



The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security

Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003, the federal government has spent an estimated \$333 billion on the agencies that carry out immigration enforcement.¹ As Congress renews its focus on immigration enforcement and border security under the Biden administration, it is important to review how much money has already been spent on these initiatives and what outcomes have been produced.

Immigration enforcement spending largely falls into two issue areas: border security and interior enforcement. Border spending includes staffing and resources needed for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), an agency of DHS working at and between United States ports of entry. Interior enforcement is primarily focused on staffing and resources for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), also part of DHS, to apprehend noncitizens in the interior of the country, detain those undergoing removal proceedings, and deport those ordered removed.

Currently, the number of border and interior enforcement officers stands at more than 50,000, with ICE and CBP employing over 84,000 people in total.² The number of U.S. Border Patrol agents nearly doubled from Fiscal Year (FY) 2003 to FY 2019.³ Additionally, the number of ICE agents devoted to its office of Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) nearly tripled from FY 2003 to FY 2019.⁴ In FY 2019, DHS employed more than 8,200 ERO officers.⁵

In February 2019, after the longest government shutdown in history, 35 days, Congress reached a deal with the President, offering \$1.375 billion for 55 miles of fencing along the Rio Grande Valley.⁶ The President expressed his dissatisfaction with this offer, and shortly after signing the bill, declared a national emergency to fund his border wall through other means. In addition to the \$1.375 billion that has already been allocated for fencing, he announced his intent to pull \$600 million from the Treasury Department's Drug Forfeiture Fund, \$2.5 billion from the Department of Defense's Drug Interdiction program, and 3.6 billion from the Department of Defense's military construction account.⁷ An additional \$1.5 billion in Department of Defense funds were transferred in May 2019.⁸

What has this spending bought? The United States currently has roughly 700 miles of fencing along the Southern border, record levels of staff for ICE and CBP, as well as a fleet of drones—among other resources.⁹ Some of these resources have been spent on ill-conceived projects, such as the \$1 billion attempt to construct a "virtual fence" along the Southwest border, a project initiated in 2005 that was later scrapped for being ineffective and too costly.¹⁰ CBP announced a similar project in July 2020 to install a total of 200 "Autonomous Surveillance Towers" along remote areas of the southern border at a reported cost of several hundred million dollars.¹¹

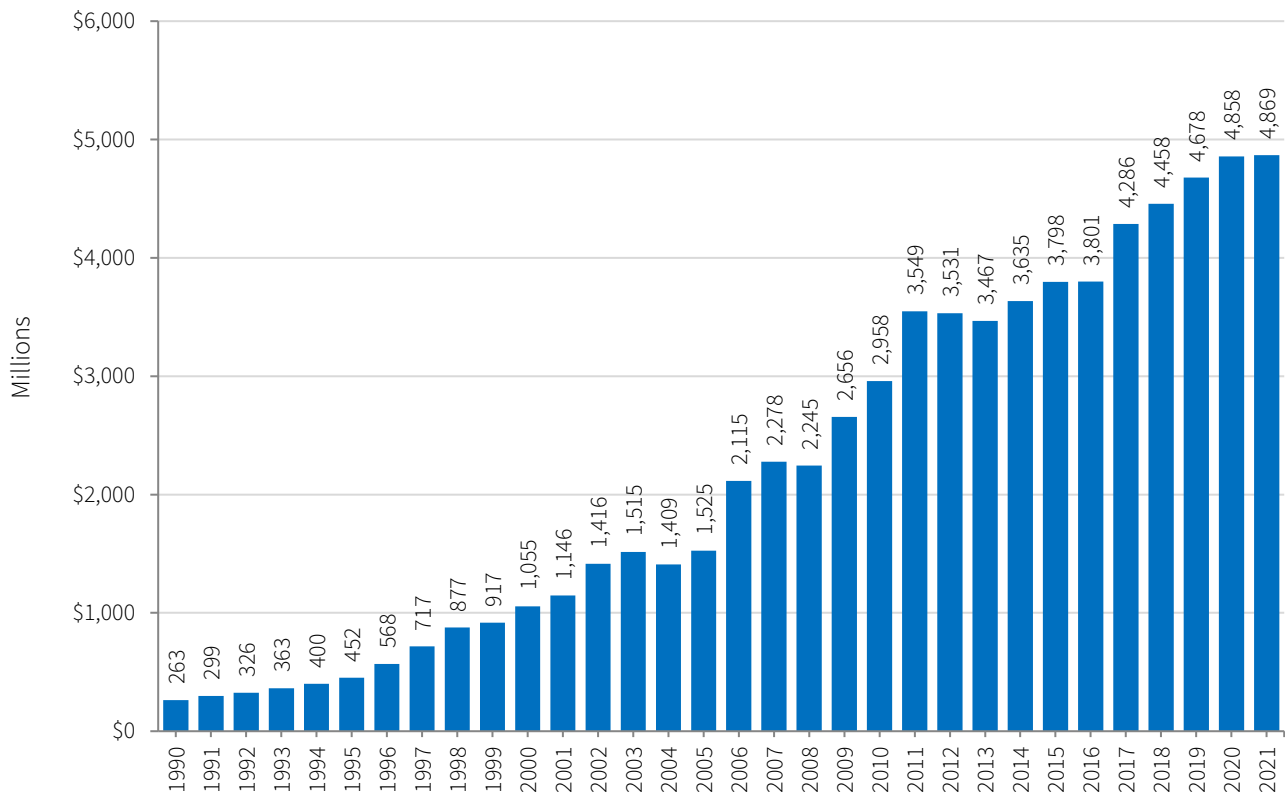
Even with record level spending on enforcement, enforcement alone is not sufficient to address the challenges of undocumented migration.¹² It also has significant unintended consequences; according to U.S. [Border Patrol statistics](#), the Southwest border witnesses close to one death per day.¹³ All of these efforts that have accumulated in the name of security, however, do not necessarily [measure border security](#) properly, or make the border more secure.¹⁴ It is past time for the United States to turn away from costly and haphazard efforts to secure the border and instead focus on reining in the costs of border enforcement.

The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security in Dollars

The immigration enforcement budget has increased massively since the early 1990s, but many members of Congress and the president continue to call for more taxpayer dollars to be spent on immigration enforcement.

- Since 1993, when the current strategy of concentrated border enforcement was first rolled out along the U.S.-Mexico border, the annual [budget](#) of the U.S. Border Patrol has increased more than ten-fold, from \$363 million to nearly \$4.9 billion (Figure 1).¹⁵

Figure 1: U.S. Border Patrol Budget, FY 1990-2021



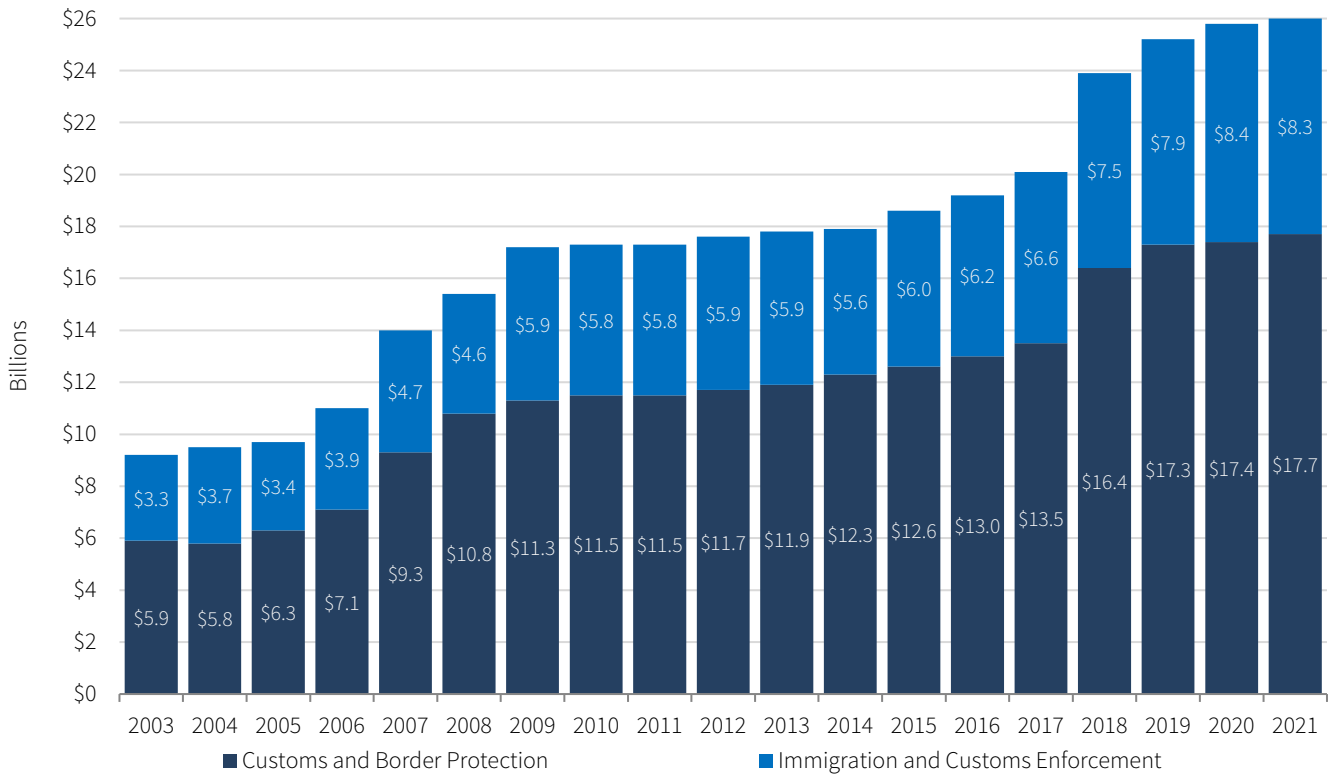
Sources: See endnote 14.

- Since the creation of DHS in 2003, ICE [spending](#) has nearly tripled, from \$3.3 billion to \$8.3 billion today

(Figure 2).¹⁶ Much of this funding has gone to increasing the agency’s ability to hold immigrants in detention in locations around the country.

- Since 2003, the budget of CBP, which includes both the Border Patrol and operations at ports of entry, has also nearly tripled, rising from \$5.9 billion in FY 2003 to a high of \$17.7 billion in FY 2021 (Figure 2).¹⁷

Figure 2: CBP & ICE Annual Budgets, FY 2003-2021



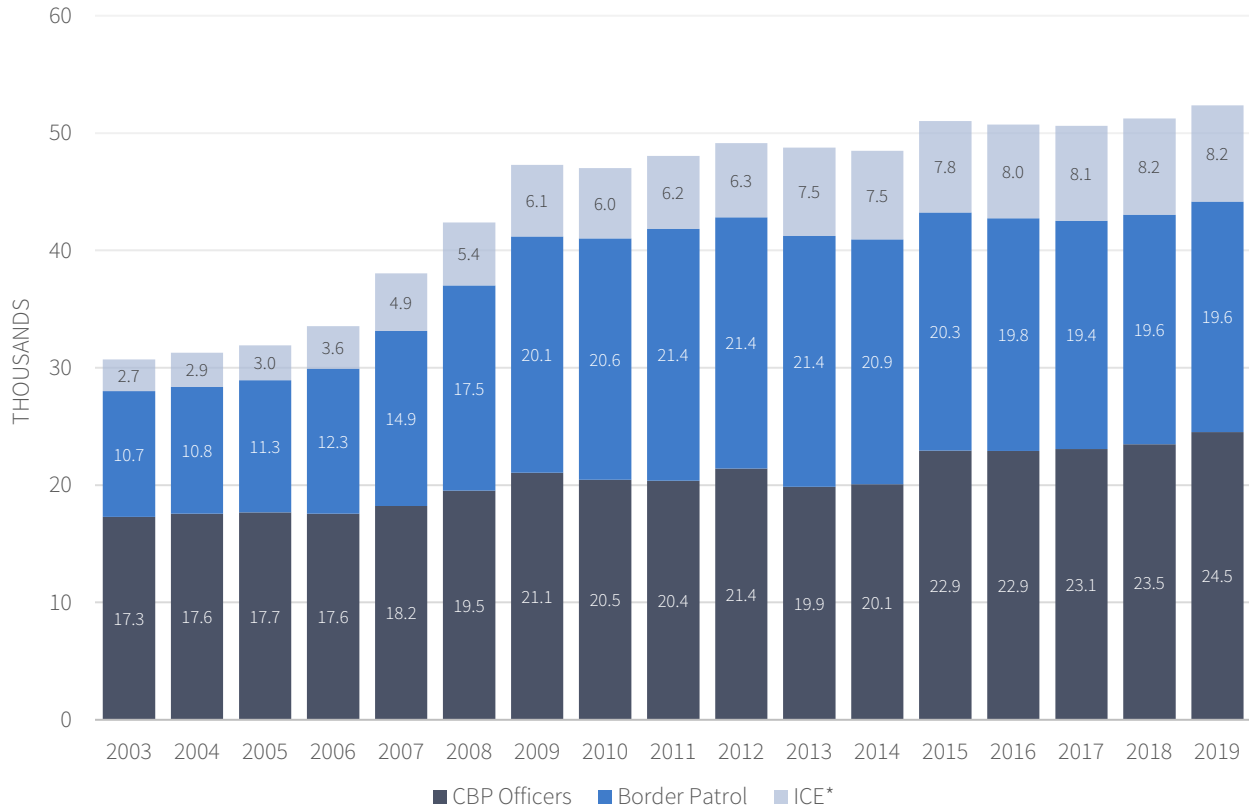
Source: Congressional budgets, gross budget authority as provided in Conference Reports, FY 2003-2021.

Increases in Immigration Enforcement and Border Security Personnel

- Since 1993, the number of U.S. Border Patrol agents has skyrocketed from 4,139 agents to a congressionally authorized 23,645 agents in FY 2018, although due to hiring issues Border Patrol only had 19,648 agents in FY 2019. (Figure 3).¹⁸ Of those agents, 16,731 are deployed to the U.S.-Mexico border, more than four times the 3,555 agents deployed to the U.S.-Mexico border in FY 1992. An additional 2,073 agents are deployed to the U.S.-Canada border, more than seven times the amount deployed in FY 1992. A further 255 agents are deployed to the Coastal Border Sectors.
- The number of CBP officers staffing ports of entry (POEs) grew from 17,279 in FY 2003 to 24,511 in FY 2019 (Figure 3).¹⁹
- The number of ICE agents devoted to Enforcement and Removal Operations increased from 2,710 in FY 2003

to 8,201 in FY 2019 (Figure 3).²⁰ In total, ICE employs more than 20,000 people, including 6,500 special agents in ICE Homeland Security Investigations. Although Homeland Security Investigations does not have a primary role in enforcing immigration law, agents are frequently involved in the prosecution of individuals who have violated laws which provide a criminal penalty for immigration violations.²¹

Figure 3: CBP Officers, Border Patrol Agents, and ICE Agents, FY 2003-2019



Sources: See endnotes 17, 18, and 19.

*Includes only ERO Officers.

Previous Benchmarks Have Been Met, Yet Enforcement Funding Continues to Grow

The federal government has already met the border security benchmarks laid down in earlier Senate immigration reform bills.

- As the American Immigration Lawyers Association pointed out in a [January 2013 analysis](#), the “benchmarks” for border security specified in the bipartisan 2006, 2007, and 2010 immigration-reform legislative packages in the Senate have been largely met.²²

- The requirements in those Senate bills for more border enforcement personnel, border fencing, surveillance technology, unmanned aerial vehicles, and detention beds have also been fulfilled and in many ways surpassed.²³ ICE detention bed quotas rose from the normal 34,000 beds to 40,520 for 2018—an all-time high.²⁴ Despite Congress only appropriating enough money for 40,520 beds throughout the year, in FY 2019 ICE’s use of budgetary mechanisms to shift money from other locations to their detention account led to ICE breaking records by detaining more than 55,000 people.²⁵

Border security depends on the smart and efficient use of available resources. At the same, border enforcement cannot and should not be done in isolation. Instead, it must be examined in the larger context of reforms needed for the entire immigration system.

Endnotes

1. This number is derived from the gross or total budget authority figure provided in conference reports accompanying congressional appropriations bills for Fiscal Years 2004-2021, an amount which includes fee-funded expenditures. See also American Immigration Council, *Giving the Facts a Fighting Chance: Addressing Common Questions on Immigration* (Washington, DC: December 2015), 16, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/addressing-common-questions-immigration>; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Budgets, FY 2003-2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-budget>;
2. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *FY 2019 Budget-in-Brief*, 26, 32, <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS%20BIB%202019.pdf>.
3. U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year Staffing Statistics (FY 1992-FY 2019), 3, https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2020-Jan/U.S.%20Border%20Patrol%20Fiscal%20Year%20Staffing%20Statistics%20%28FY%201992%20-%20FY%202019%29_0.pdf.
4. See National Immigration Forum, *Fact Sheet: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)* (Washington, DC: July 10, 2018), <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-immigration-and-customs-enforcement-ice/>.
5. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Budget Overview Fiscal Year 2021*, 29, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/u.s._immigration_and_customs_enforcement.pdf.
6. Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Puts Best Face on Border Deal, as Aides Try to Assuage an Angry Right,” *New York Times*, February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/us/politics/deal-government-shutdown.html>.
7. Amanda Macias and John Schoen, “Here’s Where the money for Trump’s border wall will come from,” *CNBC*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.cbc.com/2019/02/15/heres-where-the-money-for-trumps-border-wall-will-come-from.html>.
8. Idrees Ali, “Pentagon to transfer \$1.5 billion to border wall from Afghan forces, other areas,” *Reuters*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-border-pentagon/pentagon-to-transfer-15-billion-to-border-wall-from-afghan-forces-other-areas-idUSKCN1SG1TM>.
9. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Report to Congressional Requesters, Southwest Border Security: Additional Actions Needed to Better Assess Fencing’s Contributions to Operations and Provide Guidance for Identifying Capability Caps*, February 2017, 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/682838.pdf>.
10. Julia Preston, “Homeland Security Cancels ‘Virtual Fence’ After \$1 Billion is Spent,” *New York Times*, January 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/us/politics/15fence.html>.
11. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, CBP’s Autonomous Surveillance Towers Declared a Program of Record along the Southwest Border, July 2, 2020, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-s-autonomous-surveillance-towers-declared-program-record-along>; See also Nick Miroff, “Trump administration hires tech firm to build virtual border wall, an idea democrats have praised”, *Washington Post*, July 2, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-virtual-border-wall/2020/07/02/7b380490-b0ac-11ea-a567-6172530208bd_story.html.
12. Doris Meissner, Donald M. Kerwin, Muzaffar Chishti, and Claire Bergeron, *Immigration Enforcement in the United States: The Rise of Formidable Machinery* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, January 2013), <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-enforcement-united-states-rise-formidable-machinery>.

13. U.S. Border Patrol, Southwest Border Sectors, Southwest Border Deaths By Fiscal Year, https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2020-Jan/U.S.%20Border%20Patrol%20Fiscal%20Year%20Southwest%20Sector%20Deaths%20%28FY%201998%20-%20FY%202019%29_0.pdf.
14. This number is derived from the gross or total budget authority figure provided in conference reports accompanying congressional appropriations bills for Fiscal Years 2004-2021, an amount which includes fee-funded expenditures. For historical numbers and further context, see Bipartisan Policy Center, *Measuring the Metrics: Grading the Government on Immigration Enforcement* (Washington, DC: February 2015), <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/measuring-the-metrics-grading-the-government-on-immigration-enforcement/>.
15. Carla N. Argueta, *Border Security: Immigration Enforcement Between Ports of Entry* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 19, 2016), 11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesecc/R42138.pdf>; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Budget-in-Brief*, FY 2018-FY 2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-budget>.
16. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Budget-in-Brief*, FY 2018-FY 2021, <https://www.dhs.gov/dhs-budget>.
17. Ibid.
18. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Border Patrol Fiscal Year Staffing Statistics (FY 1992- FY 2019), 1, https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2020-Jan/U.S.%20Border%20Patrol%20Fiscal%20Year%20Staffing%20Statistics%20%28FY%201992%20-%20FY%202019%29_0.pdf.
19. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “On a Typical Day in FY 2019, CBP...”, April 15, 2020, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/typical-day-fy2019>.
20. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Budget Overview Fiscal Year 2021*, 29, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/u.s._immigration_and_customs_enforcement.pdf.
21. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “Who We Are,” <https://www.ice.gov/about>.
22. Greg Chen and Su Kim, *Border Security: Moving Beyond Past Benchmarks* (Washington, DC: American Immigration Lawyers Association, January 2013), <http://www.aila.org/content/default.aspx?bc=25667143061>.
23. Ibid.
24. Homeland Security Advisory Council, *Report of the Subcommittee on Privatized Immigration Detention Facilities* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, December 1, 2016), <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS%20HSAC%20PIDF%20Final%20Report.pdf>; National Immigration Forum, *The Math of Immigration Detention, 2018 Update: Costs Continue to Multiply* (Washington, DC: 2018), <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Math-of-Detention-2018-Update-FINAL.pdf>.
25. Isabela Dias, “ICE is Detaining More People Than Ever—And For Longer,” *Pacific Standard*, August 1, 2019, <https://psmag.com/news/ice-is-detaining-more-people-than-ever-and-for-longer>.