

Trump tweets anti-immigrant study, says, 'Wall will pay for itself'

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March 13, 2018

President Donald Trump shared a tweet Tuesday morning citing what sounded like a new study showing that his proposed border-wall expansion would pay for itself by reducing the number of undocumented immigrants who receive federal welfare benefits.

The study was actually published more than a year ago by the Center for Immigration Studies, a group that regularly publishes reports that support increases in immigration enforcement and reductions in all immigration, legal and illegal.

The report's reemergence is perfectly timed: Trump headed to California Tuesday morning to get his first up-close look at eight prototypes for a border wall, his signature campaign promise.

Trump's tweet quoted a Fox News tweet and article, which referenced a "new study" and linked to the New York Post column. That column did not clarify that the CIS study being referenced is more than a year old. Breitbart also published a story on it Monday that was shared widely.

Trump's tweet suggests that undocumented immigrants use federal welfare benefits when, in fact, they are legally barred from receiving public assistance.

"It's just not true that unauthorized immigrants use welfare," said Randy Capps, director of research, U.S. programs, at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. "They are not eligible for it. Their kids might, but that is not what he said."

The CIS report claims that over the course of a lifetime, the average undocumented immigrant uses \$74,722 more in public services than they pay in taxes because they tend to have low levels of education, and therefore earn less in wages than people with higher levels of education.

"If a border wall stopped between 160,000 and 200,000 illegal crossers — 9 to 12 percent of those expected to successfully cross in the next decade — the fiscal savings would equal the \$12 to \$15 billion cost of the wall," the CIS report said, relying on a cost estimate that Senate leader Mitch McConnell gave in January 2017.

During Trump's border visit, a White House official stressed the same idea, telling traveling reporters that the wall would save the country money.

But that is not how federal spending works, Capps said. The government would not stop spending money on government programs just because fewer undocumented immigrants entered the country.

"Where is the evidence that we would need to spend less on military, general government, highways, and basic infrastructure just because a hundred thousand fewer people crossed the border illegally every year?" Capps said.

Capps also pointed out that the number of people who arrive legally and then overstay visas now outnumbers those who enter the country by crossing the border illegally.

"So the implication that the wall is going to solve the problem" is incorrect, Capps said. "If unauthorized immigrants cost more the wall is only addressing a small share of that cost."

Other researchers criticized the CIS report when it first came out.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, wrote last April that "the border wall would have to deter the entry of about 1 million illegal immigrants over the next ten years to break even — an estimated 5 to 6.3 times as many as CIS estimated.

"Furthermore, this means that the border wall would have to permanently deter 59 percent of the predicted border crossers over the next ten years to break even. This does not include the cost of any additional enforcement measures such as hiring more border agents, border returns, or border deportations."

Demonstrators in San Diego protest plans for Donald Trump's border wall on Tuesday, March 13, 2018, ahead of the president's visit to California. USA TODAY Network

Cato also estimated that the average undocumented immigrant uses closer to \$43,444 more in public services than they pay in taxes, and that building and maintaining a wall would cost closer to \$43.8 billion.

"Those who support Trump's border wall should be able to make the case without relying on unrealistically cheap construction costs and outrageous estimates of the number of illegal immigrants that it will deter."

Shortly after the report was published, the Southern Poverty Law Center added the Center for Immigration Studies to its list of hate groups for its "decades-long history of circulating racist writers, while also associating with white nationalists."

Still, the tweet sparked the conversations it was likely intended to: Trump supporters who are excited about an expanded border wall shared it as proof for their mission, while people against the wall criticized the change of course after Trump previously said he would make Mexico pay for the wall.

Two-thirds of Arizonans oppose Trump's plans for a border wall, according to a North American Research Partnership poll in December.