

Inside Border Detention: Observing Migration Motives at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Igor Leonov

Independent Researcher, United States

ORCID: 0009-0004-3645-6031

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Abstract

Conversations in border detention can raise questions about migration motives and the preparation of asylum accounts. This article begins with a retrospective account of detention at San Ysidro from September 22 to 26, 2021. The author recalls conversations about debt, opportunities in the United States, possible return visits to Russia, and, in some instances, inventing an account to obtain asylum. The analysis distinguishes these recollections from verified case histories and asks what evidence is needed to assess protection claims. Migration research and U.S. statutory distinctions are then considered alongside official screening, staffing, and border data. Descriptive calculations show that credible fear screening completions rose from 54,100 in fiscal year 2022 to 136,300 in 2023, while the annual excess of referrals over completions remained close to 14,000. A separate comparison shows that single adults accounted for 86.7 percent of the decline in southwest land border encounters between fiscal years 2023 and 2024, while encounters involving people in family units changed much less. Documentary evidence identifies further problems in transferring and classifying cases. The article argues that credible assessment requires attention to both the content of individual accounts and the capacity to examine them. Its contribution is to connect a situated observation with administrative evidence while preserving the distinction between suspicion, investigation, and an established finding. It does not estimate the prevalence of valid or fabricated asylum claims.

Keywords: asylum; migration motives; credible fear; border detention; administrative capacity; United States

1 From a detention-room impression to a research problem

I was detained at San Ysidro on September 22, 2021, and remained there until September 26. We were held in a cell intended for temporary detention. I remember it as approximately three by five meters, with a concrete floor and metal benches fixed along two walls. There were no beds. A single toilet stood behind a short partition. During those days, I recall between 15 and 25 men occupying the cell at a time. People lay close together on the floor, using narrow camping mats and covering themselves with reflective plastic sheets. These details describe the cell in which I was held; I cannot speak to conditions throughout the facility.

Most of the men around me came from Russia, including Central Russia, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Siberia. I recall their ages as ranging from about 20 to 56; I was the oldest. Very bright lights remained on continuously. The cell felt very cold. I saw a thermometer in the corridor reading 65°F (about 18.3°C). Men talked and prayed at all hours, sleeping when exhaustion overtook them. In that small shared space, conversations were readily audible to others. There was a continuous exchange of stories and information, much of which I heard without joining in.

Several accounts concerned debts, difficulties at home, and the hope of building a different life in the United States. Some men said that they had taken out loans and were avoiding creditors. Others described an attraction to American life shaped by films. Listening to them, I

formed the impression that many had left after setbacks in their lives. That was my interpretation of the accounts I heard, not an independently established description of their circumstances. I had no way to verify the debts, reconstruct their histories, or determine whether they had other reasons for leaving that they did not discuss in the cell.

Some conversations went beyond hopes for a better life. I heard men seek advice about how to construct an asylum case and what story to invent in order to obtain protection. Those exchanges concerned me because they appeared to involve creating an account rather than explaining an experience. I also remember discussions about how people could return to Russia for visits after receiving asylum. My rough recollection is that about a third of those around me expressed interest in that possibility. This is an estimate from memory, not a recorded count or a survey result. I do not know what those men later submitted, whether they returned to Russia, or how their cases were decided.

At the time, I imagined how a U.S. consular officer might react if many of these men applied for ordinary tourist visas. My thought was that many would probably be refused. I was imagining a visa interview, not conducting an assessment of asylum eligibility. The distinction matters to the argument developed here: my reaction to the stories I heard cannot replace examination of the different questions involved in a request for protection. Yet the recollection should not be reduced to a misunderstanding of ordinary ambition. It includes conversations that I understood as discussing the invention of an asylum narrative, and those conversations were an important source of my distrust.

My own experience of persecution made me reluctant to discuss my circumstances with the men around me. I considered it unsafe to enter into personal conversations or tell them my story. I did not keep their contact details and have no continuing connection with them. My position was therefore that of a detained person who overheard conversations while deliberately withholding information about himself. This experience also shows a limit of treating silence as evidence: I had reasons for seeking protection, but I did not regard that cell as a safe place to explain them. I cannot assume that other people's silence had the same cause, just as I cannot know everything they left unsaid.

This account was reconstructed from memory in September 2026. The approximate dimensions, occupancy, ages, and proportion mentioned above are recalled details, not measurements or counts collected for research. The article contains no structured interviews, case files, or follow-up of the people encountered. The episode raises two questions: how should an observer distinguish a wish to migrate from a claim to protection, and how should concerns about an invented account be investigated? The purpose is to examine those questions without converting a small, unverified set of recollections into a prevalence estimate for asylum applicants.

Questions about destination preferences and protection grounds invite different kinds of answers. A conversation about the United States may concern relatives, language learning, employment, or a child's education. An asylum inquiry asks about past harm, future risk, the grounds for that harm, and other conditions established by law. The same person can answer both sets of questions truthfully. Confusion begins when the answer to the first is treated as a sufficient answer to the second. A preference for a particular country becomes evidence against protection without an examination of risk. The reverse inference is also possible: a difficult journey or a convincing expression of distress can be taken as proof of legal eligibility even though important elements of the claim remain unexamined.

The article studies this interpretive problem together with the administrative conditions under which it must be resolved. An institution does not receive a fully documented account at the moment of arrival. It has to create a record, conduct screening, transfer information,

schedule further proceedings, and reach a decision under the applicable standard. Each stage consumes time and depends on the work of other offices. If new referrals grow faster than the capacity to handle them, officials must make choices about where to assign staff and which cases to advance. Those choices affect what is recorded and when, even though workload itself says nothing about the legal strength of an individual claim. The connection between evidence and capacity is therefore central to the analysis.

The empirical approach is descriptive and documentary. Published U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data supply a five-year series of credible fear referrals and completions for fiscal years 2019 through 2023. Border encounter figures for fiscal years 2023 and 2024 permit a separate examination of changes in the composition of arrivals recorded by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Reports by the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General (DHS OIG) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) document staffing pressures, case transfers, and weaknesses in outcome measurement. These sources describe a wider administrative setting. In particular, the later annual comparisons do not establish conditions in my cell in September 2021 or corroborate the conversations recalled above. The two numerical series are not merged: they concern different units, stages, and periods. All derived percentages and differences are calculated from the published totals, with their denominators stated below.

The resulting argument has a limited but practical scope. Research on migration helps explain why personal aspirations are an unreliable shortcut for classifying protection claims. Administrative data then show why seemingly clear performance indicators can be equally misleading when detached from the process that produces them. The central issue in both cases is a mismatch between an observation and the conclusion drawn from it. A statement about work is not a finding on persecution; a completed screening is not a final asylum decision; and a smaller border total does not establish that every part of the system has less work. Keeping these distinctions intact makes it possible to discuss both protection and control without assuming the answer in advance.

2 Migration decisions and the legal basis of protection

Migration research offers a useful way to interpret the ordinary language of plans and preferences. In the aspirations-capabilities framework, movement depends on what people want to achieve and on their ability to act within social and material constraints (de Haas, 2021). Carling and Schewel (2018) likewise distinguish a wish to move from the capacity to do so. These approaches do not divide people into those who choose freely and those who have no agency at all. They ask how choices become possible, how alternatives are restricted, and why the same conditions can produce different responses. Applied to the present problem, the framework suggests that a person can make deliberate decisions about a route or destination while facing serious constraints on remaining at home.

The distinction becomes clearer when departure and destination are considered separately. A threat can make continued residence unsafe without determining which country a person can reach. Available money, documents, family contacts, and information may then shape the route. Even after departure, the choice of a destination may remain unsettled. Crawley and Hagen-Zanker (2019) examine the role of policies, people, and perceptions in the formation of destination preferences. Their work cautions against reading an eventual destination as the execution of a single fixed plan. For this article, the important implication is temporal: what a person wants at the border may reflect decisions made during the journey as well as circumstances that existed before departure. An account of present plans cannot simply be projected backward as a complete explanation of the original decision to leave.

Evidence about destination choice also has to be used at the scale at which it was collected. McAuliffe and Jayasuriya (2016) analyze surveys involving potential and actual migrants in several origin countries and Australia. Their study supports examining destination choice as an empirical question rather than assuming that all movement is either wholly planned or wholly uncontrolled. It does not provide an estimate of the motives of Russian-speaking people at the U.S.-Mexico border. Differences in populations, routes, legal systems, and the stage of migration make such an inference untenable. The study is relevant here because it identifies questions worth asking about information and choice, not because its results can be used to assign probabilities to an unfamiliar group.

These distinctions are particularly important when the terms “refugee” and “migrant” become descriptions of personal character. Crawley and Skleparis (2018) show how categories can conceal the complexity of journeys and motives. Erdal and Oeppen (2018) similarly examine the limits of treating forced and voluntary migration as cleanly separated experiences. Neither argument requires abandoning legal categories. An administrative decision still needs an applicable rule and a reasoned conclusion. The difficulty lies in treating an analytical label as if it were a complete biography. A person who exercises agency is not thereby free from coercion; a person exposed to danger does not thereby satisfy every legal requirement for a particular status. Social explanation and legal classification have related but different tasks.

Under U.S. law, the refugee definition concerns persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution connected to specified protected grounds. Asylum also involves statutory conditions, exclusions, and discretion; meeting the refugee definition does not automatically produce a grant. The nexus inquiry in 8 U.S.C. § 1158(b)(1)(B)(i) concerns whether a protected ground is a central reason for the persecution. It is not a test of whether the applicant had only one personal reason for migrating. Credible fear screening under 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1) serves a preliminary function and applies a different inquiry from final adjudication. These statutory distinctions are sufficient for the present analysis. The article does not offer a comprehensive account of changing border regulations or advice on the eligibility of a particular applicant.

Consider two hypothetical accounts, neither drawn from the detention episode. One person leaves because of threats connected to political activity and also hopes to join a sibling in the United States. Another leaves primarily because employment prospects are poor and expects to earn more abroad, without alleging persecution on a protected ground. Both may talk at length about work and family. Those topics therefore do not distinguish the cases. The relevant difference would have to emerge from evidence about the alleged harm, its basis, and the other requirements of the applicable law. The example shows why a shared vocabulary of aspiration cannot by itself serve as a screening device. It does not establish how often either kind of case occurs.

This does not make questions about a journey or future plans irrelevant. They may help establish chronology, explain decisions, identify missing information, or reveal matters requiring further examination. Routes and residence in other countries may also have consequences under applicable rules. The narrower claim is that their meaning must be specified. If an official considers a fact adverse, the reasoning should identify what that fact tends to establish and which issue it bears on. “The applicant wanted to work” is incomplete as an explanation of why a claimed threat did not occur. It becomes useful evidence only when connected to a concrete proposition, assessed alongside the rest of the record, and distinguished from a general suspicion about migration.

The conversations about inventing a story raise a different issue from the desire to work or join relatives. Seeking help to explain actual events and discussing the creation of events that

did not occur are different activities. My recollection concerns the latter in some conversations, and it would be misleading to recast all such exchanges as harmless discussion of destination preferences. The evidentiary limit is more specific: I heard informal talk but did not see the subsequent applications. I can report why the conversations caused suspicion, while an established finding about a submitted account would require examining that account and the evidence relevant to it. No category of asylum outcome in the aggregate data below identifies those particular men or resolves that question.

The setting also affected what could be heard. The close physical proximity exposed conversations to others, while my own concern about safety led me to withhold personal information. Hearing a large amount of talk therefore did not mean hearing a complete account from every person. My recollection of discussions about future visits to Russia raises a further question about how the speakers understood their plans, but it does not establish that a visit occurred. The analysis must preserve the difference between an overheard proposal, a later action, and the account eventually presented to an official. Each would have to be established separately before conclusions could be drawn about an individual case.

The interpretive burden therefore falls on the process that turns an account into assessable evidence. That process must allow the relevant distinctions to emerge while also producing timely decisions. The following analysis examines whether aggregate measures commonly used to describe border pressure tell us enough about this task. It begins with the relationship between new referrals and completed screenings, then considers how the composition of encounters and the allocation of staff complicate the picture. This moves the discussion from assumptions about the people in detention to observable features of the institutions responsible for their cases.

3 Border pressure and the displacement of administrative work

The USCIS series provides a useful starting point because it records both incoming work and completed work within the same reported category. Table 1 reproduces credible fear screening receipts and completions, reported as Form I-867, for fiscal years 2019 through 2023. The calculations add two measures: completions divided by receipts, and receipts minus completions. The first compares annual output with annual inflow. The second describes the difference between the two annual totals. Neither follows a cohort from referral to completion, and neither measures the probability that a person will pass screening. The fiscal year in which a case is completed need not be the fiscal year in which it arrived. The source reports rounded counts, so the calculations should not be read as more precise than those counts permit (USCIS, 2024, data table 1).

Table 1. Credible fear screening inflow and output, FY 2019-2023

Fiscal year	Receipts	Completions	Output / inflow	Flow gap
2019	105,400	102,300	97.1%	3,100
2020	30,900	33,600	108.7%	-2,700
2021	59,200	44,000	74.3%	15,200
2022	68,300	54,100	79.2%	14,200
2023	150,400	136,300	90.6%	14,100

Source: USCIS (2024), data table 1, Form I-867. Ratios and differences are author calculations from rounded published counts. Flow gap = receipts – completions. Annual output is not a cohort completion or approval rate; the gap is not a measured change in backlog.

The sharp change between 2022 and 2023 illustrates why output alone is an incomplete measure of pressure. Referrals increased by about 120.2 percent, while completions increased by about 151.9 percent. Measured only by the growth of completed work, the agency expanded its activity substantially. Measured against incoming work, the improvement was smaller: the output-to-inflow ratio rose from 79.2 to 90.6 percent, but the annual gap changed from 14,200 to 14,100. Additional completions, about 82,200, almost exactly matched the additional referrals, about 82,100. The descriptive result is important because both statements can be true at once. Officers can complete far more work, and the annual excess of new work over completed work can remain almost unchanged.

The earlier years help clarify what this ratio means. In 2020 it exceeded 100 percent because completions were greater than new receipts. This is not an impossible success rate. It is an annual production measure that can include work received earlier. In a simplified queue with consistently defined inflows and outflows, the closing stock equals the opening stock plus inflows minus outflows. Applying that identity to an actual administrative series also requires accounting for transfers, withdrawals, reopened cases, corrections, and any other changes in scope. The annual difference in Table 1 is therefore a flow gap, not a reconstructed backlog. The table does not supply an opening stock or the full set of adjustments needed to calculate one.

The distinction changes how a performance claim should be evaluated. An office facing a sudden rise in referrals may improve its efficiency and still fall behind. Alternatively, annual completions may rise because more employees are assigned to the task, because the mix of cases changes, or because older cases reach completion. The published totals do not separate these mechanisms. They establish the scale of the output response and its relationship to recorded inflow, but they do not identify productivity per officer. A claim that a procedural reform caused the increase would require additional evidence about implementation, staffing, case mix, and an appropriate comparison. The present analysis deliberately stops short of that causal claim.

The staffing evidence points to a further complication. DHS OIG reported that, in June 2023, more than 90 percent of asylum officers were assigned to credible fear work, while approximately 3 percent were assigned to affirmative asylum claims (DHS OIG, 2024). This is a snapshot, not an annual allocation series, and the shares cannot be translated into comparable numbers of completed cases. It nevertheless documents the extent to which one urgent function drew on the same occupational capacity needed for another. In conjunction with the USCIS figures, it suggests that the large screening response should be examined as a reallocation within a connected system, rather than assumed to be an increase in capacity available to every asylum workload.

A simple administrative mechanism follows from this connection. When officers are reassigned to new border referrals, the receiving operation gains capacity while another operation loses the time those officers would otherwise have provided. Additional hiring or improvements in productivity may offset the loss, but that offset must be demonstrated. Without it, a shorter queue in one place can coexist with a longer queue elsewhere. This is not evidence that a particular reassignment was mistaken. Urgent screening may warrant priority. It is evidence that the cost of priority should be included in the assessment. Counting only the completed border screenings would omit a potentially important consequence for applicants whose cases are waiting outside that operation.

Nor can the flow of credible fear referrals be read directly from the overall number of border encounters. Encounters are enforcement events, not a count of unique asylum applicants or completed protection claims. The same person can generate more than one

event, and the legal disposition of an encounter can differ from that of another. For that reason, the second numerical comparison uses encounter data only to examine the composition of recorded border activity. It does not divide screening referrals by encounters to estimate the proportion seeking asylum. Such a calculation would join incompatible units without identifying which events produced which referrals. The two series describe related administrative pressures, but they are not interchangeable measures of a single population.

Table 2 compares southwest land border encounters in fiscal years 2023 and 2024. The counts are drawn from the CBP data reproduced in DHS OIG's 2025 inspection report. Total encounters fell by 340,664, or 13.8 percent. Single-adult encounters accounted for 295,442 of that decline, equivalent to 86.7 percent of the total decrease. Encounters involving individuals in family units fell by only 17,081, or 2.1 percent. Consequently, their share of all encounters rose from 33.2 to 37.7 percent. The family-unit category counts people, not families. These are descriptive changes in recorded encounter composition, not estimates of unique arrivals or the legal merits of their cases (DHS OIG, 2025, table 1).

Table 2. Southwest land border encounters by category, FY 2023-2024

Encounter category	FY 2023	FY 2024	Change
Single adults	1,514,322	1,218,880	-19.5%
Individuals in family units	821,537	804,456	-2.1%
Unaccompanied children	137,275	109,998	-19.9%
Accompanied minors	2,535	1,671	-34.1%
Total	2,475,669	2,135,005	-13.8%

Source: CBP counts reproduced in DHS OIG (2025), table 1; percentage changes calculated by the author. Counts represent encounters, not unique people. The family-unit category counts individuals, not the number of families. Categories follow the source.

The composition shift matters for interpreting the apparent relief conveyed by the total. A planning exercise that reduced every resource category by 13.8 percent would implicitly assume that all forms of work contracted at the same rate. The observed counts do not support that assumption. In particular, the recorded family-unit category remained much closer to its previous level than the single-adult category. The table does not establish how much staff time each category required, or whether a family-unit encounter was more costly on average. It establishes that a uniform percentage reduction in workload cannot be inferred merely from the fall in the aggregate. Estimating actual relief would require information about the activities triggered by each encounter and their resource demands.

This point can be expressed without assigning speculative costs to particular people. Total administrative workload is the sum of the number of events of each type multiplied by the average work required for that type, with further work added by transfers and later proceedings. A change in the number of events affects the total, but so does a change in their composition or in the procedures applied to them. The counts in Table 2 describe the first two components only. They contain no time-use observations and cannot be used to estimate total officer hours. Their value lies in testing a common simplifying assumption: that a decline in headline encounters is sufficient evidence of a proportionate decline in administrative demand.

Taken together, the two comparisons identify different limits of aggregate performance claims. The screening series shows that a large increase in output can leave a substantial annual flow gap. The encounter series shows that a decline in volume can be concentrated in one category rather than distributed evenly. The staffing report adds a documented connection

between tasks competing for the same officers. None of these findings measures the prevalence of unfounded claims, and no such inference is needed to make them useful. They describe the conditions under which claims have to be examined. The next question is whether the recorded outcomes allow an observer to determine what happened after that examination began.

4 What administrative outcomes can establish

An administrative record is produced for a particular stage of a process. Its value depends on preserving that stage when interpreting the result. A positive preliminary screening means that a threshold was met; it does not mean that asylum was ultimately granted. A negative decision is an outcome under a specified procedure; it is not automatically a finding that the account was fabricated. A case closed without a merits decision has a different meaning again. These distinctions are especially important when data are used in public debate, where several outcomes can be combined into an apparently simple acceptance or rejection rate. Before interpreting any rate, the analyst must identify who entered the denominator, which decisions count in the numerator, and which cases have not yet reached a recorded endpoint.

GAO's review of credible and reasonable fear screening illustrates the problem. For fiscal year 2014 through the first two quarters of fiscal year 2019, GAO reported roughly 71 percent positive findings, 14 percent negative findings, and 14 percent administrative closures across those screening processes. The review also identified limitations in the available case data and in the consistent tracking of quality assurance (GAO, 2020). These figures describe preliminary outcomes in a defined historical period. They combine credible and reasonable fear processes and are not a final asylum grant rate. Treating the positive share as a measure of eventual eligibility would silently replace both the relevant legal threshold and the endpoint of observation.

The same report provides a concrete example of why record structure matters. USCIS data did not adequately distinguish principal applicants from people recorded as dependents or for family unity purposes. Subsequent implementation updates describe a new field introduced nationwide in January 2021 to improve that distinction (GAO, 2020). The historical deficiency should not therefore be repeated as a claim that the field remains absent. Its analytical significance is the relationship between a category and a count. If a database does not reliably distinguish different roles within a family record, the number of records cannot safely be treated as the number of independent claims. Correcting the field improves future interpretation, while historical comparisons still require attention to the date and consistency of implementation.

A separate GAO examination of two expedited screening pilots shows that a recorded screening outcome may not guarantee that the next stage is visible in the receiving institution's data. The Prompt Asylum Claim Review and Humanitarian Asylum Review Process pilots operated from October 2019 to March 2020. GAO found that, as of October 2020, proceedings could not be accounted for in the relevant court data for about 630 people who had received positive fear determinations. Problems involved the filing of notices to appear and the timely entry of information. Later updates reported corrective action on the outstanding notices (GAO, 2021). This was a documented historical handoff problem, not evidence that the same cases remain missing today.

The pilots are useful here because they locate a failure between stages. An office can record that it completed its assigned interview while the person concerned has not yet appeared in the next office's usable caseload. A performance measure ending at interview completion would miss that delay. Conversely, a researcher examining only court records might fail to

observe people whose cases should have reached the court. The practical unit of analysis is therefore the case trajectory, including the interval between institutional milestones. That conclusion does not require assuming bad faith by either officials or applicants. It follows from the fact that separate organizations can each maintain a partially correct record while the combined process remains incomplete.

The pilots also show why comparing percentages across programs can be misleading. A different negative-screening share might reflect differences in the people included, selection into the pilot, the conditions of screening, the applicable procedures, or the time period. Without a design that addresses those differences, the percentage does not isolate the effect of speed, custody location, or interview quality. In particular, the historical results of the pilots should not be compared mechanically with the combined credible and reasonable fear figures from the earlier GAO study. The two sources help identify questions about procedure and measurement. They do not together form a controlled experiment or a common cohort from which a policy effect can be calculated.

Court appearance statistics require the same care. GAO reported that about 34 percent of initial case completions for non-detained respondents in fiscal years 2016 through 2023 were in absentia removal orders (GAO, 2024). The denominator is initial completions, not every scheduled hearing, every pending case, or every person in proceedings. It follows that the percentage cannot be restated as the share of all respondents who failed to attend court. The report identified shortcomings in attendance information, and its implementation record notes that the Executive Office for Immigration Review introduced required hearing-appearance fields in December 2024. That improvement matters, but it does not retroactively convert the older completion-based measure into a hearing-attendance rate.

There are at least two distinct selection problems in using completed cases to describe the full system. First, cases that finish quickly enter the measured group sooner than cases that require more time. Second, the way a case ends can itself affect how quickly it becomes a completion. A percentage calculated from initial completions therefore reflects both underlying events and the pace at which different cases reach the endpoint. This does not make the measure useless. It makes it a measure of the composition of completed work. To study attendance, the appropriate data would identify scheduled hearings, appearance requirements, actual attendance, and the relevant exceptions. To study final protection outcomes, the data would have to follow the same cases to the appropriate final decision.

The common lesson is that administrative outcomes must be read in relation to their production. The difficulty is not simply that agencies need more data. They need clearly defined units, reliable links between stages, and enough information to explain why a case changed status. An expanded database that preserves ambiguous categories can produce more precise-looking versions of the same mistake. Conversely, a small number of well-defined milestones can reveal whether a screening was completed, whether a notice was filed, whether proceedings began, and whether a decision was reached. The institutional task is to make those transitions visible without confusing them with judgments the record does not contain.

5 Implications for screening and adjudication

The analysis suggests a practical approach to interviewing that follows directly from the distinction between migration decisions and protection grounds. Questions about departure, route, destination, and alleged harm should be related to one another without being collapsed into a single question about whether someone “really” wanted to migrate. A chronological account can establish what happened before departure, which decisions were made during travel, and when the United States became the intended destination. An account of alleged persecution then needs its own examination. The value of this separation is not to exclude inconvenient facts. It is to make their relevance explicit, so that a preference for work, family reunification, or a particular country does not substitute for analysis of the claim being decided.

This approach is compatible with careful scrutiny. An interviewer may find that dates conflict, an asserted event lacks support, or an explanation changes when tested against other evidence. Those issues can be investigated directly. The record should show the discrepancy, the question asked about it, and the explanation offered, rather than using a general impression of ambition or confidence as a proxy. Similarly, a sympathetic account of hardship should not remove the need to examine the applicable criteria. The administrative benefit is a more reviewable decision: another officer or judge can see which fact mattered and why. A record organized around concrete propositions is also more useful for identifying recurring weaknesses in interviewing than a record dominated by broad conclusions about credibility.

The personal reflection at the beginning of this article identifies two problems an inquiry must be able to address. There may be grounds to question an account, including evidence that someone discussed inventing it. There may also be relevant experiences that a person has avoided describing in an exposed or distrusted setting. An interview should make it possible to investigate the first and elicit the second without deciding in advance which explanation applies. Sufficient communication and a usable record matter because they allow unresolved facts to be examined. Additional interview time is useful to the extent that it serves this task. An evaluation focused only on minutes per interview or cases completed would not establish whether that task had been performed.

Capacity planning should likewise account for connected tasks rather than reward an isolated increase in output. The screening calculations show that maintaining pace during a surge can require a very large expansion of completed work. The staffing evidence shows that some of that response can involve moving officers from another asylum function. A management account should therefore describe both the benefit to the receiving operation and the effect on the operation supplying the staff. This does not imply a fixed staffing formula. It implies a common accounting boundary: an intervention should be assessed across the workloads it materially affects. Otherwise, an apparent efficiency gain may partly reflect the transfer of waiting time to applicants who are less visible in the immediate border debate.

The same principle applies to targets. A completion target can be useful when its unit is clear and when quality is separately examined. It becomes misleading if every completion is treated as equivalent despite differences in case complexity, or if an office can meet the target while leaving unresolved transfers for another office. The empirical record reviewed here supports pairing stage-specific output with information about what happens next. For screening, that could include the timely transfer of the result and the appearance of the case in the relevant subsequent process. For court administration, it could include the time from filing to the first required hearing and the completeness of attendance information. These are proposed evaluation measures, not findings that the agencies currently lack every such control.

Any new reporting requirement also has a cost. Officers who spend time recording information have less time for other work, and collecting detailed personal information creates responsibilities for access and protection. The implication is not to record every possible detail. It is to identify the minimum information needed to reconstruct the legally and administratively important transitions. Definitions should be stable enough for comparisons over time, while changes should be dated and explained. When a field is introduced, as in the GAO examples, published analysis should make clear which periods can be compared. This would reduce the risk that an apparent change in outcomes is partly a change in what the system can observe.

Evaluation of accuracy requires more than the rate of positive or negative decisions. A shift in either direction may be justified by the cases received, or it may signal a problem. Distinguishing those possibilities requires review of evidence and reasoning within a defined sample. Existing supervisory and quality-assurance arrangements should be assessed for what they actually detect, rather than treated as absent simply because the aggregate data are insufficient. GAO's 2020 review documented such arrangements as well as weaknesses in their tracking. The recommendation here is consequently to connect quality findings to workload and process measures. A faster operation should be judged in light of whether review identifies avoidable errors, incomplete records, or repeated failures at the next stage.

An important implication for public communication follows. Agencies and researchers should label outcomes narrowly enough that their meaning survives outside a technical report. "Screenings completed," "positive preliminary findings," "initial court completions," and "final asylum grants" describe different events. Reporting one under the language of another can mislead even when the underlying count is accurate. The two tables in this article illustrate a modest alternative: provide the raw counts, state the denominator, show the calculation, and explain the boundary of the inference. This makes an argument open to inspection. A reader can disagree with the policy conclusion without having to guess what the reported percentage counts.

These recommendations do not resolve the political choice between competing uses of limited resources. They clarify what that choice should take into account. A government may assign priority to new border cases, older pending claims, or particular procedural deadlines. Each choice has consequences for people waiting elsewhere in the system. The contribution of analysis is to make the consequences traceable, distinguish them from changes in demand, and avoid attributing administrative delay to personal motives without evidence. Protection and enforcement both depend on an institution's ability to determine what a case is, move it through the required stages, and explain its result. Weakness at any of those points reduces the value of speed at the others.

6 Conclusion and limits

The experience in the San Ysidro cell involved both ordinary aspirations and conversations that I understood as discussing fabricated asylum accounts. It also involved my own decision to remain guarded because I considered disclosure unsafe. A faithful account must retain all three elements. Discussing work or a preferred destination does not establish that a persecution claim is false. Discussing the invention of a story raises a more specific concern, but an overheard exchange does not reveal what was later submitted or decided. The contribution of the personal episode is to identify this problem of evidence, including the position of the listener, rather than to supply a verdict on the people present.

The administrative evidence adds a parallel lesson. In fiscal year 2023, USCIS completed substantially more credible fear screenings than in the previous year, but the annual flow gap

remained near 14,000. Between fiscal years 2023 and 2024, southwest land border encounters declined, but most of the decline came from single adults, while the family-unit category changed little. Oversight reports further show how the assignment of staff, the definition of a record, and the transfer of a case can affect what appears in an agency's statistics. Together, these findings support evaluating the process across connected stages. Neither a rising completion count nor a falling encounter count can, by itself, establish that the work of protection assessment has become easier or more reliable.

The limitations are substantial and define the contribution. The article uses no representative interviews, linked individual records, or independent assessment of legal merits. Its numerical analysis is based on published aggregates for bounded historical periods; it is not a description of all border operations in 2026. It does not identify the causal effect of a policy, estimate errors in individual decisions, or measure the prevalence of fabricated claims. The personal account cannot be generalized beyond its role in formulating the question. The administrative sources also use different populations and endpoints, which is why their percentages are not pooled into a common measure of success or failure.

Within those limits, the article offers a defensible way to connect experience and evidence. A situated observation can reveal an interpretive problem. Migration research can explain why a simple classification is inadequate. Administrative data can then test narrower claims about workload, output, and recorded outcomes. The practical conclusion is to preserve those levels of analysis while improving the links between stages of the legal process. Decisions should rest on relevant evidence about an individual claim, and judgments about institutional performance should rest on measures that follow the work far enough to reveal its consequences. That is the basis on which both protection and control can be assessed without treating impressions as findings.

Data and method note

Tables 1 and 2 use published government aggregates. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. In Table 1, the output-to-inflow ratio is $100 \times \text{completions} / \text{receipts}$, and the annual flow gap is receipts minus completions. In Table 2, the percentage change is $100 \times (\text{FY 2024 count} - \text{FY 2023 count}) / \text{FY 2023 count}$. The single-adult contribution to the total decline is $295,442 / 340,664 \times 100 = 86.7$ percent. Family-unit shares use the annual total as the denominator. The personal episode is a retrospective account supplied by the author in September 2026, concerning September 22 to 26, 2021. The start date follows the author's border records obtained through FOIA. Recalled conversations are paraphrased, not presented as verbatim quotations. The approximate proportion recalled in that account is separate from the administrative calculations. No individual-level dataset was created. Historical shortcomings in oversight reports are distinguished from subsequent corrective actions recorded on the agencies' report pages.

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