



How a Bigger, Longer Border Wall Might Backfire

Nora Haenn, North Carolina State University at Raleigh

Although much of American politics these days is dominated by proclamations against migrants and expansion of “the wall” President Trump wants to build on the U.S.-Mexico border, available evidence suggests little need for an expanded barrier – and little prospect that it would have much effect.

The border shared by the United States and Mexico is about 2,000 miles long – about the distance as a bird flies from Seattle, Washington to Cleveland, Ohio. The border has no “wall,” but parts do have fencing. The U.S. Border Patrol lists a patchwork of materials that make up a 700-mile barrier: three-wire cattle fences, vertical railroad rails, concrete-filled steel tubing, corrugated steel plates, and crushed cars.

So how might an expansion of this fencing affect migration?

According to the non-partisan [Pew Research Center](#), since the year 2005, the number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States has fluctuated between 10 and 12 million. Over the past two decades, these numbers have held relatively firm despite millions of deportations under the past three administrations. One reason for this consistency is job availability. Again, from the Pew Research Center, “most registered voters in the U.S. say immigrants – whether unauthorized or legal – mostly fill jobs American citizens don’t want.” As a result, tolerance of unauthorized immigrants as employees stands high.

This data points to the weightier forces influencing migrant flows, including political and economic conditions that can work at cross purposes, sometimes in surprising ways. As an anthropologist who studies migration, my research suggests the construction of a more complete wall is unlikely change these conditions and will therefore not meet the goals claimed for it.

The Ironic Story of Recent Mexican Migration to the United States

During the past 25 years, political and economic conditions in the United States and its southern neighbors have tended to encourage unauthorized migration, even when governments restricted unauthorized travel. Research reveals that the early 1990s marked a turning point when U.S. efforts to curtail immigration had unintended consequences, especially for Mexican migrants.

Here is what happened: During the 1980s, the border between the United States and Mexico was fairly porous, a situation that allowed 85% of Mexican immigrants to regularly return home between stints of working in the United States. This is known as “circular migration,” because people, mostly workers, tended to come and go periodically over a number of years. In the early 1980s, Mexicans were at least twice as likely to return home than the millions of migrants who preceded them to the United States. For comparison, between 1880 and 1930 – a period known for mass migration from Europe and Asia to the United States – some 30-

40% of U.S. arrivals turned out to be similarly temporary sojourners.

But after the 1980s, things changed. The United States tried to get tough on the border. The fluidity with which Mexicans came and went transformed in step with increased border security. Between 1992 and 2009, U.S. border patrol staffing rose from 3,555 to 17,415 agents, as costs to taxpayers rose from \$3.26 million to a whopping \$2.7 billion.

For migrants, meanwhile, new fences and patrols meant that crossing the border became more expensive. Smugglers readjusted routes and pressed deeper into the Sonoran desert, where border patrol officers were less likely to venture. Not surprisingly, the smugglers charged migrants ever higher prices for these ever-evolving avoidance strategies. In 1993, a migrant might pay \$143 to be smuggled into the United States. By 2000, the same traveler paid \$800 to \$1,300 – in real terms, at least a five-fold increase. The going rate in 2006 was \$3,500, and by 2016 the cost had risen to \$5,000. In 2025, the price stands at \$10,000. Despite these rising costs, unauthorized entries persisted, making it clear that these amounts are not a deterrent.

The new routes required longer stays in remote and inhospitable environments. The results were costly in lives. Threats to human lives grew along with costs for the migrants as well as for the U.S. government and taxpayers. Between 1994 and 2009, an estimated 5,600 people died during dangerous crossings. Annually to this day, some 300 to 470 people are known to perish trying to make the trip across the patrolled and partially fenced southern border.

Yet when it came to actually limiting the impact of Mexican migration on the United States, the tightened border security backfired. In order to justify the costly and dangerous crossing, migrant workers began to stay longer in the United States. Where circular migration previously took place on something like a two-year cycle – with migrants returning home once every two years – by the new century, migrants planned five and six-year journeys. The longer they stayed in the United States, the less likely they were to return to their previous homes.

In short, by militarizing the southern border, the U.S. government actually *increased the likelihood* that migrants would move permanently. But rising numbers of immigrants are not coming, at least not recently. Again, the number of undocumented migrants in the United States has remained within the 10-12 million band since 2005. So if some people are sensing an uptick in migration, what they might be noticing is an uptick in *permanent* migration as the circular routes became less viable and migrants are *forced* to stay in the United States, often bringing other family members to join them. For workers, the costs for going back and forth across the border have become prohibitive.

Will History Repeat Itself?

Will unintended consequences again follow if reinforcements are added to build one big “wall”? It’s hard to say. Forces making life south of the border harder might increase migration regardless of U.S. policies. This seems to be the case for asylum seekers whose home-country conditions receive very little attention. Conditions on both sides of the border do more to influence people’s decisions to migrate than fences or policies alone.

In the past, economic troubles in Mexico have propelled more northward migration, to the degree that employers in the United States continue to hire new arrivals. Will U.S. employers do such hiring? Economic forecasters predict continued growth in the U.S. economy in the coming years, partly based on increased government deficit spending. Demand for workers is likely to remain high. More U.S. public spending – ironically, even billions on the wall – could propel growth and encourage U.S. employers to hire more undocumented workers.

In short, the much touted border wall might end up doing exactly the opposite of what it promises. A more extensive barrier, one costly to American taxpayers, might make it even harder for migrants to return home, thereby encouraging even more migrants to settle permanently in the United States.

Read more at <https://norahaenn.org/>. Nora Haenn is the author of various articles on economic development in Mexico. She is at work on a book manuscript *Marriage after Migration: Women's Pleasures and Dangers in Globalizing Mexico*.