



To pay for border wall, Trump admin weighs cutting security measures experts say actually work

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The Trump administration would cut or delay funding for border surveillance, radar technology, patrol boats and customs agents in its upcoming spending plan to curb illegal immigration — all proven security measures that officials and experts have said are more effective than building a wall along the Mexican border.

President Donald Trump has made the border wall a focus of his campaign against illegal immigration to stop drugs, terrorists and gangs like MS-13 from coming into the United States. Under spending plans submitted this past week to Congress, the wall would cost \$18 billion over the next 10 years and be erected along nearly 1,450 kilometres of the southern border.

The wall also has become a bargaining chip in negotiations with Congress as lawmakers seek to prevent nearly 800,000 young immigrants living in the country illegally who were brought here as children from being deported.

But security experts said the president's focus on a border wall ignores the constantly evolving nature of terrorism, immigration and drug trafficking.

"People that are dealing with this issue know that a third-century solution to a 21st-century problem is not going to fix this long-term," said Rep. Will Hurd, a former CIA officer. Hurd, whose district includes more than 1,200 kilometres of border territory with Mexico, has pushed for more funding for sensors and other border security technologies.

Homeland Security officials have long and frequently described border security as a holistic system, made up not just of walls and fencing but also patrol routes, lighting, cameras, sensors and personnel.

David Bier, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute, said a border wall would do little to stop the drug trade. Most of the cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines smuggled into the United States come through legal ports of entry rather than areas that would be stopped by a wall, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Nor would a wall stop illegal immigration, other experts said. Data from the Department of Homeland Security and research groups like the New York-based Center for Migration Studies show that most immigrants living in the country illegally now simply overstay legally obtained short-term visas — and did not sneak across the border.

“So unless the wall is 35,000 feet high, it’s not going to do much to stop those overstaying these visas,” said Robert Warren, a fellow at the Center for Migration Studies who has worked on immigration issues for Republican and Democratic presidents.

Additionally, Warren said, many people who have been stopped by the Border Patrol in recent years are seeking asylum — including some who simply walk up to agents and surrender.

Trump’s budget request for a wall represents more than half of the \$33 billion spending blueprint for border security during the next decade. It either eliminates critical funding for border security programs or shifts money from them, threatening to leave gaping holes. A Government Accountability Office study released in February found that Customs and Border Protection has not shown how much fencing and walls bolster border security.

An internal budget guidance document for the 2019 fiscal year shows that the White House Office of Management and Budget asked officials at the Homeland Security Department to reduce or delay funding requests for additional border security technology and equipment. Instead, the document instructed, Homeland Security should dramatically increase funding for a wall on the Mexico border.

Homeland Security officials said the plans are subject to change. Still, the document underscores the priority that a border wall remains for Trump, who promised its construction during his presidential campaign. It also instructed the department to seek \$1.6 billion in the upcoming fiscal year to build 74 miles of a border wall — about \$700 million more than Homeland Security officials felt they needed to build that.

Parts of the document were viewed by The New York Times; the rest of it was based on reports by the Democratic staff of the Senate Homeland Security Committee

The cuts include money for a remote video surveillance system in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, an area known for high numbers of border crossings and drug smuggling. The system is composed of infrared cameras mounted on poles, towers and buildings, allowing Border Patrol agents to track attempted smuggling and border crossings.

In the internal document, the White House Budget Office called the surveillance system important but said its funding requests were lowered “to offset the costs of presidential priorities not funded in the DHS request.”

Customs and Border Protection faces several cuts.

Its \$7.9 million request for technology upgrades to its P-3 surveillance aircraft — which operates thousands of miles beyond U.S. borders to track narcotics being shipped from Colombia, Peru and other drug producing countries — was denied. In 2016, the latest data available, the P-3 aircrews contributed to 145 drug seizures, helping U.S. and foreign officials capture a combined 34,108 pounds of marijuana and 193,197 pounds of cocaine.

The internal document also suggested delaying a request to buy 15 new Coastal Interceptor boats to catch drug smugglers. The agency had sought nearly \$15 million to replace its aging fleet to keep up with drug smugglers’ smaller, faster boats.

It also would cut nearly 200 of the 500 canine units that customs officials say play a key role in programs to prevent terrorism and drug smuggling. The dogs' handlers would then be reassigned to ports on the southwest border to help with staffing shortages.

“The lack of funding and the elimination of the canine teams is short-sighted and poses a serious threat to border security,” said Tony Reardon, the president of the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents customs officers. “If you are going to focus on border security, you can't do that without talking about the men and women who man these ports of entry.”

Perhaps most significantly, the proposed budget would not fund the hiring of new customs officers — the agents who denied 200,000 people from entering the United States at ports of entry in fiscal 2017 and who stopped 600,000 pounds of drugs, including cocaine, heroin, meth and fentanyl. Customs officers also intercepted nearly \$70 million in illicit currency, much of it headed back across the border to fill the coffers of Mexican drug cartels.

Experts said the absence of hiring funds could potentially have the most impact on border security; the agents form a crucial line of defence against smugglers and terrorist threats. An internal Customs and Border Protection review showed that the agency's ranks were about 3,700 officers below required levels, according to the National Treasury Employees Union.

By comparison, Trump has called for hiring 5,000 additional Border Patrol agents and 10,000 new Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

“A wall is the single most expensive thing you can do in terms of trying to secure the border, and not necessarily the most effective on its own,” said Doris Meissner, who was the top immigration official during the Clinton administration. “If you want to be strategic about it, you want to invest in technologies and programs that can stop threats well before they can actually get to the border.”