



Yes, illegal immigration is a national emergency, but not for the reasons Trump is giving

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Border Patrol agents apprehended more than 76,000 illegal immigrants at the southern border last month. That's more than double the monthly average during President Donald Trump's first year in office.

This border surge constitutes a national emergency – but not for the reasons the president and many of his supporters think.

In his speeches and campaign rallies, the president frames illegal immigration primarily as a threat to public safety. He wants a wall to stop "an invasion of our country with drugs, with human traffickers, with all types of criminals and gangs."

It's true that some illegal immigrants are violent. MS-13, the Central American street gang infamous for its grisly murders, is present in more than 40 states. One of the gang's mottos translates to "Kill, steal, rape, control."

But there is no proof that illegal immigrants, on the whole, are more violent than native-born Americans. In fact, researchers who have examined the relationship between illegal immigrants and crime have drawn wildly different conclusions.

The Cato Institute found that illegal immigrants were less likely to commit murder, sexual assault and robbery than native-born Americans. Meanwhile, data from the U.S. Sentencing Commission suggest the opposite – that illegal immigrants were responsible for a disproportionate share of federal crimes between 2011 and 2016.

It is impossible to definitively prove whether illegal immigrants are more or less likely to commit violent crimes. We do not even know exactly how many illegal immigrants live here. And we do not know whether they are caught by police at different rates than native-born criminals. The data are simply too unreliable to draw firm conclusions.

The debate over whether illegal immigrants are more or less likely than the native-born to commit crimes distracts from two important truths. First, no amount of crime by illegal immigrants is acceptable. Secondly, this debate over violent crime obscures the bigger threat from illegal immigration: the massive economic burden imposed on American workers and taxpayers.

Illegal immigrants compete with native-born Americans and legal immigrants for jobs. Of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants living in the United States, about 8 million work.

These illegal workers, many of whom lack formal educations and English-language skills, flock to low-skilled jobs. In fact, over the past two decades, the influx of immigrants who lack high school diplomas has swelled the low-skilled workforce by about 25 percent.

This competition disproportionately harms less-educated Americans. Each 10-percent increase in the size of the low-skilled labor force decreases workers' wages by at least 3 percent, according to research from Harvard professor George Borjas. Competition with immigrant laborers depresses the annual wages of Americans without high school diplomas by up to \$1,500.

These less-skilled American workers are among the most vulnerable members of society. They already struggle to afford health care and nutritious food. By turning a blind eye to illegal immigration, our elected officials are effectively kicking these workers while they are down.

Workers are not the only ones suffering from illegal immigration. When illegal immigrants use public services, American taxpayers are often stuck with the bill.

Consider health care: More than seven in 10 illegal immigrants do not have health insurance. When they get sick, they frequently turn to emergency rooms, which legally cannot turn patients away. The cost of that care is ultimately passed on to government programs and everyone with a private insurance plan. Americans pay about \$18 billion a year to provide free and subsidized health care for illegal immigrants.

The same goes for welfare and food assistance programs. Eighty-nine percent of households headed by illegal immigrant parents utilize at least one welfare program. These families draw nearly \$6 billion in welfare benefits per year.

Children from illegal immigrant households also strain our public-school system. Nearly a quarter of students in U.S. public schools now speak a language other than English at home – that share has more than doubled since 1980. Taxpayers shell out roughly \$1.6 billion a year to teach these kids English.

All together, illegal immigration costs federal, state and local taxpayers \$116 billion annually.

Most illegal immigrants are hardworking and nonviolent. They are not bad people. However, that does not mean we should tolerate illegal border crossings. Rising levels of illegal immigration threaten American workers and taxpayers. It's time for our elected officials to take that threat seriously.