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**OPINION** This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.

# Trump expelled refugees against CDC advice. As COVID subsides, why won't Biden admit them?

As we remove our masks and even travel abroad, it should trouble us all that COVID pandemic is still used to justify refugee expulsion at the border.



U.S. Border Patrol agent and immigrants on April 10, 2021, in La Joya, Texas. John Moore/Getty Images

**Lindsay M. Harris and Sarah Sherman-Stokes** Opinion contributors  
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As cities and states nationwide [begin to ease up on COVID-19 restrictions](#), the southwest border remains closed to asylum-seekers. While families across the United States are reuniting with loved ones for the first time in more than a year, refugees fleeing violence and danger are [being expelled at the border, with COVID-19 as a pretext](#). These illegal border expulsions endanger children and families, and fly in the face of scientific evidence. Both should be cause for serious concern.

While the Biden administration has made some [key changes](#) to rebuild our asylum system, decimated by four years of relentless [attacks under former President Donald Trump](#), the most sweeping anti-asylum policy has yet to be rescinded. Known as [Title 42](#) for where it falls in the [Public Health Service Act](#), it was put into place in March 2020 under the auspices of protecting Americans from COVID-19. Simply put, noncitizens who arrive at the Southern border are [expelled and sent to Mexico](#), regardless of their country of citizenship.

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## Cruelty doesn't improve public health

The expulsions are swift and uncompromising. Indeed, only [through litigation](#) has a small exception been carved out for unaccompanied minors, leaving vulnerable and desperate families with the terrifying choice of sending an 8-year-old alone to the border to [live in refugee camps](#) for children within the United States. Under Title 42, about [537,000 immigrants and refugees have been expelled](#) from the United States in the past year.

From the beginning, public health [experts have decried the policy](#), a brainchild of Trump senior White House official [Stephen Miller](#), as unnecessary, cruel and counterproductive. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [coerced into implementing the expulsions](#) under the Trump administration, told advocates in April that it is still [examining them](#) under President Joe Biden's [Feb. 2 order to reassess immigration policy](#).

Last month, the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, [called on the United States to end the asylum restrictions](#).

Immigrants wait to be transported to a U.S. Border Patrol processing center after they were taken into custody on July 02, 2019 in McAllen, Texas. The immigrants, mostly families from Central America, turned themselves in to border agents after rafting across the Rio Grande from Mexico to seek political asylum in the United States. John Moore, Getty Images

However, despite advice from public health experts and condemnation by UNHCR, expulsions under Title 42 continue and the human cost has been devastating. Though refugees come from countries all over the world, the Department of Homeland Security expels them to Mexico, just on the other side of the border.

Reports by [Human Rights First](#) document the terrifying realities they face once there: kidnappings, violence, sexual assault, extortion and even murder in border towns where criminal gangs and cartels prey on recently expelled children and families. Just this spring, a 4-year-old Honduran boy and his asylum-seeking mother [were kidnapped in Nuevo Laredo](#) immediately after they were expelled under Title 42.

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Expulsions don't just impact migrants from Mexico and Central America. Despite the recent [designation of temporary protected status for Haitian migrants](#) within the United States, the Biden administration has sent plane after plane of asylum-seeking families back to Haiti, with some Haitians being expelled to Mexico. The [UndocuBlack Network](#) and the [Haitian Bridge Alliance](#), for example, document a Haitian woman expelled to Mexico with her three-day-old baby, where she will face extreme anti-Black discrimination and be at risk of violence and homelessness.

**Just the start: Biden will no longer detain migrants at two county jails. That's good but not enough.**

Public health has often been used as a pretext for restrictionist immigration policies. Beginning as early as 1793, when [Haitians were blamed for bringing yellow fever](#) to Philadelphia, nativism and xenophobia have long merged with concerns about public health to exclude immigrants and refugees. These concerns were not justified by science then, and they certainly are not justified now.

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## Give refugees a chance for safety

As Americans plan for summers on the beach with friends, remove their masks outdoors and even travel abroad, it should trouble us all that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be used to justify illegal expulsion policies at the border. [In January](#), President Biden affirmed his commitment to science, and scientists, and Vice President Kamala Harris vowed to make decisions "based not on ideology but on evidence."

**Unpopular and futile: Cruelty at the border is not the same as strength or an effective immigration strategy**

Today Biden and his team have the opportunity to follow through on these promises, to turn words into action, and provide the chance for safety to bona fide refugee children and families. We implore them to do so, and urge the American public to do the same.

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