



## Number of Criminals in Migrant Caravan – Does It Matter?

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When President Donald Trump told VOA's Greta Van Susteren last week that 650 members of the migrant caravan in Mexico were "stone-cold criminals," he elevated the number to a new high.

Since the beginning of November, the number of criminals accompanying the various migrant caravans has more than doubled, according to the administration.

The numbers matter because they are part of the argument for extending the mission of some 7,000 troops at the U.S.-Mexico border through January, and for a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) request, reported by Politico, for federal police officers to help at the border. And they are disputed. Immigration advocates and critics of Trump's border policies believe the numbers are exaggerated to generate a false crisis at the border.

The DHS' on-the-record comments show the criminal count has gone from a low of 270 to the recent high of 650.

Nov. 1: "So far, there are over 270 individuals along the caravan route that have criminal histories, including known gang membership." (DHS fact sheet)

Nov. 19: "We've identified more than 500 criminals travelling with the caravan flow." (DHS official told reporters on a press conference call)

Nov. 26: "We have confirmed that there are over 600 convicted criminals traveling with the caravan flow." (DHS Secretary Kirsten Nielsen wrote in a Facebook post)

Nov. 30: "And you see what's happening when you have MS-13 and these gang members, and look at the caravan. Now, they have over 650 people that are absolutely stone-cold criminals." (Trump to VOA's Van Susteren)

"This number changes," a DHS official explained during the Nov. 19 press call. "People enter and leave that caravan flow throughout the journey. But we are very confident in our assertion that there are criminal elements within the caravan seeking to exploit it to gain entry into the United States or to actually to exploit other individuals in the caravan."

How does DHS calculate the numbers?

DHS has said little about how it makes assessments.

"Some of the details are law enforcement sensitive, so we can't release those publicly," DHS press secretary Tyler Houlton said last week.

U.S. Customs and Border Patrol Commissioner Kevin McAleenan was a fraction more forthcoming, telling reporters after CBP agents used tear gas on about 500 protesting migrants last week, “That [the number] is gathered through direct engagement, as well as information-sharing with our government of Mexico partners.”

But not knowing how the numbers are generated makes them impossible to confirm or disprove.

DHS has used annual arrest numbers to demonstrate that criminals were likely to be part of the caravan. In fiscal year 2018, CBP apprehended 17,256 criminals trying to cross illegally along the southwest border, as well as 1,019 gang members.

The criminals were among a total of 396,579 undocumented border crossers in 2018. So, 4.4 percent were criminals and 0.3 percent were gang members.

A report issued by DHS in August about the 2014 immigrant surge is consistent, saying that 5 percent of the people apprehended at the southern border had a criminal record. (About 50 percent of those apprehended were from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.)

600 out of how many?

San Diego Sector Border Patrol Chief Agent Rodney Scott told reporters last week that there are about 6,000 migrants in Tijuana, and another 2,000 in Mexicali. If that is the group within which DHS is identifying criminals, 600 comes to about 7.5 percent, higher than the stats from earlier years.

But the DHS official on the Nov. 19 call, after citing the same Tijuana statistics, said, “The combination of all groups trying to reach the United States is between around 8,500 and 10,500.”

Six hundred in 10,500 is about 5.7 percent — still high, but closer to previous years.

‘Stone-cold criminals’

Neither the president nor DHS are specific about what they consider “criminal” charges or convictions.

Were the charges in the U.S.? In the migrant’s home country? Were they immigration offenses such as re-entering the U.S. illegally?

“It’s important to note that these are also violent criminals,” DHS press secretary Houlton told reporters.

“This includes individuals known to law enforcement for assault, battery, drug crimes, burglary, rape, child abuse and more. This is serious,” DHS Secretary Nielsen said in her Facebook post.

Last week, the CBP announced an arrest on Nov. 24 by border patrol agents of a convicted murderer from Honduras “after he illegally entered the United States with other members of the migrant caravan.” Agents discovered documents showing the 46-year-old man had been recently released from prison in Honduras on murder charges.

Yet, DHS data show that 32 percent of the undocumented immigrants deported in fiscal year 2014 as “criminal aliens” were convicted of illegal entry. Sixteen percent were removed for drug offenses; 14 percent for traffic offenses; 10 percent were removed for assault; and 1.7 percent for sexual assault.

One group that is unlikely to be included in DHS' group of criminals is Middle Eastern terrorists as hinted at in an October tweet by Trump.

A new study by the immigration hard-line group Center for Immigration Studies says that based on publicly available source material, "15 suspected terrorists have been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, or en route to it, since 2001."

To CIS, this "soundly refute[s] public suggestions that suspected terrorists have never crossed the southern border."

Alex Nowrasteh with the libertarian Cato Institute, thinks the report shows how remote the threat is.

"If the goal of this CIS report was to show how small the terrorist threat along the Mexican border is, then it succeeded marvelously."