

ISSUE BRIEF:

Border Security Assets

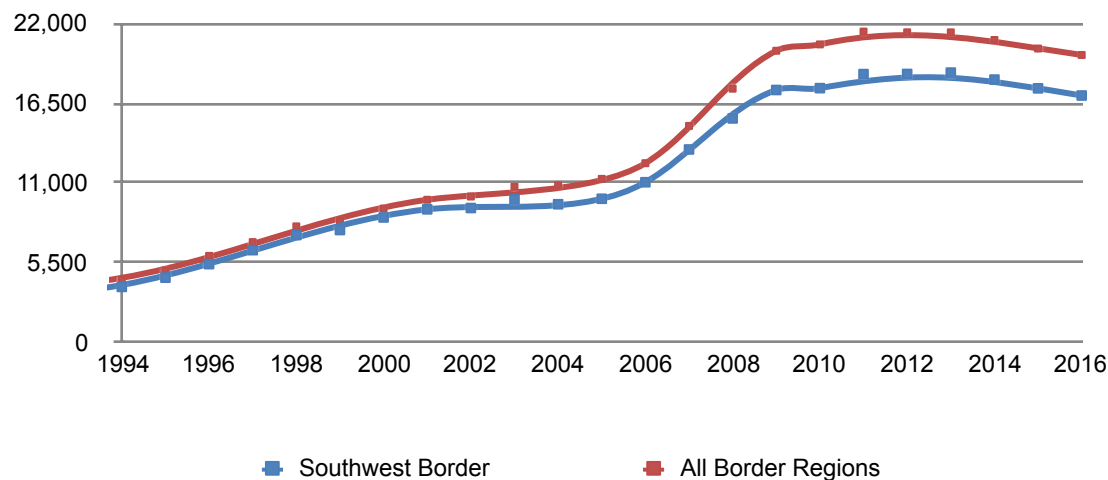
UPDATED AS OF JANUARY 2017

For most of U.S. history, little to no security existed along the southwest border with Mexico. This began to change after the United States enacted its first immigration quotas in the late 19th century. Irregular efforts to patrol the border [began in 1904](#), and Congress officially established the Border Patrol in 1924. Early efforts focused mainly on unauthorized Chinese immigration and unlawful liquor smuggling.

Over the following decades, a focus on unauthorized immigration from Mexico led to substantial increases in the U.S. presence along the southern border. The total number of border agents has more than doubled since 2002, and the extent of border fencing has more than quadrupled since 2005. Investments in surveillance technology also increased substantially in the past decade, including a new network of mobile surveillance systems and watch towers. Today, the United States maintains an unprecedented level of investment in border security, particularly along the southwest border.

Border Patrol agents. The number of agents deployed on the southern border increased dramatically in the past decade. The Border Patrol had [450 agents](#) when it was established in 1924, which increased to [more than 1,400](#) by the end of World War II. In 2002, the total number of border patrol agents surpassed 10,000 for the first time. By 2014, the force had more than doubled to over 21,000. Difficulties in hiring and retaining agents have dropped the number slightly in recent years.

Figure 1. Border Patrol agents, FY1993-2016



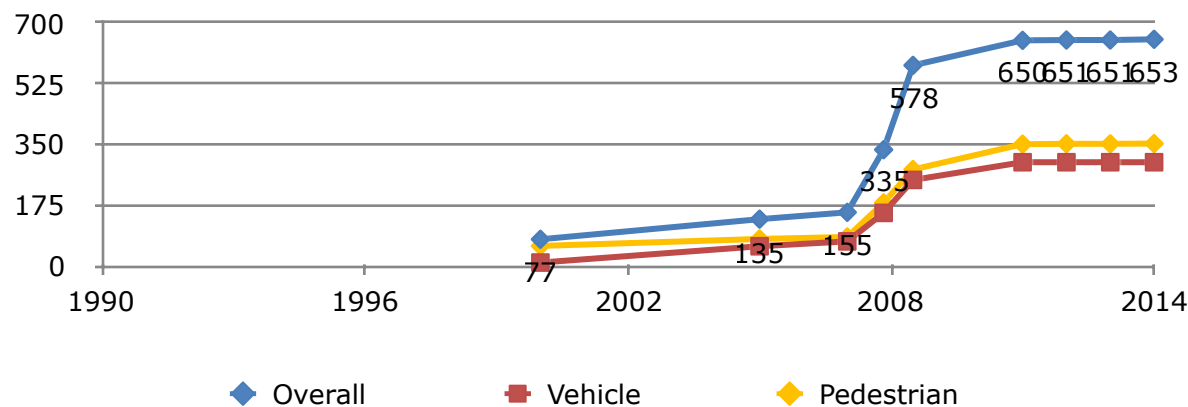
Source: [CBP](#).

Fencing and tactical infrastructure. The United States had started to protect its border with Mexico by utilizing physical barriers in the early 1990s as a part of the Border Patrol's

“Prevention Through Deterrence” strategy. The first primary fence was [completed in 1993](#), covering 14 miles of the border starting from the Pacific Ocean, and was largely made of surplus military corrugated steel [landing mats](#) from the Vietnam War.

The [Secure Fence Act of 2006](#) authorized the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to construct at least 700 miles of fencing along the southwest border. By 2014, CBP had completed 653 miles of the barrier, including nearly 353 miles of [pedestrian fence](#) and 299 miles of [vehicle barriers](#). In addition, some sectors of the US-Mexico border have been secured by multi-layered barriers. Besides the 36 miles of secondary fence securing many areas of the border from [California to Texas](#), there have been also about 14 miles of triple-layered fence built [near San Diego](#). Both these types of multi-layered barriers have been built in specific areas of the border that have been characterized by higher inflow of unauthorized immigrants and drug smugglers entering the United States. Tactical infrastructure such as stadium lighting also sits along the fence.

Figure 2. Miles of Southwest Border Covered by Fence, 2005–2014



Sources: AILA ([2005](#)), CBP ([2007](#), [7/2008](#), [11/2008](#), [2012](#)), GAO ([2011](#)), U.S. Senate ([2013](#)), DHS ([2000](#), [2014](#))

Surveillance systems. Border Patrol’s network of ground-surveillance technology expanded significantly between 2005 and 2014, including three new types of mobile-surveillance systems. The Office of Air and Marine manages CBP’s aerial- and marine-surveillance assets with a staff of about [1,700 agents](#).

Table 1. Surveillance assets in all border sectors, 2014 and prior years

GROUND-BASED	2014	2012	2005	2000
Unattended ground sensors	11,863	13,406	11,200	
Night Vision Goggles	9,255			

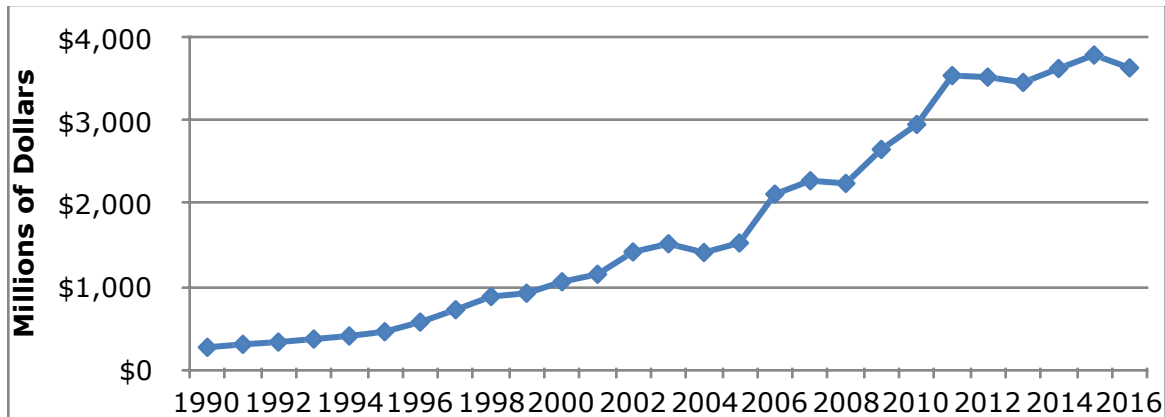
Thermal Imaging Capabilities	600				
Remote Video Surveillance Systems (daylight and infrared cameras)	273	337	269 (2006)	140	
Border Lighting	70 miles				29 miles
Short & medium truck-mounted Mobile Vehicle Surveillance Systems	178	198	0		
Long range truck-mounted Mobile Surveillance Systems	40	41	0		
Hand-held portable medium range surveillance systems		12	0		
Integrated Fixed Towers developed through SBInet		15	0		
AERIAL AND MARINE	2015*	2014	2012	2011	2000
Aircraft		267	249		56
Flight hours	97,299*	90,740	81,045	94,857	
Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS)		8	10	0 (2006)	0
Flight hours	6,000*	4,611	5,735	4,553	
Marine vehicles		305	293		2
Underway hours	115,000*	104,811	124,100	133,374	2

Source: [CRS](#) (May 2013), [CBP](#) (December 2011), [DHS](#) (2000, 2014), *Congressional Budget Justification FY2016 (2014, 2015)*, *DHS Budget Justification FY2015 (2014)*

*DHS projections

Funding. Large increases in agents, fencing, and surveillance assets were paired with corresponding increases in funding. Border Patrol’s 2015 budget of \$3.7 billion more than tripled its 2000 budget of \$1.1 billion, and it exceeded 1990’s funding level by nearly 14 times.

Figure 3. Border Patrol budget, 1990–2016



Source: [CBP](#).

Conclusions. Since the last round of comprehensive immigration reform proposals in the mid-2000s, the United States has substantially increased its investments in border security. Border agents have more than doubled, fencing has more than quintupled and surveillance technology is more widely deployed. During that time, unauthorized immigration has [fallen](#) while the Border Patrol’s “effectiveness rate” has [increased](#). However, the recession corresponded with the decline in unauthorized entries and a rise in effectiveness, making it difficult to know exactly how effective these investments have been.

Despite significant investments, border security continues to be one of the most contentious issues in the immigration reform debate. Some argue that the border is more secure than it has ever been, while others advocate further investments. Many believe that the border is overemphasized and that efforts to halt unauthorized immigration should place more focus on measures such as employment verification and entry/exit tracking.

The lack of consistent, widely accepted metrics has contributed to the disagreements over the state of border security. The federal government has generally failed to publicly report a comprehensive set of performance indicators that measure the effectiveness of its efforts to combat unauthorized immigration beyond input-based, “brute force” metrics like the number of agents or miles of fencing along the border. The lack of outcome-based measures has made it difficult for Congress and stakeholders to determine whether enforcement has been successful or cost-effective, or how much is “enough.” However, the lack of adequate performance reporting generally does not reflect a lack of data. DHS and external researchers have invested significant resources in developing methodologies to measure immigration enforcement outcomes over the

past few decades.

BPC recently undertook efforts to complete an assessment of the U.S. immigration enforcement system, focused on the interdependencies and cost-benefit tradeoffs among the various enforcement tools, as well as measures for border security success and effectiveness. The report, [*Measuring the Metrics: Grading the Government on Immigration Enforcement*](#), suggests a slate of metrics that, if reported consistently over time, would allow policy makers and the public to objectively evaluate the success of our border and immigration enforcement efforts.

Congress has recently pushed for some of the most comprehensive assessments of border security and enforcement efforts to date. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, which was signed into law at the end of 2016, includes language directing DHS to develop and regularly report on metrics to measure the effectiveness of its border security efforts at and between ports of entry and in the maritime environment. It is likely that border security will remain a key immigration reform issue in the years ahead. Having objective metrics by which to ground the debate over the state of the border in facts will be key to making any progress on this and other critical immigration reform issues.