



Fact check: Does U.S. spend more on undocumented immigrants than veterans?

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In a video of a meeting with voters, Arizona Republican U.S. Senate candidate Blake Masters describes what he believes is wrong with current immigration strategy. The problem begins, Masters said, with signaling to people here illegally that they can "come on in."

"Not only will you not be deported, but we'll treat you better than U.S. military veterans," Masters said in the video tweeted by a supporter Oct. 15. "Here's cash. Here's a cellphone. Here's a bus ticket. A plane ticket."

In fiscal year 2022, U.S. officials used immediate expulsion at the southern border more than 977,000 times, under a rule known as Title 42, a public health policy intended to prevent the introduction of a contagious disease into the U.S. through immigration. That's in addition to formal deportation proceedings through Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which totaled about 59,000 in fiscal year 2021.

But what caught our eye was Masters' comparison of the treatment of border crossers with treatment of veterans. We debunked this talking point when former President Donald Trump said it in 2016, and it remains wrong today.

Spending heavily favors veterans

At the very least, Masters' comparison faces one formidable number: \$269 billion, the amount the Veteran Affairs department received in fiscal year 2022. Most of that money goes to help veterans with health care, housing, job training and a host of other services.

There's no simple way to tally every single dollar the federal government spends to shelter, feed and provide medical care to immigrants in the U.S. illegally. We looked at some of the larger line-item expenses at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection and Health and Human Services. We found aggregate yearly spending in the neighborhood of \$11 billion.

That is a small fraction compared to spending on veterans.

David Bier, associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, called Masters' comparison "absurd."

"It's not remotely plausible to think immigrants crossing illegally receive greater benefits than veterans," Bier said. "Immigrants cannot access most federally funded benefits programs at all without legal status, and they do not receive any of the special assistance provided to veterans."

Masters campaign relies on incorrect and shaky examples

Masters mentioned cash, cellphones and bus and airline tickets. There are flaws with each argument.

Immigrants illegally in the country are ineligible for any form of federal cash assistance, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. (Some states allowed them to apply for one-time COVID-19 relief money.) In contrast, there are several federal cash aid programs for veterans. They include payments to low-income and disabled veterans, their surviving spouses and their dependent children. Congress appropriated \$139 billion in 2022 for veteran financial aid programs.

Some veterans are eligible for free cellphone service. And it's true that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcements will give smartphones to some immigrants. But those phones can't be used to make personal phone calls or browse the web. They are for tracking people who have been released from detention and are awaiting court hearings.

As for the bus and airline tickets, Republican governors in Texas and Florida have made headlines for busing or flying immigrants across the United States, including to Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., New York City and Chicago, but immigrants don't pick the destination. Those governors decided to move those people beyond their borders. Federal immigration officials fly detainees to detention centers, or pay to move an unaccompanied minor to a parent or sponsor.

Meanwhile, the VA covers transportation costs for any veteran who needs help getting to and from a health care center.

Katie Miller, an adviser to Masters' campaign, focused on the fate of homeless veterans, who she said "have been left to suffer, even die."

"More effort has gone into finding homes for almost 300,000 unaccompanied children, while no such comparable effort has been made to house veterans in need of housing or get treatment to veterans in need of treatment," Miller said.

We asked Miller where she got her number and she didn't explain further. The Department of Health and Human Services reported that it had sheltered 122,731 children in fiscal year 2021. As of June 2022, there were about 10,500 in the department's care.

Since July 2021, the VA has awarded nearly \$980 million to nonprofit organizations to keep veterans in their homes, or to find a permanent place to live if they were homeless. The VA reported that in 2022, so far it had placed 19,000 homeless veterans in homes.

Also, the department's 2022 budget included \$3 billion to help veterans buy homes.

Additional areas where veterans fare better than immigrants in the country illegally

Our past work has found key areas where the advantage goes to veterans.

Higher education: Veterans are eligible for higher education and training benefits. Students in the country illegally are not eligible for federal financial aid.

Health care: The VA health system and Medicaid are available for free to veterans in need. Although people in the country illegally can receive free emergency care, they are ineligible for Medicaid and any insurance through the Affordable Care Act.

Taxes and Social Security: Veteran benefits generally are tax-free. They can receive Social Security. Many workers who are in the country illegally pay taxes and pay into Social Security — a total of about \$12 billion in 2010, the most recent figure from the Social Security Administration — but, except in rare circumstances, are able to draw any benefits.

PolitiFact ruling

Masters said that immigrants in the country illegally are treated "better than military veterans."

The numbers tell a different story.

This year, the Department of Veterans Affairs has \$269 billion to help veterans get health care, pay their monthly bills, build their skills through education and training and buy homes. In the past year and a half, the department has released \$980 million to help move homeless veterans into permanent housing.

By comparison, federal aid for immigrants illegally in the country is limited. Masters' references to cash, cellphones and bus tickets were misleading and overlooked the wide gap between what veterans and immigrants in the country illegally receive.

We rate this claim False.