In recent years, Mexican and Latin American immigrants have been strongly and unfairly discriminated against because of false notions numerous Americans have about how immigration affects the United States. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best . . . They’re sending people that have lots of problems . . . They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime,” presidential candidate Donald Trump emphasizes. And, while many people recognize the absurdity of this statement, it accurately reflects several of the stereotypes that have caused Americans to fear immigration rather than embrace it (qtd. in Lee). The stereotype that immigrants come to the United States to sell drugs and commit crimes is extremely backward—much of the time, that is exactly what they are fleeing. As The New York Times’ David Brooks reports, studies have been conducted that show that less than two percent of male immigrants in the U.S. between ages 18 and 39 have served jail time, as opposed to over three percent of native-born American men in the same age range. He reveals that over a hundred U.S. cities that participated in a study to investigate the correlation between immigration and crime rates found that the influx of immigrants during the 1990s and early 2000s actually preceded a decline of crime in most cities (Brooks). U.S. citizens, especially low-wage workers, also worry that Mexican immigrants “take jobs from Americans, and strain the welfare, educational,
and healthcare systems,” as acknowledged by sociologists Michael T. Light and Dimeji Togunde in “The Mexican Immigration Debate: Assimilation and Public Policy” (279). However, Robert LaLonde, a professor in the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at University of Chicago, states that the “presence of illegal immigrants in some service jobs makes it easier for Americans to participate in the labor force. The immigrants act as complements to higher-wage workers, who can then participate in greater numbers and become more productive” (qtd. in Merken). Light and Togunde also cite several economic studies that show “illegal immigration from Mexico has a minimal impact on wages in US border areas,” and “both legal and illegal immigrants pay more money in taxes than they consume in educational and social services,” boosting the U.S. economy (280).

In fact, all of the concerns about the supposedly rising levels of undocumented immigration may be entirely unfounded. Mexican immigration hit its apex in 2005, and has been decreasing ever since (Brooks). Last year, the U.S. experienced an outflow of 140,000 Mexican immigrants as more left the country than entered (Preston). Moreover, according to Jeffrey Passel, a senior demographer at the Pew Research Center, the “[a]pprehensions of Mexicans are lower than any time since 1970” (qtd. in Hunt). So, if the downsides of immigration are exaggerated, and the number of undocumented immigrants crossing the border has decreased during Obama’s presidency, it seems as if this situation is wholly positive. But, if we examine exactly why Latin American immigration is down, we come to question the U.S. immigration policy, which is in need of revision if it is to humanely accommodate refugees and migrants.

According to Sonia Nazario of the New York Times, “Mexico has carried out a ferocious crackdown on refugees fleeing violence in Central America” because of pressure from the United States government (Nazario). In preventing undocumented immigrants from reaching the border, the U.S. has implicitly caused a refugee crisis in Mexico, which is now full of migrants trying to flee the gang and cartel violence in their hometowns in El Salvador, Honduras, or Mexico itself. Nazario tells the story of July Elizabeth Pérez, a single mother of three whose eldest son was killed by gang members in Honduras when he was just fourteen, now desperately trying to escape to the
United States. Though her mother and grandmother reside legally in Miami, Pérez has still not been granted a visa, and she and her children were sent to a refugee camp after traveling for nearly three weeks (Nazario). Migrants “are being hunted down on a scale never seen before and sent back to countries where gangs and drug traffickers have taken control of whole sections of territory,” Nazario explains. “They are often tortured and held for ransom. The survivors tell of being enslaved working in marijuana fields or forced into prostitution” (Nazario). Hence, the United States’ overemphasis on border security has led to an undeniable breach in human rights on the Mexican side of the border. More education in the United States about the full situation of immigration—the real causes and effects that people on both sides of the border experience—is necessary in order to cause a collective change in perspective, and ultimately a change in policy.

In an interview about their book entitled *Migrations and Mobilities: Citizenship, Borders, and Gender*, Seyla Benhabib and Judith Resnik discuss the issue in “criminalizing immigration, rather than viewing it as part of the human condition” (“A Conversation” 272). Like Nazario, they believe that the economic implications of accepting refugees are secondary concerns compared to the value of human life, and that the U.S.—and people everywhere, as a whole—should actively “seek a humane and just answer;” a concept they discuss many times in their book is the “right to have rights” (“A Conversation” 272, 274). In a changing, globalized world in which migration is rife, there should be a way for countries to protect the rights of even non-citizens. Currently “there is still no mechanism for asking states to naturalize immigrants or to grant entry to refugees,” and “no legal statute whereby in fact the claim to citizenship of migrants, refugees, and asylees must also be respected” (“A Conversation” 275). This results in refugees and migrants being disrespected, exploited, and treated as inferior human beings as they move into other countries, which proves that the construct of citizenship needs revising.

If more people understood what hardships these refugees and migrants endured, the concept of citizenship would most likely be under more scrutiny and greater action would be taken to help those in desperate situations. However, a major problem regarding the crisis in Latin America is the lack of awareness that people in the United
States have regarding the violence and turmoil that these people are experiencing. In the past ten years, drug cartels in Mexico have gained an obscene amount of power, and have started zeroing in on local politics (Grillo). In his *New York Times* article, Ioan Grillo describes the coldblooded murder of Gisela Mota, who had been the new mayor of Temixco, a town in Morelos State, Mexico, one of the prime areas for drug cartel activity. “For a decade, Mexican troops have worked with American agents to pursue kingpins, in what is known as the cartel decapitation strategy,” Grillo explains, meaning that officials attempted to crack down on the cartels’ prominent leaders, hoping that would be an important stride in ending Mexico’s drug war. However, this strategy went disastrously wrong; once the leaders were out of the picture, their hired killers, known as sicarios, created their own cartels. Since then, Mexico’s murder rate has skyrocketed (Grillo).

Political corruption is one primary cause for the worsening of the crisis. Grillo reports that in the drug crisis’s early years, gangsters targeted political figures with bribes; but, since they have gained so much prominence in the past ten years, and because of rampant corruption, “gangsters are flipping this century-old deal. Instead of handing out bribes, they are making the mayors pay them” (Grillo). Corruption in Mexican politics has made it nearly impossible to get a handle on the drug crisis, as there have been numerous instances in which mayors were actually directly linked to gangsters involved in cartels (Grillo). And though the United States is theoretically trying to help solve the crisis by giving the Mexican government approximately $300 million annually to fight the cartels, an unknown and possibly very large portion of this sum goes directly to the cartels, whether through bribes, extortion, or corrupt politicians (Carlsen, Grillo). In response to Grillo’s claim that “cartels now fight for political power itself,” political analyst Laura Carlsen submitted an opinion piece to the *New York Times*, explaining that “the cartels are not fighting the state for political power; they are seeking to protect a $40 billion drug-trafficking business that has been converted into a war for control of territory, a war against the people” (Carlsen). While this is probably true, there is no doubt that gaining political power is an extremely effective way to obtain territory and cause rampant fear and paranoia among the people. In a collection from the *Los Angeles Times*, a chilling photo
depicts a man being comforted by soldiers over the death of his brother, who was shot in the city of Juárez. The caption, in part, reads: “Many Mexicans don’t trust authorities enough to report crime or suspicious activity” (Bartletti). Corrupt and gang-laden, much of Mexico is not safe for its own people, let alone the Honduran, El Salvadorian, and other Latin American refugees that are detained in camps after fleeing the violence in their own countries.

The United States should be helping these migrants rather than subjecting them to a corrupt system in which they—according to Nazario—may be captured, tortured, sent away, or thrown into unsanitary jail cells while awaiting visas unlikely to ever arrive. Nazario’s article states that “Mexico granted asylum to 18 children last year” (Nazario). Only 18. The pressure that the United States has put on the Mexican government to keep migrants from crossing the border has developed into a human rights crisis, as Mexico has become increasingly strict in sending migrants back to their own countries. So what can the United States do to help Latin American migrants and make strides to stop the drug crisis?

To start, the U.S.’s pseudo-involvement in fixing the drug crisis sprawling across Latin America has, so far, only made matters worse. Its stance must change. Mexican citizens resent the United States for the damage they have done, as “victim organizations that have organized throughout [Mexico] demand that the United States stop funding the drug war under any guise” (Carlsen). With its current political and economic situation, Mexico will not be able to solve the situation on its own. If any progress is to be made, there must be some form of cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico in handling the crisis, with the U.S. taking an active stance while not pursuing complete control. Ideally, the U.S. should work with the Mexican government to spur both political and police reforms, including “build[ing] an effective justice system to crack down on sicarios” and “incorporating Mexico’s city-level officers into unified state forces” to create a stronger authority that can stand up to cartels and eventually eliminate them (Grillo). Grillo argues that “the United States should use its drug-war aid to push harder for such reforms,” ensuring that the money is used correctly, rather than entrusting it to the corrupt politicians that may be linked to the cartels in the first place. Essentially, the most headway
would be made if the two governments collaborated to stop the violence, since the Mexican government is too weak to enforce greater security by itself. However, the U.S. should avoid taking total charge on its own, as this would most likely lead to even more hostility from the victims of the crisis.

Of course, the ten-year-long Mexican drug war and the widespread gang violence throughout Latin America will not be simple conflicts to solve, nor is everyone in the United States ever going to share the same perspective on what our immigration and border policies should be. But one thing is certain: as Nazario implies, the United States needs to stop using Mexico as a zone for detaining refugees, as this is only creating an even more desperate situation. Looking at the statistics, we can see that immigration has had a largely positive effect on American society in the past. It has raised GDP, lowered crime, diversified the nation, and has not actually lowered wages like many people think it has (Brooks). Nazario emphasizes the importance of “open[ing] the door” to refugees, viewing them as human beings in nearly hopeless situations which we can easily help them out of. If the United States were to provide refuge for many of these asylum-seekers, the power of the cartels may subside, at least slightly, since part of their power comes from spreading fear among the people. Carlsen describes the drug war as “a war against the people,” implying that the cartels thrive, in part, off the terror they cause. Fewer people to terrorize would lead to a decrease in power for them and, with weaker cartels, the U.S. could work with Mexico more closely to weed out corruption and make greater progress in ending the drug war.

At the same time, it is also clear that the United States immigration policy needs revision. Legal immigration to the U.S. is not only a very involved, complicated process, but is also extremely unyielding, allowing the minuscule number of 70,000 refugees into the country each year, with a further limit of only 5,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean (“How the United States Immigration System Works”). The United States holds a population of nearly 320 million; a refugee influx of 70,000 accounts for 0.02 percent of that. The U.S. also “provides for an annual worldwide limit of 675,000 permanent immigrants, with certain exceptions for close family members;” considering Pérez’s case, the exceptions aren’t always particularly effective
If a migrant finally reaches the U.S., there is an arduous process for obtaining citizenship. According to the American Immigration Council, “applicants for U.S. citizenship must be at least 18 years old, demonstrate continuous residency, demonstrate ‘good moral character,’ pass English and U.S. history and civics exams, and pay an application fee, among other requirements.” The process is involved, and many refugees may not be able to meet all the standards. The description also vaguely hints at “other requirements,” implying that there may be complications and the procedure can be prolonged further (“How the United States Immigration System Works”). If the process of getting into the United States wasn’t so dangerous and gaining citizenship was easier, there would be a humane alternative for desperate migrants and less concern about undocumented immigration. Securing our borders isn’t the issue: opening them is. That is certainly not to say we should eradicate border patrol completely. Rather, in the words of Brooks, we do need to “work on our legal immigration system—make the system ample and streamlined enough so that most people come here in the right way” (Brooks). The process could certainly be more lenient, and the pressure on Mexico to keep migrants away is causing more problems than it is solving. In addition to revising its immigration policy, the United States could provide immediate assistance to refugees by funding cleaner, livable camps with adequate food. Nazario also argues that the U.S. should work toward finding homes for refugees outside of Latin America, which could be done using a portion of the money they are giving to the Mexican government in the form of aid.

Since revising the process to obtain citizenship is not necessarily an easy thing to do, Benhabib and Resnik offer temporary solutions to improve the situations of refugees and migrants while they are undocumented. “Citizenship isn’t the only way to be a rights-holder in the twenty-first-century social order,” Resnik explains, elaborating on the concept of a “citizenship of the world” (“A Conversation” 279). That is to say, countries should still be required to protect their inhabitants, “provide security for persons within their borders,” and ensure quality of life regardless of citizenship status (“A Conversation” 281). One idea of theirs is to have some form of “citizenship of place” rather than citizenship of state, because a refugee or migrant should still be
treated like a human being even if he does not have national citizenship (“A Conversation” 275-276). Resnik questions why people’s statuses are determined on a national level. One possible change is that migrants and refugees could initially be acknowledged and have rights on a local level so that they are not considered undocumented, and simply have their right to vote on a national scale withheld until they are able to maintain full citizenship (“A Conversation” 276). This would still be an imperfect process, but it would be a promising first step toward providing more humane treatment to undocumented immigrants in the future.

There are undoubtedly limitations. Many would argue that the U.S. would be stronger as a nation if it focused solely on domestic rather than foreign affairs, but it is important to consider the U.S.’s moral responsibility. It would also be useful to know approximately how many refugees would come into the U.S. seeking unskilled labor, and how many Latin American refugees the United States can realistically take in, but this number is certainly greater than 5,000. Therefore, these limitations still leave room for the United States to perform its humanitarian obligation of assisting these refugees and migrants to some extent. Why should people suffer simply because they don’t possess this artificial construct we call citizenship? It is time we change our definition of citizenship so that it helps vulnerable immigrants rather than keeping them powerless. Benhabib and Resnik’s idea of citizenship of place is not without its flaws, but in a globalized world, it makes much more sense to view people as global citizens, with each individual having her own rights, rather than being bound by one state and then excluded or exploited by another.

WORKS CITED
