

Has Increased Border Enforcement Reduced Unauthorized Immigration?

Over the past two decades, controlling unauthorized immigration along the U.S.-Mexican border has become an increasingly important national objective. The current border enforcement policy was implemented in 1994, when Attorney General Janet Reno and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner Doris Meissner launched a nationwide strategy of “prevention through deterrence.” That multiyear strategy, which is meant to reduce illegal immigration and the unauthorized population in the United States, blocks entry through major crossing areas and routes unauthorized traffic through remote areas, where the INS has a tactical advantage. To implement this strategy, the INS has provided the Border Patrol with additional personnel, equipment, and technology to deter, detect, apprehend, and remove unauthorized immigrants. The annual enforcement budget, which increased sevenfold between 1980 and 1995, tripled between 1995 and 2001 and now exceeds \$2.5 billion.

Despite the strategy’s initial bipartisan support, concerns about its effectiveness are beginning to emerge. It is not clear, for example, that the strategy has reduced unauthorized immigration. Although the stream of unauthorized immigrants may have slowed in some areas, it has increased in others. Furthermore, there is evidence that increased border enforcement may encourage unauthorized immigrants to stay longer in the United States.

In *Holding the Line: The Effect of the Recent Border Build-up on Unauthorized Immigration*, Belinda Reyes, Hans Johnson, and Richard Van Swearingen address the following questions about migration behavior:

- Has increased border enforcement changed decisions to migrate to the United States?
- Has it altered the length of time immigrants stay in the United States?
- Has it decreased the number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States?
- Has the build-up changed where and how people cross the U.S.-Mexican border?

- What has been the effect of increased enforcement on migrant deaths?
- What are other policy options to curb unauthorized immigration?

Using descriptive and econometric techniques, and drawing on both U.S. and Mexican datasets, the authors consider changes in migration before and after the border enforcement build-up. They also develop models to isolate the effect of the border build-up on the probability of migration to and durations of stay in the United States. In general, they find that the policy has won some tactical successes but has not achieved its primary goal of reducing unauthorized immigration.

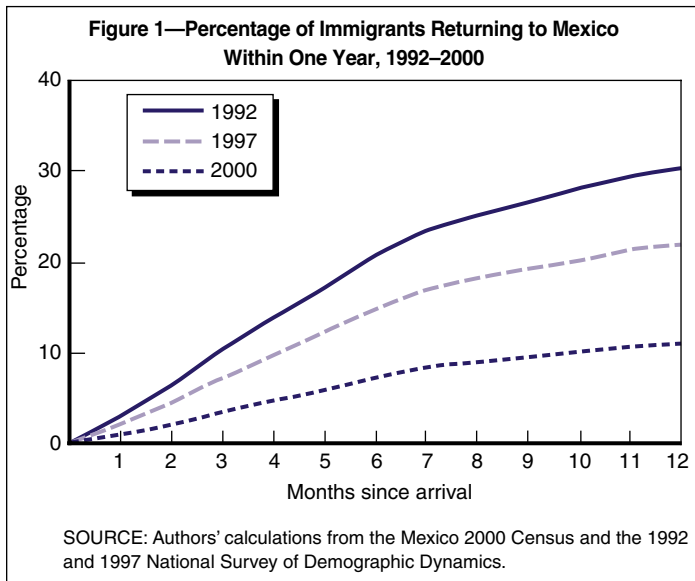
Key Findings

1. **There is no evidence that the border enforcement build-up has substantially reduced unauthorized immigration.**

The authors found a decline in the probability of first-time migration in the late 1990s, as well as an increase in the probability of migration for experienced migrants during the same period. However, they did not find a statistically significant relationship between the build-up and the probability of migration. Economic opportunities in the United States and Mexico have a stronger effect on migration than does heightened enforcement.

2. **There is strong evidence that unauthorized migrants are now staying longer in the United States.**

The authors detected an increase in the duration of stay in the United States during the period of increased enforcement (Figure 1). Data from a 1992 survey in Mexico indicate that 20 percent of the people who moved to the United States 24 months before the survey year returned to Mexico within six months of migration. By 1997, this portion had declined to 15 percent. By the time of the Mexican 2000 Census, only 7 percent of those who moved 24 months before the survey returned to Mexico within the first six months and only 11 percent had returned within a year. Using another sample from Mexico,



however, the analysis found no independent effect of the build-up on the duration of stay in the United States through 1997.

3. The total number of unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States increased substantially in the mid to late 1990s.

The number of unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States is at an all-time high. Moreover, increases in the unauthorized population residing in the United States in the 1990s appear to be very large. The total population of unauthorized residents during that period is estimated to be at least 7 million and perhaps as many as 9 million people. Although uncertain, estimates of the annual flow of unauthorized immigrants suggest that unauthorized immigration was high during the period immediately after passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), it declined with the recession of the early 1990s, and it increased substantially in the very late 1990s. Overall, the picture is one of a large and rapidly growing population of unauthorized immigrants in the United States.

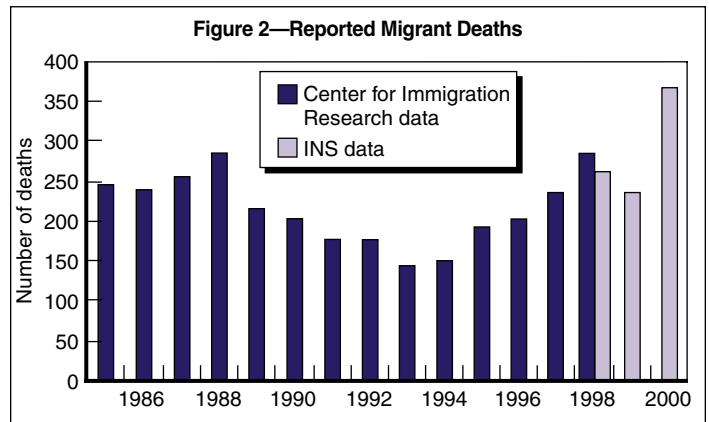
4. The border enforcement strategy has increased the probability of apprehension, changed the crossing places of migrants, and increased the costs associated with crossing the U.S.-Mexican border.

Immigrants are now taking alternative routes across the U.S.-Mexican border, and there has been an increase in the probability of apprehension. However, the number of apprehensions did not decline substantially until 2001, and it is unclear whether this decline was due to increased border enforcement or a deterioration of the U.S. economy and the attacks of September 11. An unintended, though predictable,

consequence of heightened enforcement during this period was the increase in both the use of smugglers and their fees.

5. The number of unauthorized immigrants who die while attempting to cross the border has increased.

Another predictable, but unintended, consequence of the border strategy has been an increase in the number of deaths at the border (Figure 2). This number declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s, reaching a low point in the years immediately preceding the increase in border enforcement. Following the introduction of the Border Patrol's strategy, however, migrant deaths increased rapidly, reaching a 15-year peak in fiscal year



2000. Unauthorized migrants are also more likely to die from environmental causes than ever before. In fiscal year 2000, the Border Patrol tracked 135 deaths from exposure to heat and 92 deaths from drowning; in 1994, the Border Patrol recorded only nine exposure deaths and 48 drownings. The shift in causes of death appears to be the result of changes in crossing locations.

Policy Implications

The authors conclude that the INS strategy to date has not met its primary goal of reducing unauthorized immigration—a complex task that requires a multitude of policy tradeoffs. Although the authors do not advocate a specific set of policies, they survey alternatives to the current approach, including internal enforcement efforts, employer sanctions, national identification cards, guest worker programs, and foreign direct investment. The authors also note that a judicious combination of such policies could provide needed labor in the United States, protect workers' rights, reduce unauthorized immigration, and allow for a more accurate identification of legal residents.

This research brief summarizes a report by Belinda I. Reyes, Hans P. Johnson, and Richard Van Swearingen, Holding the Line? The Effect of the Recent Border Build-up on Unauthorized Immigration (2002, 172 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-059-0). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas] or through the Internet at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.