7.2M Migrants Have Illegally Crossed US Border Under Biden, Exceeding the Populations of 36 States?

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On Feb. 20, 2024, a user on X posted (archived) and many others shared the claim, "7.2 million illegals entered the U.S. under Biden administration, an amount greater than population of 36 states." An image displaying a map of U.S. states accompanied the post, which contained attribution in its lower-right corner to Fox News.

The post and image cited data from a Fox News article that was published on the same day. The headline read, "7.2M illegals entered the US under Biden admin, an amount greater than population of 36 states."

This claim was true, in that the number of more than 7.2 million immigrants specifically reflected border encounters with U.S. officials, according to data provided on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website — not an increase of that magnitude in the immigrant population.

Snopes contacted the White House for comment about the Fox News article. We received a response from a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, who said, in part, that U.S. President Joe Biden's administration "has removed, returned, or expelled more migrants in three years than the prior Administration did in four years." This also was true, according to statistics provided on the DHS website. Further comment from DHS and a wealth of statistics are all laid out below.

More Than 7.2 Million Southwest Border Encounters

Here are the facts: A record number of migrants have attempted to cross into the U.S. during Biden's administration since his inauguration on Jan. 20, 2021.

U.S. Border Patrol agents and Office of Field Operations officials recorded encounters with more than 7.2 million migrants who attempted to cross the Southwest border between the time Biden assumed office and the end of January 2024. Comparatively, the number of border encounters with migrants under the Trump administration was around 2.4 million, according to statistics provided on the CBP and DHS websites.

In other words, as of January 2024, the Biden administration had handled around three times the number of border encounters as the Trump administration.

'Greater than the Population of 36 States'

It's true that the number of border encounters under Biden, 7.2 million, is larger than the individual populations of 36 states, according to the most recent data that's available, as provided by WorldPopulationReview.com.

As accurately reported in the Fox News article, "That is larger than the population of 36 U.S. states, including Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming."

The Border: Trump Versus Biden

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, published an article on Jan. 5, 2024, contending that "data from the Trump era clearly show that, if he were in office, Trump would not be deporting any more border crossers than Biden has."

While it's not possible to know for certain what may have occurred had Trump been reelected in 2020, Snopes examined the statistics sourced in the article, which laid out figures for specific time periods that pitted Trump's administration versus Biden's, citing data from CBP, DHS and the U.S. House of Representatives. The data on Trump's administration pertained to the 24-month period of fiscal years 2019 and 2020 (October 2018 through September 2020), while the statistics for Biden pertained to a 26.3-month period between Jan. 20, 2021, and March 31, 2023.

For Trump, out of 1,365,529 Southwest border encounters during the 24-month time period, 47.4% of those immigrants were expelled or repatriated, while 52.2% were released. Comparatively, under Biden during the 26.3-month time period, out of 5,022,027 encounters, 50.9% of the immigrants were expelled or repatriated, while 48.6% were released.

Also, the estimated apprehension rate for immigrants attempting to cross the Southwest border averaged 78% between fiscal years 2017 and 2020. For fiscal year 2021, which appeared to be the most recent data available and included Trump's roughly last four months in office and Biden's roughly first eight months, the estimated apprehension rate was reported as 80.9%.

The DHS spokesperson told Snopes by email: "Under [Biden's] Administration, the estimated annual apprehension rate has averaged 78%, identical to the rate of the prior Administration." Snopes requested the specific statistics for fiscal years 2022 and 2023, but did not receive a response before this fact check was published.

Note: The data regarding apprehension rates is available on Page 13, Table 1 in this DHS document, which also notes the following: "While USBP has reliable administrative data on apprehensions, the Department does not have an exact count of unlawful entry attempts since an unknown number of unlawful border crossers evade detection. As a result of this so-called 'denominator problem,' the Department must estimate the apprehension rate."

From fiscal years 2021 through 2023, which included data for October 2020 through September 2023, around 1,589,155 "gotaways" were recorded by Border Patrol for the Southwest border.

This was in addition to the 7.2 million-plus encounters recorded by officials — not just detected — along the Southwest border.

Comparatively, "gotaways" for fiscal years 2017 through 2020, which included most of Trump's time in office and a small amount of former U.S. President Barack Obama's second term, totaled 521,247.

DHS defines the term "gotaway" as "a person who is not turned back or apprehended after making an illegal entry" along a U.S. border. A "gotaway" is recorded "when cameras or sensors detect migrants crossing the border, but no one is found, or no agents are available to respond." The department also reported that "an unknown number of migrants evade detection" and "the actual number of 'gotaway' migrants is unknown."

Mayorkas' Impeachment and Failed Border Bill

The publishing of the Fox News article and the X post followed the news of the impeachment of DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas by the U.S. House, which occurred on Feb. 13, 2024. The impeachment succeeded by one vote and followed an unsuccessful vote the previous week. It also followed a failed vote to pass a national security and border reform package, which Biden supported. Republicans largely rejected the package after Trump both criticized and mischaracterized the bill, The Washington Post reported.

Mayorkas' impeachment came after fierce criticism from Republicans regarding his record of border security since being sworn in on Feb. 2, 2021. The articles of impeachment will next go to the U.S. Senate. However, The Associated Press reported that "neither Democratic nor even some Republican senators have shown interest in the matter," meaning that it might be "indefinitely shelved to a committee."

Voters' Thoughts on Immigration

As it appears, at the time of publication, that Biden is headed for another election showdown with Trump in November 2024, the results of a new poll suggested that some voters have become increasingly concerned about immigration and border security.

PBS.org reported of the PBS NewsHour/NPR/Marist poll – which was released on Feb. 7, 2024: "Welcoming others makes the country what it is, 57 percent of U.S. adults said in this poll, including 84 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of independents. That's a significant downward shift in attitudes since July 2021, when 66 percent of U.S. adults supported openness to others."

The poll summary also noted that: "More than four in ten Americans (41 percent) report that the Republican Party will do a better job at handling the issue of immigration. 29 percent say the Democrats are better equipped to do so. 10 percent of residents say both the Republicans and Democrats are on par to address immigration. A notable one in five Americans (20 percent) reports neither party can handle the issue, an increase from 13 percent in November 2022."