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Here's what you need to know about the border wall

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In President Donald Trump's public push for \$5.7 billion to extend existing border fencing by 215 miles, he has painted a dire picture filled with deadly drugs, violent criminals and bloodshed.

Meanwhile, congressional Democrats argue the border crisis Trump is referring to either doesn't exist or was manufactured for political reasons. Besides, they contend, a wall wouldn't solve many of the problems Trump has identified.

It is a debate filled with facts — facts offered by each side that tend to support their own perspectives and agendas.

The truth — as it often does — lies somewhere in between.

It doesn't help that immigration is an incredibly complex issue, one that Congress has struggled to agree on and failed to comprehensively reform for decades.

Here is what the data, research and expert analysis show.

— Two-thirds of the 1,933-mile southwest border is not divided by any type of man-made barrier.

The majority of that gap is in Texas, where the Rio Grande acts as a natural obstacle of sorts and swaths of private land extend to the international line.

In Texas, 91 percent of the state is without any fence or wall, compared with 36 percent of New Mexico and 18 percent of Arizona, according to 2017 Border Patrol data.

California's border with Mexico is the most heavily fortified, with all but 23 miles not fenced to some degree. In the unfenced areas, mountains and treacherous wilderness areas act as natural barriers.

The types and condition of fencing along the southwest border vary greatly. Taller, stronger pedestrian fencing is concentrated around cities and towns — in some areas three layers deep, such as Friendship Park — while rural areas typically have barriers designed to keep vehicles from driving through but are easy for people on foot to breach.

The border along Texas, particularly the Rio Grande Valley — where Trump visited earlier this week — has in the past several years become the hotspot for illegal crossings.

The region's Chief Border Patrol Agent Raul Ortiz told Trump during his visit that while there are 55 miles of fencing already in the sector, 90 percent of the illegal traffic occurs in areas without fencing.

— Fencing helped slow and shift illegal immigration in San Diego — but only when combined with increased enforcement and use of technology.

San Diego's border with Mexico was largely without any barrier before the 1950s. Residents on both sides of the border at that time remember crossing easily back and forth — to work, to visit family, to play.

Some barbed wire was strung up in more populated areas, but it was easily breached. It was more of a visual reminder of the border line than an actual deterrent.

The scene on the border changed dramatically by the 1980s as Mexican migration spiked, largely single men crossing for economic opportunity. Thousands would gather on any given night in Tijuana and wait to cross illegally under cover of darkness. They would run into the U.S. in droves, overwhelming Border Patrol agents. (Border Patrol polices the areas between legal ports of entry, while Customs and Border Protection officers enforce vehicle and pedestrian traffic entering at the ports of entry.)

The primary fencing that covers the 14-mile stretch between the Pacific Ocean and Otay Mountain started going up in 1989, constructed of Vietnam-era landing mat up to 10 feet high.

But, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, the “primary fence, by itself, did not have a discernible impact on the influx of unauthorized aliens coming across the border in San Diego.”

So Operation Gatekeeper was launched in 1994 during the Clinton administration, focusing on the first five miles of border. The campaign brought increased manpower to the area and deployed agents in three layers at the border, first to deter illegal entry and then apprehend. Vehicle checkpoints were set up inland. Agents were also much better equipped with night vision goggles, portable radios, light towers, and all-terrain vehicles. Technology such as seismic sensors came into play.

A secondary layer of fencing came in 1996.

Apprehensions in San Diego dipped significantly, cut in half from nearly 484,000 in 1996 to nearly 284,000 in 1997.

With the border hardened in San Diego, migrants headed east, with apprehensions in the El Centro Sector spiking in the late 1990s as a result. More fencing was constructed there, and illegal crossing routes moved to Arizona's remote deserts.

But with the shift to remote wilderness areas came an increase in migrant deaths.

(EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)

— San Diego is in the middle of replacing its aging primary border fence.

The landing mat barrier was initially praised by border authorities, but it has been easy to scale and for power tools to rip through.

The Obama administration began planning to replace the first 14 miles of the fence in San Diego in 2009, and the project was later funded under Trump.

The new fence, 18 feet tall, is made of hollow steel bollards placed closely together, filled with concrete and topped by a metal plate.

Trump pointed to the project during a recent White House news conference: “In San Diego and in areas of California, we just finished brand new walls, beautiful walls, steel walls, and they wanted them badly. . . . They really needed it, they were having tremendous problems. So we built the brand new wall in San Diego, and it’s working really well. You should go and look at it, it’s amazing. It’s incredible how well it works.”

In a news conference last year, Ronald Vitiello, then the acting deputy commissioner of CBP, said requests for new “border barrier systems” came from agents in the field.

“The truth is walls work: the data show it and agents know it,” Vitiello said.

However, the Government Accountability Office in 2017 reported that the U.S. didn’t have a reliable way to measure how well fencing along the border was working.

Border Patrol agents who work the line are excited about the taller, stronger new barrier, especially the fact that it is see-through, unlike the opaque landing mats. It is one of the reasons Trump has said his previous calls for concrete walls have morphed into plans for steel slats.

Any assessment on the effectiveness of San Diego’s new barrier is premature, as the construction is only halfway finished. The new fence has been scaled or otherwise breached numerous times in the past several months.

A similar replacement project was recently completed in Calexico, although at a height of 30 feet.

In July, Congress approved \$251 million in funding to replace the secondary fence — made of metal mesh — but construction has not yet begun. Other plans to replace some existing fencing and build some new miles of fencing were also funded at that time, primarily in Texas.

Agents also continue to rely on a vast network of seismic sensors and remote cameras to patrol the line. The technology helps deploy agents more efficiently to where they are needed, especially in remote areas.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM)

— Migration through the southwest border as a whole has steadily declined — not just in areas with fencing.

In fiscal 2018, Border Patrol apprehended about 396,500 unauthorized immigrants at the southwest border — 10 percent of those in the San Diego Sector. That is a dramatic downturn compared to a peak of 1.6 million apprehensions in 2000.

Much of the decline can be attributed to a steep drop in Mexican migration. Many have found it harder over the past few decades to find well-paying jobs in the U.S. due to the economic recession that followed the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and later the housing market crash.

The economy in Mexico, in turn, is more stable than it was during massive crossings in the '80s and '90s.

Greater enforcement is also believed to be a factor, with more emphasis on border security and advancements in technology since 9/11.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security — which is developing better ways to measure the effectiveness of border security — “available data indicate that the southwest land border is more difficult to illegally cross today than ever before.”

The 2017 report suggests 55 to 85 percent of those trying to cross illegally between the ports of entry are caught, and about 55 to 75 percent are deterred from making a subsequent attempt after being returned to their home country.

While apprehensions these days are similar to those seen in the early 1970s, they are ticking back up, with a 30 percent increase last year compared to the previous year.

— The nature of migration has changed, shifting more from economic migrants to asylum seekers of all ages.

When a single man or woman from Mexico who comes illegally to work or visit family in the U.S. is apprehended, returning them used to be a relatively straightforward matter. If they weren't being criminally charged for their entry, they would be detained for maybe a day and walked back across the border.

But the face of today's migrant has dramatically changed to Central American families and unaccompanied minors fleeing rising gang violence, corrupt governments and extreme poverty. Many are claiming persecution in their home countries as a reason for wanting to resettle in the U.S.

An asylum claim sets off a whole different legal process, starting with an interview in which the migrant must show a credible fear of persecution if returned. If that is passed, the civil process handled in immigration court can take years.

Officials encourage migrants to present themselves at a U.S. port of entry to ask for asylum. Many migrants, including those in the caravan camped out in Tijuana, are trying to do just that. However, U.S. authorities have limited the number of asylum applicants they will see on any given day — between 30 and 100 at San Ysidro — creating an unofficial line that forces asylum seekers to wait in Mexico.

Many migrants, desperate to enter the U.S., have taken to crossing the border between the ports, giving themselves up to Border Patrol agents immediately and claiming asylum.

In fiscal 2018, nearly 93,000 migrants — 14 percent of those who crossed between the ports and 31 percent of those who presented at a port of entry — claimed a credible fear, according to CBP.

The Trump administration has said it would like to detain asylum seekers but there isn't enough detention space, especially for the growing number of families, and laws and legal rulings put restrictions on how children can be detained. Many migrant families seeking asylum are released into the community as they go through the legal process.

December was a record month for families arriving between the ports of entry, with 27,518 family members apprehended by Border Patrol, along with 4,766 unaccompanied minors. Ninety-five percent of those family members are from the Northern Triangle: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Border authorities say some adults are lying about being related to children they are traveling with, causing concern about child sex and labor trafficking. From October 2017 to May 2018, more than 700 migrant children were taken from adults claiming to be their parents, including more than 100 children under age 4, the Los Angeles Times reported.

But many of those adults turned out to be grandparents, uncles or other relatives, and some had to sue for DNA tests to prove they were in fact related — including the lawsuit by a Congolese mother, known in court documents as Ms. L. — that sparked the landmark family separation litigation based in San Diego.

— A small percentage of unauthorized immigrants caught trying to illegally cross into the U.S. have been convicted of a crime.

In fiscal 2018, Border Patrol apprehended 6,259 people with some kind of criminal record. It is not clear how many of those apprehensions occurred on the border with Mexico versus Canada. But even if all of those apprehensions occurred on the southwest line, that would account for 2 percent of total apprehensions there.

CBP breaks down the data by crime type, although some people have multiple convictions.

Just over half of the prior convictions were for illegal entry into the U.S. — a crime often charged as a misdemeanor. About 1,000 were for DUI. Drug and gun convictions totaled about 900. About 500 were for assault, battery or domestic violence, while 328 were for burglary, robbery or theft and 78 for unspecified sexual offenses.

Three were for murder.

Also last year, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which enforces civil immigration law, made about 158,500 administrative arrests for immigration violations against people in the country both illegally and legally. Of those, 87 percent had prior criminal convictions or pending charges.

Nearly half of those — 46 percent — included immigration-related offenses such as illegal entry.

The most common crimes were for DUI, drugs or traffic offenses, while about 2,000 were for homicide and another 2,000 for kidnapping. Sexual assault accounted for 5,350 charges or convictions, sex-trafficking offenses for 1,739 and other sex offenses for 6,888.

Besides immigration offenses, the data does not specify if the crimes were committed in the U.S. or another country, or when.

Using ICE arrests to extrapolate how many immigrants in the U.S. have serious criminal backgrounds can be misleading because a high priority is put on finding and deporting unauthorized immigrants or visa holders with criminal records.

Determining how many people in the U.S. illegally commit crime while here has always been a challenge because there is no official data collected regularly on the subject and there are hundreds of thousands of criminal justice jurisdictions across the nation.

Studies on the issue have shown that the nation's population of unauthorized immigrants is less inclined to commit crime than Americans, and those in the country legally even less so.

A 2018 study by the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute looked at 2015 conviction data in Texas, finding there were 56 percent fewer criminal convictions of unauthorized immigrants than native-born Americans. The rate for legal immigrants was 66 percent below Americans.

The study did show that unauthorized immigrants were more likely to be convicted of "gambling, smuggling, vagrancy and kidnapping," but those crimes account for 0.18 percent of all convictions in Texas in 2015.

Another study published in the journal *Criminology* last year suggested there was less crime in areas with higher populations of unauthorized immigrants.

Certainly, a handful of killings by unauthorized immigrants have been spotlighted recently, including one last month of a police officer shot to death near Modesto after pulling over a driver. The suspect is in the U.S. illegally, has allegedly boasted of ties to a street gang and has two prior DUI arrests.

— Drugs are mainly entering the U.S. through the ports of entry.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the lead agency in multinational drug trafficking investigations, reported in its 2018 assessment that Mexican cartels largely prefer using passenger vehicles and semi-trucks to smuggle hard narcotics through the ports of entry — not through areas in between.

The assessment is based on seizure trends, as well as on intelligence sources that include undercover investigations and wire-tapped cartel business communications.

The trial of Sinaloa Cartel drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, happening now in Brooklyn, has detailed the powerful organization's preference for using everything from cars and trucks at the ports to trains, airplanes, boats and submarines to smuggle drugs.

The DEA notes that Mexican cartels still sometimes smuggle drugs in backpacks through remote crossing routes.

While it is unknown exactly how many drugs are entering the country due to the nature of illicit smuggling, seizure data has traditionally been considered a good indication of such trends.

For the first 11 months of fiscal 2018, nearly 67,300 pounds of methamphetamine were seized at the ports of entry, whereas nearly 10,400 pounds were seized by Border Patrol agents at points between the ports, CBP reports.

Similar seizure ratios are seen for heroin, cocaine and fentanyl.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has said about 80 percent of the fentanyl coming through the southwest border enters through the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa ports of entry in San Diego.

A large amount of fentanyl is also arriving in the U.S. mail or through services such as FedEx, direct from China where the deadly synthetic heroin and its precursors are manufactured.

The one exception to the port trend seems to be marijuana. Last year, nearly twice as much was seized by Border Patrol than at the ports.

Mexican cartels, especially the Sinaloa, also rely on tunnels. Several that were complete or under construction, with advanced rail and lighting systems, have been found along the border in San Diego, considered to have good clay soil for such engineering. Many went under existing fencing.

Two were found in the San Diego Sector in fiscal 2018, according to the Border Patrol. While tunnels are often used for drugs, agents in 2017 found one after about 30 unauthorized immigrants emerged from a vacant lot in Otay Mesa.