

Climate Change, Immigration, and Militarization



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2003 Pentagon Commissioned Report

“Just like super-typhoons, rising seas, and heat waves, border build-up and militarization are by-products of climate change,”

Journalist Todd Miller

Climate Change Compounds Instability and Influences Migration

Policymakers have long denied the urgency of the climate crisis, but people around the world are already experiencing its devastating impacts. In coming decades, drought, resource scarcity, extreme weather events, rising sea level, major flooding, and other climate impacts will make corners of the globe increasingly uninhabitable.

These new ecological realities will compound existing conflicts, cause more political instability, and dislocate unprecedented quantities of people. Commonly cited [estimates project](#) that around 200 million people will be displaced by the middle of the century due to climate change.⁵² Other studies suggest [that number may be far higher](#)—possibly reaching as high as one billion people by 2050.⁵³ Regardless of the exact number of people that will be on the move in the coming decades, it is clear that climate change will force people to

migrate at staggering rates. Thus, climate change and border militarization are inextricably linked. As the U.S. continues to ramp up border security and border enforcement expands beyond U.S. boundary lines, so do threats to all people's freedom to move and stay. Especially in light of extreme inequality, border closures, walls, and harsh immigration policies are a violent, militarized response to human need.

Climate change is already impacting flows in migration. Between 2008 and 2015 an average of [21.5 million people were displaced annually](#) from the "impact and threat of climate-related hazards."⁵⁴ [According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#), the largest annual increases in displacements are due to weather or climate-related causes.

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In fact, a person is more likely to be displaced by environmental forces than war, although as climate-driven conflict intensifies, it will become ever-harder to distinguish between the two.⁵⁵ As the compounding impacts of a warming climate continue to worsen, this trend will magnify.

Despite the growing recognition of the relationship between the global impacts of climate change and migration, contemporary international law is ill equipped to accommodate the huge numbers of climate-migrants. Existing immigration laws are narrow and restrictive and there is currently no legal framework for climate refugees. "The only real preparations for such a world are grim

ones: walls and the surveillance technology that goes with them," [writes journalist Todd Miller](#) whose work documents the relationship between climate change and border militarization. "Most climate-displaced people traveling internationally without authorization will sooner or later run up against those walls and the armed border guards meant to turn them back."⁵⁶

What We Can Learn from the Dust Bowl's "Bum Blockade"

It's worth noting that so far, most climate displacement has occurred within national borders. Since 2008 extreme weather has displaced an average of [21.4 million new people](#) annually within their own countries.⁵⁷ Communities in the U.S. have already experienced the impacts of climate change; take for example people forced to flee their homes in California in the face of annual [fire seasons made-worse](#) by climate change. In the years ahead, some parts of the United States will be more vulnerable to climate change than others. A [study by NASA](#), for example, predicts a devastating drought to hit the Southwest and plains states by the end of the 21st century.⁵⁸

The Dust Bowl of the 1930s is a harrowing historical parallel for how militarization could stifle movement within the United States. Those who fled the drought and dust storms ravaging the Great Plains region during the Dust Bowl-era met armed authorities along the Californian state border. The Los Angeles Police Department [positioned officers along the border](#) with Arizona, creating a "bum blockade" to ward off dust bowl migrants who were predominantly poor and often white. Resembling [immigration enforcement today](#), a border apparatus largely premised on profiling those passing through it was constructed to obstruct people's mobility. Colorado declared martial law along its southern border to "repel" people described as "aliens" and Florida instituted a "poverty quarantine" that sought to keep those with little money out.⁵⁹

The so-called “bum blockades” created in response to Dust Bowl migration demonstrates that borders can be easily constructed tomorrow in places where they are not today, even within national boundaries. This is a powerful reminder that borders are not natural, and they block our collective freedom to move and stay. The reality that people within the United States will have to move from their homes because of climate change should inspire a spirit of solidarity with those facing climate displacement around the world.

It is clear that on a warming planet, cross-border migration will rise. But instead of responding with solidarity or compassion and sharing the resources that could provide safe refuge to those forced to travel across borders, migrants are met with expanded border enforcement. This dynamic is visible along the United States southern border, where migrants and asylum seekers increasingly cite crop failure and food insecurity as a driver of migration. The Central American northern triangle—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—has been characterized as “ground zero” for climate change’s impact in the Americas.⁶⁰ Here, a deadly combination of devastating hurricanes and extended drought hits already precarious populations hard. According to the [2018 World Risk Index](#), both El Salvador and Guatemala are among countries most at risk from natural disasters due to frequent exposure and limited response capacity.⁶¹ In a region marked by high levels of violence and extreme inequality, where a third of all employment is linked to agriculture and huge percentages of the population live in conditions of acute poverty, such climate impacts have devastating consequences that can significantly influence the choice to leave. In addition to driving the climate crisis, U.S. interventionism has also [played a defining role](#) in the region’s history of violence and inequality. As is the case in regions around the globe, in Central America a convergence of interlinked conditions motivate migration. In the first eight months of the 2019 fiscal year alone, [an estimated 508,000 people](#) from Central America’s Northern Triangle left home and migrated north.⁶²

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Fortress America: The U.S. Military’s Plans for Climate-Related Migration

The relationship between climate change and migration has been well-documented by the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security, who have long been preparing for global instabilities and associated dislocations of people. A report commissioned by the Pentagon nearly two decades ago, called [An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for United States National Security](#), projects that in a future afflicted with climate cataclysms,

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Since this xenophobic report was issued, U.S. border and immigration enforcement has undergone unprecedented military escalations. Transforming the border into an imagined

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- 2003 Pentagon-commissioned report on climate change

war zone, a bloated border budget funds increasing numbers of armed border patrol agents and surveillance technologies from drones and sensors to facial recognition and human detection technologies. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has [the largest U.S. drone fleet of its kind](#) outside the Department of Defense, including 36-foot-long, nearly 5,000-pound Predator B drones that were built for military use but have been used by CBP since 2006.⁶⁴ These military-grade drones, which run around \$17 million each, cost the federal government \$32,000 every time they’re used to apprehend an individual.⁶⁵

U.S. border militarization was born out of a transfer of surveillance technologies used by the U.S. Military in Vietnam to the U.S.-Mexico border in the 1970s, and were significantly enhanced in the

1980s under the guise of drug-enforcement efforts (the same efforts that increasingly militarized domestic law enforcement and ultimately helped justify mass incarceration). After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed in 1993 there was another surge in border militarization alongside a significant increase in the border security budget. [Technologically advanced equipment](#) from infrared night scopes to thermal-imaging devices and in-ground sensors populated the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁶⁶ After 9/11 such practices turbo-charged. In the past two decades, the budget for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which houses Immigration Criminal Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), has [more than doubled](#).⁶⁷ The ballooning budget helps the agencies acquire more military-grade equipment. DHS purchased \$108,464 worth of ammunition [in response to the so-called migrant caravan](#) from Central America in 2018, for example.⁶⁸ It also fuels the deportation machine.

As a result of this expansive immigration enforcement apparatus, undocumented communities become the target of the racist and for-profit detention and deportation machine. Thousands of immigrants are unnecessarily locked up every year, tearing families apart and imposing heavy social costs. The cost to taxpayers is also significant; the cost of incarcerating so many people is [estimated to be over \\$1 billion dollars a year](#).⁶⁹ In 2017 there were [more than \\$19,500 Border Patrol agents](#), who have helped facilitate the deportation of more than 5 million people since the DHS was founded in 2003.⁷⁰ In 2017, the [budget for the ICE](#) division known as Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) was \$3.7 billion and the Border Patrol budget was more than \$4.2 billion.



The Militarized Border Extends Far Beyond International Boundaries

The force of the “war on migrants” extends beyond the borderlands, as something akin to a “virtual border” follows immigrants—particularly those who are undocumented—wherever they go. Beyond international boundary lines themselves, CBP operates in a far more expansive zone that stretches 100 miles inland from any land or sea border. Encompassing entire states such as Florida and Maine, and almost all of the country’s most populous metropolitan areas, the [area covers](#) territory where two-thirds of the U.S. population lives, including where many undocumented people live and work.⁷¹ By design, the extended border zone expands the militarization of the border well beyond the actual international boundary line. To that end, the physical barriers along the actual boundary line are [just one layer of immigration enforcement](#), followed by virtual technology walls, roadside checkpoints, and roving patrols far away from the southwest border.⁷²

The [ACLU has characterized](#) the Border Patrol’s policing practices as often amounting to a “de facto policy of ‘stop and frisk’ for border residents.”⁷³ ICE and CBP have a track record

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of systematic violence that terrorizes immigrant communities across the United States. For undocumented communities, the threats of detention and deportation loom heavily as ICE employs increasingly nefarious tactics to surveil immigrant communities. These methods are designed not only to arrest, detain, and deport, but also to create confusion and fear in undocumented communities. Climate adaptation by “[armed lifeboat](#)” is only possible in the context of narrow presumptions that some human lives are more worthy than others. As climate change drives

more state failure in the Global South and more authoritarian state hardening in the Global North, such xenophobic regimes are emboldened.⁷⁴

While efforts to pressure local law enforcement not to cooperate with ICE have been successful in some “sanctuary” areas, in many communities within—and increasingly, beyond—the 100 mile zone, collaboration with police and private contractors exacerbates the criminalization of immigrant communities. One DHS program known as [Operation Stonegarden](#) provides money for local and state police to do border enforcement, which includes [funds for police agencies to buy equipment](#) for border-enforcement purposes.⁷⁵

The United States’ strategy to militarize borders to keep migrants out extends globally. Expensive paramilitary technologies along Mexico’s southern border, from underwater motion sensors to Black Hawk helicopters, are compliments of a military aid package from the United States known as the Merida Initiative. A convergence of the racist so-called “war on drugs” and exclusionary anti-immigrant sentiment, [the Merida Initiative](#) is a bilateral anti-narcotics initiative funded by the U.S. and Mexico. Police training is a key strategy of the

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Merida Initiative and also a long-standing instrument in the U.S. foreign policy arsenal.⁷⁶ Not only have U.S. homeland security agents trained Mexican immigration authorities, police, and military in border policing, but they are physically working in immigration detention centers along the Mexico-Guatemala border.⁷⁷ While failing to reign in the country's powerful criminal groups, violence in Mexico spiked alongside spending increases for U.S. and Mexico security cooperation. [Five years after the Merida Initiative](#) was signed in 2007, drug-related homicides spiked from around 2,000 annually to more than 12,000.⁷⁸ On the frontlines of both climate and borders, for those in the Global South, expanding borders and the militarized systems that keep them in place reinforce global systems of social and economic exclusion and widens the gulf between the "environmentally secure and the environmentally insecure."⁷⁹

Solidarity Over Security

Knowing that climate change will force more people to migrate across borders, border militarization and fortification is a gross display of inhumanity. By turning climate change into a security issue, those who have contributed the least to the crisis not only suffer the most from its consequences, but are also targeted with security responses to those very climate impacts.

The United States has emitted more metric tons of greenhouse gas pollution than any other country since the Industrial Revolution—nearly a third of the excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today. Still today, the [U.S. is among the world's highest](#) per capita carbon emitters.⁸⁰ Having played such an outsized role in causing the crisis, the United States bears a disproportionate share of the responsibility to address it, including a debt to displaced people around the world. Instead of accounting for this reality, the United

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States (alongside other heavy emitters like the European Union) has characterized climate migrants as "security threats" and invested unprecedented amounts in border fortification to keep them out. As climate law professor Michael Gerrard [wrote in a 2015 op-ed](#) on the topic, "Rather than leaving vast numbers of victims of a warmer world stranded, without any place allowing them in, industrialized countries ought to pledge to take on a share of the displaced population equal to how much each nation contributed to emissions of the greenhouse gases that are causing the crisis."⁸¹

We need to fundamentally change our societies and economies to be more just and caring. We need a massive expansion of funding for victims of U.S. wars and economic and environmental policies that have left tens of millions in need of humanitarian support. We also need to defund hate by doing away with the militarized agencies that terrorize immigrant communities in the United States. In the face of a climate-changed future, we must reverse our decades-long trend in border militarization and all anti-immigrant operations carried out by ICE and CBP and in doing so uphold our collective freedom to move and stay. [Immigrant justice is climate justice](#), and challenging militarism is critical to achieving both.