
Donald Trump's Mexican Border Wall Is a Moronic Idea

The data show that fences don't keep migrants out — they just keep them from going home.

By Douglas Massey

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Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's recently released proposal for immigration reform is simple: build a wall along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border, and make Mexico pay for it. Setting aside the issue of how the United States might make Mexico pay for a blatant monument to anti-Mexican sentiment, the idea is flat-out moronic, to use one of The Donald's favorite adjectives, like asking the Mongolians to pay for the Great Wall of China.

In the first place, it's not as if the border is undefended. The United States spends \$3.7 billion per year to keep around 21,000 Border Patrol agents in the field, and another \$3.2 billion on 23,000 inspectors at ports of entry along the border, a third of which has already been walled or fenced off. It is perhaps the most patrolled and highly defended border anywhere in the world, at least for two closely connected countries at peace with one another. Judging from the border, you'd never know Mexico was a friendly nation linked to the United States by a treaty agreement worth over half a trillion dollars in annual trade

Abundant evidence also shows that money spent on border enforcement is worse than useless — it's counterproductive. For most of the 20th century, migration from Mexico was heavily circular, with male migrants moving back and forth across the border to earn money in the United States and then returning to Mexico to spend and invest at home. From 1965 to 1985, estimates indicate that 86 percent of undocumented entries were offset by departures, and the undocumented population grew slowly, rising to just under 3 million over two decades. In 1986, however, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which kicked off a decades-long process of border militarization

Enforcement was further buttressed by the launching of Operation Blockade in El Paso, Texas, in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, California, in 1994. These operations, led by the U.S. Border Patrol, erected a literal wall of enforcement resources at the two busiest U.S.-Mexico border crossings

Although the intent of border enforcement was to discourage migrants from coming to the United States, in practice it backfired, instead discouraging them from returning home to Mexico. Having experienced the risks and having paid the costs of gaining entry, undocumented men increasingly hunkered down and stayed in the United States, rather than circulating back to

face the gantlet once more. As a result, the rate of return migration began to fall after 1986 and accelerated with the launching of the border operations in 1993 and 1994.

Because net migration equals the difference between those entering and leaving the United States, the falling rate of return produced a huge increase in the net volume of undocumented migration. Through the 1990s and early 2000s, in other words, the United States spent billions of dollars, only to double the rate of undocumented population growth

In addition, as male migrants spent more time north of the border, they were increasingly joined by their wives and children. And then they started making babies. At present, almost 80 percent of the 5.1 million children of unauthorized immigrants were born in the United States and are U.S. citizens. In the end, the militarization of the border transformed what had been a circular flow of workers going overwhelmingly to just three states — California, Texas, and Illinois — into a much larger settled population of families living across all 50 U.S. states — not a good outcome for a policy whose goal was the limitation and control of immigration.

Doubling down on a failed policy of border militarization by adding more fences and walls is not only moronic because it would continue, at great cost, a demonstrably counterproductive strategy for restricting immigration — but it is also senseless because net undocumented migration from Mexico has stopped By the Department of Homeland Security's own estimates, the total undocumented population peaked at 12 million in 2008, fell by a million by 2009, and since then has fluctuated around 11 million people.

. . . . While net undocumented migration from Mexico may have ceased, legal immigration continues apace. Over the past 10 years, the United States experienced 1.6 million entries by legal immigrants and 3.9 million entries by temporary workers from Mexico. These migrants increasingly circulate back and forth in response to changing conditions and opportunities in each country, while undocumented migrants are paradoxically the ones who are trapped north of the border, unable to return to Mexico for fear of not being able to return to family, friends, and lives in the north. Rather than attempting to repress migration that occurs as a natural consequence of ongoing economic integration in North America, a more reasonable policy would be to bring the flows aboveboard and manage them in ways that benefit both countries, while protecting the rights of citizens on both sides of the border.

The United States already has a sizable guest-worker program and supports a legal framework that allows for significant legal immigration from Mexico each year. And with net undocumented migration at zero, the border is as under control as it's ever going to be. The only task remaining is finding a pathway to legal status for 11 million undocumented residents of the United States, giving them the freedom to come and go as they please and build a better life wherever they choose.

With few undocumented migrants entering and those already in the United States legalized, the problem of undocumented migration would be solved But the reality is that undocumented migration has ended and won't be coming back. Spending billions of dollars more on border enforcement to solve a problem that no longer exists is, umm, what's the right word? Moronic.