

Walling Off Crime: An Analysis of the Local Deterrent Effects of Increased Border Control

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the deterrent effects of both border patrol agents and increased U.S.-Mexico fencing on reported crime rates in U.S. cities located along the border, between 1992 and 2017. We find that, for cities along the U.S.-Mexico border, increases in the number of border patrol agents, within patrol sectors, are associated with significant declines in property crime rates and that increased border fencing is associated with a significant deterrent effect on both property and violent crime rates. Further investigation into the underlying mechanism provides evidence that border control measures, particularly border patrol agents, are associated with significant reductions in the share of the migrant population committing crimes. The avoided crime indicated by the baseline estimates represents an economic benefit, ranging, on average, from \$7,700 for an additional border agent to \$1.4 million for an additional mile of in-city fencing.

JEL Classification: K40, K42, D74, H56, D23

Keywords: Border studies, border control, migration, crime, national security

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“El Paso used to have one of the highest crime rates in America. After that fence went up and separated Juarez, which still has an extremely high crime rate, the crime rates in El Paso now are some of the lowest in the country. So we know it works.” Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (El Paso Times, Jan. 10, 2019)¹

“Mr. Paxton, like most people who purport to know anything about the border, is dead wrong. El Paso has long (and consistently) been one of the safest communities in American — even before the wall was built.” U.S. Representative Veronica Escobar, D-El Paso (El Paso Times, Jan. 10, 2019)

¹Mekelburg, M. (2019, January 10). Did construction of a border fence cut down on crime rates in El Paso? *El Paso Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/politics/2019/01/10/el-paso-crime-rate-topic-in-trump-roundtable-to-support-border-wall/2539838002/>