

Cut Back on Border Patrol - Save \$2.6 Billion

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As the congressional Super Committee struggles to cut the federal deficit by \$1.2 trillion by next Wednesday, pro-immigrant advocacy groups are amplifying their calls to dial back on border security as a way to reap savings.

The federal government stands to save \$2.6 billion a year by deporting only violent criminals, capping yearly border patrol budget increases, and ending a government program to level minor criminal charges against people crossing portions of the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, according to a National Immigration Forum report released Tuesday.

The latest iteration of the 2012 Department of Homeland Security budget calls for spending \$5.5 billion on Immigration and Customs Enforcement and \$11.8 billion on Customs and Border Protection. That's nearly double the spending levels for both compared to fiscal 2000, and up from \$5.1 billion and \$9.3 billion in fiscal 2008. Declining numbers of arrests along the Southwest border are evidence that this ramped-up spending is an unnecessary use of taxpayer dollars, the report concluded. According to government data, border patrol arrests fell about 28 percent between October 2010 and August 2011 in California, New Mexico, Texas and Arizona.

"The number of people arrested for trying to cross the border illegally, used as a proxy for measuring the total number of people trying to cross illegally, is at its lowest point since 1972," the report said. "We are spending more and more money so that we don't have to apprehend fewer and fewer people."

More than half of all immigrants detained in 2009 and 2010 did not have criminal records in 2009 and 2010, and only 11 percent had committed "violent crimes," according to the Department of Homeland Security. The federal government stands to save more than \$4.4 million per night if it detains only those immigrants who have committed violent crimes and uses methods other than detention - GPS monitoring, telephone reporting, unannounced home visits, curfews - to monitor other illegal workers, said Katherine Vargas, a spokeswoman for the National Immigration Forum.

The budgetary trend is symptomatic of how dysfunctional the U.S. immigration system has become, multiple immigration activists said Tuesday during a conference call. Lawmakers' focus on the need to secure the border denies the reality that offering illegal immigrants a path to citizenship would bolster government coffers and the U.S. economy at large, said Ben Johnson, executive director of the American Immigration Council. "These [immigrant] workers are important actors in our economy, not just as workers, but as producers, consumers, taxpayers, renters and homeowners," he said. "Harnessing [their] power rather than focusing all of our energies on enforcement strategies would really bring some welcome, positive news to an otherwise dim economic and fiscal environment... Instead, policymakers are just sort of sticking their heads in the sand, playing more politics than anything with this issue."

Yet according to border control advocates, the notion that leaner budgets will deliver long-term fiscal savings is misguided. "You could logically extend the argument to all areas of law enforcement and say 'we could save a lot of money by not enforcing any laws in this country,' but that's not exactly responsible," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesperson for the Federation for American Immigration Reform. "And the \$2.6 billion that they claim we could save is just dwarfed by the cost of having millions of illegal aliens in the country using government benefits" - such as K-12 public education, health care services, and in, some cases, the use of tax credits, Mehlman said. Although undocumented workers lack Social Security numbers, use of government IDs has enabled them to claim \$4.2 billion in refundable tax credits last year, according to August IRS data.

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Now It's a Campaign Issue

Border security has emerged as a hot-button issue on the campaign trail as well as on Capitol Hill, with GOP candidates contenders Rick Perry, governor of Texas, and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney promising to expand border control. "Our country must do a better job of securing its borders and as President, I will," said Romney in a September speech. "That means completing construction of a high-tech fence, and investing in adequate manpower and resources."

About two-thirds of the roughly 11 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S. have jobs and collectively paid \$11.2 billion in taxes in 2010, according to data from the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy and the Pew Hispanic Center. And although undocumented workers are not able to claim Social Security benefits, they paid between \$120 billion and \$240 billion into the Social Security trust fund as of 2007, according to the Social Security Administration's chief actuary.

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