Congress’s Ongoing Immigration Failure Leaves Taxpayers Stuck with the Tab

Congress’ failure to fix the broken immigration system has led to record and wasteful government spending on immigration enforcement. The insistence of some Members of Congress to enforce outdated rules that haven’t changed in more than 20 years has come at an unjustifiably high cost to the American taxpayer. Billions of dollars could be saved if government agencies better used the resources they’ve already been allocated, if Congress terminated wasteful or duplicative programs, refocused our enforcement priorities on real threats, or were not bogged down in the apprehension, detention, and removal of immigrants who have become an essential part of our workforce. Our broken immigration system encourages law-breaking, waste, and extravagant spending, and it is long past time for Congress to pass needed reforms so that we have the legal tools to protect our citizens and spend their dollars wisely.

Yet rather than address the problem directly through comprehensive immigration reform, Congress continues to aimlessly throw money at wasteful enforcement programs. For example:

- **THE GOVERNMENT SPENDS $23,000 TO DEPORT A SINGLE IMMIGRANT.** In 2010, our Government deported 197,000 immigrants with no criminal record. At $23,000 per removal, taxpayers are shelling out more than $4.5 billion per year to remove immigrants who would otherwise be law-abiding taxpayers themselves if allowed to stay.

- **THE AVERAGE YEARLY BUDGET INCREASE FOR BORDER PATROL IS AN ASTRONOMICAL $300 MILLION.** Since 2005, the budget for the Border Patrol has gone up an average of $300 million per year, despite declining numbers of people crossing the border illegally. Simply stopping increases in the budget would save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars per year.

- **THE GOVERNMENT SPENDS $7,500 FOR EVERY APPREHENSION AT THE BORDER.** In 2005, government expenses for border security equaled approximately $1,400 for each person apprehended on the border. Today, the government spends more than $7,500 for each apprehension, a 500% increase.

- **KEEPING THE NATIONAL GUARD AT THE BORDER COSTS TAXPAYERS $300 MILLION ANNUALLY.** In addition to the Border Patrol, we are spending more than $300 million per year to keep 1,200 National Guard troops on the border. When these troops were deployed, crime rates were already down in the border region, and many border communities ranked among the safest in the country.

- **WASTEFUL AND FLAWED 287(G) PROGRAM COSTS TAXPAYERS $68 MILLION ANNUALLY.** Congress has appropriated so much money for enforcement that
billions are being wasted. Deeply flawed programs receive funding year after year. Ending the 287(g) program, for example, would save $68 million per year.

Instead of maintaining the unsustainable status quo, Congress should act immediately to reform the broken immigration system. Doing so would save taxpayers billions of dollars, while simultaneously injecting an additional $1.5 trillion into the economy over the next 10 years. In the meantime, they should shift funding and prioritize spending on ports of entry to intercept illegal activity and to promote commerce, trade, and tourism. Additionally, the resulting judicial backlog created by all of this lopsided and wasteful enforcement means that Congress should increase funding for the immigration court system to keep pace with the massive caseload and tackle the backlog of federal judicial confirmations. Finally, Congress should establish a methodology to ensure that additional enforcement spending is justified by demonstrating its value and effectiveness.

For its part, the Administration must do a better job of adhering to their stated priority of focusing on real threats to public safety, and not the unfocused mass deportation of immigrants. Rather than endlessly prolonging failed programs like 287(g), the Administration should weed out initiatives that fail to meet enforcement priorities.
Introduction

The last decade has witnessed enormous expansion of immigration enforcement efforts, both at the borders and in the interior of the United States. In 2010, the government carried out more deportations than ever before and deployed more enforcement agents to the border than at any time in our history. 

Correspondingly, the federal government is spending more money than ever on border and immigration enforcement. Budgets for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have grown steadily since they were created as part of the new Department of Homeland Security in 2003. The Fiscal Year 2011 budget submitted to Congress last February requested a staggering $11.1 billion for CBP and $5.8 billion for ICE.\(^1\)

Many members of Congress have repeatedly said that they want to see the border “secured” before they will consider fixing our immigration system, widely acknowledged to be broken. Security benchmarks that Congress identified in 2007 as a prerequisite for an immigration overhaul have long been met. In fact, the Obama Administration has broken every record for arrests, removals, and worksite audits. Even so, Congress has failed to resolve the broken immigration system through necessary and comprehensive immigration reform. Instead, when enforcement benchmarks have been met, Congress has responded by setting new benchmarks. It continues to appropriate ever-larger sums for border security and enforcement.

The ballooning immigration enforcement complex operates at enormous cost to taxpayers. However, the need to continue its rapid expansion is questionable. For example, the number of people arrested trying to cross the border illegally, used as a proxy for measuring the total number of people trying to cross illegally, is at its lowest point since 1972. Still, Congress repeatedly funds increases in the construction of infrastructure and technology to find and apprehend those crossing illegally along the U.S.-Mexican border, and Border Patrol staffing is still on an upward trajectory.\(^2\) As expenditures for border security continue to increase while apprehensions on the border decline, it is clear that without comprehensive immigration reform our marginal return on investment in border enforcement is rapidly diminishing.

It is increasingly difficult to justify the record spending for immigration enforcement in the context of our economic crisis and massive budget deficit. Those fiscal realities demand that we take a hard look at enforcement spending and assess its effectiveness to the nation, while Congress fails to pass reform that would create a functioning immigration system.

The Southwest Border

Unprecedented manpower, infrastructure, and technology for border security efforts have been deployed in the last decade—the vast majority of which have been directed at surveillance and manpower between ports of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border. 

**Border Patrol and More:** Beginning with manpower, the Border Patrol more than doubled its force on the Southwest border between 2000 and 2009, mushrooming from 8,580 to more than 17,400 agents.\(^3\) There are 17 Border Enforcement Security Teams, including hundreds of
agents led by ICE that focus on dismantling criminal organizations in the border region.\textsuperscript{iv} 1,200 National Guard troops patrol the southwest border, as well as thousands of federal law enforcement agents from ICE, the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the US Marshals Service, and CBP.\textsuperscript{v} Federal courts in the Southwest, whose criminal dockets are dominated by immigration prosecutions, hear more than 75% of all the federal criminal prosecutions in the country.\textsuperscript{vi}

**Technology and Infrastructure:** Congress has also provided enormous sums for security infrastructure to Customs and Border Protection, which includes the Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations (the office that manages ports of entry). There are 649 miles of border fencing, 139 Border Patrol stations, and 37 Border Patrol checkpoints. On the lookout for unlawful traffic is a vast panoply of electronic surveillance and communications equipment, including 10,000 ground sensors, as well as sensor and communications towers, mobile surveillance systems, and thousands of cameras with infra-red night vision.\textsuperscript{vii} A total of 290 aircraft are deployed daily for surveillance, along with mobile surveillance systems and remote video surveillance. In addition, there are radiation monitors to detect smuggling of people, drugs, and dangerous materials.\textsuperscript{viii}

In August 2010, following the public furor over the murder of a rancher near the Arizona-Mexico border, Congress passed an emergency supplemental border appropriations bill, providing funding for 1,000 additional Border Patrol agents and 250 new Customs and Border Protection Officers.\textsuperscript{ix} It augmented federal law enforcement in the Southwest border districts by adding seven ATF Gunrunner Teams, five FBI Hybrid Task Forces, additional DEA agents, equipment, operational support, and over 30 prosecutors and immigration judges. With U.S. crime rates and unlawful cross-border traffic at historic lows, how these additional government agents will contribute to safety, security, or prosperity in the border region is unclear.

**The Pricetag:** Since the passage of the Secure Fence Act in 2006, American taxpayers have spent nearly $50 billion on border security.\textsuperscript{x} Spending by Customs and Border Protection has more than doubled since 2005, from $5.4 billion to more than $11 billion this year.\textsuperscript{xi} The Border Patrol’s budget alone is now more than $3.5 billion—nearly ten times what it was in 1993.\textsuperscript{xii}

By September of 2009, the border fence, along with accompanying roads and lighting, cost more than $2.4 billion, with more yet to be built. It will cost an estimated $75 million per year to maintain the fence,\textsuperscript{xiii} which is frequently breached. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), as of mid-May 2009, the fence had been breached more than 3,300 times, with cost to repair each breach averaging $1,300.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Since 2006, more than $1 billion was spent on the SBI\textit{net} program, which Secretary Napolitano suspended in 2010 and canceled in 2011 for failing to meet implementation and operational requirements.\textsuperscript{xv}

**Neglect of Ports of Entry:** Fortifying the border between ports of entry has been politically popular. Infrastructure at ports of entry has not had the same political caché, and so the ports of entry have by comparison been neglected. The budget for the Office of Field Operations, the component of CBP that manages all of the staff and infrastructure at the ports of entry, has
increased only 17%, during the same period (1993 to 2010) in which the Border Patrol budget increased nearly 1,000%. Ports of entry on the Southwest border have not been adequately updated or renovated in decades, despite handling far more traffic than the Northern border ports, nearly all of which have been expanded and retro-fitted in recent years. xvi

Not surprisingly, experts estimate that just 30% of those attempting illegal entry at ports of entry are caught, versus a 70% apprehension rate between ports of entry. xvii It is estimated that 90% of illegal drugs enter the U.S. at ports of entry, which also serve as the conduit for nearly all the bulk cash and guns being smuggled into Mexico.

While the taxpayer pays a high price for this border enforcement strategy, local economies pay much more dearly. A 2006 study estimated that wait times at the border due to insufficient lanes, inspectors, and technology at ports of entry results in about $2 billion in lost economic output in the San Diego region alone, every year. xviii Each additional 15 minutes of wait time at ports of entry represents an additional $1 billion loss in productivity and a loss of 134,000 jobs in the bi-national border region. xix

Interior Immigration Enforcement

**Record Removals:** The Obama Administration deported 392,000 non-citizens in FY 2010, more than any other year in American history. xx The Administration’s removal strategy focuses first, in theory, on removing individuals who pose a safety or security threat to the United States. Theory and practice, however, don’t always coincide. While the Administration has increased the number of deportations of people who have committed a crime, more than half of those deported in 2010 had no criminal record. xxi

**Straying from Priorities:** For example, the Secure Communities program, which as of February 1, 2011, is in 1006 jurisdictions in 38 states, is designed to allow ICE to identify noncitizens who have been booked into local jails by searching fingerprint databases. This way, ICE can use the information gained to take custody of the individual “with a priority placed on aliens convicted of the most serious crimes first—such as those with convictions for major drug offenses, murder, rape and kidnapping.” xxii

While Secure Communities has led to the deportation of 58,300 non-citizens convicted of a crime, it has also led to the deportation of thousands of individuals who have committed no crime at all. The fact that so many individuals referred to ICE through Secure Communities fall outside the Administration’s stated enforcement goals has raised concerns in immigrant communities and undermined trust in the police in those communities.

Similarly, in the 287(g) program, in which state and local police officers receive training to enforce immigration laws, a newly-released study found that about half of those held for ICE are people who have committed traffic violations. xiii

**A Focus on Employers:** Worksite enforcement of immigration laws also continues at an unprecedented pace. Since President Obama took office, ICE has conducted more than 3,200 audits of US employers. These audits review the I-9 forms employers are supposed to keep on
file (the I-9 form) showing that their workers are authorized to work in the U.S. These audits have resulted in record-breaking penalties—ICE has imposed $50 million in sanctions for worksite violations and banned 225 companies from contracting with the federal government. xxiv

**Detention at Record Levels:** The federal immigration detention system has also grown dramatically over the past several years. In FY1994, 81,000 persons were held in detention facilities for immigration enforcement purposes. By the start of FY 2011, ICE was expecting the number of immigration detainees to rise to 430,000—more than five times the 1994 number. xxv

To a growing extent, immigration detainees are held in prisons built by private detention companies. These companies are capitalizing on Congress’ failure to fix the broken immigration system and are becoming so dependent on the taxpayer dollars spent to detain immigrants that they tried to influence immigration policies to maximize the number of immigrants who will be sent to prison. (For example, the Corrections Corporation of America, which received $74 million in 2010 to house immigrant detainees, xxvi was involved in helping to draft Arizona’s SB 1070, which would greatly increase the number of immigrants held in detention. The company also gave money to lawmakers in favor of SB 1070 while it was being considered in the Arizona legislature.) xxvii

**The Cost:** The Administration has shown that it can identify, detain and deport record numbers of noncitizens, and go after employers who have hired undocumented immigrants. The cost to taxpayers for deporting all of these people is significant. ICE’s budget increased by more than 50%—from $3.5 to $5.4 billion—between 2005 and 2010. xxviii For detention and custody operations alone, ICE requested $1.9 billion for Fiscal Year 2011. xxix The average cost of detaining an individual in a jail-like facility for a single day is $122. ICE estimates it costs the government $12,500 to deport each individual, xxx but when all the costs of apprehension, detention, legal processing, and transportation are added up, the government spends more than $23,000 to deport each person.xxxi

In addition to the enormous financial costs, poor conditions in ICE’s network of immigration jails have been a source of outrage and lawsuits for years.xxxii

ICE operations demonstrate an overreliance on the costly and inappropriate institutional detention complex. Many of the detainees in ICE’s custody have no criminal record. It is hard to understand why the government spends the money to keep these individuals in facilities designed for punishment and isolation. There are tested and fiscally sound options to ICE’s current over-incarceration of immigrants, such as Alternatives to Detention programs, which can ensure that individuals appear for their immigration proceedings for a lot less money. ICE is undergoing a long-awaited reformation of its detention system.

**Courts Strained by Record Prosecutions:** Other concerns arise from the perpetual growth of immigration enforcement inside our borders. While billions are spent to detain and remove immigrants, the budget for immigration courts responsible for hearing and adjudicating immigration cases has barely grown. Record numbers of cases have been jammed into the immigration court system, leading to staggering backlogs. Immigration judges are dismissing an ever-larger number of removal cases brought by ICE.xxxiii These dismissals raise two concerns. First, ICE’s constantly growing enforcement apparatus is targeting individuals who
are not legally removable. Second, the immigration courts perform a critical check on the enforcement authority of the Department of Homeland Security and must be funded at a level that allows them to perform their oversight role.

Conclusion

We are in the midst of a period of record immigration enforcement—more Border Patrol agents on the Southwest Border than ever before, more surveillance technology, more employers being scrutinized and fined, more apprehensions and removals in the interior, more immigrants in detention, and unprecedented government spending. Unfortunately, all of these taxpayer dollars are being used to treat the symptoms, not to fix the cause.

Our immigration system is badly broken, and lawmakers have so far been satisfied to spend ever-greater sums to try to enforce a reality that existed 20 years ago when the immigration system was last overhauled. The nation needs an immigration system for the 21st century, one that can accommodate our dynamic economic realities. If immigrants have a functional system to go through, fewer will need to go around it. We could then reexamine the need to spend $11 billion and more, year after year, on border enforcement. Our agents and technological resources would be able to focus on drug smuggling and security risks, and smarter enforcement targeting should lead to smarter spending.

In the interior, we have millions of undocumented immigrants who have been living in the United States for years. They are already integrated into our economy. Instead of giving ICE more than $5 billion year after year to track down, detain, and deport these immigrants, we could have the agency focus on public safety and security threats, and shift some of the $23,000 we spend to deport each individual to devising a policy to have the undocumented come forward, get a criminal background check, and take steps to earn legal status. Their families should be encouraged to become fully integrated citizens, without having to worry about having to suddenly pack up and abandon their houses, their businesses, their jobs.

In his State of the Union address, President Obama spoke of the need to “win the future.” The broken immigration system impedes this task. As the President noted, we need to fix the immigration system and stop, among other things, “expelling talented, responsible young people who could be staffing our research labs or starting a new business, who could be further enriching this nation.” It will be difficult to win the future with an immigration system stuck in the past.

Recommendations

ON THE BORDER, SHIFT FUNDING PRIORITY TO PORTS OF ENTRY TO INTERCEPT ILLEGAL ACTIVITY AND SUPPORT COMMERCE, TRADE, AND TOURISM

- Staffing at ports of entry must be commensurate with the reality of the ports’ role in preventing smuggling, both in and out of the U.S., and promoting travel and trade. The GAO estimates that 6000 new personnel are needed at ports of entry, not between them.
$5 billion is urgently needed for infrastructure and technology improvements at the ports themselves, not along the border line or in the interior.

Current border security initiatives must be vigilantly reviewed for effectiveness or wastefulness. Failed or wayward initiatives should be scrapped promptly.

CBP officers and Border Patrol agents must be equipped for the challenges of the 21st century through increased training and professional development for the “first face” at the border for travelers and commercial partners.

ADHERE TO THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION’S STATED PRIORITIES OF FOCUSING ON THREATS TO PUBLIC SAFETY

ICE must balance the enforcement of immigration laws with striving for judicious use of discretion in enforcement and prosecutorial activities, including ensuring that enforcement priorities set centrally are observed in practice by field offices and across all ICE programs.

Each ICE enforcement program, including 287(g) agreements, Secure Communities, and the Criminal Alien Program, must clearly and consistently adhere to the enforcement priorities set by the Administration. Programs that persistently fail to meet their goals or are riddled with incurable flaws, like the failed 287(g) program, should be terminated.

Immigration detention should be guided by DHS enforcement priorities and should maximize cost-savings programs, such as Alternatives to Detention programs. ICE should continue to reform its immigration detention facilities and should utilize detention only when able to justify the expense and rationale for detaining an individual facing removal proceedings.

INCREASE FUNDING FOR THE IMMIGRATION JUSTICE SYSTEM TO KEEP PACE WITH INCREASED CASELOAD

Congress and the Obama administration should focus on delivering justice in the immigration courts by eliminating the disparity between funding for apprehensions and deportations and funding for the adjudication of proceedings in the immigration courts.

Programs such as the Legal Orientation Program, which assists detainees to represent themselves before the immigration court, are cost-saving initiatives that should be maximized.

ADDITIONAL ENFORCEMENT SPENDING MUST BE JUSTIFIED BY SHOWING ITS ADDED VALUE AND EFFECTIVENESS

Enforcement appropriations should be examined for effectiveness and efficiency, and whether they add value to what we have already spent on the border. Otherwise, they should be cut, reduced or reallocated.

Enforcement policies and resource allocation should reflect the diversity of America’s land and marine borders and the respective needs of those sectors; this should be reflected in funding allocation and tailored to state and local needs.

Consult with diverse stakeholders—including land owners, businesses, law enforcement, local elected officials, tribal governments, immigration policy experts, environmental
policy experts, faith leaders, and other community leaders—to identify what type of programs and program funding are needed. Successful strategies also depend on inter-agency coordination and cooperation.

- Going forward, DHS should avoid the same mistakes that have led to wasteful spending, overlaps in funding and duplicative programs. Investing in “due diligence” including research, evaluation, risk assessment, and cost estimate analyses prior to program roll-outs will save taxpayers money by reducing excessive trial and error.

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viii Ibid.


xiv Ibid.


xvi Texas Border Coalition White Paper.

xvii Ibid.


xix Ibid.


