

# Donald Trump wall is a tall order, but migrant issue is heating up

[Henry Ergas](#) January 4, 2019



Central American migrants at the US-Mexico border fence. Picture: AFP

Lost in the shouting match over the partial shutdown of the US government were the striking findings of a study released late last year. The study, carried out by demographers from Yale University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concludes that the number of illegal migrants in the country has been greatly underestimated.

The conventional wisdom sets that number at 11.3 million; according to the researchers, who applied more accurate estimation methods to recently released data, there are now at least 16.7 million, and more likely 22.1 million, illegal migrants in the US, up from barely 3.3 million in 1990.

Those estimates imply that between 5 per cent and 7 per cent of the US population, 10 to 15 per cent of its labour force, and perhaps a quarter of

its unskilled workers are in the country illegally.

Little wonder that dealing with illegal migration tops the list of the issues Americans want the new congress to address, according to a Rasmussen poll in November.

And little wonder Rasmussen found that support for building a wall along the Mexican border rose from 37 per cent in July 2017 to 46 per cent at the time of the poll, while the proportion of Americans opposing the proposal fell from 56 per cent to 48 per cent. There is, no doubt, a debate to be had about whether the concrete barrier Donald Trump promised in his election campaign is the most efficient way to stem the inflow, which the turmoil in Central America threatens to swell.

But it is hard to deny that a substantial strengthening of border protection — including 1100km of fencing built largely by the Obama administration — helped slash the success rate of attempted crossings along the US-Mexico border from 80 per cent in 2000 to about 50 per cent in 2015, contributing to an overall fall in the estimated number of illegal entrants from 1.6 million in 2000 to 460,000 in 2016.

However, it is also clear that higher apprehension rates in regions that are fenced and heavily patrolled have diverted the entry attempts to the much larger border zones where the terrain is extremely hazardous and hard to monitor, increasing the death toll and making illegal migrants ever more dependent on well-organised people-smugglers. Building physical barriers in parts of those under-patrolled zones would allow costly surveillance resources to be redeployed to the areas where fencing is unfeasible.

As a result, while no one would argue that additional fencing can entirely eliminate illegal entry, it should form part of any sensible solution.

That the US is entitled to construct or extend barriers along its borders is

beyond dispute. Few rights are as uncontested in international law as that of a state to control access to its territory.

Indeed, the modern concept of the state, which emerged in the period from the 16th to the 18th centuries under the twin impetus of the settlement of the European wars of religion and the rise of territorially defined absolutist monarchies, is inextricably bound up with recognition of the role of borders as crucial markers of the state's sovereignty.

Moreover, it was accepted from the outset that states could determine who entered their territory. Even Immanuel Kant, whose 1795 essay *Perpetual Peace* proposed a "natural right of hospitality" that later developed into the notion of asylum, emphasised that the right to settle in a country could be acquired only by agreement with its inhabitants.

And Kant also stressed that if the rule of law was to have any substance, states had to accept a moral obligation to enforce their laws — an obligation the US has plainly not fulfilled in respect of immigration.

The fact that the costs of illegal immigration fall so heavily on working-class Americans should make that obligation all the more compelling.

As Harvard University's George Borjas has shown, illegal migrants depress the earnings of lower-skilled workers to an even greater extent than their numbers suggest, in part because their labour supply is relatively unresponsive to lower wages.

Meanwhile, the well-off benefit both from the reduced cost of personal services, such as home cleaning, which illegal migrants often provide, and (as landowners) from the increases in property prices induced by high levels of migration.

It would, of course, be best were strengthened border protection part of a comprehensive reform of the immigration laws.

For example, according to the Yale-MIT study, there are almost nine million illegal migrants in the US who entered the country before 2000, in many cases as children. A substantial majority of Americans believes they should have a path to legal residence.

Unfortunately, efforts at tackling that problem and others have repeatedly failed; how likely it is that a compromise package will emerge from the present crisis remains hard to gauge. What is certain, however, is that the wall's opponents will continue to castigate the proposal itself, and any attempt to rationally debate its merits, as xenophobic.

Nor are they alone in trying to suppress discussion of migration: just a few weeks ago, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to exclude it from the "great national debate" he has launched in response to the revolt of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests).

The risks of fomenting xenophobia are all too real.

It is, after all, no coincidence that the Latin word *hostis*, from which the word host derives, also lies at the root of the word hostility, suggesting how readily acceptance of the stranger can mutate into enmity.

But Hannah Arendt was right when she said that it was precisely the issues "respectable society hypocritically passed over" as too dangerous to discuss that provided totalitarian movements with their most "unerring" fuel stock.

And Arendt's intuition finds some support from a new study by the Pew Research Centre which concludes that in Germany, Sweden and France — where "respectable society" has repeatedly demonised critics of migration — public opposition to even legal migration now vastly exceeds support for increased migrant inflows, as it does in Australia.

In contrast, the US, where the issue is vigorously debated, remains one of

the few countries where there is almost as much support for ramping up legal migration as there is for scaling it back.

Ultimately, it is hard to disagree with Robert Frost when he murmurs, in his poem *Mending Wall*, that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall". But as Frost himself seems to admit, the farmer next door's stubborn insistence on the proposition that "good fences make good neighbours" expresses an enduring truth.

Like Frost's farmer, Donald Trump may, at least on this issue, be less of a fool than his critics contend.