

## Exploiting Migrants: A Game Anyone Can Play

Migrants to the United States are vulnerable to many different exploitative dynamics—and not just at Martha’s Vineyard.

[Peter Skerry](#)

03 Oct 2022, 11:56 am

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’s attention-getting stunt—flying fifty Venezuelan migrants from San Antonio to Martha’s Vineyard—has been widely and justifiably condemned. But, as frequently occurs in such controversies, most of those doing the condemning have lost all perspective.

DeSantis is a Republican, so few of his many critics have bothered to compare his stunt with recent moves by two Democrats, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker. After denouncing another Republican, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, for his unilateral policy of busing thousands of migrants to sanctuary cities such as Chicago and New York, Lightfoot and Pritzker emphasized that their jurisdictions are open to such populations in distress. Yet they then proceeded to move sixty-four Venezuelan migrants to a hotel in an outlying jurisdiction, the exurban community of Burr Ridge, without notifying any of the officials there. Not surprisingly, the mayor of Burr Ridge, a Republican who has expressed no animus toward the migrants, has strenuously criticized his fellow elected officials.

The point is not a partisan one. Clearly, no one—on either side of the aisle—knows quite what to do with, or for, the hundreds of thousands of migrants now streaming across our southern border. Just as clearly, it is time to stop and examine our assumptions about the goals and motives of those seeking to enter our country. And it is certainly time to stop capitalizing on the challenges posed by the record numbers of migrants to take potshots at those among our fellow citizens whom we have learned most enthusiastically to vilify.

To begin, it is critical to acknowledge what we do *not* know about these migrants. In response to dramatic and controversial changes in the implementation of our immigration laws, more and more individuals arriving at our southern border are not economically motivated migrants seeking to enter surreptitiously. Instead, they are presenting themselves directly to border officials as asylum applicants fearing for their lives and safety. And while the Venezuelans in these recent controversies are fleeing situations that might qualify them for refugee status, it is far from certain that all of these current migrants, or even most of them, meet those criteria. In any event, Venezuelans represent just one segment of the hundreds of thousands of individuals from various nations who have—for diverse and often legitimate reasons—been arriving at our southern border and contributing to the chaos and confusion there.

Obviously, immigration officials face daunting difficulties determining who among these thousands have legitimate claims to refugee status. Yet confounding the challenge is the mythology that has come to envelop our immigrant history. For this, look no further than the Statue of Liberty, and the words of Emma Lazarus's sonnet inscribed on its base. Designating Lady Liberty the "Mother of Exiles," Lazarus sought to memorialize the plight of her Jewish brothers and sisters suffering Tsarist persecution in Eastern Europe. In so doing, she helped revive the Founders' view of America as a refuge from European oppression. But she also managed to imprint on the millions of migrants who passed under Liberty's torch the image not just of immigrants choosing to come here but of "the homeless, tempest-tost," the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—in a word, refugees.

Refugees or immigrants, the thousands arriving at the border—especially those with limited social capital and financial means—are vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by the rest of us. And when I say "the rest of us," I mean "*all* the rest of us," not just greedy capitalists or manipulative politicians. To fathom what this means, we need to look beyond recent controversies and scrutinize the complex motives of those who leave their homes and often risk their lives to reach America's doorstep.

To begin, it is critical not to regard migrants merely as passive victims. Most arrive with a pre-conceived plan, or if not, they quickly develop one. More to the point, those plans—or least some of them—tend to be compatible with, or useful, to the agendas of individuals and groups already living and working in the host society. These agendas may involve mere reinforcement of flattering images of ourselves as a nation; support for various ideological, ethnic, religious, or partisan projects; or most commonly, promotion of mundane material interests. One need not be a cynic to observe that Americans have historically been inclined to receive migrants because, in some sense or another, they fit into *our* notions of how things ought to be.

Yet this fit has seldom been precise. Either the plans of migrants prove to be unrealistic, or the expectations of their employers or new hosts prove to be narrowly self-serving. And further, migrants frequently pursue goals and make choices to which the rest of us remain oblivious. For example, many migrants past and present have arrived here not necessarily intending to settle down permanently; so they have been willing to tolerate what the rest of us regard as substandard, even unsafe working and living conditions. They have frequently been what development economists refer to as "target earners," who seek not to maximize their earnings but merely to reach a pre-determined goal—then return home. Of course, that initial plan may not work out in practice.

On this point, activist lawyer and MacArthur "genius" grantee Jennifer Gordon is particularly insightful. She reports that despite mistreatment and abuse from employers, the Latino immigrants (not all of them undocumented) whom she tried to unionize had a "sojourner attitude" that ultimately stymied her efforts. As she wistfully concludes: "Such immigrants may decide that their current wages and working conditions are good enough in the short term, which is the only term in which they imagine themselves living here." This orientation also helps explain why even among migrants who have established themselves and become legal permanent residents, naturalization rates are surprisingly low. Yet most Americans fail to accurately read such patterns, which requires piercing through the dominant myth of our immigrant history—that

the United States has invariably been peopled by migrants eager to settle down here permanently.

When the migrants in question are young people, especially young men cut loose from the bonds of family and community back home, they may be willing to take additional risks that prudence would advise against. And the effects of migrants' short-term time horizons are hardly confined to the workplace. For example, they also result in a willingness to put up with poor living conditions at the hands of unscrupulous landlords, or to drive motor vehicles without proper insurance and documentation, including driver's licenses.

Further insight into such counterintuitive motives and their consequences is provided by anthropologist David Stoll's field research in Central America. He depicts a migratory dynamic driven not by hunger or scarcity as much as by debt-fueled aspirations resulting in dangerous and expensive journeys to the United States that very often lead to strained or broken family ties. Even when migrants manage to return home and reunite with their families, their remittances have in the interim contributed to inflation that eats away at their U.S.-earned dollars. The remedy is another dangerous trip north and more strains on family life. The overall outcome depicted by Stoll is an elaborate pyramid scheme in which migrants get exploited not only by American landlords and employers, but also by their village neighbors and other migrants struggling to stay afloat.

The topic of migrants exploiting migrants brings to mind one of the stock villains in any honest portrayal of immigrant and refugee communities in the United States: the barrio *abogados*, or self-styled "lawyers" whose knowledge of U.S. immigration law is limited if not erroneous, but whose familiarity with their neighbors' language and mores affords them predatory opportunities to provide "legal advice." This kind of relationship came to mind recently when Lawyers for Civil Rights, a Boston-based legal advocacy firm, filed a class-action suit in federal district court *against* DeSantis and other Florida officials *on behalf of* the Venezuelans transported to Martha's Vineyard. Also represented by these lawyers, and named as co-plaintiff, is Alianza Americas, described in the brief as "the only transnational organization rooted in Latino immigrant communities in the United States focused on improving the quality of life of all people in the U.S.-Mexico-Central America migration corridor."

Now, it would be unfair to equate Lawyers for Civil Rights with barrio *abogados*. But questions of agency, conflicting interests, and adequacy of representation arise, as they do in any such professional relationship. For example, in addition to attorneys' fees and costs, the plaintiffs in *Alianza Americas and Yanet Doe et al. v. Ronald DeSantis et al.* are seeking "compensatory, emotional distress, and punitive damages." These are claimed on behalf of the individual migrants but also by "Alianza Americas and its 53 member organizations," which, the brief states, "are incurring concrete and ongoing injuries as a direct result of Defendants' conduct." The precise nature of the injuries experienced by these organizations is not specified.

The plaintiffs' lawyers in such cases are typically graduates of elite law schools and supported by prominent law firms. But who or what is involved with Alianza Americas? It is a not-for-profit corporation organized under the laws of California with a principal place of business in Chicago. It has received financial support from the United Food and Chemical Workers Union,

the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation. The organization's federal Form 990 (to secure tax exempt status) states that its mission is "to bring about a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable way of life for Latino immigrant communities living in the United States and across the Americas. By working transnationally with partners from civil society and government, organized labor and faith-based communities, we hope to create a more dignified and just way of life for all people in the Americas."

Clearly, an ambitious, if not grandiose, set of objectives. Yet a Latino colleague of mine, a life-long resident of Chicago and highly visible community leader who knows where all the bodies are buried (and helped bury some of them), has never heard of Alianza!

In recent days, one reads that at least some of the migrants shipped off by shameless, grand-standing politicians to places like Chicago, New York, and even Martha's Vineyard are not entirely displeased with what has happened to them so far in America. So the question arises, whose standards and interests have been voiced in the recent outpouring of outrage? Those of the migrants, or those of their advocates? To be sure, Americans should not be expected to stand by while migrants get exploited. Yet our outrage needs to be tempered by the realization that there are many ways to exploit migrants—and that to varying degrees we are all complicit in this dynamic. Finally, we must bear in mind that migrants' proclivity to take chances and circumvent forms and rules facilitates exploitative relationships—and is one reason they are valuable to us.

*Peter Skerry is professor of political science at Boston College, a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, and a contributing editor of American Purpose.*