

The REAL DEAL

Building the Wall Will We Be Better Off?

The Facts

Since 1994, the U.S. government has spent an estimated \$30 billion to “secure” the U.S-Mexico border. From 1993 to 2004, the number of Border Patrol agents nearly tripled (approx. 4,000 to 11,000) and the amount of spending on border enforcement has increased more than five-fold (from \$740 million to \$3.8 billion annually).

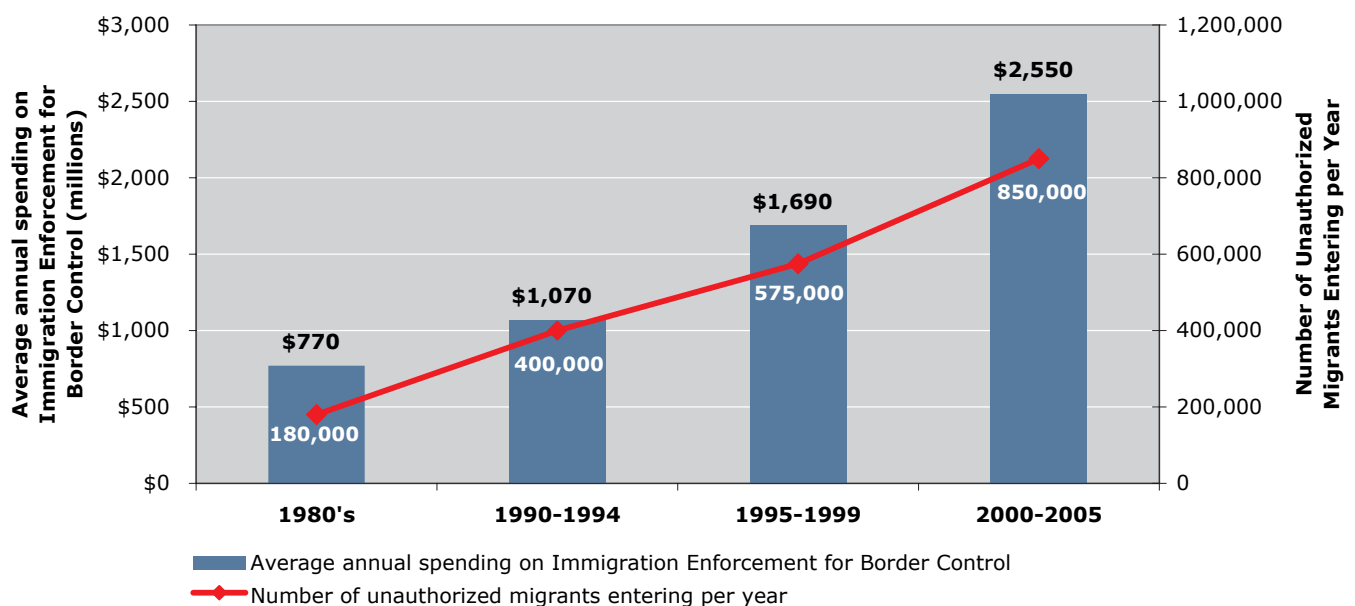
In 2002, the Border Patrol became the largest arms-bearing branch of the U.S. government, excluding the military. Yet the number of migrants crossing the border has doubled during this same period (see graph below).

Controlling the border has become a big business. The U.S. government privatized border security operations when it paid \$2.5 billion to Boeing for a new border security system. In the past, border security was considered the sole responsibility of the government.¹

Border militarization is a deadly policy. In the past 12 years, it has led to more than 4,000 border crossing-related deaths – 15 times more than all the lives that the Berlin Wall claimed during its 28-year existence.² An unprecedented 473 migrant deaths were recorded at the US-Mexico border in fiscal year 2005; over 260 people died on the Arizona border alone.³

Border militarization hurts the 11.8 million people living along the border. Efforts to secure the border have led to the systematic violation of civil and human rights of people living in border communities. Calls for an independent commission to review Border Patrol operations have been ignored despite evidence of civil rights violations. Also, the border build-up has emboldened armed “civilian” vigilante groups, like the Ranch Rescue, allowing them to acquire significant political influence and operate with impunity.

Increases in Border Patrol spending has not yielded results in managing the flow of unauthorized migrants over the past 20 years



The Border: Myths and Realities

Myth: Pouring money into “border security” will end migrant crossings.

Reality: Despite \$30 billion of border enforcement spending, the US has seen an increase in unlawful migration. For the past 12 years, the government has attempted to “seal the border” by pouring money into building walls, detention centers and tripling the number of Border Patrol agents. Yet many experts agree that economic opportunities in the U.S. and the lack of them in Mexico, along with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) passed in 1994, have had a stronger effect on migration than the border build-up.

Myth: Building double or triple fences will stop migration.

Reality: Building fences at the border merely channels migration to other places, usually more remote and dangerous terrain. For example, after triple-fencing was constructed in San Diego, arrests of undocumented immigrants there dropped 300% between 1994 – 2002, but arrests in the Tucson, Arizona sector increased 342% during this same period. The government claimed victory for reducing unlawful immigration in San Diego when in reality, it has just moved elsewhere.⁴

Myth: More border security protects border communities.

Reality: Border communities are subject to systematic harassment, racial profiling, and civil rights violations by Border Patrol agents and or civilian vigilante groups. The agency provides little response to complaints filed by community-based organizations.⁵ In case after case, citizens, immigrants with lawful status, and undocumented people have been stopped and their immigration papers demanded. Some federal judges have reported that they have been stopped and required to produce immigration documents.⁶

Myth: The Border Patrol’s “deterrence” policy of forcing migration to dangerous entry points will convince migrants to stop entering the U.S.

Reality: The “deterrence” policy is a failure. Border deaths and injuries are on the rise and more people are using increasingly more dangerous ways to cross, including smugglers, in desperation. Building a “wall” does not address the root causes of migration, such as disparities in global economies.

Myth: New border laws will keep us safe.

Reality: The new border security laws do not focus on intelligence gathering, but on a failed one size-fits-all “deterrence” policy. The new laws simply propose erecting more fences, a strategy that doesn’t work. Assessing threats to national security rely on security intelligence that someone poses a threat to national security, is planning to enter the country or is already here.

The Impact of Militarization on Border Communities: Excessive Use of Force

In November 1995, a 12-year-old girl camped with a friend in a vacant lot behind her home in Pirtleville, Arizona.⁷ She’d been asleep, curled up in a ball in their tent, when she awoke suddenly to a sharp pain in her knee. She had been shot. A bullet went through her knee and missed her head by five inches on its exit from her body. According to the Border Patrol agent’s account, he shot at the girls because he thought that they were “illegal immigrants” or dogs. The young girl was rushed to the hospital where she had the first of many surgeries to restore her knee. The agent was suspended with pay and later transferred to another Border Patrol station. This is just one of hundreds of documented cases of Border Patrol violence against migrants.

What does a real border strategy look like?

Rather than pouring money into the same old failed system, develop new strategies that would prevent fatalities, provide for orderly crossing of lawful migrants, and be based on a strong commitment to accountability, human rights, and civil rights.

For more details on an alternative strategy, see “Guidelines for Alternative Border Enforcement Policies and Practices” created by the Border Community Alliance for Human Rights at http://www.borderaction.org/PDFs/BNHR_Report_to_HRC.pdf

For more information about the border, please see:

Border Action Network: www.borderaction.org

Coalicion de Derechos Humanos: www.derechoshumanosaz.net

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights: www.nnirr.org

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The Real Deal is a collaboration of Detention Watch Network (www.detentionwatchnetwork.org), the Rights Working Group (www.rightsworkinggroup.org) and the National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild (www.nationalimmigrationproject.org).

¹ “Boeing Wins Deal for Border Security,” Washington Post, September 19, 2006.

² Evaluating Enhanced U.S. Border Enforcement, May 1, 2004. www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=223 and Migrant Death List, Coalicion de Derechos Humanos, <http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net/deaths.php>

³ The US-Mexico Border, Migration Information Source, June 1, 2006. www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=407.

⁴ Fencing in Failure,” American Immigration Law Foundation, March 2005, www.aifl.org/ipc/policy_reports_2005_fencinginfailure.asp.

⁵ Justice on the Line, Border Action Network, www.borderaction.org/PDFs/BAN-Justice.pdf.

⁶ How the Latino Community’s Agenda on Immigration Enforcement and Reform Has Suffered Since 9/11, www.maldef.org/pdf/NHLA_report.pdf.

⁷ “Justice on the Line,” Border Action Network, www.borderaction.org/PDFs/BAN-Justice.pdf.