

# BROOKINGS

## **The Border Within: Interior enforcement and the current state of immigration**

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Policy questions around the estimated 11 million individuals living in the U.S. without legal status are divisive. On February 7, 2022, the Center on Children and Families hosted a discussion of *The Border Within: The Economics of Immigration in an Age of Fear*, by Rubenstein Fellow Tara Watson and her co-author, journalist Kalee Thompson.

As Watson explained, the book synthesizes what we know about undocumented immigration and the enforcement system. It is rooted in fact-based, empirical analysis, supplemented by personal narratives that provide a nuanced understanding of immigration's spillover effects, with special attention paid to the impacts of interior enforcement.

The overview of the book was followed by a vigorous discussion that included immigration policy experts Alex Nowrasteh (director, Immigration Studies, and Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute), Theresa Cardinal Brown (director, Immigration and

Cross-Border Policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center), and Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda (associate professor, César E. Chávez Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCLA). Former Director of the Center on Children and Families Kristin Butcher moderated the event.

According to the book, two-thirds of undocumented immigrants have resided in the United States for over a decade, meaning that they have established families, careers, and ways of life in the United States, despite their immigration status. Current enforcement mechanisms, like detention and deportation, are disruptive to and traumatic for families. Personal narratives in the research demonstrate the sense of turmoil that unauthorized immigrants often face.

As one anecdote highlights, even minor infractions such as a traffic stop can negatively transform families. And among those who are not in direct contact with authorities, “chilling effects” from an aggressive system can have downstream repercussions. For example, under heightened enforcement, undocumented parents are likely to avoid enrolling their citizen children in social programs like SNAP and Medicaid. These chilling effects mean that U.S. citizen children are not receiving the benefits of societal investments for which they are eligible, according to the authors.

Panelists Alex Nowrasteh, Theresa Cardinal Brown, and Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda helped frame the policy discussion on interior enforcement. The panelists shared their thoughts on the current enforcement system and areas for innovation, while also highlighting how immigration has economic benefits for the United States:

High demand to come to the U.S. and restricted availability creates black markets. Legal pathways to immigration have become nearly impossible for most would-be migrants without specialized skills or close family ties. As Theresa Cardinal Brown lays out in a report published by the Bipartisan Policy Center, a more streamlined system could help with the burden of processing families and individuals attempting to come to the United States. Some recommendations she offers include increasing the number of immigration judges in the United States by 110 percent and mandating cases be heard within six months of arrival. Backlogs result in serious economic ramifications for immigrants but also the U.S. more broadly, causing what Brown refers to as “a black market in labor.”

We don’t need a vast immigration enforcement system if it’s a lot easier to come to the United States lawfully. Alex Nowrasteh discussed a blog he recently wrote for the Cato Institute, which looked at the allocation of employment-based green cards. In 2020, 54 percent of employment-based green cards went to the family members of immigrant workers compared to 46 percent being issued to workers themselves. Nowrasteh suggests ways to expand legal employment-based migration by changing the way family members and current HIB visa holders are counted, freeing up more spots under the cap to achieve labor market goals.

The resources that we spend on interior enforcement would be better spent on interior incorporation. In a report titled, “A Path to Prosperity: The Macroeconomic Benefits of Four Immigrant Regularization Scenarios,” Dr. Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda and his colleagues examine four different scenarios of incorporation, including (1) regularizing undocumented workers, (2) regularization of “essential” workers, (3) regularization of undocumented workers through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), and (4) regularizing workers through Temporary Protected Status (TPS). They estimate that regularizing all undocumented immigrants could generate \$1.5 trillion dollars in GDP over a ten-year period. These policy changes would also enhance social integration, access to safety net benefits, and quality of life for immigrants. Investing in incorporation, or how well immigrants can become members of and thrive in American society, is a crucial part of the conversation on immigration, says Hinojosa-Ojeda. As in the recent discussion of the role of immigration in caregiving for the elderly, the panelists in this CCF event called for significant reform of the nation’s immigration system.