

THEWEEK

Fact check: how much does illegal immigration cost the US?

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Donald Trump has been accused of exaggerating the cost of illegal immigration as he seeks to secure federal funding for his long-promised wall along the Mexico border.

As a partial government shutdown looms over a spending bill that includes an additional \$5bn for Trump's wall, The Week takes a closer look at the range of figures cited by the president.

What has Trump said?

"Illegal immigration costs our nation \$275bn a year," Trump said at the White House yesterday.

"You hear many different numbers. You can say, 'billions and billions,' but the number that I hear most accurate is \$275bn a year - at least."

But earlier this week, Trump took to Twitter to claim that the cost was "more than \$200bn". Two weeks ago, the president said the number was \$250bn. Last month, it was \$210bn. In 2015, Trump claimed the country's fiscal burden from illegal immigration was \$113bn a year.

The figures cited by Trump suggest an increase of \$40bn from November 5 to December 4 and an increase of another \$25bn from December 4 to December 20, says the [Washington Post](#).

"That is a stunning increase of about \$1.4 or \$1.5bn a day in the cost of illegal immigration annually - an increase that would certainly be worrisome if it had any attachment at all to reality," the newspaper adds.

Where are these figures from?

The White House has not provided data to back up the president's claims, and policy experts on both sides of the immigration debate are unable to account for them.

"I have no idea where that number comes from," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian research organisation.

"It seems to be conjured out of thin air. I haven't seen any fiscal cost estimates, either reputable or disreputable, that place the number at \$200bn per year," he told [Business Insider](#).

Trump's numbers have left "even those sympathetic to the president's position scratching their heads," according to the [Associated Press](#).

"I'm not sure where the president got his numbers," said Dave Ray, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which aims to reduce legal and illegal immigration.

What does the research say?

It is “difficult to pin a hard number on the cost of illegal immigration, because there’s limited data on the population living in the United States illegally,” says Politifact.

But several immigration experts told the US fact checking website they were unaware of any study pegging immigration losses or costs at \$250bn a year.

A report published by the right-wing organisation Fair in 2017 estimated that illegal immigrants were costing the US around \$135 billion a year.

Taxpayers are forced to “shell out approximately \$134.9bn to cover the costs incurred by the presence of more than 12.5 million illegal aliens, and about 4.2 million citizen children of illegal aliens” at the federal, state and local level, the report concluded.

However, policy experts claim there are serious flaws in the study’s methodology and accuse the report’s authors of inflating the number of illegal immigrants in the country.

Fair’s method of estimating fiscal costs is “fatally flawed” and “rejected by all economists who work on this subject,” says the Cato Institute.

Using the average number of illegal immigrants as estimated by the Pew Research Center instead of FAIR’s number lowers their report’s estimated cost by \$11.6 billion, it adds.

A separate report by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office in 2007 concluded that while it is “difficult to obtain precise estimates,” the net impact of illegal immigrants on state and local budgets was “most likely modest.”

Michelle Mittelstadt, from the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute said that the numbers used by advocacy groups on both sides of the issue are notoriously flawed because “they don’t look at the other side of the ledger.”

“Doing a rigorous analysis that fully captures costs and economic contributions to come up with a net fiscal impact is quite complicated, because it is far easier to assess the cost side of the ledger [...] than it is to capture the full economic activity generated by unauthorized immigrants,” she told AP.

Who is right?

Estimates of the cost of illegal immigration vary widely due to a lack of data on the number of people living in the US illegally. However, none of them come close to the numbers cited by President Trump.