

Andres Oppenheimer: Instead of a border wall to fix a crisis that doesn't exist, Trump should fix America's crumbling infrastructure

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President Trump used fake data in his national address Tuesday to create a climate of anti-immigrant hysteria and get U.S. taxpayers to pay \$5.7 billion for a border wall, but the fact remains that illegal immigration is at historic lows, and that undocumented immigrants commit far fewer crimes than native-born Americans.

Unless you are a Martian who just landed on Earth —or a regular viewer of Fox News—you should know by now that Trump's border wall project is a non-solution to a non-problem.

In fact, no serious study backs up Trump's claims to justify spending billions in taxpayers' money for a border wall, which he had originally promised would be paid for by Mexico.

Is there an invasion of illegal immigrants, as Trump claims? No. Despite a small uptick in recent months, border apprehensions of undocumented immigrants —a good way of measuring the influx —have plummeted from about 1.1 million in 2005 to 400,000 in 2017, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection figures.

Will the border wall stop illegal immigration? No. Two-thirds of all undocumented immigrants do not enter the country through the southern border. They arrive at U.S. airports with valid tourist or student visas and overstay their period of admission, according to a 2017 study by the nonpartisan Center for Migration Studies.

Does illegal immigration hurt Americans' jobs? No, false again. Most economists agree that undocumented immigrants do jobs that Americans don't want to do. In addition, with a historically low 3.9 percent unemployment rate, America's needs more immigrant workers to fill many construction and hospitality jobs.

Are undocumented immigrants violent criminals? No. On the contrary, undocumented immigrants commit fewer violent crimes than native-born Americans, according to a 2018 study by the libertarian CATO Institute. When I asked Cato Institute senior immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh about Trump's claim that 63,000 Americans have been killed by illegal immigrants, he told me, "That's just nonsense."

Are illegal drugs coming from Mexico killing more Americans than were killed during the Vietnam War? Totally misleading. The current U.S. opioid crisis has many sources, including heroin coming from the southern border, doctor-prescribed drugs, and synthetic drugs coming

from China through U.S. airports. Trump has deceptively put all hard drug-related deaths in the same bag —and blamed Mexico for them.

Trump is clearly trying to create an immigration crisis to fire up his base and divert attention from his mounting legal troubles. He wants TV networks to talk about an alleged immigration crisis, instead of focusing on the Mueller investigation into his campaign's ties with Russia and on more than a dozen other inquiries into alleged campaign violations, conflicts of interest and corruption.

He is also seeking a face-saving way out of the government shutdown that he himself created by linking congressional approval for the wall to keeping the government open. He may even declare an immigration "emergency" to bypass Congress and approve the funds for the wall by executive order.

Instead of using taxpayers' money to build his useless \$5.7 billion border wall —which migrants would cross anyway, whether by digging tunnels under it or climbing over it —Trump should use that money to rebuild America's crumbling infrastructure.

As anybody who flies from Beijing or other modern Asian airports to the United States can tell you, arriving at the biggest U.S. airports increasingly feels like landing in a Third World country. Rather than building a "big, beautiful wall" in the desert, Trump should modernize airports in New York, Los Angeles and Miami.

Our roads, bridges and internet connectivity are way behind other industrialized countries. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) estimates that the country will need to spend about \$4.5 trillion by 2025 to update its infrastructure, including roads, bridges and dams.

Trump could also put the \$5.7 billion in federal funds to much better use by significantly upgrading existing trade agreements with Central America to promote economic development across the region and reduce the pressure for migration.

Unfortunately, Trump's whole charade about the border wall has nothing to do with stopping crime or improving Americans' lives. It's populist demagoguery, a huge smokescreen to shift our attention away from Trump's legal troubles.