

Lost in a Pressing Crisis: Perpetual Immigration Issues

By JULIÁN AGUILAR JULY 17, 2014

BROWNSVILLE, Tex. — After [reports in March](#) of three undocumented Honduran migrants being assaulted by a [Border Patrol](#) agent, who was later found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot, immigration activists decided to form a group to determine whether migrants were being routinely abused.

At the same time, the [American Civil Liberties Union of Texas](#) has been contributing to a yearslong effort to document possible abuses of border residents by federal agents. The group was also planning to join a multistate campaign to help border residents understand their legal rights if they were stopped by law enforcement officials while crossing back from Mexico.

But organizers say both efforts have been drowned recently by the national attention on the arrival of tens of thousands of Central Americans, including a surge of unaccompanied minors, who have crossed the border illegally.

“It’s going forward, but it’s overshadowed by the children,” Michael Seifert, the network director of the [Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network](#), a network of community organizations, said of the residents’ group that was formed after the March incident. “But it’s all relevant. The big question was: If the guy hadn’t killed himself, would we have ever known how much this happens?”

Those living on the border hope that the increased attention on the area will teach more people about the complexities of life here and help the region address longstanding issues that will still be here after the current crisis stops making headlines.

On the Texas side of the Brownsville and Matamoros International Bridge last week, A.C.L.U. members gave residents wallet-size pamphlets with information on their rights when they are stopped by law enforcement, including questioning, detention and search-and-seizure procedures. The campaign, part of a multistate [“Revitalize Not Militarize”](#) effort, was planned before the immigration crisis.

“The idea is to address the culture of impunity that’s been going on for a long time,” said Brooke Lyssy, a border rights fellow with the Equal Voice Network. “This was planned by the A.C.L.U. of New Mexico, but it definitely does fall at a very intense time for border issues.”

The spotlight on the border has brought other groups to South Texas hoping to gain attention for particular immigration issues. Last week in nearby McAllen, dozens of activists, including several who were undocumented, held a [three-day vigil](#) near a church acting as a temporary shelter for some of the migrants. Organizers said they came to show support for the children and

to call for their humane treatment, but that the situation also needed to be seen in the broader context of the debate over immigration reform.

“This is something that requires a lot of attention, something that deserves a lot of media attention,” said Mario Carrillo, the communications manager for [United We Dream](#), a coalition that advocates immigrants’ rights and lobbies in support of the [Dream Act](#), which would create a formal path to citizenship for young people who came here as children. “But I think within that we have to remember some of the things that cause these types of crisis. When this happened, it really did solidify our point, that the system is broken, that it is something that is not sustainable.”

With activism comes a risk of criticism.

Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, was the highest-profile activist in McAllen supporting the migrants. But attention shifted to Mr. Vargas himself after [he was detained](#) by the Border Patrol. He was eventually released, but the incident raised questions about whether his visit was part of a larger effort to gain publicity.

Mr. Vargas insisted that he never intended to be detained when he came to South Texas.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/18/us/lost-in-a-pressing-crisis-perpetual-immigration-issues.html>