



There's no evidence Americans pay \$155 billion each year to cover the cost of illegal immigration

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Another year, another false claim about the cost of illegal immigration going viral.

Although former President Donald Trump is no longer in office trying to rally support for his border wall, the debate about illegal immigration continues, and one old immigration post is regaining traction on Facebook.

"Chuck Schumer: 'why should American citizens be responsible to pay 5 billion to fund the wall?'" asks a screenshot of a Tweet that was shared [on Facebook](#). "Better question. Why should American citizens be responsible to pay \$155 billion annually to make sure illegal immigrants are taken care of better than American citizens?"

The 2019 post, which people were sharing and commenting on as recently as Jan. 20, was flagged as part of Facebook's efforts to combat false news and misinformation on its News Feed. (Read more about [our partnership with Facebook](#).) The original tweet came from an account that has since been [suspended](#) and we could not find the date it was first posted, but Sen. Chuck Schumer was frequently at odds in 2018 and 2019 with then-President Donald Trump over the president's plan to build a wall at the southern U.S. border.

In years past, PolitiFact has debunked claims that illegal immigration costs taxpayers [\\$113 billion](#), [\\$130 billion](#) and even [\\$250 billion](#) annually.

We searched news clips and asked experts, but PolitiFact was unable to find a report that estimated illegal immigration costs American taxpayers \$155 billion annually.

"The internet is full of a wide range of estimates of the costs of unauthorized immigrants and also of the benefits they bring to the United States," said Julia Gelatt, a senior policy analyst with the Migration Policy Institute. "These estimates all focus on different types of costs and contributions, and many do not give a clear explanation of their methods."

She said she was not aware of "any good, well-researched and well-documented estimates" of the costs and benefits of immigrants illegally in the U.S. that she could recommend.

Even so, she said that the claim seemed far-fetched: "\$155 billion sounds high for the estimated costs, but it is difficult to assess this claim without knowing what data and information was used to generate that estimate."

Regardless of the cost, that doesn't mean immigrants in the country illegally are "taken care of better than American citizens." In many cases, immigrants in the country illegally are ineligible for the assistance programs available to U.S. citizens.

Determining the exact cost of illegal immigration is difficult, but some analysts have tried.

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, produced a 2013 report that estimated that immigrants living in the U.S. illegally "impose a net fiscal burden of around \$54.5 billion per year."

But that estimate, which is now eight years old, is still more than \$100 million off from the post's claim.

One of the highest more recent estimates available comes from a 2017 report from the Federation for American Immigration Reform or FAIR, a group that advocates for reducing legal and illegal immigration. Its report concluded that "In 2017, the total cost of illegal immigration for the United States – at the federal, state, and local levels – was approximately \$116 billion."

The authors of the report said they estimated the total cost of illegal immigration by subtracting the tax revenue paid by immigrants here illegally from "the total economic impact of illegal migration," though there is no clear consensus on the overall economic impact.

Critics of FAIR's 2017 report said the organization vastly overestimated the net cost of illegal immigration.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian public policy think tank, called the report "fatally flawed" and published a detailed critique of FAIR's work: "FAIR's report reaches that conclusion by vastly overstating the costs of illegal immigration, undercounting the tax revenue they generate, inflating the number of illegal immigrants, counting millions of U.S. citizens as illegal immigrants, and by concocting a method of estimating the fiscal costs that is rejected by all economists who work on this subject."

Steven Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that uses data to argue for low levels of immigration, said he conducted his most comprehensive analysis of the cost of immigrants in the U.S. illegally in 2017.

He said he tried "to take into account all their taxes and all the services they use in their lifetime, while excluding U.S. born descendants." Camarota noted that his lifetime estimate heavily discounts future costs and more heavily weights current costs.

In 2018, he adjusted that estimate to 2018 dollars, suggesting that each immigrant in the U.S. illegally costs nearly \$70,000 during their lifetime.

"The numbers are large, but remember it is over a lifetime," he said.

When asked what immigrants in the country illegally cost each year, on average, Camarota said "a back of the envelope estimate" based on his lifetime cost analysis would fall somewhere between about \$24 billion and \$48 billion annually, depending on the methodology used.

That's significantly below the \$116 billion estimate reached in the FAIR report and the \$155 billion claimed in the Facebook post.

Our ruling

A Facebook post claimed American citizens "pay \$155 billion annually to make sure illegal immigrants are taken care of better than American citizens."

We couldn't find evidence suggesting illegal immigration costs \$155 billion annually.

Determining the exact cost of illegal immigration is complex and a source of ongoing debate among experts. Available reports estimate that immigrants in the U.S. illegally cost less than \$155 billion annually — with one of the highest totals estimating a cost of \$116 billion annually.

Regardless of the cost, that doesn't mean immigrants in the country illegally are "taken care of better than American citizens."

We rate this claim False.