

Trump's statistics about unauthorised immigrants are questioned by experts

Mihir Zaver

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President Donald Trump came away empty-handed for now after the longest federal government shutdown in American history failed to pressure Congress into funding his long-promised border wall, purportedly to stop an inflow of drugs and crime from Mexico.

But he is not done making his case on immigration.

On Sunday, he rattled off several figures on Twitter about how many unauthorised immigrants there are in the United States, how much they cost the country financially and how many had illegally voted in Texas.

There were already many problems with Trump's assertion that unauthorised immigrants disproportionately bring with them more drugs and crime. And several experts said they had concerns with the figures he disseminated Sunday.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

— Noncitizens casting votes in Texas

In one tweet Sunday, Trump said that "58,000 non-citizens voted in Texas, with 95,000 noncitizens registered to vote." He was citing an investigation that Texas officials had publicised days earlier but which Democrats in the state immediately questioned.

The investigation, by the Texas secretary of state's office, said that 95,000 people who were registered to vote in the state had at some point told a law enforcement agency that they were not citizens. Out of that number, 58,000 had voted at some point since 1996.

Politicians and voters' advocates are asking officials to investigate both figures.

"Because we have consistently seen Texas politicians conjure the specter of voter fraud as pretext to suppress legitimate votes, we are naturally skeptical," state Rep. Rafael Anchia, a Democrat in the state House, told The New York Times.

Even if the numbers are deemed accurate, those 58,000 voters could have become citizens before casting ballots. More than 50,000 people were naturalised in Texas in 2017, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

"We have a reason to distrust these numbers," said Andre Segura, the legal director for the ACLU of Texas. "There's a long history of these numbers being inaccurate. Voter fraud is extremely rare."

In Florida, the administration of the former governor, Rick Scott, had tried to purge noncitizens from voter rolls in 2012. It started with a list of 180,000 voters based on driver's license data, according to The Tampa Bay Times. Ultimately, 85 people were removed from the rolls, according to the newspaper.

— The cost of illegal immigration

In another tweet, Trump said that “the cost of illegal immigration so far this year is \$18,959,495,168. Cost Friday was \$603,331,392.”

It is not clear where Trump arrived at those figures. They track with a tweet from last month in which he declared that the country loses “250 Billion Dollars a year on illegal immigration.”

But several experts said those figures were far too high.

There is little research on how much unauthorised immigrants cost the United States. The highest costs would generally be related to education and health care, but many unauthorised immigrants pay taxes and are typically barred from receiving many of the costliest benefits, like Medicaid.

No study seems to comprehensively address a net cost, instead focusing on either the costs or the benefits.

“They tend to talk past each other, unfortunately,” said Randy Capps, the director of research for American programs at the Migration Policy Institute.

The National Academy of Sciences concluded in 2016 that immigration, both legal and illegal, benefited the economy. It said that the average immigrant cost state and local governments about \$1,600 a year from 2011 to 2013, but that their children and grandchildren paid far more in taxes than they consumed in public services.

Alex Nowrasteh, a senior immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said the highest figure he had seen came from the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favours restricting immigration. It has said unauthorised immigrants cost the country at least \$116 billion per year.

The Cato Institute disputes that figure, which Nowrasteh said did not take into account the economic benefits of unauthorised immigrants. He and others have questioned the group's methodology.

“There's no basis to any of those numbers about the fiscal cost,” he said. “The president's numbers are even twice as bad.”

— Number of undocumented immigrants in the country

Trump also claimed that in the United States there are “at least 25,772,342 illegal aliens, not the 11,000,000 that have been reported for years.”

Again, several experts said Trump's numbers were too high.

It appears that Trump is making his claim based on a study conducted by researchers affiliated with Yale University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which estimated the number at 22 million.

Starting with an estimate in 1990, the researchers modelled how the population would change in future years based on immigration rates, demographic change and deportations, among other factors, eventually arriving at the 22 million estimate.

The conclusions of that study, published in the journal PLOS One in September, have been challenged, with some questioning whether it underestimated the number of immigrants who had left the country.

The researchers have also acknowledged that their results diverge from existing estimates. Most other studies say the number is around 11 million or 12 million. The Pew Research Center estimated that it was about 10.7 million in 2016. In 2015, the Department of Homeland Security estimated the number to be 12 million.

“There’s been no evidence of a new, rapid increase of the population,” Capps said.

William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, said the methodology used by Pew had been vetted over decades.

“They have a general sense that what they are doing is reasonably OK,” he said of the Pew researchers. “I trust them. They have been doing this for a long time.”