socioeconomic status or your concerns about security.

I think that this polarization is largely the result of the general polarization in our politics.

But on the immigration issue, I think it is also a product of frustration with our failure to enforce our laws and reform the system in a way that benefits our country.

So you mentioned the 1986 amnesty.

That is now largely recognized as a huge mistake among Republicans and some members of Reagan's

administration said that was one of their biggest regrets in terms of policies that were undertaken that that particular deal did not deliver what it promised.

It offered an amnesty in exchange for increases in enforcement and claimed that it would make

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illegal immigration a thing of the past by legalizing many of the people living here illegally and by cracking down on employers, making it illegal to hire illegal workers and boosting border security.

While the amnesty happened, but the increase in enforcement really didn't happen until much later.

And the failure of that deal to deliver what it promised is part of what has made it difficult for supporters of a big mass comprehensive immigration reform bill to sell it to skeptics as that we've tried this before and it didn't work.

And that's one big reason why attempts in of the Bush administration in 2007 and the gang of eight so-called gang of eight that tried to push forward a huge deal like that in 2013.

That's why one reason why those efforts failed is because of our experience with that, that the amnesty always happens first and the enforcement and the fixes to our immigration law never come to be.

Alex, I'm curious to get your take on the 86 and whether or not that amnesty was a mistake perhaps and perhaps botched in the way that Jessica described.

But I'm also curious to have you respond to what's been taking place on the kind of other side of the ideological spectrum.

And we can take a time machine, go back to 1995 and listen to a Bill Clinton State of the Union speech.

And I did this exercise and Bill Clinton sounds like a MAGA Republican.

All Americans not only in the states most heavily affected but in every place in the country are rightly disturbed by the large numbers of illegal immigrants entering our country.

The jobs they hold might otherwise be held by citizens or illegal immigrants or legal immigrants.

The public services they use impose burdens on our taxpayers.

That's why our administration has moved aggressively to secure your border by hiring a record number

of border guards, by deporting twice as many criminal aliens, criminal aliens, I mean cheese, as ever before by cracking down on illegal hiring and barring welfare benefits to illegal aliens.

He also talked about building the wall enthusiastically and got applause from Democrats and Republicans.

So what happened on the left to move them in a different direction on this issue?

Perhaps from your perspective, how did they find religion here and why?

So I think it goes back to my home state of California.

When I was a kid there was this famous proposition called Prop 187 that was on the ballot in 1994. And that proposition did two things.

The first one was to bar illegal immigrant access to welfare in the state.

It was already the law that they were barred, but this proposition would basically restate the law.

And the second portion of it would force all government employees in the state of California

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to report anyone who they thought was an illegal immigrant, including kids in school.

And what this did in the state of California is prior to this, on the state level elections, Democrats and Republicans basically split the Hispanic vote in the state.

They basically split it.

But beginning in 1994 and afterwards, Republicans really embraced this Prop 187 sort of out of a desperation because it was a tough election year for them in 1994 in the state of California on the governor's level.

And they sort of embraced it out of opportunism.

And then Democrats reflexively embraced it on the other side, being like, no, we need to plead pro-immigration.

And the result was the Republican governor, Pete Wilson, won the election, Prop 186 passed.

And then as a result of that, in later elections, American citizens in the state, people who could vote in the state, which was growing rapidly in Hispanic and Asian population, flipped radically to support the Democrats because they thought that the Republican message was also being targeted at them.

And by some people, that's true.

By other people, that's not true.

And then that sort of built up.

I mean, Governor George W. Bush, when he was governor of Texas at the same time, took the exact opposite perspective on immigration, his very pro-immigration, the state of Texas.

And he was elected in 1990 with 28% of the Hispanic vote.

And then in the next election, he got half the Hispanic vote.

And now Texas Republicans get about half of the Hispanic vote in the state because they have historically been much more pro-immigration or at least opposed to interior enforcement than the California Republican Party.

And then you sort of fast forward 15, 20 years, and you see this transformation carry out.

And then the other big factor, of course, is the political genius of Donald Trump.

I don't think you hear that phrase very often, but he really was a political genius.

When a lot of the other Republican candidates in 2015 and 16 were saying similar things about immigration, not getting a whole lot of traction, and he sold it because he took a look at opinion polls.

We had the differences between Republicans and Democrats on immigration, it's pretty much the same until about 2007, 2008, started to widen a little bit, and then Trump really widened it after that.

And now you seem to have sort of immigration be as polarized as everything else.

About the 1986 amnesty, it's true we got an amnesty about 3 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

We did get a lot more enforcement in the United States.

There was a hiring of about 1,500 Border Patrol agents in the course of about two years after that amnesty.

And now there's about six times more Border Patrol agents than there were at the time.

It grew actually much faster staffing a Border Patrol than the rest of the federal government

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over that entire time period.

But the great failure of the Reagan amnesty is that it did not increase legal immigration. There was no, there were no more ways for people who were low skill from Mexico, from Central America, from south of the border to come here lawfully.

And that's what I think was the great failure.

It was a real opportunity to try to channel these future flows of workers who were coming illegally into the legal market by creating a guest worker visa program, but instead they didn't do that.

And in some ways in the late 1980s, some of the regulations and rules in the books actually made it more difficult for people to come in lawfully.

So it's a great failure of the 1986 was just that it didn't liberalize immigration.

And some of the actions in the few years after actually made it slightly more difficult for legal immigrants to come in.

And as a result, you know, the predictable result of this, of restrictions that I keep coming back to is that we got a larger black market as a result.

I want to wrap up this conversation, which has been really great and illuminating.

And I appreciate both of you and having such a congenial debate here.

It's interesting to me that for all of the concern about immigration and there is quite a bit of it in our politics and even the fact that there have been points at which a single party has controlled the White House and Congress, nothing seems to get done on this issue.

To the extent there have been major changes, it comes in the way in the form of executive orders, which then can't be sustained in different ways and end up kind of having these convoluted implications.

And now the Biden administration, Joe Biden gets into office early on, he sends something, the Congress, nothing happens.

And again, both houses of Congress.

And now we get more executive orders that are supposed to perhaps fix the situation.

Why isn't there any real desire to do anything about this from a policy standpoint?

How come nothing has happened?

And in a world where something was going to happen, what is the first step to putting us on the right path from both of your perspectives?

I think that the main reason nothing is happening is because there is genuine disagreement about what needs to be done and what should be done first.

And that's really been the sticking point.

There's a huge gap between proposals to reform things.

I think pretty much everyone would probably agree that the border should be secured.

But the problem in actually passing legislation to do that or to help an administration that wants to enforce the law strictly has been that Democrats and others who favor a huge legalization program for people now living here illegally and amnesty have been unwilling to concede on border security anything at all unless it comes attached to an amnesty.

And those whose priority is security of the border and who would perhaps like to see also a more moderate level of immigration are insisting that border security has to come first.

First we have to enforce our laws because what is the point of having laws if they're

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not going to be enforced and why should we spend time talking about a new legal immigration system if the laws aren't being enforced at the border and illegal immigration is undermining the legal system.

So I mean I think that's what it boils down to what your priorities are and the order in which things should occur.

So there are vastly different opinions about how to reform immigration and this is just a result of the deadlock is just a result of these very different opinions as well as just the growing impotence of Congress in general and the general drift in our constitutional system toward more and more power to the president.

But there are vastly different opinions.

I mean you saw President Trump in his platform he wanted to cut legal immigration by 63% to the United States he campaigned on cutting legal immigration to the United States.

There was a border deal that was cooked up during the Trump administration would have given Trump his wall in exchange for legalizing the dreamers sort of these illegal immigrants who came here brought here by their parents when they were young and it was scuttled when at the last moment President Trump threw in you also have to cut a little bit of legal immigration off of the system and that really scuttled that deal.

In terms of what happens has to happen first.

I think an increase in legal immigration is the number one first step.

This will not only be good for the United States and the U.S. economy but it will also help secure the border by taking would be illegal immigrants putting them into a legal system that is orderly that is under control and then we can get basically two birds with one stone we can learn from the mistakes in 1986 expand legal immigration opportunities and then we can use enforcement resources to focus on those bad actors on criminals on other people who we don't want to come in to focus on that but we just cannot regulate a black market the government will not gain control of the system so long as it is so difficult and nearly impossible and in most cases impossible for immigrants to come to this country lawfully and as long as the legal immigration system is so restrictive we're not going to get the law and order that we deserve along the border.

Well Alex Jessica I want to thank you both so much for your time thank you for joining me today.

Thank you.

Thank you this was a lot of fun.

Thank you to Alex and Jessica for joining me today and thanks so much to all of you for listening.

Hopefully you learned something from this conversation that challenged your assumptions that is always the goal.

So if you did I encourage you to share this with your friends and family use it to have a debate of your own about the future of immigration in America and if you want to support honestly you can do that by going to [thefp.com](https://thefp.com) and becoming a paid subscriber today.

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