

Arrests of illegal migrants on U.S.-Mexico border plummet

By [Nick Miroff](#) and [William Booth](#), Published: December 3

MEXICALI, Mexico — Arrests of illegal migrants trying to cross the southern U.S. border have plummeted to levels not seen since the early 1970s, according to tallies released by the Department of Homeland Security last week, a historic shift that could reshape the debate over immigration reform.

The Border Patrol apprehended 327,577 illegal crossers along the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2011, which ended Sept. 30, numbers not seen since Richard Nixon was president, and a precipitous drop from the peak in 2000, when 1.6 million unauthorized migrants were caught. More than 90 percent of the migrants apprehended on the southwest border are Mexican.

The number of illegal migrants arrested at the border has been dropping over the past few years but appears to be down by more than 25 percent this year.

Experts say that Border Patrol apprehensions are a useful marker for estimating the total flow of illegal migrants, though imprecise because the U.S. government has no idea how many are not caught. But coupled with census and labor data from both countries that show far fewer Mexicans coming to the United States and many returning home, it appears that the historic flood of Mexican migration north has slowed dramatically.

“We have reached the point where the balance between Mexicans moving to the United States and those returning to Mexico is essentially zero,” said Jeffrey Passel, a senior demographer at the [Pew Hispanic Center](#), whose conclusion was shared by many migration experts.

Such a steep drop in illegal crossings gives supporters of immigration reform ammunition to argue that now is a good time to tackle the issue.

GOP presidential contenders Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney have been sparring over the estimated 11 million people living illegally in the United States. Gingrich says it would be heartless to kick out migrants who have worked and raised families here for years, while Romney blasted Gingrich for supporting “amnesty” for illegal residents but has not given a clear answer on what he would do.

In Congress, comprehensive immigration reform has been sidelined, stuck between those who would not allow illegal migrants to remain and others who are pushing, like President Obama, to create a “pathway” to legal status, but not necessarily citizenship.

The lower number of apprehensions supports the Obama administration's contention that the border is more secure than ever — that the doubling of Border Patrol agents since 2004, along with hundreds of miles of new fence, cameras, lights, sensors and Predator drones, has helped slow the [illegal flow northward](#).

But those who say the border remains out of control can point to the fact that hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants still try to make the crossing every year.

Fewer in search of shelter

At the Casa Betania migrant shelter in a rough section here in the sprawling border city of Mexicali, manager Jorge Verdugo has seen a steep decline in the number of ragged men who arrive each afternoon looking for a meal, a shower and a safe place to sleep.

Five years ago, the shelter's 42 beds were always full. But on a recent afternoon, the place was mostly empty. At the other migrant shelter across town — for women and children — there was only one guest.

“The change has been drastic,” Verdugo said.

Data from Mexican surveys show that the amount of money sent home from the United States is falling, from a peak of \$24 billion in 2007 to \$21 billion last year, according to Mexico's Central Bank.

For the first time, according to U.S. census data, the growth of the Hispanic population in the United States is being fueled more by births than by immigration. Hispanics remain by far the fastest-growing group in the nation.

Reasons for the downturn in migration are both obvious and complex.

[Surging violence in Mexico](#) has made the journey more perilous, and smugglers have increased their fees, now charging \$3,000 for a quick hop from Mexicali.

Increased enforcement and tough new laws against illegal immigrants in Arizona and Alabama are daunting, and some Mexicans are seeing better conditions at home.

But immigration experts say the No. 1 cause of the steep drop is the U.S. economy, which dipped into a recession in 2008 and continues to see sluggish growth.

“The arrests on the border are moving like the U.S. economic cycle,” said Juan Luis Ordaz, senior economist for the Bancomer Foundation. Ordaz and colleagues say Mexican and U.S. data suggest that the number of Mexican migrants arriving each year in the United States has been cut in half since 2005 — and that poverty rates for Mexican migrants living in the United States have grown to 30 percent from 22 percent in 2007.

Especially hard hit in the economic downturn — and the busting of the real estate bubble — were the home-building and construction industries, which employ an outsize number of illegal workers.

“Migration has decreased because employment opportunities in the United States are not good. Fewer

migrants have full-time jobs. Hours are reduced. Wages are lower. The amount of money they send home is less,” said German Vega of the College of the North in Tijuana. “And another reason is organized crime.”

Vega referred to the sensational news in Mexico of mass graves filled with the bodies of migrants and wave of kidnappings and extortion of those trying to cross north.

An even more difficult trip

Many Mexicans say it has become much more difficult to cross illegally into the United States. A group of men gathered on the sidewalk outside the shelter in Mexicali explained their plan. They had a stack of Google Maps printouts showing the local topography, as well as the latest weather report. It called for mist and low fog in the Imperial Valley, which the men said would help shield them from Border Patrol night-vision cameras. They would also wear black clothing and pieces of sponge or carpeting on their feet to avoid leaving prints in the sand.

“Some of these men try three, four or five times to get across, and then they give up,” Verdugo said. “It’s much harder now because of all the surveillance.”

According to Verdugo, most of the Mexican men who come through the shelter now are deportees, not fresh arrivals from the south. With jobs, children and homes in the United States, they talk about getting back in with single-minded determination.

Mexican officials, meanwhile, have seized on the lower numbers as evidence that life is better in Mexico and that fewer citizens are seeking a life north of the border.

Foreign investment in Mexico is relatively strong, and the country has one of the healthiest economies in Latin America. Inflation is under control. The exchange rate is stable. University and technical college enrollments are up. Families are having fewer children.

At least one man at the Mexicali shelter, Juan Carlos Vela, 28, said he had decided Mexicali was far enough for him.

He had found a job making \$75 a week in a brick factory, twice as much as the going wage for similar work down south in his home state of Durango, where he said there have been so many drug cartel gun battles lately “I can’t let my daughters outside.”

“Mexicali seems pretty quiet; I like it here,” Vela said. “Might as well forget about the American dream and get on with my life.”

Researcher Gabriela Martinez contributed to this report.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/arrests-of-illegal-migrants-on-us-mexico-border-plummet/2011/12/02/gIQA6Op8PO_story_1.html