



# IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

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## **POLICY BRIEF**

### **The Cost of Doing Nothing: The Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform**

by Walter A. Ewing, Ph.D.\*

*President Bush's proposal to address the problem of undocumented immigration by creating more opportunities for legal immigration and providing a legal status to those already here is a useful starting point in reforming a broken immigration system that costs hundreds of lives and billions of dollars every year.*

As President Bush acknowledged in his January 7 speech on immigration reform, current U.S. policies toward undocumented immigration are unsustainable. In outlining his administration's proposal for a temporary worker program that would include undocumented immigrants already living in the United States, the president observed that immigration reform "must begin by confronting a basic fact of life and economics: some of the jobs being generated in America's growing economy are jobs American citizens are not filling." He described a broken system in which many employers are "turning to the illegal labor market," while "we see millions of hard-working men and women condemned to fear and insecurity in a massive, undocumented economy." Crucial aspects of the president's proposal remain unclear, such as the fate of millions of undocumented workers who have lived in the United States for many years or even decades, developing deep roots in their communities and raising U.S.-born children. How these workers and their families would fit into a "temporary" workers program is a key question. However, the proposal has put immigration reform back on the national political agenda for the first time since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Congress should take the president's proposal as a starting point and work to fix a broken immigration system that sends the dual messages "Keep Out" and "Help Wanted" to the Mexican and Central American workers upon whom large sectors of the U.S. economy depend. The cost of doing nothing – in both lives and dollars – is far too great.

#### **A Costly Failure**

Since 1993, the amount of money spent each year by the federal government on border enforcement has more than quintupled from \$740 million to \$3.8 billion. Much of this has been spent implementing a southwest border enforcement strategy of "prevention through deterrence" that channels would-be migrants into ever more isolated and dangerous terrain where they can be apprehended with relative ease.<sup>1</sup> In theory, the increased difficulty of the journey and risk of being caught is supposed to convince migrants to stay home. However, undocumented immigration has continued at a rate of about 500,000 per year.<sup>2</sup> As the General Accounting Office concluded, the "prevention through deterrence" approach has succeeded primarily in moving migrant traffic from one place to another.<sup>3</sup>

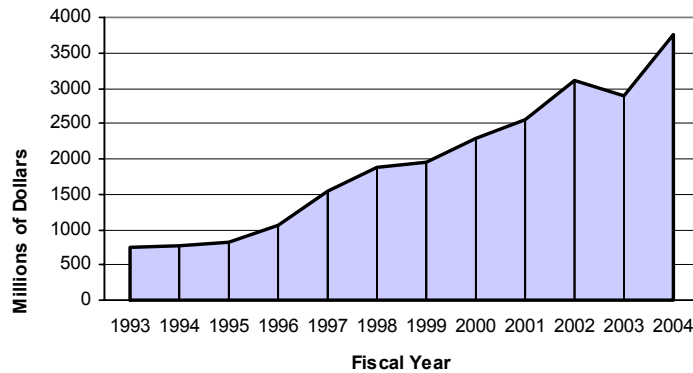
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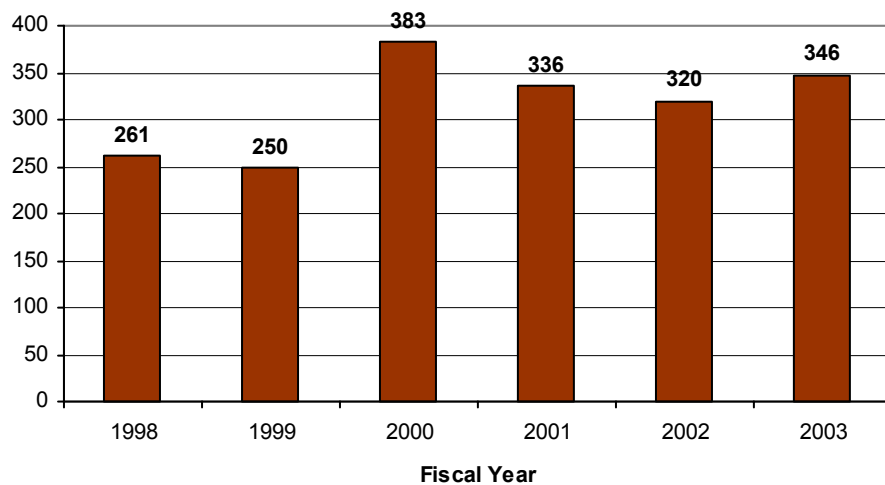
**U.S. Border Enforcement Budget, FY 1993-2004**



(Source: Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice budget statistics.)

Rather than actually reducing migration, the principal accomplishments of the deterrence strategy have been to increase business for human smugglers who bring migrants over the border and to fuel an increase in the number of migrants who die during their journey.<sup>4</sup> According to U.S. Border Patrol statistics, 1,896 people have died since 1998 while crossing the southwest border from Mexico.

**Migrant Deaths Along Southwestern U.S. Border, FY 1999-2003**



(Source: U.S. Border Patrol)

## **Ignoring Reality**

Meanwhile, the roughly 9 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, 55% of whom come from Mexico and 22% from the nations of Central America, remain an integral part of the national economy.<sup>5</sup> In 2001, these immigrants filled 1.4 million jobs in wholesale and retail trades, 1.3 million in service industries, 1.2 million each in manufacturing and agriculture, and 620,000 in construction.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, the 4.5 million undocumented immigrants from Mexico alone contributed an estimated \$220 billion to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product.<sup>7</sup> The Social Security Administration (SSA) has concluded that undocumented immigrants “account for a major portion” of the billions of dollars paid each year into the Social Security system under names or social security numbers that don’t match SSA records and which payees therefore can never draw upon.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, despite the ubiquitous presence and economic importance of undocumented immigrants, the federal government continues to grasp at straws in pursuing a failed enforcement strategy. In 2003, the most high-profile federal responses to undocumented migration were a September pilot program in “lateral repatriation,” taking undocumented immigrants caught in Arizona and sending them back over the border in Texas, and the October 23 round up of undocumented workers at Wal-Mart. Faced with this dearth of leadership at the federal level, a growing number of officials at the state and local level are attempting to fill the void with piecemeal measures such as accepting the Mexican consular identification card (*matricula consular*) as valid identification, granting driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants, and allowing undocumented high school graduates to pay in-state college tuition rates.

## A Beginning

Although the Bush administration’s proposal for a temporary worker program is by no means a panacea for the challenges posed by undocumented immigration, the principles underlying it are a useful beginning. As the president emphasized in his speech, bringing undocumented immigrants out of “the shadows of American life” by granting them legal status would enable them to seek the protection of U.S. labor laws, encourage them to report crimes to the police, and free law enforcement “to focus on the true threats to our nation.” Moreover, the United States “will be more secure when we can better account for those who enter our country, instead of the current situation in which millions of people are...unknown to the law.” A critical unanswered question in the proposal is how millions of undocumented immigrants who already are established members of U.S. society would be persuaded to seek a legal status that “will last three years and will be renewable – but...will have an end.” This is a question Congress will have to address if it chooses to accept the challenge that the president’s proposal represents and finally begin the task of reforming a deeply flawed immigration system that needlessly consumes hundreds of lives and billions of dollars every year.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Michael A. Pearson, Executive Associate Commissioner for Field Operations, Immigration and Naturalization Service, Before the Subcommittee on Immigration of the Senate Judiciary Committee Regarding Border Security Issues, Senate Immigration Subcommittee, February 10, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Passel, “New Estimates of the Undocumented Population in the United States,” Migration Information Source. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, May 22, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> General Accounting Office, *INS’ Southwest Border Strategy: Resource and Impact Issues Remain After Seven Years*. Washington, DC: August 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Belinda I. Reyes, Hans P. Johnson & Richard Van Swearingen, *Holding the Line? The Effect of the Recent Border Build-up on Unauthorized Immigration*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Passel 2002.

<sup>6</sup> B. Lindsay Lowell & Roberto Suro, *How many undocumented: The numbers behind the U.S.-Mexico Migration Talks*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, March 21, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Raúl Hinojosa Ojeda, *Comprehensive Migration Policy Reform in North America: The Key to Sustainable and Equitable Economic Integration*. Los Angeles, CA: North American Integration & Development Center, School of Public Policy & Social Research, University of California, Los Angeles, August 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Inspector General, Social Security Administration, *Obstacles to Reducing Social Security Number Misuse in the Agriculture Industry* (Report No. A-08-99-41004), January 22, 2001.