

12. Trump's Arguments About The Wall Are Mostly False or Exaggerated

By Washington Post, Dec 27, 2018

President Trump's sales pitch for a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico hasn't really changed much since he first launched his presidential campaign in 2015. He summarized it in a tweet Thursday meant to pressure Democrats into acquiescing to his demand for billions in dollars of funding for its construction.

"Need to stop Drugs, Human Trafficking, Gang Members & Criminals from coming into our Country," Trump wrote with his idiosyncratic capitalization. Later in the day he added that Democrats want an "Open Southern Border and the large scale crime that comes with such stupidity."

Democrats don't want "open borders," of course, but oppose the construction of the wall in part because it's so central to Trump's priorities. But the bigger reason Democrats oppose construction of the wall is that Trump's arguments about what the wall will prevent are inflated or incorrect.

Illegal immigration: Consider the question of illegal immigration alone.

Last month, Pew Research Center released updated data about illegal immigration in the United States. Since the recession, the number of undocumented immigrants living in the country is estimated to have dropped slightly, thanks largely to a slowdown in immigrants from Mexico entering the country illegally. One result? Two-thirds of those living in the United States illegally have been here for at least a decade.

So who are the new arrivals? Are they mostly people crossing the southern border illegally? No. They are mostly people who arrive in the United States on legal visas who don't leave when they are required to. In June, a report from the Center for Migration Studies estimated that about two-thirds of those who join the undocumented population each year are people overstaying visas.

"The number attempting to get across the Southern border is probably the lowest it's been since at least the 1970s," one demographer told Ingraham.

Government data suggest that in 2016 there were about 170,000 successful illegal border crossings outside of authorized border crossing points. That same year, the Department of Homeland Security estimates, 630,000 people overstayed visas.

What's more, those who cross the border illegally often quickly seek out law enforcement officials to make asylum claims. The Trump administration is trying to force asylum seekers to use designated ports of entry, but many of those who have crossed the border illegally in recent years have done so because the asylum process requires that someone seeking protection be in the United States when making a claim.

Drugs: Trump has tied illegal immigration to the opioid crisis specifically and illegal drug smuggling broadly. But that, too, is misleading.

In February 2017, then-Homeland Security secretary John F. Kelly testified before Congress that most drugs that enter the United States across the border with Mexico come smuggled in vehicles or on the bodies of people crossing into the United States.

As USA Today reported last year, moving smuggling to ports of entry by blocking or patrolling heavily used smuggling routes was intentional, making it easier for authorities to track illegal drugs. But it also meant an increase in the use of different methods, such as drug-smuggling tunnels, through which drugs still flow and which wouldn't be affected by a wall.

A Customs and Border Protection official who spoke with USA Today argued that no wall — or anything else — would fully curtail drug smuggling.

“We can put barriers and we can slow them down but no matter what we do people are still going to try,” he said.

Crime and gangs

It's well established by now that there's no correlation between immigrants and crime; in fact, immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans.

Two different studies, covered by the Washington Post this year, show further that undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native citizens. The first study looked at conviction data in Texas finding that, while immigrants in the country illegally were more frequently convicted of crimes than legal immigrants, the rates of conviction were lower than among native-born Americans. The other study found an inverse correlation between the rate of violent crime and the percentage of the undocumented immigrant population — as one went down, the other went up.

Trump also often claims that young people coming into the United States are members of the criminal gang MS-13. To address that, we can point to testimony from the acting head of Customs and Border Protection in June of last year. From 2011 to mid-2017, the agency had encountered nearly 250,000 unaccompanied minors — people under 18 — at

the border. Of that group, about 159 had some gang affiliation. Fifty-six of those were MS-13, about 0.02 percent of the total.

Other arguments

It is the nature of Trump's rhetoric that he will make debunked claims over and over and over again, without changing course. So we'll note three other arguments that he's made in the past — and that we've already debunked.

Terrorism. Trump has claimed that the criminals crossing the border include terrorists. Earlier this month, he claimed that 10 terrorists had been caught in recent months.

There's no evidence that's true. In fact, a report from the State Department last year offered a sharply different assessment of the threat: There is "no credible information that any member of a terrorist group has traveled through Mexico to gain access to the United States."

Disease. Trump claimed that immigrants crossing into the country illegally helped spread disease. Experts who spoke with NBC News this month said that there was "no evidence" that this was happening. There have been increases in communicable diseases in immigrant populations that often stem from conditions related to their migration (such as being housed in camps), but transmission of those illnesses is generally among other members of the community. As with so much of the rest of his rhetoric, his claims are unattached to reality.