

Immigrant costs soar for border counties

Study: Police work saps funds from other services

Republic
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Mar. 5, 2008

WASHINGTON - Illegal immigration is costing Arizona border counties millions a year for law enforcement and criminal prosecutions, diverting money from parks, libraries and other law-enforcement efforts, according to a study to be released today.

The costs to the four border counties in Arizona increased 39 percent, from \$19.2 million in fiscal 1999 to \$26.6 million in fiscal 2006, researchers at the University of Arizona and San Diego State University found.

For the nation's 24 border counties in Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas, the costs related to illegal immigration in fiscal 2006 were \$192 million, more than double the costs in 1999

The study was commissioned by the U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition, a non-profit group of border-county officials who want the federal government to reimburse their county jails and prosecutors offices for legal costs.

"The study is important because, for the most part, these border counties are small, they're rural, they're very poor, and this is a tremendous hit to their county budgets," Tanis Salant, a public-policy lecturer at UA and the study's main author, said in an interview.

The coalition, which began looking at the impact of illegal immigration on border counties in 1999, paid for the study using a Justice Department grant.

Researchers estimate the costs of illegal immigration on county law enforcement borderwide at \$1.2 billion in the past eight fiscal years.

Researchers examined county budgets, court records and crime statistics and interviewed hundreds of county officials for the report. The report did not look at the impact of illegal immigrants on cities, states or Indian tribes.

The coalition wants Congress to spend more federal dollars on the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program, which gave border counties a total of \$4.7 million in reimbursements last year.

The money was less than one-tenth of the actual costs the counties bore for detaining illegal immigrants, according to the report.

The group also wants more funding for the Southwest Border Prosecution Initiative, among other federal programs.

The costs of illegal immigration are placing "undue burdens" on people who live in border counties, the report says. Urban counties bore the highest costs, with San Diego County in California spending the most at \$77.1 million, followed by El Paso and Hidalgo counties in Texas

and Pima and Yuma counties in Arizona.

Residents of three Texas counties - Hudspeth, Terrell and Zapata - carried the costliest per capita burden, with each resident paying about \$378, \$126 and \$112, respectively, last year.

The costs came at the expense of other county services such as libraries, jails, courtrooms and parks, according to the report.

Officials in Santa Cruz County, Ariz., for example, say they need more money to offer better amenities at their local parks; officials in Presidio County, Texas, say they don't have the money for a new ambulance they need; and officials in Imperial County, Calif., want to enhance other law-enforcement efforts.

Illegal immigration is creating budget problems for Cochise County, spokeswoman Karla Jensen said.

"It definitely has an impact, primarily with our law-enforcement and judicial systems," she said. "Law enforcement is one of our biggest expenses on our budget."

Poor Border Counties Pay Steep Price for Illegal Immigration

CNSNews.com
Josiah Ryan

Poor rural communities along the border are paying a steep price for illegal immigration, according to a study released Wednesday done on behalf of the United States/Mexico Border Counties Coalition by the University of Arizona and San Diego State University.

Some of this cost is driven by the need for increased law enforcement.

Manny Ruiz, vice president of the coalition, is chairman of the board of supervisors in Santa Cruz County, Ariz., which includes 50 miles of the Mexican border. Sheriffs in his county have caught undocumented immigrants carrying AK-47 rifles and have discovered weapons caches hidden in remote hills near the border, Ruiz told Cybercast New Service.

"There are gangs out there trying to outrun local law enforcement and the Border Patrol," he said. "It's becoming expensive, and we are very concerned."

Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), who helped secure Justice Department funding for the study, said it demonstrates that communities in states like his are being overwhelmed by the cost of illegal immigration.

"This updated study effectively illustrates that, until our borders are secure and our immigration laws are adequately enforced, many states and localities, particularly in border states like Arizona, will continue to incur overwhelming costs to process those illegal immigrants who commit crimes or who, sadly, die trying to come to the United

States," Kyl said.

Between 1999 and 2006, the 24 U.S. counties bordering Mexico spent \$1.23 billion on illegal immigrants in their local criminal justice systems, according to the report.

Ruiz said his county can ill afford to deal with the illegal immigrant crime problem considering that the average per capita income in the county is \$13,278.

Between 10 percent and 25 percent of the inmates in the local jail are illegal aliens, and \$2.2 million of the \$22 million in annual local general-fund taxes are spent dealing with criminal aliens, Ruiz said.

Laura Ilardo, Phoenix coordinator for No More Deaths, a group that assists immigrants once they have already crossed onto U.S. soil, told Cybercast News Service most illegal alien crime is committed by a minority of illegal immigrants.

"I challenge the idea that there is violence among undocumented people," she said. "It's very specific to the drug smugglers or human smugglers. They are the problem."

Ilardo said her group does not see illegal immigrants bringing weapons across the border.

"The immigrants themselves never invoke violence. They never carry weapons," she said. "Our group has been walking the border for four or five years, and we have never encountered a single weapon, not even once."

Dan Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, told Cybercast News Service that the cost for illegal immigration is a heavy and unnecessary burden on local communities.

"It is a lot of money for these local communities," he said. "County officials should be out there catching local criminals. Instead they are chasing down people who are coming to be construction workers and dishwashers and maids."

Griswold likens our current immigration laws to the historical outlawing of alcoholic beverages in the United States.

"Like prohibition in the 1930s, current border laws have spawned an underworld of crime, smuggling and document crime," he said. "That's where the violence comes in. If we had reform, we would see a drastic reduction in smuggling."