

They Said It...

“I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.”¹

DONALD TRUMP

“First, secure the border, once and for all. No other reform is meaningful if we do not fix our porous southern border.”²

TED CRUZ

Reality Check

America faces numerous challenges related to illegal immigration, but ensuring the security of its southern border is—by and large—no longer one of them.

Jacob Vigdor, Adjunct Fellow,
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America's Southern Border Is Secure

Jacob Vigdor

In Reality

Between the mid-1980s and 2007, America's Border Patrol annually apprehended an average of more than a million Mexicans attempting to enter the U.S. illegally. That figure has since fallen by more than 75 percent—a drop caused by fewer Mexicans attempting to cross, not fewer crossers being caught. While the number of Mexican-born U.S. residents rose by 34 percent during 2000–07—equivalent to adding an extra Minneapolis every year—that population has been falling since 2007. Princeton University's Mexican Migration Project finds that Mexicans are now less likely to attempt a border crossing than at any time in the past 50 years. America faces numerous challenges related to illegal immigration, but ensuring the security of its southern border is—by and large—no longer one of them.

Key Findings

- **Mexicans are now leaving the U.S. faster than they are arriving.**
 - ◆ America's Mexican-born population nearly tripled during 1990–2007.
 - ◆ Since 2007, the number of illegal Mexican immigrants has declined annually by 185,000.
- **Because crossing the border illegally has become so difficult, Mexicans have largely stopped trying.**
 - ◆ Since peaking at 1.6 million in 2000, arrests have declined by more than 85 percent, to 229,178 in 2014—the lowest number since 1970.
 - ◆ Hiring a “coyote” smuggler to cross the border is now about eight times more costly than it was in the early 1990s, adjusting for inflation.
- **Mexico's demographic and economic trends suggest that the age of massive Mexican emigration has ended.**
 - ◆ In recent years, Mexico's economy has grown at twice America's rate.
 - ◆ Mexico's population growth has stabilized, driven by a significant decline in fertility over the past generation.

On the Record

“It’s reasonable to argue that a secure border is the foundation of any prospective reform to immigration policy. It is no longer reasonable, however, to argue that the border is not secure. All the trends that one would associate with a secure border—fewer attempts to cross, fewer apprehensions, and stabilization of the migrant population—have been evident for years.

The security of our southern border has not solved all our immigration problems, which only serves to underscore the need for presidential candidates to focus on step two: What do we do now that the border is secure?”

Jacob Vigdor, Adjunct Fellow, Manhattan Institute

Proving that a border is secure—that no migrants are crossing it without authorization—is next to impossible. No statistical agency surveys illegal border crossers. Indeed, the goal of migrants is to evade detection and proceed from the border to an American community, where they typically seek to quietly join the workforce. However, evidence from several sources suggests that U.S. Customs and Border Protection (the “Border Patrol”) is doing its job on the United States–Mexico border and that would-be illegal immigrants are changing their behavior in response.

Border Patrol data on arrests point to a dramatic drop in border crossings since the 2007–08 recession.³ This could result from fewer crossing attempts or a lower apprehension rate; but corroborating data, from both sides of the border, point to the former. Census Bureau estimates of the number of Mexican-born U.S. residents, whose numbers surged before 2007, have plunged: since 2007, America’s legal, Mexican-born population has declined by more than 150,000;⁴ America’s illegal, Mexican-born population has likely fallen by more than a million, or by about 185,000, annually.⁵

Princeton University’s Mexican Migration Project (MMP), which surveys residents of Mexican villages, has found a recent sharp rise in the cost of illegally crossing the border⁶—a finding consistent with the hypothesis that coyotes’ jobs have become much tougher—as well as an equally sharp fall in crossing attempts.⁷ MMP’s data also highlight a side effect of improved border security. A generation ago, illegal Mexican immigrants frequently crossed the border in *both* directions; most border crossers returned home in less than a year, confident that they’d be able to reenter the U.S. in the future. Today, this practice is rare: illegal immigrants now typically remain in the U.S. for the long haul.⁸ A more secure border has shut off the flow of migrants in both directions.

The summer of 2014 saw a surge of unaccompanied minors from Central America, who typically crossed the border at official checkpoints and turned themselves in to authorities. This illegal youth-immigration surge was small in relation to immigrant inflows in the peak years preceding 2007: the 67,000 arrests of unaccompanied children in 2014, for instance, totaled only 4 percent of the Border Patrol’s record 1.6 million arrests in 2000. In 2015, the number of such child arrests dropped by 42 percent.⁹ Central American parents sent their kids north under the false impression that they would be treated leniently—rather than be subjected to detention and deportation—upon entering America. When the reality became apparent, such parents changed their behavior.

Mexico’s Economy Is Growing Faster than Its Population

Just as important, changing economic and demographic trends suggest that the forces propelling Mexican migrants toward the U.S. are permanently weakening. Since colonial times, emigrants to America have tended to leave countries with growing populations and stagnant economies. A generation ago, Mexico fit the bill.

In 1970, the typical Mexican woman would have expected to give birth to 6.7 children in her lifetime.¹⁰ This contributed to the contemporary population growth rate of over 3 percent annually—nearly three times America’s population growth rate at the time. Today, at 2.2 children per woman, Mexico’s fertility rate is less than a third of what it was in 1970 and has almost fully converged with America’s current rate of 1.9 children per woman.¹¹ Mexico’s population growth rate has, in turn, declined to 1.3 percent annually, exactly the same as America’s population growth rate in 1970.¹²

As Mexico’s population has stabilized, its economy has accelerated. In 2006—the year before the 2007–08 recession that struck much of the world—Mexico’s economy expanded by 5 percent, while America’s grew by 2.7 percent. In 2010, Mexico’s first year of positive GDP growth following the recession, the country grew by 5.1 percent, compared with America’s 2.5 percent;¹³ and in 2011, the rates were 4 percent (Mexico) vs. 1.6 percent (U.S.); and in 2012, 4 percent vs. 2.3 percent.

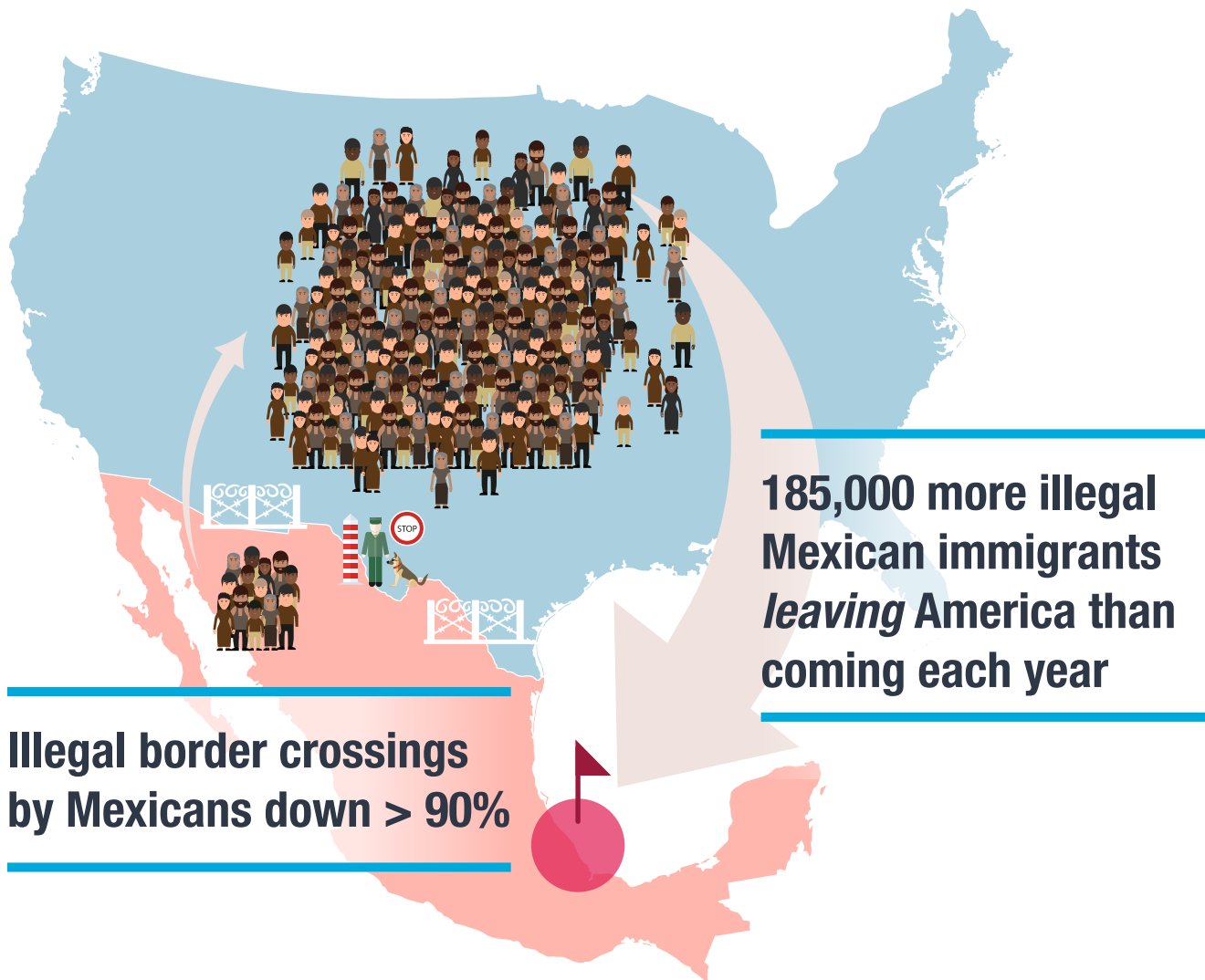
Mexico’s economic growth is closely tied to industrialization, spurred by trade with America. Since 2003, the dollar value of Mexican exports to the U.S. has doubled, to nearly \$300 billion annually.¹⁴ For many born in Mexico’s poorer south, the path to economic advancement now leads not across the U.S. border but to Mexico City and industrial towns in northern Mexico. Indeed, Mexican regions closest to the U.S. border enjoy Mexico’s highest living standards.

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America's Real Immigration Challenges

Available data indicate that America's border-security problem has been solved, but many other immigration challenges remain. Millions of illegal immigrants continue to reside in the U.S.—staying, in many cases, because they know they won't be able to return if they leave. Illegal immigrants to the U.S. increasingly arrive on temporary visas and do not leave when their visas expire. American firms in many industries, from software to agriculture, worry that they won't have access to the workforce needed to expand. And as Europe faces an ongoing refugee crisis, America must weigh the need for security against humanitarian concerns.

By focusing on border security, the 2016 presidential contenders have avoided these more complicated issues. Though doing so may be a savvy campaign strategy, America's next president will need to tackle the country's real immigration challenges.



Endnotes

- ¹ See <http://www.donaldjtrump.com/media/donald-trump-i-would-build-a-great-great-wall-on-our-southern-border-and-ma>.
- ² See <https://www.tedcruz.org/cruz-immigration-plan>.
- ³ See https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Apps%20FY1960%20-%20FY2014_0.pdf.
- ⁴ See <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s>.
- ⁵ See <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/20/what-we-know-about-illegal-immigration-from-mexico>.
- ⁶ See <http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/results/001costs-en.aspx>.
- ⁷ See <http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/results/009firsttrippers-en.aspx>.
- ⁸ See <http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/results/012returnlife-en.aspx>.
- ⁹ See <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016>.
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/completingfertility/RevisedTUIRAN-PARTIDApaper.PDF>.
- ¹¹ See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?page=1>.
- ¹² See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>.
- ¹³ See <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?page=1>.
- ¹⁴ See <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/americas/mexico>.