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SECURING THE BORDER AND FUELING ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

Senator Ruben Gallego's
Plan for Border Security and Immigration Reform

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOR DECADES, WASHINGTON HAS FAILED TO SECURE THE SOUTHWEST BORDER AND create a humane immigration system that meets our economic needs. Some politicians have cynically chosen to keep the issue alive — exploiting the chaos for their own political benefit and presenting a false choice between security and humanity. Because of this deliberate sabotage, the U.S. has a dysfunctional immigration and border security system. As a result, Washington swings from one extreme to another: from being unwilling to secure the border to manufacturing chaos and fear in our communities. Neither of these extremes is the answer. We can have secure borders and safe communities without sacrificing our values, and we should demand nothing less.

THE BORDER IS THE BEATING HEART OF OUR ECONOMY. FEW STATES EXPERIENCE THIS as directly as Arizona, where trade with Mexico reached over \$20 billion in 2024,¹ and thousands of workers and tourists cross our ports daily to support local businesses.²

BUT OUR BROKEN BORDER SECURITY AND IMMIGRATION SYSTEM PUTS THIS prosperity in jeopardy. Decades of underinvestment and failed policies, coupled with unprecedented migrant surges, have overwhelmed border agents and officers, preventing them from doing their jobs. These conditions have forced agents to release hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers onto the streets of small border communities, leaving municipalities on the hook to manage a crisis they did not create.

DRIVING MUCH OF THIS DYSFUNCTION IS OUR OUTDATED ASYLUM SYSTEM. MOST individuals who claim asylum at the border do not have valid protection claims,³ but the years-long immigration court backlog means they are allowed to live and work in the US for years while they await adjudication, further incentivizing new migrants to make the trek to our Southwest border. Yet decades-old, arbitrary legal immigration caps and endless bureaucratic delays make it impossible for most individuals to migrate to the US legally.

AND THIS INFLEXIBLE LEGAL IMMIGRATION SYSTEM COMBINED WITH CONGRESS' inability to come together to provide a pathway to citizenship for the millions of Dreamers who live in the shadows means many are unable to fully contribute to our communities.

FINALLY, OUR LACK OF FOCUS ON ADDRESSING THE REASONS WHY MIGRANTS LEAVE their homes in the first place allows drug cartels and authoritarian governments to dictate who arrives at our border and when, where, and how they do so.

my **FIVE PILLAR FRAMEWORK**

I.

*Secure the border
and keep our
communities safe.*

II.

*Reform the asylum
system to end abuse.*

III.

*Expand legal pathways
to fuel economic prosperity.*

IV.

*Bring people
out of the shadows.*

V.

*Address root causes
of migration.*

**It won't be easy, but this framework is how we rebuild
trust with Americans and deliver the security and prosperity that they deserve.**

LET'S GET TO WORK.

1

PILLAR ONE

**SECURE THE BORDER
AND KEEP OUR
COMMUNITIES SAFE**

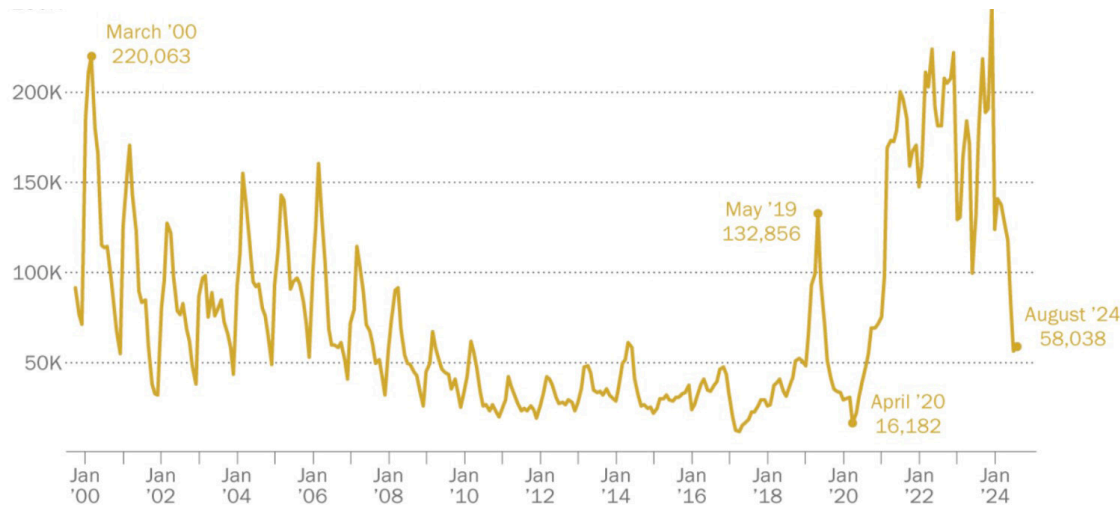
PILLAR I:

**SECURE THE BORDER
AND KEEP OUR COMMUNITIES SAFE**

PILLAR I

Like every nation, the U.S. has an obligation to control who enters and exits our borders as a matter of sovereignty, safety, and security. Yet, elected officials have failed to adequately uphold this obligation for decades, and the American public has taken notice. To regain the country's trust and unlock comprehensive immigration reform, we must first prioritize maintaining order at the border and keeping our communities safe.

The number of migrants attempting to cross our borders has skyrocketed over the last decade⁴ (see Figure 1), yet budgets and personnel hiring have failed to keep pace.⁵



Note: Beginning in March 2020, monthly totals combine apprehensions and expulsions into a new category known as encounters. Monthly totals before March 2020 include apprehensions only. Some migrants are encountered more than once.
Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 1. (*Encounters with migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border peaked in December 2023 but have plummeted since then, chart, Pew Research Center,*
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/01/migrant-encounters-at-u-s-mexico-border-have-fallen-sharply-in-2024/>).

While most people attempting to cross into our country do so in pursuit of a better life, our broken system has made it easier for dangerous individuals to enter as well. Between FY 2020 and FY 2023, the number of people on the Terrorist Watchlist encountered by Border Patrol (USBP) surged by over 5,700 percent.⁶ Left roaming our streets, these bad actors have threatened Americans' safety and security.

Additionally, the majority of the fentanyl entering the U.S. is coming through our ports of entry. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) seizures of fentanyl have increased over 680 percent between 2019 and 2024, over 80 percent of which occurred at ports of entry (see Figure 2).⁷ In fact, Arizona's ports have consistently seized the most significant proportion of fentanyl in the country, accounting for nearly 50 percent of all CBP seizures.⁸ This means far more fentanyl and other dangerous drugs are smuggled undetected across the border each day into our communities.

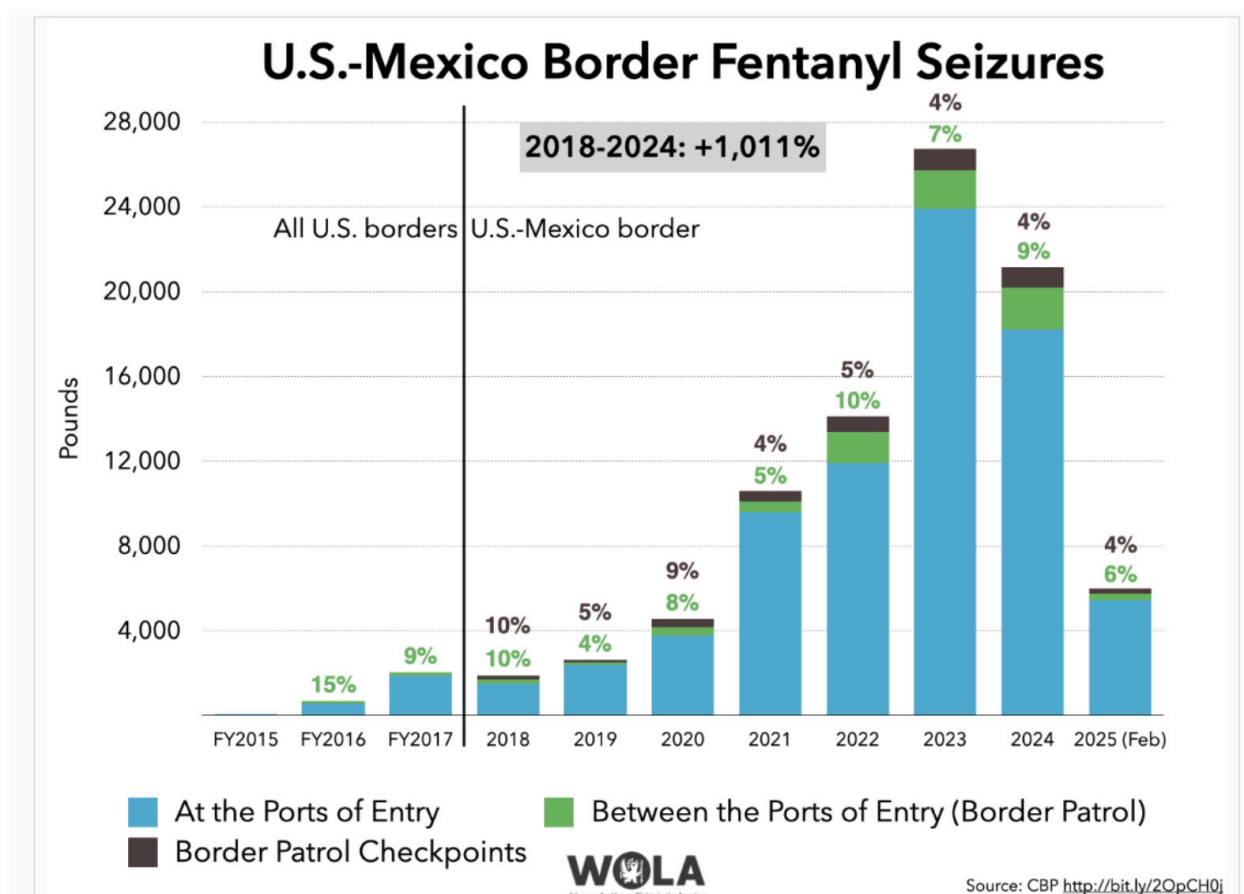
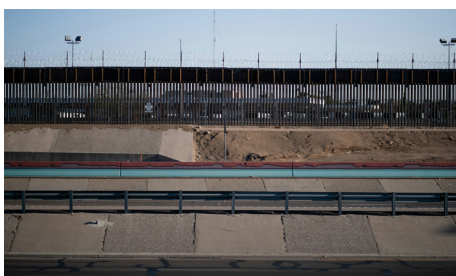


Figure 2. (*U.S.-Mexico Border Fentanyl Seizures*, chart, Washington Office on Latin America, https://borderoversight.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf).

Driving these problems are outdated and underfunded border crossing infrastructure and technology that cannot meet modern demands and threats. Moreover, chronic understaffing of CBP officers and USBP agents, who have been overwhelmed in recent years by migration surges and face grueling hours and conditions, often in remote locations, has caused severe morale, recruitment, retention, and quality of life issues.⁹



PILLAR I RECOMMENDATIONS

While migrant border arrivals have dropped significantly since June 2024, history shows the next surge can come at any time. To prepare, we must:

- 1. Hire and retain Border Patrol agents.** Address the agent and officer shortage by providing incentives like increased base pay and bonuses, defending their ability to collectively bargain, and addressing other workforce issues like workplace safety, benefits, and mental health challenges to better retain and recruit border agents and officers.
- 2. Allow Border Patrol to focus on its mission.** Hire additional support to handle processing and transportation of migrants, enabling agents to get back to their core mission of patrolling the border.
- 3. Strategically build border barriers.** Construct border barriers in strategic locations with an eye towards operational effectiveness and cost efficiency to prevent illegal crossings.
- 4. Invest in port infrastructure.** Build new ports of entry and modernize existing, outdated port infrastructure to drive economic efficiency and combat human smuggling and drug trafficking.
- 5. Leverage cutting-edge technology.** Fund development and deployment of cutting-edge technologies at and between land ports of entry to better detect fentanyl and serve as a force multiplier for agents and officers.
- 6. Prioritize the removal of criminals.** Focus U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) finite resources on identifying, arresting, and deporting convicted criminals, known gang members, and other violent individuals who jeopardize Americans' safety.
- 7. Create a migration reserve corps/fund.** Establish a flexible migration emergency reserve corps and/or fund that can respond to unexpected migrant surges.
- 8. Streamline and expedite migrant processing.** Construct new regional processing centers along the border that co-locate federal agencies involved in processing migrants, thereby reducing processing time and freeing up Border Patrol agents to do their jobs.
- 9. Channel migrants to official crossings.** Implement policies that ensure migrants cross at, rather than between, official border crossings to more effectively control who enters the country and prevent illegal migration.
- 10. Initiate an aggressive communications strategy.** Implement a multi-agency communications strategy to combat drug cartel recruitment and misinformation on social media and to ensure migrants receive accurate information about legal pathways and risks of illegal migration.
- 11. Fund state and local grant programs.** Fund grant programs that enable border communities to respond to unexpected migrant surges more effectively.
- 12. Ensure robust oversight.** Bolster oversight of agent and officer conduct and detention standards, enhancing compliance with existing requirements governing the care and treatment of migrants.

2

PILLAR TWO

REFORM THE ASYLUM SYSTEM TO END ABUSE

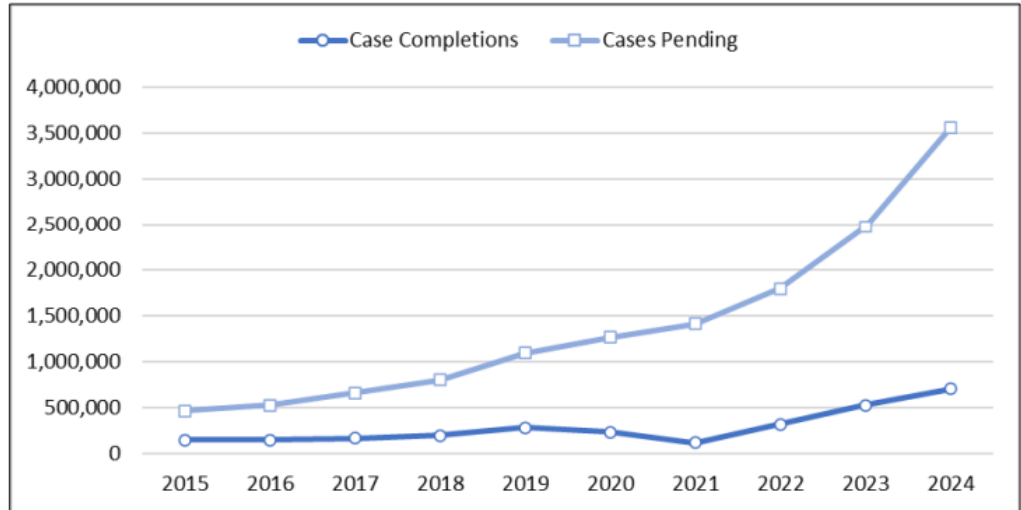
PILLAR II:

REFORM THE ASYLUM
SYSTEM TO END ABUSE

PILLAR II

The chaos at the Southwest border is driven and exacerbated by an outdated and under-resourced asylum system. U.S. law provides the right to seek asylum for those fleeing persecution.¹⁰ When an individual is arrested at the Southwest border, claims asylum, and passes an initial screening, they are often released into the country and allowed to live and work until their claim is adjudicated.

Figure 3. (*Case Completions and Cases Pending, FY2015-FY2024*, chart, Congressional Research Service, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12492>)



But a skyrocketing case backlog (see Figure 3)¹¹ and a chronically under-resourced asylum system¹² mean migrants can wait many years for their claims to be adjudicated,¹³ even though only one in five will end up qualifying for asylum (see Figure 4).¹⁴

This growing backlog, combined with arbitrary and restrictive legal immigration caps, has led migrants to use asylum at the Southwest border as the surest means of living and working in the U.S. even if they are not fleeing persecution. Knowing this, drug cartels prey on migrants, providing them with false hope of creating a better life in the U.S. by claiming asylum.

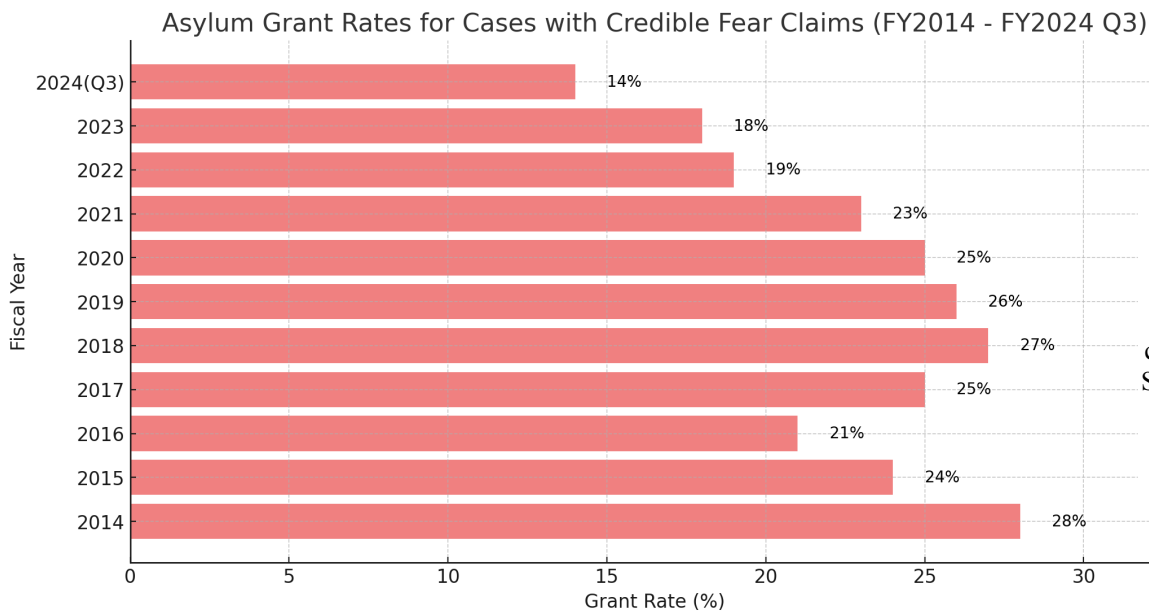


Figure 4. (Source: *Asylum Outcomes for Cases Originating with a Credible Fear Claim, FY2014-FY2024(Q3)*, July 19, 2024, chart, Congressional Research Service, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48078>).

These conditions incentivize even more economic migrants to make the journey to our border, a self-perpetuating cycle that prevents the asylum system from protecting those who need it most.

PILLAR II RECOMMENDATIONS

To end abuse of the asylum system and ensure we provide protection to those with legitimate claims, we must:

- 1. Expedite and streamline the asylum process.** Take the asylum adjudication system out of the courts, provide asylum officers with the authority to decide asylum claims, and surge hiring of new asylum officers to drastically reduce the asylum adjudication timeline.
- 2. Strengthen the asylum standard.** Strengthen the asylum standard and provide work authorization to those who pass the heightened standard to ensure only those with legitimate claims receive protection and can immediately contribute to our communities.
- 3. Limit asylum access during serious border emergencies.** Tighten access to the asylum system during migrant surges to prevent our border and nearby communities from being overwhelmed.
- 4. Protect American values by upholding due process.** Support children, vulnerable populations, and due process by expanding access to legal counsel and legal orientation.
- 5. Treat migrants with dignity and respect.** Strictly uphold detention standards, oversight, and other requirements that govern the care and treatment of migrants.
- 6. Aggressively address the immigration court backlog.** Surge resources to prioritize clearing the immigration court backlog, which prevents those with valid asylum claims from receiving protection.
- 7. Create asylum process efficiencies.** Streamline and digitize the asylum process and adjudication requirements to create efficiencies.

3

PILLAR THREE

EXPAND LEGAL PATHWAYS TO FUEL ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

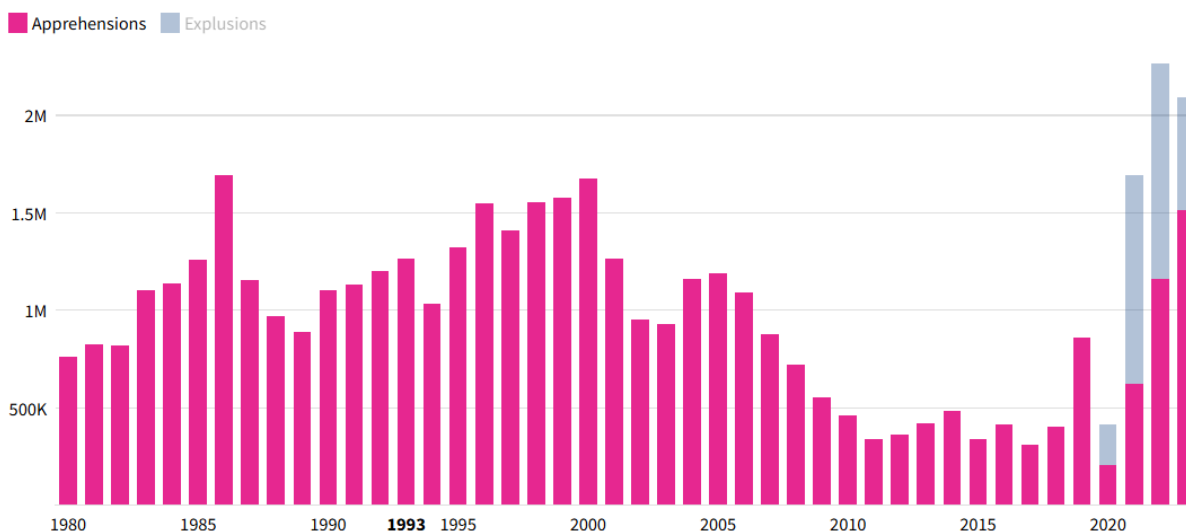
PILLAR III:

EXPAND LEGAL PATHWAYS
TO FUEL ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

PILLAR III

We must focus on first securing the border to restore order and regain Americans' trust, but enforcement alone will not solve the problem in the absence of expanded legal pathways. Indeed, over the last three decades, Congress has passed several bills designed to step up immigration enforcement, yet the number of border crossings surged in recent years under administrations of both parties (see Figure 5).¹⁵

Nationwide border encounters by category, FY 1980 – 2023



Border expulsions began in March 2020 and ended May 2023. The Office of Field Operations provides detailed data on Inadmissibles as far back as 2010, so that data is not included as to note artificially inflate encounter figures in more recent years.

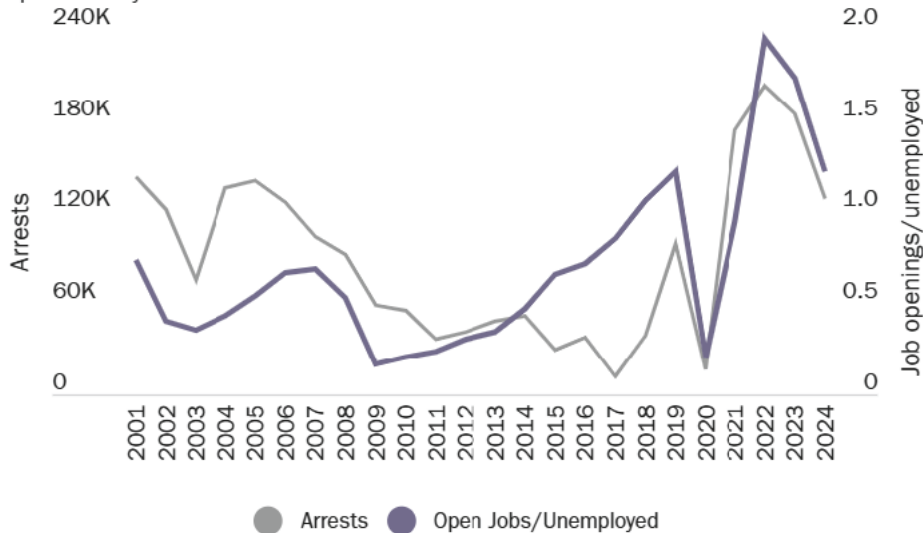
Source: Customs and Border Protection • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • [Download SVG](#)

Figure 5. (Nationwide border encounters by category, FY 1980 - 2023, chart, USAFacts, <https://usafacts.org/articles/what-can-the-data-tell-us-about-unauthorized-immigration/>).

Moreover, increased deterrence in the absence of expanding legal immigration channels enables violent drug cartels, who control illicit smuggling networks and exploit desperate migrants, to get richer and dictate who arrives at our border and when, where, and how they do so.¹⁶

In fact, the evidence shows that the number of illegal border crossings closely corresponds with the number of U.S. job openings at any given time (see Figure 6).¹⁷

Border Patrol arrests and job openings per unemployed worker April of each year 2001-2024



Sources: Customs and Border Protection, Secretaria de Gobernacion, Bureau of Labor Statistics
 *Notes: BLS job openings were seasonally adjusted April numbers because that was the most common peak migration month.

Figure 6. (Border Patrol arrests and job openings per unemployed worker April of each year 2001-2024, chart, Cato Institute, <https://www.cato.org/blog/biden-didnt-cause-border-crisis-part-4-what-caused-border-crisis>).

We should celebrate the fact that people across the globe seek to migrate to the U.S. Migrants feed Americans, care for the sick and elderly, and build homes. In Arizona, thousands of immigrants work in produce production in Yuma,¹⁸ providing affordable vegetables for Americans.

Immigrants also grow our economy. In 2023, immigrant households represented \$1.7 trillion in spending power (see Figure 7) and paid \$651.9 billion in total taxes, \$215.8 billion to Social Security, and \$58.7 billion to Medicare.¹⁹ And nearly a quarter of all STEM workers in the U.S. are immigrants,²⁰ which is particularly important as we seek to lead in high-tech manufacturing and ensure U.S. economic competitiveness into the future. Immigrant entrepreneurs also start businesses that create good-paying jobs for Americans and help working-class Arizonans live the American dream.

Immigrants' Spending Power Tops \$1.5 Trillion

Disposable income of foreign-born households, 2022

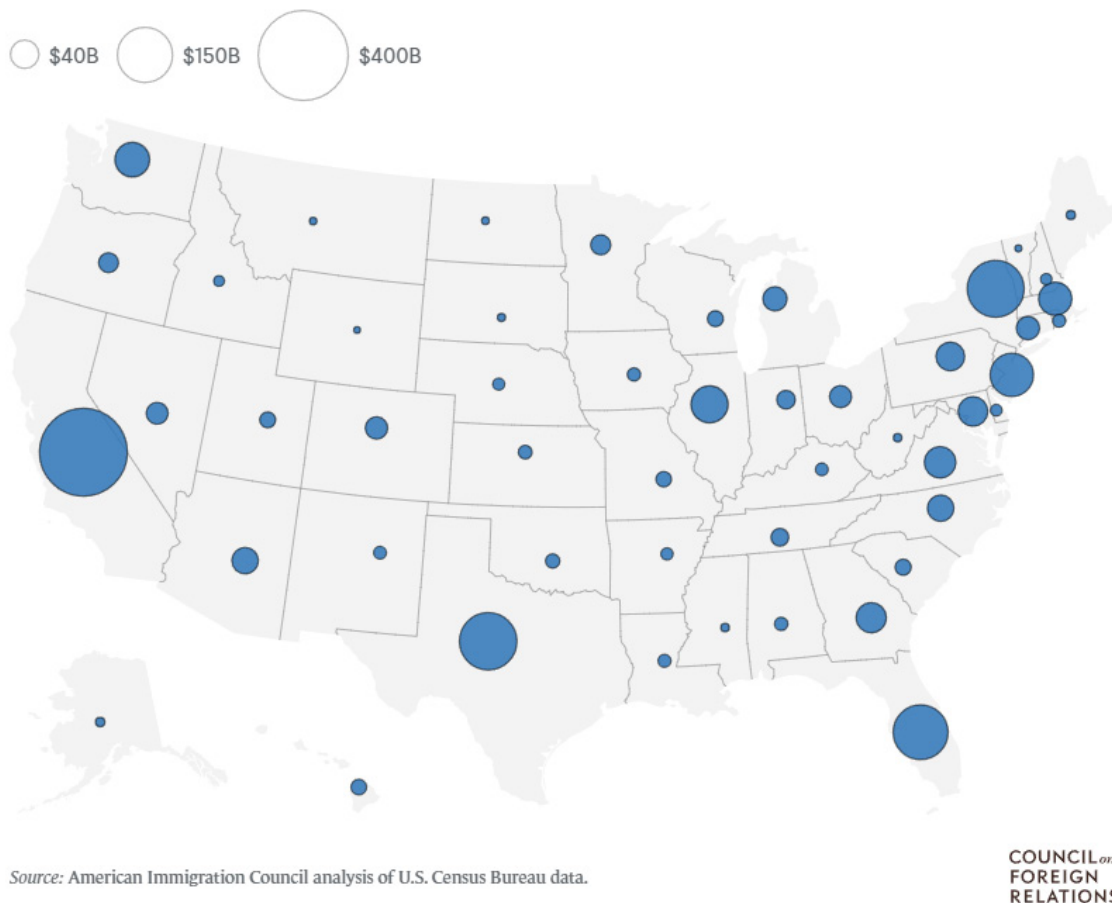


Figure 7. (*Disposable income of foreign-born households, 2022*, chart, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-does-immigration-affect-us-economy>).

What does this all mean? A sustainable immigration system should pair increased immigration enforcement with an expansion of lawful immigration pathways to meet our economic, national security, and other key interests, while ensuring such policies do not displace or harm American-born workers. It should also ensure that all working people — including migrant workers and American workers — have rights on the job and are able to exercise them without fear of retaliation. When big corporations exploit foreign workers, American workers — and all workers — suffer.

PILLAR III RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking these steps will drive down costs for Americans, empower workers, unlock economic growth, and enable the U.S. to compete with our adversaries for decades to come.

1. **Boost key visa and Green Card caps.** Increase the annual allotment of key visas and Green Cards to enable more individuals to migrate to the U.S. legally and provide greater labor mobility.
2. **Ensure strong labor standards for all temporary visa programs.** Require all temporary worker visa programs to have strong labor standards and crack down on employers gaming the system to displace and depress American workers' wages.
3. **Increase or remove arbitrary per-country caps.** Remove or significantly increase arbitrary annual per-country visa caps that currently mean high-skilled foreign nationals from populous countries who fill critical labor gaps must wait decades to receive a Green Card and contribute to the U.S. economy.
4. **Create new visas with strong labor standards.** Authorize new visa categories with robust worker protections to create a 21st century economy that works for all Americans.
5. **Streamline and expedite military naturalization process.** Streamline and expedite the process by which immigrants who have served our country in uniform may become citizens.
6. **Reduce bureaucratic hurdles for foreign students, high-skilled workers, and entrepreneurs.** Make it easier for talented and motivated individuals to start businesses, study, live, and work in the U.S.
7. **Boost refugee resettlement capacity.** Expand refugee cap, ramp up refugee resettlement capacity, and improve oversight and efficiency of the refugee processing system to save taxpayer dollars and ensure vulnerable individuals can meaningfully contribute to our communities.
8. **Create a special visa category for tribes.** Establish a new visa category for Native American tribes whose ancestral lands stretch across international borders to ensure that tribe members can cross for religious and cultural reasons with certainty.
9. **Implement E-Verify.** Gradually implement the E-Verify system nationwide for businesses, ensuring technical assistance for small businesses, to create a fair transition without harming the economy or workers.

4

PILLAR FOUR

**BRING PEOPLE
OUT OF THE
SHADOWS**

PILLAR IV:
BRING PEOPLE OUT
OF THE SHADOWS

PILLAR IV

As of 2023, an estimated 3.4 million Dreamers live in the U.S.²¹ Brought here as children, most of these individuals lack any legal status or pathway to citizenship.²² Many of them grew up and have lived in the U.S. for their entire lives. They have attended our schools, received college educations, worked and helped grow our economy, paid taxes, contributed to Social Security, and started families — oftentimes with U.S. citizen spouses. And immigrants, including Dreamers, are less likely to commit crimes than U.S.-born individuals.²³

Due to Washington's failure to create an immigration system that works, most of these Dreamers live in the shadows. Failing to provide them with a pathway to citizenship is wrong and harms our economic vitality (see Figure 8).²⁴

*Ending DACA could **shrink**
the U.S. economy by an estimated:*

\$38 BILLION

in income from underemployed DACA recipients over their lifetimes
(per-affected person loss of \$70,000 in lifetime income)

\$234 BILLION

if DACA recipients are no longer working over their lifetimes
(per-affected person loss of \$430,000 in lifetime income)

\$295 BILLION

if DACA recipients and their spouses are no longer working over their lifetimes
(per-affected person loss of \$543,000 over their lifetimes);

\$648 BILLION

if all DACA-eligible individuals and their spouses were no longer working over their lifetimes (per-affected person loss of \$561,000 over their lifetimes)

Figure 8. (Source: Coalition for the American Dream, https://www.coalitionfortheamericandream.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/240529_C4AD_DACAReport_v2_Web.pdf).

PILLAR IV RECOMMENDATIONS

Enacting these commonsense solutions is a moral imperative that aligns with American values and will drive economic activity, innovation, and competitiveness for generations to come. To bring these migrants out of the shadows and harness their enormous economic and cultural contributions, we must:

- 1. Provide a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers.** Provide lawful status and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented Dreamers and other long-term immigrant residents who were brought to the U.S. as children.
- 2. Protect kids from aging out.** Protect documented Dreamers who are at risk of aging out of legal status due to the years-long visa backlog caused by circumstances outside of their control.
- 3. Provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented spouses.** Provide legal status and a path to citizenship for undocumented spouses of U.S. citizens and Green Card holders.

5

PILLAR FIVE

**ADDRESS
ROOT
CAUSES OF
MIGRATION**

PILLAR V:

**ADDRESS ROOT
CAUSES OF MIGRATION**

PILLAR V

Most of our attention has focused on the Southwest border, and for good reason — the number of migrants attempting to cross has surged in recent years, reaching a record 300,000 individuals in December 2023 alone.²⁵ However, our singular focus on the border has caused us to largely neglect the fundamental reasons why migrants leave their homes in the first place.

Countries across the world have experienced global displacement crises of unprecedented scale. In the Americas alone, unstable political, economic, and environmental conditions have resulted in the displacement of tens of millions of individuals (see Figure 9).²⁶ Yet many countries in the region where displaced individuals travel through have failed to invest in their immigration and asylum systems adequately,²⁷ preventing such countries from serving as safe locations for these individuals to seek protection.

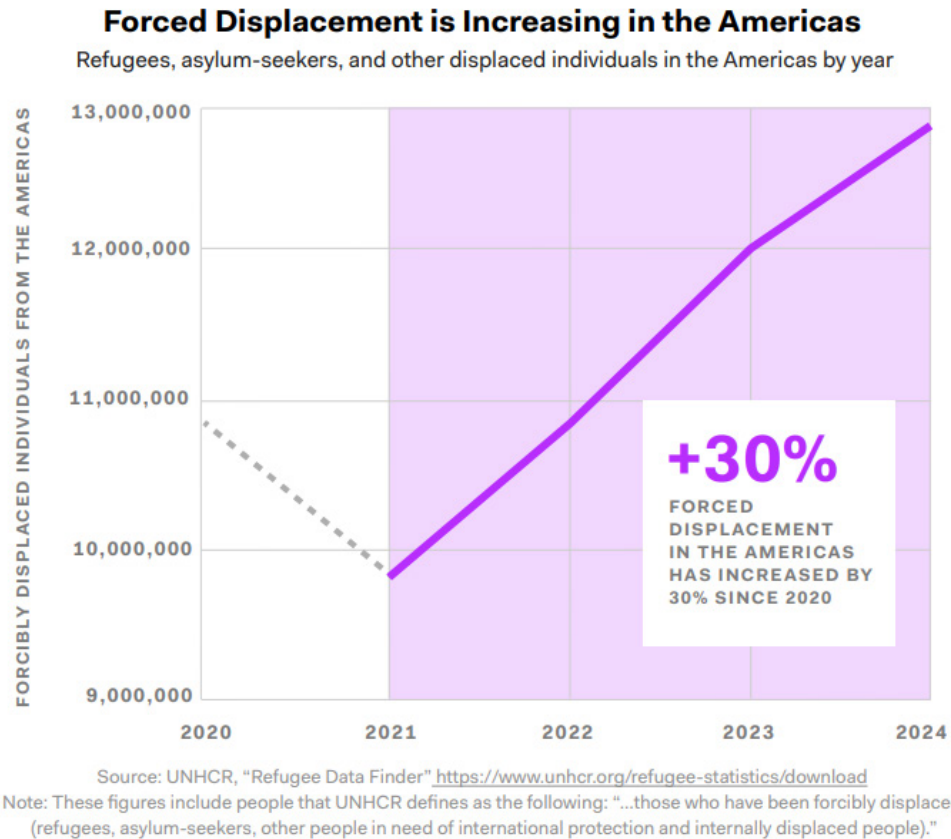


Figure 9. (Andrea R. Flores, *A Better Way Forward*, chart, FWD.us, <https://www.fwd.us/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/A-Better-Way-Forward-Full-White-Paper.pdf>).²⁸

At the same time, our reactive approach, combined with unstable conditions in many Latin American countries, has enabled violent drug cartels to strengthen and enrich themselves through their control over the drug trafficking and migration routes to our Southwest border.²⁹

Under the current U.S. approach, a change in one of these countries' immigration enforcement policies or a shift in drug cartels' strategy could cause the next U.S. border surge.³⁰

U.S. borders are the one-yard line. If we only defend the one-yard line, we will forever be at the mercy of forces beyond that point. This is why the U.S. needs a proactive approach to addressing the root causes of migration.

PILLAR V RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Create a Western Hemisphere engagement strategy.** Create and implement a cohesive strategy for engagement in the region to ensure our efforts achieve U.S. interests on migration, security, stability, and power competition.
2. **Promote refugee/asylum resettlement responsibility sharing.** Explore creative strategies to incentivize other countries to share the responsibility of managing migration and resettling refugees and asylum seekers.
3. **Fund regional immigration enforcement efforts.** Provide additional funding and technical assistance to countries in the Western Hemisphere to step up their immigration enforcement and prevent our border from being overwhelmed, while also securing assurances that countries will adopt a fair and humane approach to enforcement.
4. **Build regional asylum capacity.** Build asylum and refugee resettlement capacity in the Western Hemisphere to allow other countries to serve as safe resettlement countries for displaced individuals before they reach our Southwest border.
5. **Strengthen regional partnerships to combat fentanyl networks.** Expand partnerships with other regional governments to stem the flow of illicit drugs to our Southwest border, weaken the illicit economy, strengthen legitimate economic activity, and diminish the power of cartels.
6. **Support economic stability and democratic institutions.** Boost financial assistance and technical support to help countries in the region combat conditions that force migrants to flee, such as economic and political instability, corruption, lawlessness, drugs, violence, and illegitimate elections, and ensure this assistance is spent more efficiently and effectively.

FOOTNOTES

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