



Commentary: Want to stop illegal immigration? Allow more legal immigrants

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President Donald Trump's insistence on tighter immigration policies could reach an apex by Dec. 21, when a partial government shutdown looms without a new funding bill. Trump, no fan of immigrant "caravans" heading our way through Mexico, is pushing to include \$5 billion for his long sought-after border wall.

Oddly enough, to stop illegal immigration we need more —not less —immigration (of the legal variety).

Trump's solution resonates with many Americans who believe entering the country illegally makes one a criminal by nature and likely to commit future crimes, or that disregard for U.S. border policy undermines law and order in America. The president himself has referred to these immigrants as drug dealers, rapists, and gang members.

And indeed, most Americans would never sneak into another country, right? Probably not.

But why? Is it out of respect for other countries' laws and borders? Surely that's true, but no. Most Americans would simply never need to. Anyone who holds a U.S. passport can legally enter 186 countries around the world —many without a visa and essentially no questions asked. By contrast, the United States only extends this courtesy to 40 countries, primarily to European and high-income countries.

The easiest way to stop illegal immigration into the United States —and even address related border security and public safety issues —would be extending this benefit to more countries. The vast majority of individuals crossing the southern border pose no threat to public safety. Recent research by the Cato Institute showed that fewer than 1 percent of Texas' undocumented population had criminal convictions, consistent with earlier nationwide research. The only crime most undocumented immigrants will ever commit is crossing the border, which they only do because there is no legal alternative. Allowing them through legal ports of entry would prevent them from breaking the law and also allow officials to screen and record their identities.

Since 1990 the budget for the Border Patrol has increased tenfold with no real impact on illegal border crossings and apprehensions. Apprehensions were largely unchanged between 1990 and 2007, yet the undocumented population grew. Both declined after 2008, though this was largely due to economic factors, not enforcement.

There is one discernable impact of increased enforcement: higher costs associated with crossing the border. Smugglers charge higher prices to get people over the border, and those crossing face higher risk of injury and death on more dangerous terrain.

Higher smuggling costs make it more appealing for criminals to establish sophisticated smuggling operations. Once across the border, gangs will often hold their clients for additional ransom or traffic them into sex work.

More legal, documentable border crossings would undercut the profitability of smuggling, keeping thousands of people from the mercy of truly violent criminals. It would also remove pressure from the Border Patrol and allow them to more effectively keep America safe. Every hour the Border Patrol spends stopping, transporting, and filing paperwork for economic migrants is an hour they are not out patrolling for dangerous criminals.

It is possible that once legal immigrants enter in the United States, they might not return home. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that in 2016, 1.25 percent of legal entrants (or more than 600,000 people) did not leave when they were supposed to. While this percentage might increase if we allowed more Mexicans and Central Americans to come in legally, history shows that it likely wouldn't increase by much.

Prior to the dramatic increases in border enforcement in recent years, many who came into the United States illegally would only stay for short periods of time to, for example, work seasonal agricultural jobs. However, after the costs and uncertainty of crossing the border increased, more chose not to return home for fear they could not cross again. Somewhat counterintuitively, more legal immigration would actually allow many undocumented immigrants to return to their native countries.

But what if they didn't? Suppose they did decide to stay. Many would ask, "How could we be so foolish and let them in when we knew they would stay?" The real question we should be asking ourselves is, "why were we trying to keep them out in the first place?"