



Fact check: Is there an immigration crisis at the border as President Trump claims? Here's what we found

Gillian Friedman

January 9, 2019

President Donald Trump opened a nationally televised [speech](#) Tuesday evening by describing a “growing humanitarian and security crisis at our southern border.”

The prime time address was an attempt to drum up support for his proposed \$5.7 billion border wall, as a partial government shutdown over the issue continued into its third week.

The claim of a crisis is one that administration officials including Vice President Mike Pence and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen have put forth many times [before](#). They frequently cite three main issues: increasing numbers of illegal border crossings, the flow of drugs and terrorism, and the overwhelming number of asylum seekers.

But is there actually a crisis at the border? Some experts have called the Trump administration's claim into question. The Deseret News took a close look at the three parts of the administration's case for a border crisis.

1. Has the number of illegal border crossings increased to crisis levels?

The short answer is no.

Trump's description of a “growing crisis” of people crossing the border illegally implies a problem that is getting worse.

Immigration data show that the number of people caught crossing illegally at the border — the standard measure of the volume of illegal crossings generally — peaked at 1.6 million in 2000 and has been on the decline ever since, according to [The Washington Post](#).

In 2017, border arrests dropped to a historic low (310,531). To find a year with fewer border arrests, you have to go back 45 years — all the way to 1971.

And while there was an uptick in illegal border crossings in fiscal 2018 (396,579), they remained lower than the average over the previous decade (400,741), as well as the number of border arrests in fiscal 2016, 2014, and 2013, [Politico reported](#).

A combination of factors explain the decline, including technology upgrades, tougher penalties post-9/11 and sharp rise in the number of Border Patrol officers, [The Washington Post](#) reported.

But experts agree that the primary explanation is the sharp decrease in the number of Mexicans entering the country illegally over the last decade, which has plummeted by more than 300,000, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Economics played a major role in that decrease, Heide Castaneda, associate professor at the University of South Florida, told the Deseret News in December. There was a nosedive in Mexican migration in 2008 due to the recession, which wiped out millions of jobs that attracted undocumented immigrants to the United States.

“With the recession, there was just no draw of the U.S. job market, and the migration of low-wage workers since 2008 never fully recovered,” she said.

At the same time, the Mexican economy improved, giving people from Mexico less reason to migrate to begin with.

In fact, a 2015 Pew study found that more Mexicans returned to their home country between 2009 and 2014 than entered the United States. And while migration from Central America increased by 375,000 between 2007-2016, a trend most powerfully exemplified by the migrant caravan that arrived in December from Central America, it has not come close to offsetting the decline in Mexican migration, according to Pew.

Statistics show that recently arrived unauthorized immigrants to the United States are less likely to have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, according to a 2018 Pew study, and more likely to be visa “overstays” — people who arrive in the United States on legal visas, and then overstay their departure date.

Higher overstay rates highlight a need for more interior enforcement, but doesn’t mean the U.S. should pare down border security efforts, Matthew Sussis, assistant director of communications for the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that favors low immigration numbers, told the Deseret News in December.

“The fact that overstay rates are high doesn’t mean you can ignore the border,” Sussis said. “Just because your back door is open doesn’t mean you can forget about keeping your front door closed too.”

To sum up: If a border crisis is defined by an increase in the number of illegal border crossings, then immigration data do not indicate a crisis.

2. What about the flow of drugs and terrorism across the border?

In Trump’s portrait of a crisis at the border and his justification for a wall, he has also often referred to the flow of illegal drugs and terrorists across the border.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the majority of the drugs that cross the southwest border are brought in through official ports of entry, PBS Newshour reported. And the drugs that Border Patrol agents seize at official ports of entry are three times more valuable than drugs seized outside of those ports, David Bier, an immigration policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute, told PBS Newshour.

“In other words, a border wall would not target the most valuable drugs crossing the border,” said Bier.

The White House has also expressed concern about the numbers of terrorists crossing the border.

The State Department, however, has said no terrorists have been identified crossing the southern border from Mexico into the United States, and a 2017 report said there was “no credible

evidence” that terrorist groups have established bases in Mexico or sent operatives to the United States from there, [PBS News Hour](#) reported.

Last week, Secretary Nielson told Democrats that immigration officials apprehended more than 3,000 terrorists in the last fiscal year. But data obtained by [NBC news](#) showed that just 41 people on the Terrorist Screening Database were stopped by Customs and Border Protection at the southern border from Oct. 1, 2017 to March 31, 2018, but 35 of them were U.S. citizens or permanent residents. And only six were classified as “non-U.S. persons” and suspected of terrorist ties.

The U.S. keeps databases of people it believes may have ties to terrorism based on travel patterns, spending activities, family connections and other activities, according to NBC News.

When pressed at a news conference, Nielsen clarified that officials stopped more than 3,000 "special interest aliens" last year at the border. A “special interest alien,” as defined by the [Department of Homeland Security](#), is a non-U.S. person who potentially poses a national security risk to the United States or its interests based on an analysis of travel behaviors, meaning that they simply come from countries regarded as potential sources of terrorism — not that the individuals are necessarily terrorists themselves, according to DHS.

“DHS has never indicated that the SIA designation means more than that,” stated the agency.

3. Are migrants overwhelming — and exploiting — the U.S. asylum system?

In mid-November, more than 6,000 migrants, half of them women and children, traveling in caravans from Central America arrived at the U.S. border at Tijuana fleeing poverty, violence and political oppression and seeking to claim asylum in the United States. (The Immigration and Nationality Act allows migrants to apply for asylum after entering the United States at a border and proving that they are escaping their homeland because of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.)

Trump has pointed to these caravans as evidence of a security crisis at the border, saying migrants are exploiting backlogs in the asylum system to remain in the United States long-term.

There is in fact an enormous backlog, in part because of the small number of immigration judges relative to the increase in cases, that grew from 186,108 cases in 2008 to 714,067 cases in 2018, according to the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#). The average waiting period for immigrants to have their cases heard is two years, allowing asylum applicants to stay in the United States while their cases are processed.

“A huge and growing backlog of applications in the hundreds of thousands has created perverse incentives for would-be migrants to file spurious asylum claims, because these can allow them to remain in the U.S. for years while their cases wait to be processed,” according to a [Bloomberg editorial](#). “The backlog doesn’t discourage bogus asylum seekers, as you might suppose; it does the opposite.”

The backlog is due partly to a sharp increase in the number of people seeking asylum in the United States in recent history, according to [Human Rights First](#). But the notion that "bogus" asylum claims are overwhelming the system is disputed.

About a decade ago, about 1 of every 100 border crossers was an unaccompanied child or asylum seeker in search of protection. Today, that share is 1 in 3, as a result of political and economic instability in the Northern Triangle — El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Trump has attempted to curtail the ability of migrants to seek asylum in the United States, including largely eliminating domestic violence as grounds for protection and requiring migrants to "Remain in Mexico" while their asylum claims are processed. Some of these actions have been challenged in court by federal judges.

That's why some experts say it would be more constructive to describe and respond to the current situation not as a "border security crisis" but an "asylum system crisis."

"What you need is not necessarily more detention, more security, more walls, more barriers, more detection," Randy Capps, the director of research at the Migration Policy Institute, told PBS Newshour. "You need facilities that can handle women and children, a better and faster screening process for asylum."

Meanwhile, the White House has still left the possibility of declaring a national immigration emergency on the table. Whether such a move would actually free up the funds Trump needs for the border wall remains unclear.