

The surprising details behind DeSantis' and Abbott's immigration stunts

Analysis by [Zachary B. Wolf](#), CNN

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(CNN) — Republican governors are in a cynical competition to outdo each other and send migrants from the US border by bus to New York, Washington, DC, Chicago and, now, [by plane to Martha's Vineyard](#).

Two unannounced planes carrying an estimated 50 migrants landed in the wealthy seaside enclave of Massachusetts on Wednesday night, surprising locals.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis claimed credit for the stunt, which took the migrants from Texas, not Florida, and left them without planning on the street.

His stunt may have been outdone by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who started sending buses of migrants to Washington, DC, back in April and on Thursday morning, left asylum-seekers [outside Vice President Kamala Harris' house](#) at the US Naval Observatory. She's under intense criticism from immigration hawks for saying on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that she was confident the border is "secure."

Many rightly pointed out that the political point came at the expense of vulnerable migrants who had already been through a tremendously arduous journey -- but some of the details of the transport may surprise you. For starters, many of the migrants were appreciative of the ride.

Are these migrants in the country illegally?

These stunts by Republican governors are built on the false idea that the migrants are in the country illegally. Technically, those on the buses and planes are asylum-seekers who have been processed by federal immigration authorities and are awaiting court dates.

Where are the migrants coming from?

While most of these migrants crossed the border with Mexico, they are fleeing poor economies and dangerous situations at home in Central America and, increasingly, South America. After crossing the border and claiming asylum, they are released in the US to wait for hearings on their asylum claim.

THE POINT

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One person left in Massachusetts, a 45-year-old named Leonel, [told The New York Times](#) about his three-month journey from Venezuela through Colombia and Central America. He tried more than once to cross the US border with Mexico before being detained and then released in San Antonio.

It was there that he was approached and asked if he wanted to go to Massachusetts. It's not clear if he knew he was headed to a wealthy island community unprepared for the arrivals.

Are they being forced on the buses and planes? No, they are not

Anger at the stunts is in part also fed by the idea that the people are being forced onto buses. That is not true, as CNN's Gary Tuchman found when he visited a shelter in Eagle Pass, Texas, in August.

He met asylum-seekers planning to meet up with family and friends already spread around the country. Other migrants coming to the US without somewhere to go were happy for the free trip.

Who is happy for the ride? These people have incredible stories

Tuchman talked to a 28-year-old woman named Genesis Figueroa from Venezuela who traveled for a month and a half by foot, bus and boat to get to Eagle Pass with her husband.

"I got very tired. My legs hurt and I got sick," she told Tuchman in Spanish. "I came down with pneumonia. I was hospitalized for three days in Guatemala." [Watch Tuchman's report](#).

He also talked to cousins traveling from Venezuela; one man's brother died during the journey after disappearing while they crossed the Rio Grande.

Nearly 750 migrants are known to have died at the southern border since October 2021, [CNN's Priscilla Alvarez recently reported](#).

"We left in search of a dream, but now it's a very difficult, hard situation," Luis Pulido told Tuchman in Spanish. He was going to get on a DC-bound bus, hoping to get off in Kentucky to be met by relatives before moving toward Chicago.

A week after their bus trip, Tuchman found Pulido and his cousin in Chicago, where they had met up with relatives, were sheltered in a small, shared apartment and were looking for work in a restaurant. They likely can't legally work for at least 180 days, [according to rules](#) posted on the US Citizenship and Immigration Services website.

[Watch Tuchman's follow-up.](#)

Tuchman told me Pulido and his cousin went to their first appointments, but it was mostly administrative and they are waiting for their next appearance.

It takes a long time to get a work permit

Getting a work permit can take up to a year, New York City officials told CNN's Polo Sandoval, who also reported on this issue last month.



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He went to a shelter in Brooklyn and met a young couple from Venezuela, Anabel and Crisman Urbaez, who are seeking asylum.

They showed him cellphone videos from their two-month, 10-country trek, often on foot, which started in Peru and continued through jungles in Colombia and the Darien Gap linking South and Central America -- all with their 6- and 9-year-olds and their dog Max.

How long does it take to settle an immigration case?

It takes years. The average time to complete an immigration case is 1,110 days, according to [data maintained](#) by Syracuse

University. During that time, migrants and asylum-seekers start to build American lives.

How many will be granted asylum?

Less than half of asylum applications have been granted in recent years, [according to Syracuse](#).

During the Trump administration, the rate of denial was over 70%, but during the first year of the Biden administration the grant rate grew to nearly 40%.

Why are so many coming from Venezuela?

Alvarez wrote recently about the [mass exodus from Venezuela](#). The United Nations says similar numbers of people are fleeing the South American country -- which has suffered from years of political repression and economic unrest -- as war-torn Ukraine. Around 6.8 million Venezuelans are part of this diaspora.



There have been nearly 2 million border encounters [reported by US Customs and Border Protection](#) so far in the fiscal year that ends September 30.

Some of those encounters are repeat crossers. Others have been turned away under a Trump-era Covid-19 policy the Biden administration has tried, so far unsuccessfully, to end. A fraction are seeking asylum.

Why are officials declaring states of emergency?

Officials in New York City, Illinois and [Washington, DC](#), have declared emergencies to deal with the buses, and they have complained they have no idea when or where to expect them, and they want warning from Texas, Arizona and now Florida.

Texas has [spent more than \\$12 million](#) and bused around 9,000 migrants up north.

Overall, the buses and now planes have moved thousands of migrants, but it's a small fraction of the nearly 700,000 pending asylum applications slowly working through the justice system.

These stories are all unique, but so many of them share the theme of fleeing a home without opportunity and being comparatively happy for the trip inside the US from the border.

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