

“You Can’t Deport 11 Million People” Statement Reflects Mistaken Image

By David North

The frequently heard comment “You just can’t deport 11 million people” reflects a mistaken mental image of the illegal alien population.

In the minds of, or the unconscious of, those making that statement is a vision of a static population of 11 million people, all in the same big room, all staying put, with no one arriving or leaving. I call this the stadium model.

Think of the Super Bowl at half time. There are 100,000-plus people in the stadium, and they all want to stay for the rest of the game. There are, at the moment, no comings and goings.

If the police had to clear the stadium by arresting and removing specific individuals one at a time — as is the case with deportation — it *would be* an impossible task.

In the mind’s eye, the situation looks like this:

Figure 1. The Wrong Way to Visualize the
Illegal Alien Population: The Stadium Model



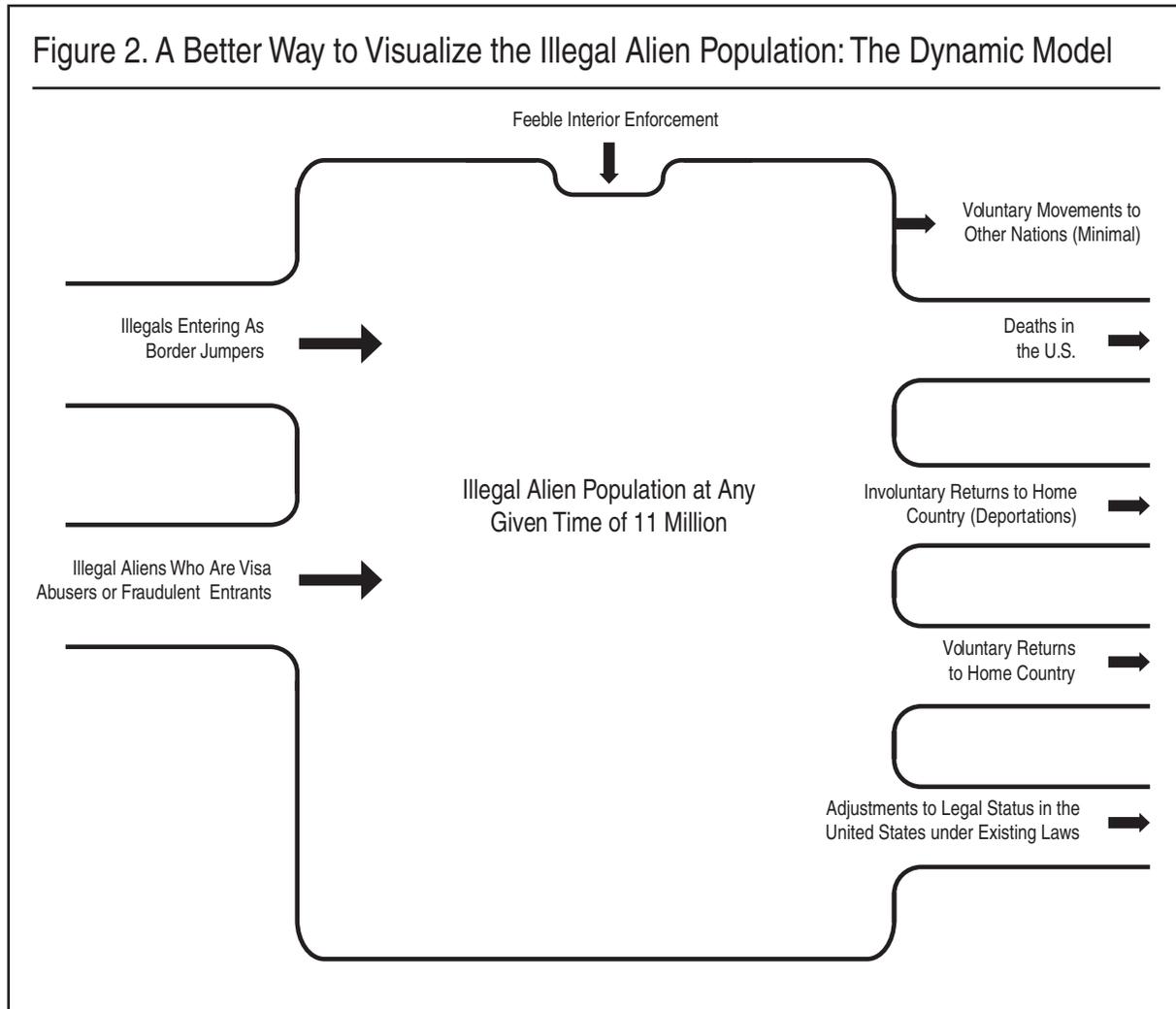
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But the illegal alien population is not like the Super Bowl audience; it is a churning group, some newly arrived, some here for a long time, and many thinking about, planning to, or actually leaving through a wide variety of exits.

If we could limit the number of new entrants *and* make it less attractive for illegal ones to stay *and* make it easier and more attractive to leave, then we could decrease the size of the illegal alien population without any need to deport them all, as the graphic below illustrates.



Arrivals in the Illegal Alien Population. The left side of the chart shows the two major sources of the illegal alien population, those jumping the border with no papers at all and those arriving through the ports of entry with phony (but not detected) papers (fraudulent entrants) and the far more numerous group that arrives legitimately, but subsequently violates the terms of their visas.

The government, in recent years, has made some serious efforts to slow the arrivals of the border jumpers, by hiring more Border Patrol agents and building some fences. The government, however, has been far less likely to spend equal amounts of money on reducing the flow of the visa abusers and fraudulent entrants (a term used by migration managers). Unfortunately hiring more screeners at the ports and chasing down visa abusers is nowhere nearly as dramatic as saying “we just added 1,000 more agents to the Border Patrol.”

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So we have done something to slow one of the flows into the illegal alien population, and that's good. But there are other things that can be done to reduce the illegal alien population, to cause attrition through enforcement, which CIS has been arguing for all along¹ — and very little attention has been paid to any of these reforms.

Departures from the Illegal Alien Population. Looking at the second graphic again we see that one way to encourage specific illegal aliens to depart is to squeeze the population generally through enforcement. If all illegal aliens caught driving without licenses were quickly (with appropriate safeguards) kicked out of the country as soon as caught, it would encourage other illegal alien drivers to leave the nation. If there were repeated factory raids and widely publicized expulsions of large groups of illegal alien workers, something the Bush administration did from time to time, the same message would get through to many of the illegal aliens holding jobs, and they would start to leave the country through one of the gateways on the right side of the diagram.

Unfortunately, as the graphic notes, U.S. enforcement of the immigration law in the interior has been feeble in recent years, putting only minimal pressure on illegals to leave.

Another basic strategy, which has been largely ignored, is to make it easier to depart the nation, or to depart illegal status in the nation (without engaging in a foolish amnesty).

In short, **we should make it harder for illegals and potential illegals to get into the country, less pleasant for them to stay here in illegal status, and more attractive to leave.**

If all this were done simultaneously the illegal alien population would start to shrink, without any need to deport all 11 million of them.

Let's look at the five ways out of illegal alien status at the right side of the chart, some of which are much more significant and some of which are considerably more attractive than others.

Death. The least attractive is death. With a population of 11 million something under 100,000 are likely to die each year (that would be less than 1 percent). The actual death rates of the illegal population are not known, and would be depressed by the practice of some old illegals leaving the nation to spend their final years in their home countries.

Third Country. The least likely exit path, but a very attractive one, and also near the top of the right part of the chart, is the voluntary departure of some illegals into legal status in a third country. It is clearly a win-win situation for the United States, for the alien, and presumably for the third country, as well.

Some Ph.D. candidate should devote a dissertation to this subject; we need to know more about it. (At one point recently the oil-rich Canadian province of Alberta was looking for restless H-1Bs in the STEM fields in the United States, to help its economy.)

There must be some of these movements to third nations, but there probably are not a lot of them. There certainly could be more of them with a little help from the government, but this administration is much, much more interested in increasing immigration of all kinds, rather than in controlling it.

The three remaining exits from the illegal alien population are much more widely used than the two little gateways just described, and deserve more attention; these are forced departures of various kinds, voluntary returns to the home country, and adjustments to legal status within the United States under existing (not new) laws.

Forced Movements Back to the Home Country. There are many ways for the government to cause illegal aliens to leave the country, as my colleague W.D. Reasoner outlined in "Deportation Basics" in 2011.² These include deportation and its somewhat softer sibling Voluntary Departure, which means you leave the country, but without an escort, and at your own expense. (The government buys the airline or bus ticket in deportation cases.)

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For several years the government has claimed that the levels of deportations have reached close to 400,000 a year, which is encouraging, but the statistics, as even the president has admitted, are somewhat shaky and recently the Obama administration has begun using “prosecutorial discretion” to shave the numbers further. Many of those being deported have double criminal records, i.e., they have broken both immigration law and other laws as well. The administration seems to think that violating immigration laws, without other violations, should not lead to a forced departure.

This is both a major departure route for the illegal alien population and is the only one with something approaching useful statistics. More money and more political will should be devoted to expanding this existing, and government-recognized, gateway.

Voluntary Returns to the Home Country. Another major exit route from the illegal population consists of aliens going back to their home country, either for a short time or for good, without any government order to do so. Some leave for nearly frivolous reasons (e.g., to attend a wedding), while others leave for strong personal reasons (to see a dying parent), or because, on a more cheerful note, they are target earners and have reached their goals.

Still others leave because of policy-related reasons. They have found that living illegally in the United States is no longer comfortable because of how immigration enforcement impacts them now and/or how they think it will impact them later. The outflow of illegal aliens from Arizona, for example, is a good example of this, but we do not have a statistical sense of how much of this movement was back to old Mexico, or on to New Mexico and to other U.S. states.

I think Mitt Romney, for whom I generally have a dim regard, got unjustified criticism for his suggestion that part of the problem of illegal immigration could be solved by “self-deportation.” While the phrase may have been lacking in finesse, what he described is a major, useful, legal, and non-confrontational approach to the problem, one that no American government has even sought to facilitate, while numerous other democracies have used assisted return-migration as part of their set of migration-management tools.³

There are, of course, two ways to encourage “self-deportation”; one is to make the process of leaving more attractive, thus broadening that gateway. Last year I wrote a couple of blogs on specific ways for the U.S. government to encourage such movements to meet that goal.⁴

The other way to encourage “self-deportation” is to provide enough internal enforcement of the immigration law — something we do *not* have now. This would be reflected in the graphic by heavy arrows pressing on all sides of the illegal alien population.

Clearly America could, and should, do much, much, more to encourage return migration via additional interior enforcement and/or specific, to-be-created emigration-assistance schemes.

Adjustment to Legal Status in the United States. One of the ways to diminish the size of the illegal population is, of course, to legalize some currently illegal aliens.

Unrecognized by most, this is a continuing and major process under current laws. In FY 2011, for example, we issued new green cards to 1,062,040 aliens; of these, 580,092 were already in the United States and adjusted to green card status; an unknown but large number of the 580,092 were here illegally.⁵ The other 481,948 were new arrivals to the United States.

To some unknown extent there are people in the United States in illegal status who have not yet secured legalization, although they could do so should they want to do so. There are, for example, resident illegal aliens with citizen or green card relatives who could use the relationship to secure legal status, but have not done so, perhaps out of laziness or perhaps because the fees and the process appear daunting.

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Such persons would be more likely to apply were they to feel uncomfortable in illegal status, but interior enforcement is so slight that they apparently feel no such pressure.

These are adjustments under existing laws, and while those resident illegals who can adjust should do so, I am not advocating a major widening of this escape hatch. Such a widening is, however, advocated by the administration and it would be a major amnesty.

In conclusion, the illegal alien population is a dynamic one and could be reduced substantially over the next few years if the government were to bring more pressure to bear on it in an organized manner by expanding interior enforcement while, at the same time, narrowing the inflow gates for that population, and broadening the outflow gates.

End Notes

¹ See Mark Krikorian, [“Downsizing Illegal Immigration: A Strategy of Attrition Through Enforcement”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, May 2005, and Jessica Vaughan, [“Attrition Through Enforcement: A Cost-Effective Strategy to Shrink the Illegal Population”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, April 2006.

² See W.D. Reasoner, [“Deportation Basics: How Immigration Enforcement Works \(or Doesn’t\) in Real Life”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, July 2011.

³ Numerous European nations have tried, or are using, this approach. One of things that they learned was that paying people to go home works best if the country of departure has restrictive admissions practices; thus paying middle-aged or older Spanish workers to leave France was not very useful, given the effective lack of borders within the European community. On the other hand, when Czechoslovakia (or maybe it was the Czech Republic) decided to encourage Mongolian guestworkers to leave, it was more likely to work. During the Iron Curtain days, when both Czechoslovakia and Mongolia were run by the Communists, the use of Mongol guestworkers apparently made sense to the ruling elite; [after the fall of the Iron Curtain it did not](#).

⁴ See David North, [“You’re Good to Go, or Thoughts on Encouraging Emigration: Part I”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, May 2012; and David North, [“You’re Good to Go, or Thoughts on Encouraging Emigration: Part II”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, May 2012.

⁵ See [2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics](#), Washington, DC: US Department of Homeland Security, table 7.