

National Foundation for American Policy

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Research: Building a Wall Would Be Counterproductive; Work Visas a More Effective Way to Reduce Illegal Immigration

Illegal Entry of Mexicans Declined by 82% Between 2005 and 2015; Border Wall Would Have No Impact on Central Americans Seeking Asylum

Arlington, Va. – Building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, such as proposed by Donald Trump, would be ineffective and counterproductive, encouraging more unauthorized immigrants to stay long-term rather than working briefly in the United States and returning home, according to a new report released by the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP), an Arlington, Va.-based policy research group. Contrary to the impression left by campaign rhetoric, illegal entry by Mexicans, as measured by apprehensions at the border, declined by 82 percent between 2005 and 2015. Well-designed temporary work visas could further reduce illegal entry and illegal migration and free up law enforcement resources to confront more serious security threats to the nation, the report concludes.

“History shows that increased avenues to enter the United States to work legally at lower-skilled jobs is the most effective way to reduce illegal entry,” said NFAP Executive Director Stuart Anderson, former head of policy at the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Between 1953 and 1959, a large increase in the use of the Bracero program resulted in a 95 percent decline in illegal entry by Mexicans, as measured by apprehensions at the Southwest border, the study notes.

“Building a wall is likely to threaten current cooperation with Mexico on immigration enforcement and will probably have the unintended effect of helping the human smuggling cartels that currently profit from the lack of legal ways to work in America at lower-skilled jobs,” said Anderson.

The report, “Work Visas Better Than a Wall” is available at www.nfap.com.

A border wall will be ineffective in deterring families and unaccompanied minors who come to the United States to escape violence in Central America. In many cases, those fleeing Central America are turning themselves in to Border Patrol Agents. Attorneys note anyone can present themselves at a lawful port of entry and request asylum, which means a wall, even if relatively effective, would have no impact on Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States. Ultimately, a combination of intensive effort to address root causes in Central America, in-country refugee processing, and fair and expeditious processing of asylum claims, combined with more ways to work legally in the United States, is the best approach.

Americans should not rest their hopes on a wall being the “magic bullet” to prevent illegal immigration to the United States. No matter what material is used to build the wall, it would likely take many years and there will always be ways, at minimum, to go under or around any wall, or to find other means of gaining illegal entry to the United States. To cite one possible scenario: Before the end of 2016, Canada will grant visa-free travel for Mexicans. Virtually any citizen of Mexico could buy a plane ticket and arrive in Canada, just like Americans can buy a plane ticket and travel

to Europe, without a visa. That means whether or not a wall is built, Mexicans could travel to Canada and, if they desire, attempt to enter the United States illegally across the northern border. For the United States, this would be like a homeowner building a granite wall across only their front lawn.

The lack of legal work visas in the United States has exacerbated the problems that have propelled people to flee violence in Central America, since America still does not possess a means for individuals to fill lower-skilled jobs with legal visas in year-round industries like construction, hotels and restaurants. The influx of children and other migrants from Central America is one manifestation of the lack of economic-based visas. Parents who first came to the country to work have found that increased enforcement means it is not advisable to travel back and forth, as people did many years ago. Having established economic footholds superior to those in their home countries many have sent for their children to join them. If parents could work in the United States legally and travel back and forth to Central America or petition legally for their children (or spouse), then the situation of unaccompanied minors and family units appearing at the border likely would never have happened – and would not in the future.

The violence in Central America is primarily focused against those who do not comply with the wishes of gang members. Teenage girls are threatened if they do not submit to the overtures of gang members, boys are assaulted or killed if they do not join a gang, and small business owners are told to pay extortion or risk the lives of their families.

Among the other key findings in the report:

- Illegal entry, as measured by apprehensions at the border, was close to a 43-year low in FY 2015. With the exception of FY 2011, the 331,333 apprehensions along the Southwest border in FY 2015 represented the lowest level of apprehensions since 1972. The 331,333 apprehensions in FY 2015 were 80 percent lower than the 1.6 million apprehensions reported along the Southwest border in FY 2000, according to the U.S. Border Patrol.
- The increasing use of H-2A agricultural visas (an approximate doubling between 2011 and 2015) may have contributed to fewer Mexicans attempting to enter the United States illegally since 2011.
- While Mexican apprehensions have decreased dramatically (down 82 percent from 2005 to 2015), due primarily to economic and demographic factors, fear and violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador has significantly increased illegal entry by Central Americans. (Apprehensions are considered a proxy for illegal entry.) Apprehensions of “non-Mexicans” along the Southwest border increased by five-fold between FY 2011 and FY 2014, from 46,997 to 252,600. In FY 2015, apprehensions of Other Than Mexicans fell to 145,316. Through the first 10 months of FY 2016, apprehensions of Other Than Mexicans rose to 172,164. (For comparison, note there were 160,196 apprehensions of Mexicans along the Southwest border through the first 10 months of FY 2016, fewer than the apprehensions for non-Mexicans.)
- Given the large drop in attempted illegal entry by Mexicans, if apprehensions of non-Mexicans were to return to the level of FY 2011, the result would be much lower levels of illegal entry into the United States. Note that in FY 2011, only 3,933 unaccompanied alien children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were apprehended along the Southwest border. In comparison, in FY 2014, the number of unaccompanied children from those countries increased to 51,705. The number dropped to 28,387 in 2015 but has been surpassed in FY 2016, with 37,714 apprehensions unaccompanied alien children from those three countries through the first 10 months of FY 2016.

- Administrative reforms should be considered to help the H-2A and H-2B visa categories work better to increase their use, since they represent legal, temporary visa alternatives to illegal entry.
- On the legislative front, Congress should look towards a system where individuals, possibly via bilateral treaties, are awarded agricultural “work permits” and can go work for any employer in agriculture. Something similar could be used for other sectors of the economy. That would address one of the primary complaints of critics by making it easier for individuals to find another employer if they are unhappy. At minimum a pilot project for this approach is warranted, since it would eliminate the need for much of the bureaucracy in the current programs (or in any future program for a visa in “year-round” sectors, such as hospitality and construction).

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in the Fall 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, former U.S. Senator and Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and other prominent individuals. Over the past 24 months, NFAP’s research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major media outlets. The organization’s reports can be found at www.nfap.com.

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