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Looming crisis: Trump's made-up figure for the cost of illegal immigration is soaring

Philip Bump

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Making his pitch to Congress for funding for a wall on the border with Mexico on Thursday afternoon, President Trump offered numbers meant to demonstrate the urgent need of securing the border that on Thursday morning he had declared “tight.”

Among them was his estimate of the cost of illegal immigration to the country.

“Illegal immigration costs our nation \$275 billion a year,” Trump said at a signing ceremony in the White House. “You hear many different numbers. You can say, ‘billions and billions,’ but the number that I hear most accurate is \$275 billion a year — at least.”

You do indeed hear many different numbers, all of them from Trump.

The first time he talked about the purported cost of illegal immigration on the campaign trail was back in August 2015, when he asserted in an interview that “we’re spending \$130 billion right now on illegal immigration.”

“We are spending a fortune not only the crime and all the problems that is being caused,” he said, “but we’re spending a minimum of \$130 billion.”

Where that precise figure comes from is not clear, but a controversial study from a group that supports limiting immigration estimated a figure somewhat near there: \$113 billion. An analysis from the Cato Institute of a different version of that study declared the methodology “fatally flawed.”

Over the course of the campaign, Trump generally stuck to a figure around there. A document about immigration published about a month before the 2016 campaign included it precisely. On occasion he freelanced, as when he said on “Morning Joe” in November 2015 that the figure was really “\$200 billion a year, maybe \$250, maybe \$300.” For the most part, though, he stayed near \$100 billion.

That, in fact, is what he said only last month, during his series of campaign rallies before the 2018 midterms. At one rally on Nov. 5, for example, he claimed that “illegal immigration costs our country more than \$100 billion every single year, and that’s more than the budget of Ohio, Montana and Wyoming combined, all places I’ve been.”

But that same day, a bit of inflation.

“Illegal immigration costs our country more than \$100 billion every year,” he said. “Think of that, \$100 billion. And that’s a very, very low number. I’m using that low number so they can’t

criticize me. Because I said — if I said, seriously, \$210 billion, they — you know, if I’m off 15 cents on the high side, they’ll say Donald Trump exaggerated the number.”

He was off to the races.

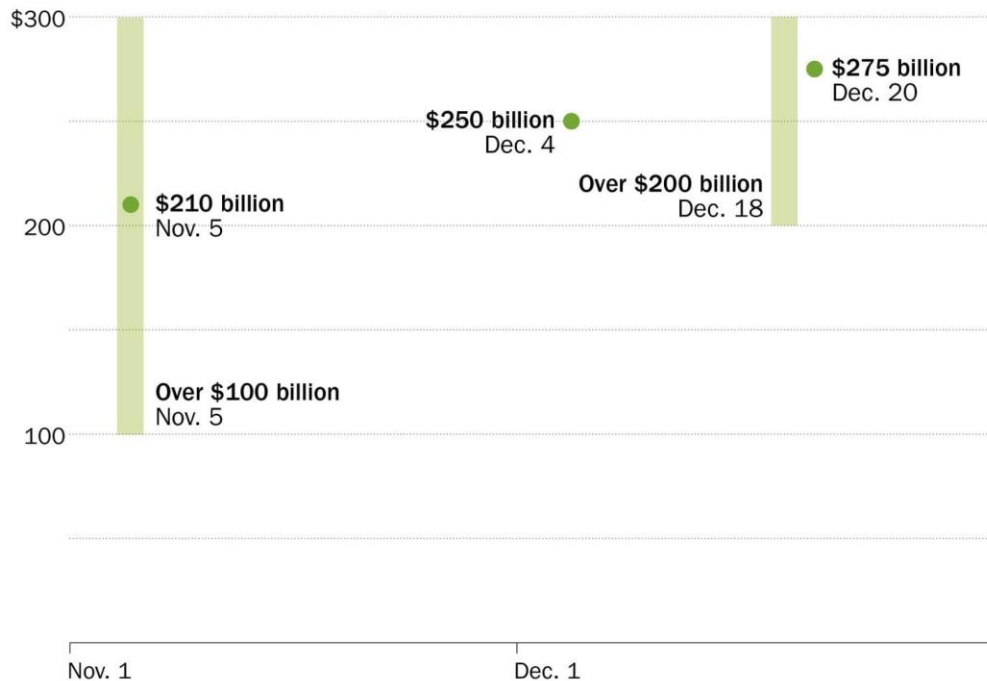
Less than a month later, the number had jumped to \$250 billion.

Earlier this week it was “more than 200 billion dollars,” per a tweet, and then, on Thursday, \$275 billion.

That is five claims since the beginning of November that look like this.

Trump’s estimates of annual cost of illegal immigration

Analysis by The Washington Post



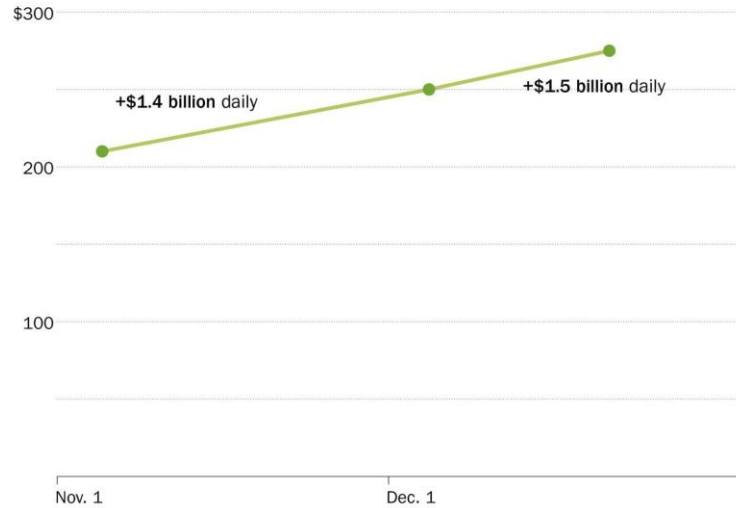
(Philip Bump/The Washington Post)

Those “over \$whatever billion” assertions can be set aside, since his other estimates, north of \$200 billion, fit those descriptors. We have, then, an increase of \$40 billion from Nov. 5 to Dec. 4 and an increase of another \$25 billion from Dec. 4 to Dec. 20.

That is a stunning increase of about \$1.4 or \$1.5 billion *a day* in the cost of illegal immigration annually — an increase that would certainly be worrisome if it had any attachment at all to reality.

Trump's increase to the cost of illegal immigration

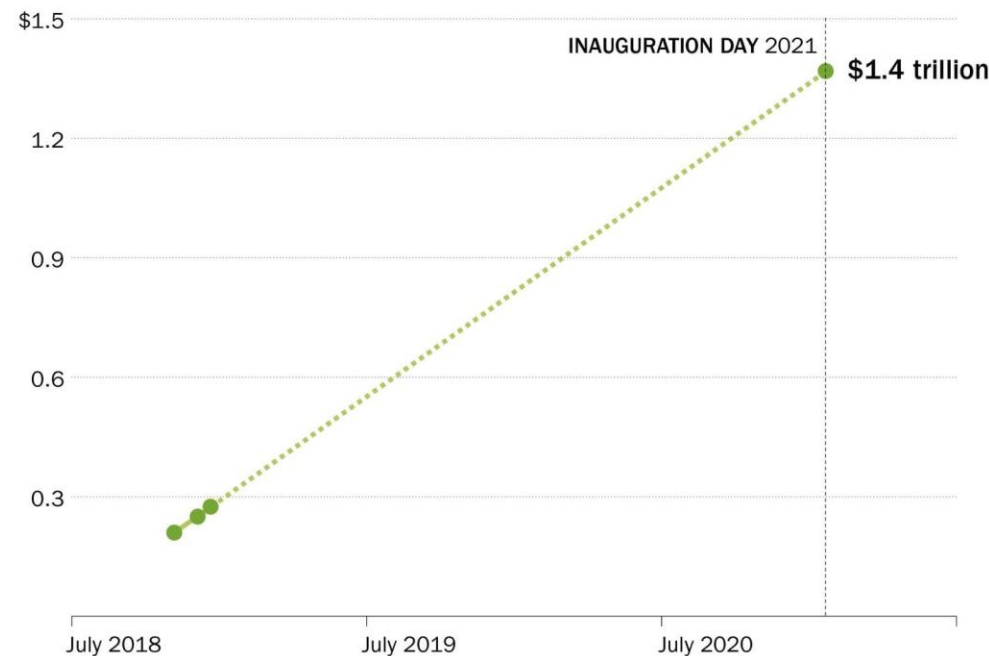
Analysis by The Washington Post



In fact, if we extrapolate those three points out to the inauguration in 2021, a day when Trump will either begin a second term or begin his retirement, the annual rhetorical cost of illegal immigration will have soared to *\$1.4 trillion*.

Projected annual cost of illegal immigration, per Trump

Analysis by The Washington Post



That is a staggering-slash-fake number. Just imagine: Every single day for the next two years, the cost incurred by the country, as plucked from thin air by the president, will surge higher and higher. One might wonder why, exactly, those costs are rising so quickly, why they've risen so quickly over the past month. Is it because we need a wall? It's not clear! But it's definitely happening, in the sense that Trump is saying new numbers.

What Trump really risks is a 2020 opponent who is brave enough to deploy rhetoric which brings that number back down. Imagine, say, Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) suddenly declaring during a debate that the cost of illegal immigration had dropped to zero. Trump, beaten at his own game.

Once we set aside the norm of linking rhetoric to reality, anything becomes possible. Which is why I am pleased to report that the cost of making up numbers from whole cloth is now \$50,000 per incident.

Make that \$55,000.