# Unworkable Immigration Proposals from Donald Trump - and Other Republican Presidential Contenders

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Donald Trump has made immigration into a front-burner issue in the 2016 presidential election, in ways that encourage unworkable, politically hyped solutions appealing only to a hard-core minority of voters. Released on August 16, Trump's six-page immigration program blended appeals to nationalism, populism, and nativism with sketchy policy ideas based on little understanding of the realities of U.S. immigration. Given Trump's rise in the polls, the rest of the Republican primary field is reacting to his claims, so it is important to specify their inadequacies.

## Repealing Birthright Citizenship

Taking a step that some other GOP candidates have been hesitant to fully endorse for fear of alienating Latino and moderate voters, Donald Trump declares that he would "end birthright citizenship" – the principle that babies born in the United States are automatically citizens. Trump wants to look tough on the "anchor baby" problem, the notion that undocumented pregnant women try to gain legal status by giving birth in the United States. The general public probably does not realize that the undocumented parents have to wait 21 years, until their child born in the U.S. grows up, to file an application on their behalf. Most immigrants come for jobs, not to have babies, so abolishing birthright citizenship would do little to reduce undocumented entries. In an equally deceptive move, Trump tries to make abolishing birthright citizenship sound easy, neglecting to mention that it would require amending the U.S. Constitution, a protracted process that has happened only 27 times in all of our nation's history. Birthright citizenship was first established by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution adopted in 1877 to ensure full citizen status for African-American ex-slaves; and it was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in 1898.

## Building a Wall on the Southwestern Border

"Just wall them all out" is an idea that has been pushed in one way or another not only by Trump, but virtually everyone else in the GOP field. Republicans try to present building an impenetrable barrier as a prerequisite to any discussion of benefits for undocumented people already in America. Tough as this may sound, it is totally unrealistic. The border between the United States and Mexico spans 1,989 miles. Only contractors would gain from this project, and previous studies have shown that people can always circumvent such physical barriers. What is more, the southwestern border is only one of the many U.S. borders, and traversing it is only one way in. Statistics from the Department of Homeland Security show that at least 40% of all undocumented people currently residing in the United States entered the country with valid temporary visas they simply over-stayed. Triply fortifying the southwestern border would be akin to double deadbolt-locking a home's front door, while closing the back door with a twisty tie from the supermarket and leaving the roof off the house.

## Defunding Sanctuary Cities

This Trump proposal is also parroted by Jeb Bush and others, because it keys off a recent tragedy – the murder of Kathryn Steinle by an undocumented immigrant living in San Francisco, a "sanctuary city" where local authorities do little to help federal authorities with deportations. Around the time of Steinle's murder, Trump was decrying Mexican immigrants as including lots of rapists and drug dealers. In fact, researchers find that immigrants are less likely than native-born U.S. residents to commit violent crimes. But Trump and other politicians know how easy it is to stoke popular fears during a fragile economic recovery, and they know that many native-born Americans worry about cultural and racial changes wrought by recent immigration.

Calling for the federal government to take punitive steps against liberal cities like San Francisco is a clever way for a candidate to confuse people. Most citizens have no way of knowing that states, cities, and towns cannot actually refuse to enforce federal law. The real issue is the ongoing division of labor between national and state and local authorities. The U.S. is a federal, not unitary system, in which different levels of government

exercise power over various key functions. Local police chiefly have the responsibility to serve and protect their communities, which they cannot do very well if officers are, in effect, deputized to do the federal government's job of enforcing immigration laws. Most local law enforcement officials do not ask motorists stopped for routine traffic issues to prove their citizenship status because this would waste time and erode community trust. If local law enforcement officers were to routinely inquire about everyone's immigration status, many crimes would go unreported and potential witnesses would hide from the police. In the San Francisco case, we should ask why federal authorities released the eventual murderer, a multiple previous offender. Instead of releasing him three times into the community, the federal Bureau of Prisons should have transferred him to Immigration and Customs Enforcement for immediate deportation. But Trump and other candidates do not want to explain all that, when denouncing San Francisco is easier.

## Toward Real Solutions

Jobs are the magnet drawing undocumented immigrants to the United States, specifically because of the huge wage gaps between posts in the U.S. economy and jobs that may – or may not – be available in immigrants' home countries. Experiences during depressions and recessions have shown that entries to the United States slow to a trickle – and even reverse – when jobs are not available. Building walls and fences only has the effect of pushing desperate people to cross at more dangerous parts of the border. Furthermore, fences trap undocumented persons, preventing them from visiting families left behind. Credible proposals to reduce economic incentives for illegal entrants must have as their centerpiece a mechanism to address the jobs magnet, including also severely penalizing U.S. employers who break immigration law.

Effective immigration reform requires overhauling many parts of the system at once. The availability of jobs for new undocumented workers must be reduced and, at the same time, law-abiding undocumented workers and families already integrated into local economies and communities across America must gain routes to temporary or permanent legal status. Trump's call to round up and expel all eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the country is totally unrealistic as well as inhumane. In 2013, the U.S. Senate passed a bipartisan bill that made a good start toward a comprehensive solution – but further progress will remain impossible until the simplistic rhetoric stoked by the 2016 GOP presidential primaries comes to an end.