

National Foundation for American Policy

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New Research: Government Spending on Immigration Enforcement Has Been Ineffective in Preventing Illegal Entry

Data Suggest Other Factors Are The Major Influences On Illegal Border Crossings

Arlington, Va. – Government spending on immigration enforcement has been ineffective in reducing illegal immigration, according to a National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) [analysis](#). Research shows an overall lack of a correlation between illegal entry and the number of Border Patrol agents and immigration enforcement spending. The analysis finds using work visas and humanitarian legal pathways are more effective and humane ways to reduce the number of people who enter the U.S. unlawfully. Though the sustainability remains unproven, cooperation with Mexico and other policy changes can also reduce illegal entry, at least in the short term.

The study “Measuring the Effectiveness of Government Spending on Immigration Enforcement” can be found at <https://nfap.com/>.

Economists have concluded America needs more workers to produce economic growth and improve U.S. living standards. An [NFAP analysis](#) found that immigrant workers have been responsible for 88% of the labor force growth in America since 2019. Allowing increased legal entry of workers could benefit border security and the U.S. economy.

Among the findings in the research:

- Looking across several decades, the data suggest that factors other than the number of agents on the border and immigration enforcement spending are the major influences on illegal border crossings.
- Fewer encounters or apprehensions generally mean individuals are deterred from unlawfully crossing the U.S. border. If Border Patrol agents significantly deter illegal entry, increasing the level of Border Patrol agents should result in fewer apprehensions, independent of other factors. However, examining several periods fails to find a strong relationship between Border Patrol staffing levels and deterring illegal entry as measured by encounters or apprehensions. (The Border Patrol reported encounters in place of apprehensions beginning in March 2020 due to the use of Title 42 health authority.)
- One finds no relationship between Border Patrol staffing levels and apprehensions from 1939 to 1960. Examining 1975 to 2024, there is little evidence of a direct connection between increasing the number of Border Patrol agents and preventing illegal immigration. In 2019, Border Patrol staffing stayed high (around 11 times more agents than in 1975) but encounters rose dramatically during the Trump Administration.
- The data indicate Border Patrol levels played little role in determining the level of illegal entry during the past decade. The number of Border Patrol agents did not deter the rise in

Central Americans seeking work and asylum in the United States, which began during the Obama administration and carried over into the Trump and Biden administrations. Many individuals and families turned themselves into Border Patrol agents rather than seeking to evade enforcement personnel like Mexicans seeking work had done decades earlier.

- The conclusion is the same on budgets related to the border, which include spending on barriers and new technology. The analysis finds no consistent correlation between the amount of money spent on Border Patrol operations and illegal entry as measured by encounters and apprehensions. Between 1990 and 2001, apprehensions remained above one million yearly while the Border Patrol's budget increased significantly. Much of this period saw falling U.S. unemployment rates and increased job opportunities in America. Apprehensions plunged between 2004 and 2011 while the Border Patrol's budget rose. However, the budget remained at a relatively flat level, measured in October 2023 dollars, between 2011 and 2022, yet encounters increased significantly in 2021 and 2022, indicating immigration enforcement spending is not a decisive factor in deterring illegal entry.
- There is no consistent correlation between encounters and the overall immigration enforcement budget when including Immigration and Customs Enforcement and all of Customs and Border Protection (CBP). CBP consists of the Border Patrol and other elements, such as CBP officers stationed at ports of entry. During a time of little change in enforcement spending, encounters rose significantly between 2017 and 2019, dropped in 2020, grew significantly again from 2021 to 2023 and plummeted in 2024.
- The evidence indicates increasing the number of enforcement personnel produced the unintended consequence of encouraging people to remain in the country after crossing the border unlawfully, which led to a significant rise in the unauthorized immigrant population. As border crossings grew more perilous and getting caught through safer routes became more likely, individuals chose to remain in the United States after making it across the border rather than travel back and forth as in the past. Between 1990 and 2007, the number of authorized U.S. Border Patrol Agents increased from 3,733 to 14,923. The unauthorized immigrant population in the United States rose from 3.5 million to 11.8 million between 1990 and 2007, according to the Department of Homeland Security.
- The Bracero program is likely the most effective policy the U.S. government has ever established to reduce illegal entry. After the 1954 enforcement actions and the increased use of the Bracero program, the 1953 level of 835,311 apprehensions fell to as low as 32,996 in 1959—a 96% reduction. Without question the Bracero program was . . . instrumental in ending the illegal alien problem of the mid-1940's and 1950's," according to the Congressional Research Service. Apprehensions and illegal entry increased significantly after the legal safety valve of the Bracero Program ended in 1964.
- After the Biden administration introduced humanitarian parole programs, Border Patrol encounters declined by 92% for Cubans, Haitians and Nicaraguans as a group between December 2022 (the month before the parole programs started) and November 2023 compared to an 18% increase for nationals of non-parole countries, according to an NFAP analysis. Illegal entry also declined for Venezuelans. Due to the demand, the low 30,000-monthly limit for the countries may limit the effectiveness of the humanitarian parole program. The programs require a U.S. sponsor, flying to an interior port of entry and the possibility of employment authorization.
- The Trump administration's enforcement-only policies did not reduce illegal immigration. During the Trump administration, Border Patrol apprehensions at the Southwest border, a proxy for illegal entry, [increased](#) 108% between [FY 2016](#) and [FY 2019](#) (from 408,870 to 851,508). After the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, Border Patrol encounters

initially declined. However, Border Patrol [encounters](#) on the Southwest border rose from 16,182 in April 2020 to 69,032 by October 2020, a 327% increase.

- Forcing asylum seekers to “Remain in Mexico” in unsafe conditions under the “Migrant Protection Protocols” (MPP) beginning in January 2019 did not reduce illegal entry. Border Patrol apprehensions along the Southwest border increased by 162% between December 2018 (the month before Remain in Mexico started) and May 2019. Eight months after the start of MPP, Border Patrol apprehensions along the Southwest border in September 2019 were almost identical to those of September 2018.
- Providing Haitians the option to enter the United States legally at a port of entry significantly reduced illegal entry. After Haitians started receiving permission and waivers to enter lawfully at ports of entry, Border Patrol encounters fell from 7,762 in May 2022 to 145 in June 2022. In November 2023, there were only 102 Border Patrol encounters of Haitians at the Southwest border. The exceptions to Title 42 expulsion authority and using the CBP One app, not Title 42, reduced unlawful migration from Haiti. “What this says is that legal pathways can work better than deterrence,” said Tom Cartwright of Witness at the Border.
- Research by Brown University economist Dany Bahar concluded that border crossings are connected to U.S. job openings. Bahar found that “In the presence of tight labor markets, the surge in border crossings observed during 2022 and 2023 . . . would have occurred in a similar magnitude regardless of who was sitting at the White House at the time, a Democrat, or a Republican. The findings also suggest that what is often perceived as a ‘border crisis’ is, in many respects, a manifestation of the US economy’s labor demands.”
- The Border Patrol saw a drop in encounters after the Biden administration’s executive action that suspended the entry of noncitizens who “cross the Southern border into the United States unlawfully” and attempt to apply for asylum and securing greater cooperation from the Mexican government aimed at preventing many Latin American migrants from reaching the U.S. border. Since the Biden administration announced its executive action, encounters at the Southwest border declined from 117,905 in May 2024 to 83,536 in June, 56,399 in July and 58,038 in August 2024. Those levels are lower than in January 2021, Donald Trump’s last month as president. It is unclear whether the policy will keep unlawful border entries low over a more extended period. Groups have challenged the legality of the asylum policies. The Biden administration has continued to allow people to apply for asylum at lawful ports of entry if they use the CBP One app.

Throughout many [presidential administrations](#), U.S. immigration policy has focused on increasing enforcement as the solution to illegal entry. The analysis finds no evidence of a correlation between illegal entry and the number of Border Patrol agents and immigration enforcement spending. The data suggest other factors as the major influences. Alternative solutions are more humane and effective in reducing illegal entry and are better for the economy. Economists at the Federal Bank of Dallas concluded that without the recent increases in immigration, the number of workers would be “insufficient to sustain the type of economic growth the U.S. is accustomed to.” Policymakers should consider focusing more on work visas and humanitarian legal pathways and less on enforcement-only policies.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan 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, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. 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. Twitter: [@NFAPResearch](https://twitter.com/NFAPResearch)

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