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Mazzuca: A matter of priorities on illegal immigration

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Writing for the CATO Institute, economist Daniel Mitchell says the reason our government wastes so many of our tax dollars is because government programs are magnets for fraud.

Mitchell makes a valid point, but fraud isn't the only cause of wasteful spending. Sometimes it's a matter of misplaced priorities. And this is never truer than in the matter of illegal immigration. So exactly how much does illegal immigration cost the American taxpayer and how could that money be better spent?

We've all heard the arguments that people living here illegally don't add to the nation's welfare costs because they pay taxes and pay into a Social Security system where they'll likely never receive a benefit check. At the same time, others argue that increasing numbers of illegal aliens don't hold jobs, don't pay taxes and yet demand social services.

Some feel the intangible benefits derived from the rich cultures that immigrants bring should be part of the calculation. Perhaps so, but then how do we quantify the damage done by the hundreds or perhaps thousands of gang members, such as MS-13, that cross our borders illegally?

While each perspective merits consideration, the reality remains that calculating the cost of illegal immigration is maddeningly difficult. If you doubt that, go to the internet and research the matter and you'll soon find yourself spending the entire day verifying sources, methodologies and statistics trying to sort through a topic replete with politics, myths, historical half-truths and questionable data.

So just how do we ascertain the costs of the services attributable to illegal immigration — such as emergency room visits, the cost of teaching non-English speaking children in primary and secondary schools, food stamps, Medicaid, incarceration of criminals, free school lunches, suppressed wages for American workers, deportations, money sent back to the immigrants' home nations, etc.?

When researching the matter I found a preponderance of websites referred to a September 2017 Federation for American Immigration Reform report that's considered the gold standard in many precincts. The report estimated the net cost to the American taxpayer was approximately \$116 billion a year.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform's report was clear inasmuch as it emphasized the word net, i.e., cost of the services used by those living here illegally less the taxes they paid. But FAIR (the organization's acronym) is right leaning and I wanted to keep the political bias to a minimum so I looked to the left and found that NBC News had done some reporting on the matter, and several of their experts pegged the cost at \$54 billion a year.

I don't know which estimate is more accurate or which organization's political agenda figured more prominently in the calculations; nonetheless we can all agree on one thing — illegal immigration has a direct financial impact on the American taxpayer.

Using the generally accepted figure that roughly 11 million people are living in this country illegally, if we insert the FAIR estimate (\$116 billion), then every man, woman and child unlawfully living in this country has an annual cost to the American taxpayer of \$10,500. If we use the NBC News figure (\$54 billion) the annual cost is \$4,900 per person. Average the two and the cost to taxpayers is roughly \$7,700 per illegal resident per year.

But regardless of cost, the real question we should ask is, why are we spending billions on people who shouldn't be here in the first place when one out of every six Americans lives at or below the poverty level?

The best definition of economics I've ever read comes from famed British economist Lionel Robbins who wrote, "Economics is the study of the use of scarce resources, which have alternative uses." Robbins' statement couldn't be more appropriate regarding illegal immigration because it puts the matter squarely into context.

So during this political season I think every candidate running for president, including the current occupant of the White House, needs to answer one simple question. Is it really appropriate that a nation with a \$20 trillion national debt allocates its scarce resources to people living here illegally when those resources could be used to assist the 43 million needy Americans (including a million and a half veterans, many without limbs and forever scarred from post-traumatic stress syndrome) living below the poverty line?