



The return of illegal immigration

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For opponents of illegal immigration, there is good news: We have found an effective method to reduce the number of new arrivals, while encouraging foreigners already here without permission to go home.

There is also bad news: The method is a long, severe recession.

It worked for a while. The unauthorized immigrant population topped out at 12.2 million in 2007, which was also the year the economy began an 18-month contraction. The ranks of interlopers shrank by nearly a million during the next two years, according to a new report by the Pew Research Center. But when the recession ended, so did the decline. It has “bottomed out, and the number may be rising again,” says Pew.

Apprehensions at the border, a rough indicator of the pace of attempted entries, followed a similar course. They started falling even before the recession, but they are now ticking upward.

Conservatives are rarely surprised to find that massive government programs are oversold, ineffective or even counterproductive. But they somehow expected the border control binge to turn out differently.

It didn't. The flow of illegal immigration continues even though the government has spent billions building nearly 700 miles of fence between the United States and Mexico. We have twice as many enforcement officers on the southern border as we had 10 years ago and five times as many as in 1993.

So what do hardliners in Congress propose to do about this conspicuous failure of government? Throw good money after bad. In June, the Senate voted to allocate a staggering \$46 billion to border security between 2014 and 2018.

It elected to double the size of the Border Patrol — even though, as Fawn Johnson of The National Journal notes, “Many of the border agents we already have spend a lot of time staring at sand.”

Anti-immigration groups think it’s about time. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, told The Washington Post, “The idea that the current level of enforcement is somehow adequate is not true.” He’s right that the current level of enforcement is not adequate. But the record suggests no level could ever be adequate.

Barack Obama has not been soft on the issue.

Last year, his administration deported a record 410,000 undocumented foreigners. But the threat of being caught and expelled has not caused a mass rush by immigrants to “self-deport,” as Mitt Romney hoped.

The implosion of the economy seems to be the chief reason for the small, temporary drop in the population of those living amid us without permission. But the overwhelming majority of those here illegally have stayed.

These failures illuminate the limits of enforcement and the importance of accepting reality. Granting most unauthorized immigrants an avenue to live here legally and eventually become citizens would foster assimilation and make it harder for employers to pay them lower wages than citizens. It would allow young people who did nothing wrong — because they were brought here as kids — to escape a dead end.

The state numbers in the Pew report suggest that the reason people come here, through hell and high water, is the lure of jobs — not, as commonly assumed, the appeal of free government benefits.

“Texas is the only state throughout the Great Recession that has seen an increase in illegal immigration,” points out policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the libertarian Cato Institute. What Texas offers is a stingy welfare system and a lot of companies eager to hire. Illinois and California, which essentially provide the opposite, saw their numbers drop.

Immigration reform would also have the unexpected effect of inducing some of those here illegally to depart. Before the crackdown, many undocumented foreigners felt free to go home for months or years, if not permanently. But as the cost and risk of sneaking in mushroomed, many of them decided that leaving is not an option.

A 2011 report from the National Academy of Sciences concluded that “rather than acting as a deterrent, increased enforcement appears to have other effects on migrant behavior: it increases the duration of trips and reduces the likelihood of return migration.” This effect is a big reason the undocumented population is so much bigger than it used to be.

The heavy enforcement approach, in short, has been a big federal undertaking stymied by individual choice and market forces, resulting in a huge waste of money. Who could have ever seen that coming?