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Democrats struggle to address rising border apprehensions as they seek to counter Trump on immigration

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Democrats who have railed against President Trump's national emergency as a manufactured crisis are facing a political dilemma as border apprehensions have spiked and are on pace for the highest level since 2008.

Since Trump took office, congressional Democrats have sought to counter his hard-line immigration agenda by pointing to federal data that showed unauthorized crossings had, in recent years, fallen to "historic lows." But after making the fewest apprehensions in 46 years in 2017, the head of Customs and Border Protection has warned that a recent surge of Central American families has left the agency at its "breaking point."

For Democrats eager to draw a sharp contrast with Trump ahead of the 2020 presidential election cycle, the growing number of migrants being apprehended threatens to puncture a reliable talking point and force them into a fraught choice: sound heightened alarms and risk affirming Trump's narrative of a border "crisis," or play down the rising numbers and risk appearing indifferent or negligent.

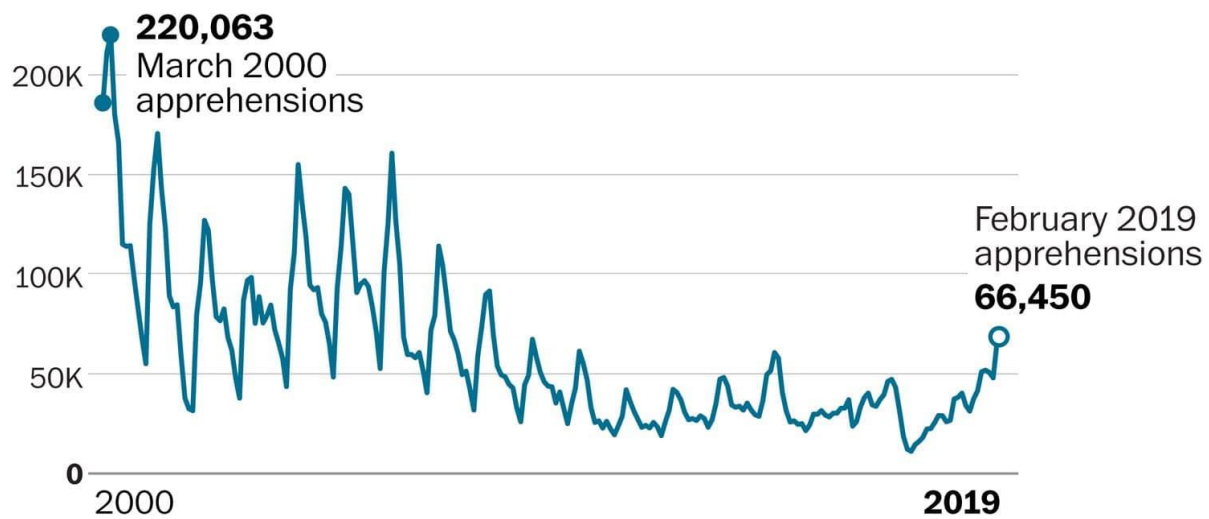
"Yes, we are in a crisis situation at the border — a humanitarian crisis, a refugee crisis. What Democrats are trying to deal with is: Is this an immigration crisis? Is this about illegal immigration? Not really," said Theresa Brown, a former CBP policy adviser who now works at the Bipartisan Policy Center. "Neither side is characterizing this accurately. But it's absolutely, 100 percent true that every part of our border management system is beyond capacity and completely overwhelmed right now."

Over the first five months of fiscal 2019, CBP had apprehended 268,044 migrants, on pace for more than 643,300 this year. If reached, that total would be the most since 705,005 in 2008 and more than twice as high as the 310,531 migrants taken into custody two years ago.

Trump and his supporters have been quick to use the new data to try to heighten tensions about threats at the border and paint Democrats as indifferent to an issue the president plans to make a central issue of his reelection campaign.

Southwest border apprehensions are rising

By month, since 2000



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection

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“We’re on track for a million illegal aliens to rush our borders,” Trump said, exaggerating the numbers, when he vetoed legislation last week that would have scuttled his attempt to secure funding for a wall by declaring a national emergency. “People hate the word ‘invasion,’ but that’s what it is.”

Democrats say they are determined to counter what they view as Trump’s irresponsible fearmongering over the security risks of the migrants and slow his push for a border wall. Experts have said the barrier would do little to stop the flow of Central Americans who seek to surrender to authorities in hopes of winning asylum protections.

In their fight, Democrats have pressed administration officials to acknowledge there is no emergency. During a Senate oversight hearing this month, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) asserted that border crossings “are still at a historic low compared to other times in our nation’s history.”

“No, Senator, they’re not,” CBP Commissioner Kevin McAleenan responded. “We’re on pace for over 700,000 crossings this year — that’s closer to historic highs than historic lows.”

After Blumenthal suggested the numbers were a fluke, McAleenan said: “We have to confront what’s happened in these five months . . . This is new, different and potentially worsening.”

In fact, the high-water mark for unauthorized crossings came in 2000, when 1.68 million migrants were apprehended, according to CBP figures. During the peak rates in the 1990s and early 2000s, when more than 1 million apprehensions in a year was common, the influx was driven largely by Mexican men sneaking across the border in search of jobs.

But over the past decade, the average number has plummeted to 400,751 per year. Federal officials attributed the steep decline to the start of the economic recession in 2007 and beefed-up border enforcement during the Obama and George W. Bush administrations.

And the makeup of the immigrants has changed radically. Immigration analysts emphasized that the families, mostly from Guatemala and Honduras, are in many cases fleeing poverty, hunger and political unrest and do not represent a national security threat, despite Trump's rhetoric.

"The Trump Administration is cooking the books to justify a vanity project that won't keep Americans safe. The fact is we're far closer to the lowest number of border apprehensions we've ever seen than the highest," Blumenthal said in a statement. "I've long called for the Administration to step up and work with Congress to fix our broken immigration system and invest in strategic border security — but the Administration's fraudulent fear-mongering does not work."

Blumenthal is far from the only Democrat to make that argument. In recent weeks, Reps. Ted Lieu (Calif.), Steve Cohen (Tenn.), Bennie Thompson (Miss.) and Sean Maloney (N.Y.) have issued tweets citing historically low numbers. In his State of the State address last month, California Gov. Gavin Newsom said: "Let us state the facts. We are currently experiencing the lowest number of border crossings since 1971."

Nathan Click, a spokesman for Newsom, said the governor is not ignoring the situation at the border, noting he has put money in the state's budget to build shelters for the Central American families, as they await their asylum court hearings.

"His point is these people are coming legally and using the system to flee violence and persecutions," Click said. "While CBP might dismiss that and lump everyone together, these are two very different things."

Thompson, the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, defended the committee's argument, made in a tweet on Feb. 15, that: "Undocumented border crossings are at *near historic* lows. There IS no emergency."

In a statement, Thompson acknowledged the rise in asylum-seeking families and said lawmakers should be addressing it as a "humanitarian challenge we must take on, not using it to manufacture a nonexistent security crisis and drum up fear of immigrants."

He criticized the Trump administration for making "hypothetical projections about border crossings off of a very short window of time" and for selectively presenting data "in its bad-faith effort to foster an anti-immigrant agenda."

But federal immigration authorities, including career officials who predate the Trump administration, have grown alarmed by the posture of Democrats. CBP and other federal agencies, including Health and Human Services, which provides shelter to migrant children, have reported operating at maximum capacity, with Border Patrol agents being pulled from the field to perform administrative tasks to process the families.

"I'm concerned about the lack of factual grounding in our political debate," said one senior U.S. official whose career has spanned multiple administrations. Democrats are "starting to not even believe data created by professionals," the official added, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal operations.

Republicans have seized on statements from Democrats to paint them as turning a blind eye to the mounting problems and make the case that the rising numbers at the border have proved Trump right about a "crisis" — even though the situation also threatens to highlight the

president's failure to make progress on his top campaign promise to reduce unauthorized immigration.

The Republican National Committee posted a video clip of Blumenthal's exchange with McAleenan on Twitter, where it has racked up more than 92,000 views.

"That argument's over," Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said of the Democrats' talking point.

Nowrasteh emphasized that dealing with the migrant families requires different solutions than Trump's wall, but he added of Democrats: "We should stop focusing on an argument that may have worked five years ago. We need to deal with reality now."

The reality is that more than 66,000 migrants were apprehended at the southern border in February — three times the number from the same month in 2017 — and the numbers are on track to surpass that in March, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said this week.

Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, a policy analyst at the American Immigration Council, said the Trump administration has failed to present the full picture. He noted that the number of undocumented immigrants in the country soared from an estimated 3 million to a peak of 11 million from 1993 through 2007 — meaning that, in addition to those who were apprehended, millions more successfully sneaked through.

A federal study found the number of immigrants who have evaded apprehension at the border has been cut dramatically over the past decade.

"Yes, we're currently at a moment, due to the humanitarian crisis in Central America, where the apprehension numbers are higher now," Reichlin-Melnick said. "But if you're looking at the broader context of just how insecure the border was pre-2008, compared to today, we are still at historic lows."