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## Blankenship statement on immigration mostly false

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Seeking to represent West Virginia in the U.S. Senate, former coal mining executive Don Blankenship called for an end to illegal immigration, saying it costs billions of dollars a year.

"We have to stop illegal immigration, costing us \$130 billion a year to house and feed and give benefits to people that shouldn't be even in the country," Blankenship said during an April 23 debate among Republican primary candidates.

We wanted to know the facts behind Blankenship's claim on the cost of illegal immigration.

Blankenship's statement stems from a report by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) that said illegal immigration costs about \$135 billion a year. The group favors stricter immigration policies.

The report has drawn criticism for some of its assumptions, such as a higher-than-usual estimate of immigrants in the country illegally (12.5 million, higher than the typically reported 11 million) and for excluding tax contributions made by U.S.-born children to parents here illegally.

Overall, it's difficult to determine a precise cost of illegal immigration due to lack of reliable data.

### **Report did not focus on housing costs**

FAIR's report said illegal immigration costs about \$135 billion a year, and that immigrants who are here illegally contribute about \$19 billion in taxes annually. That puts net costs at about \$116 billion a year.

Blankenship said illegal immigration must be stopped because it costs \$130 billion a year to house, feed and give benefits to people who shouldn't even be in the United States.

But FAIR's report did not include estimates for the cost of public housing benefits, citing a lack of reliable information.

The group also noted most welfare programs are not available to immigrants in the country illegally. But the group factored in costs for programs that benefit children born in the United States to parents here illegally.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, criticized FAIR for calculating welfare used by U.S.-born children, but failing to add in their potential tax contributions once they start working.

"Counting the benefits consumed but ignoring the tax revenue they pay (or will do so in the future) is one way FAIR gets such a negative result for this report," Nowrasteh wrote in a September 2017 post enumerating flaws in the report.

FAIR estimated that the welfare of illegal immigration amounts to about \$5.8 billion a year at the federal level and \$2.9 billion a year at the state level (including school meals and child care programs).

### **Experts' critique**

We asked more experts about the validity of FAIR's findings.

Their estimate is reasonable, though the cost could be more or could be less, said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors low-immigration levels.

Even though most immigrants living illegally in the United States come to work and pay billions in taxes, that does not make them a net fiscal benefit, Camarota said.

Other experts said there were flaws. For one, the report's bottom line included federal immigration enforcement costs.

"It seems ridiculous to attribute the costs of border security to unauthorized immigrants. Would people prefer we had no border security so then the costs of unauthorized immigration would be lower?" said Madeline Zavodny, an immigration expert and economics professor at the University of North Florida.

Enforcement is aimed not only at reducing unauthorized immigration but also at reducing drug smuggling and trafficking, Zavodny said.

Kim Rueben, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, said, "They are doing things in a way to try to exaggerate what the possible cost could be."

FAIR also factored in about \$3.5 billion for assumed Medicaid fraud.

We've fact-checked several other claims about the cost of illegal immigration based on FAIR's reports, with experts raising concerns about their methodology and assumptions.

In 2016, we rated Mostly False a claim from then-presidential candidate Donald Trump when he claimed that illegal immigration cost the United States more than \$113 billion a year, finding that he selected the highest of all possible estimates from a range that varied widely.

### **Our ruling**

Blankenship said, "We have to stop illegal immigration, costing us \$130 billion a year to house and feed and give benefits to people that shouldn't be even in the country."

Immigrants in the country illegally generate costs for taxpayers, but it's difficult to determine a precise figure largely because there isn't reliable data. Blankenship's claim is based on a 2017 FAIR report estimating illegal immigration cost about \$135 billion a year.

Experts picked apart many aspects of the report's methodology. But relevant to Blankenship's statement, the group's estimate did not factor in housing costs.

For all welfare costs brought on by illegal immigration, FAIR calculated about \$5.8 billion a year at the federal level and \$2.9 billion a year at the state level (including school meals and child care programs).

Blankenship's statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression. We rate it Mostly False.