

Illegal Border Crossings Dip Sharply

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Body

Campaign rhetoric to the contrary, statistics show that the number of **illegal** immigrants crossing the **border** is less of a problem now than it has been for four decades.

While presidential candidates talk about how to secure the United States-Mexico **border**, data show that their focus might instead be on dealing in a positive way with the millions of **illegal** immigrants already here. Apprehensions by the United States **Border** Patrol are at their lowest level since the Nixon era, according to unofficial statistics from the agency that The Washington Post reported this month.

A sour economy, increased enforcement by the **Border** Patrol and skyrocketing smuggling fees are keeping more would-be crossers at home.

In 2010, the **Border** Patrol apprehended about 448,000 **illegal** immigrants on the Southwest **border**, roughly 93,000 fewer than in 2009. This year, apprehensions have **dipped** by more than 25 percent, to 327,500.

There are now 10.2 million **illegal** immigrant adults in the country and another 1 million **illegal** minors, according to data released this month by the Pew Hispanic Center. The center estimates that 35 percent of those adults have been in the country 15 years or longer, compared with 16 percent in 2000. Conversely, only 15 percent have been in the country five years or less, compared with 32 percent in 2000.

"It's more expensive to get in, it's more dangerous to get in and there are no jobs to be had," said Jeffrey S. Passel, the senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center. "It's not surprising that the inflows are way down."

James W. Ziglar, a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute and a commissioner of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service under President George W. Bush, said there are so many people in the country illegally because the system has long been dysfunctional.

"We are not going to deport these people," Mr. Ziglar said. "We need to deal with the problem and provide them with a way to a legal status."

Mr. Ziglar's stance reflects the view of many of his fellow Republicans. In a poll this year, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press found that 58 percent of so-called Main Street Republicans supported a path to legalization while 39 percent opposed it. A poll by the Partnership for a New American Economy, a bipartisan group of mayors and business leaders, found that only 16 percent of likely attendees at the Iowa Republican caucuses were opposed to expanding legal immigration.

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Along some parts of the Texas-Mexico **border**, violence is also down. Ciudad Juarez, for example, is on pace for 1,000 fewer homicides this year -- a rare bit of good news in a ravaged city. Howard Campbell, a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas at El Paso, said the violence in adjacent Ciudad Juarez has subsided because the gangs used by the Juarez drug cartel are weaker and the Sinaloa cartel -- which has waged a war in the city since 2008 -- is distracted with tougher battles to the west. Mr. Campbell also cited pressure on President Felipe Calderon to make the police and the military more accountable and to improve his country's image.

"In general," Mr. Campbell said, "things hit bottom, and so there is an almost natural cycle of improvement. Whether this improvement will last is impossible to say."

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Graphic

PHOTOS: A fence along the Rio Grande in Brownsville and a sign are meant to deter **illegal** crossers. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB DAEMMRICH FOR THE TEXAS TRIBUNE)

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