



How much does it cost to deport one migrant? It depends

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Juan Carlos Fomperosa Garcia and Jose Escobar visited U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement offices recently for routine appointments.

Both expected to return home afterward to their families in Phoenix and Houston, respectively. Instead, they were detained and deported on the same day, becoming among the first high-profile removals in the wake of President Donald Trump's executive actions on immigration enforcement.

Trump promised during the campaign to deport all 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., but has since narrowed his focus to immigrants with criminal histories, a number many analysts put at about 2 million.

The president, in his revised budget appropriations for fiscal year 2017, asked Congress for an additional \$1.15 billion for ICE, to detain, transport and remove undocumented immigrants from the United States. He also asked for \$76 million to begin recruiting and hiring some 10,000 ICE agents.

How far would that get Trump toward deporting 2 million immigrants?

Based on current estimates, the additional funds could get Trump about 5 percent of the way to his goal.

There's nothing hard and fast about such estimates. The location, length of detention, country of origin and other factors can significantly add or subtract from the price tag, as the deportations of Fomperosa and Escobar show.

In the case of Fomperosa, his deportation from metro Phoenix involved an overnight stay in detention and a two-hour van ride to his native Mexico. Escobar, meanwhile, spent two weeks in detention in Texas, at an average cost of \$180 a day, before being escorted onto a charter flight to El Salvador.

"This (effort to increase deportations) is a major, major task ... and would require a large investment in immigration enforcement," said Ben Gigis, director of Labor Market Policy at the American Action Forum, a center-right think tank.

Government figures

ICE spent an average of \$10,854 per deportee during the fiscal year that ended in September, according to ICE spokeswoman Yasmeeen Pitts O'Keefe. "This includes all costs necessary to identify, apprehend, detain, process through immigration court, and remove an alien," she said in an interview.

Pitts O'Keefe told The Arizona Republic that she was not authorized to provide the methodology used to calculate that number, indicating a public records request would be required. The Republic is pursuing that information.

That figure was a slight decrease from 2011, when Kumar Kibble, deputy director of ICE under former DHS Secretary and Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, testified before the House Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement. He told lawmakers it cost ICE "approximately \$12,500 to arrest, detain, and remove an individual from the United States."

Based on the government's most recent estimate, Trump's budget request would cover the cost of deporting nearly 106,000 more people this year. And the supplemental funds he's requested for ICE next year would cover deporting an additional 138,000 undocumented immigrants.

Those dollars would be spread across the entire deportation process: apprehension, detention, court proceedings and removal.

Apprehension costs

Fomperosa and Escobar didn't require a sometimes-expensive effort: immigration officers searching for and arresting people. The men walked into ICE offices and were detained on the spot.

Apprehensions, however, could become one of the biggest expenses if ICE decides to do the work itself as part of a more aggressive deportation policy, said Gigis of the American Action Forum.

In 2015, Gigis conducted a study using data from the government's budget to estimate the costs of deporting all undocumented immigrants from the U.S. The study assumes that about 20 percent of the estimated 11.2 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. would leave voluntarily.

The federal government spends on average \$4,800 to apprehend an individual, according to his study. That's because ICE relies heavily on local and state agencies to hold unauthorized immigrants who've been arrested for other violations, Gigis said.

That practice has come under scrutiny by "sanctuary cities and counties" that refuse to cooperate with ICE.

If ICE is forced to go at it alone, costs could rise to as much as \$27,000 per person, the study concluded.

"These apprehension personnel, they have to investigate," Gigis said. "A lot of undocumented immigrants have been here for decades and are well-integrated into their communities, so I think it would take quite an investigative effort."

Detention is the largest expense

Detention is by far the costliest part of deporting an undocumented immigrant, said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst with the libertarian CATO Institute.

“You have to pay to monitor them around the clock, you have to pay to feed them every single day, you have to tend to their other needs, health and so forth,” he said. “So it’s an extremely expensive project to detain everybody they arrest.”

It costs on average about \$180 a day to detain an individual, with the average length of detention at approximately 30 days, according to the government's most recent data. Based on those figures, an average immigration detention costs \$5,400.

“The only thing that comes close is the costs of actually hiring the agents to do the arrests,” Bier said.

Federal law requires ICE to keep all of its 34,000 detention beds full. Trump’s executive order calls for increased detention space on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Bier said the overall costs of deportations decrease over time, once infrastructure has been funded. “The next person in line, it costs less than the first person because you need to build that detention facility, you need to hire those agents to apprehend that person,” he said.

In the case of Fomperosa, he spent one day in detention in Eloy; Escobar spent two weeks in the Rio Grande Valley. Both men, however, previously had spent many months in detention, before ICE released them under prosecutorial discretion under the Obama administration.

Court proceedings

Since October, U.S. immigration courts have handled more than 47,500 deportation proceedings, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), which tracks immigration data.

Estimates from the American Action Fund study put the average cost to legally process unauthorized immigrants at \$1,495 per person. But not all unauthorized immigrants get the chance to argue their case in courts.

Neither Fomperosa nor Escobar faced an immigration judge before their deportations. ICE said Fomperosa had been denied asylum and had a criminal record, making him a priority for removal. Escobar's lawyer said he had a pending deportation order after losing his Temporary Protection Status nearly a decade ago, and had been denied deferred action, or DACA.

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, in remarks near the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona, addressed one of the biggest obstacles to deportation: a massive backlog of pending immigration court cases. It stands at over 542,000 cases, with the average wait time up to 677 days, according to TRAC.

Sessions announced plans to hire 124 immigration judges over the next two years, but he offered no details on funding the additional positions.

Analysts dismissed the impact additional judges would have given Sessions' new prosecution guidelines with stiffer penalties for attempted illegal re-entries, which they said would add many new cases to the current backlog.