

How visa 'overstays' are fueling America's immigration boom



"Half the problem of illegal immigration, at least, is related to [visa] overstays," said Steven Camarota, the research director at the Center for Immigration Studies. FILE — In this July 26, 2018 file photo visa applicants wait to enter the ... more >

By Stephen Dinan - *The Washington Times* - Tuesday, August 7, 2018

More than 400,000 people came to the U.S. on legal visitor visas in 2017 but were still here six months after their time was up, the government said in a new report Tuesday detailing the less-talked about side of illegal immigration.

While people jumping the border gets the most attention, "visa overstays" account for a large percentage of new immigrants who settle illegally in the country every year.

The 2017 numbers show a slight improvement compared to fiscal 2016. Officials said it's too early to know what worked, but said better border security and immigration enforcement are potential causes, along with changes in visitor patterns.

Known as visa overstays, the people who refuse to leave when their permits expire account for a large portion of the new immigrant population each year.

They are a small fraction of the total travelers — slightly more than 1 percent of the nearly 53 million visitors who entered the country last year — but that still amounts to big numbers. Homeland Security said 701,900 people blew past their departure dates in fiscal year 2017.

Of those, more than 600,000 were still in the country at the end of the fiscal year and more than 421,000 were still here seven months later.

The numbers likely will continue to drop as the months tick by, but Steven Camarota, research director at the Center for Immigration Studies, said he figures at least 200,000 each year stay for the long term. That's at least equal to the 200,000 new immigrants he says come to stay each year by jumping the border.

"Half the problem of illegal immigration, at least, is related to overstays," he told The Washington Times.

While jumping the border is a misdemeanor and sneaking back in after a previous deportation is a felony, overstaying a visa is not a criminal offense. The chief punishment is deportation.

From a security standpoint, people who overstayed a visa have undergone at least some screening and the government has had a chance to refuse entry to those who raised red flags. Migrants who jump the border never face any inspection.

Yet from the illegal immigration standpoint there's little difference. One they've made it past that first barrier, be it the border or an inspector at a port of entry, the chances of arresting and deporting them are small, Mr. Camarota said.

"Our enforcement regime in the interior of the United States remains weak," he said. "People can overstay visas with a lot of immunity."

Homeland Security said when it looks at overstays, it focuses on only a small percentage of them who are deemed threats to national security or public safety.

The government said it's also trying to combat overstays by reminding people

through emails when their permission to visit expires. A new notification program was launched in January.

“To date, over a thousand notifications have occurred,” Homeland Security said in its report. “The goal is to improve traveler awareness, especially as it pertains to the length of admitted time to the United States.”

The end-of basic overstay rate in 2017 of 1.33 percent was down from 1.47 percent a year earlier.

Overstay rates vary widely between countries, with some Asian and African nations notching huge tallies. More than 42 percent of the 1,000 visitors from Djibouti failed to return to the East African nation when their time in the U.S. was up.

Mexico and Canada present their own issues, since most entries are by land. But the more than 9 million legal visitors who came by air or sea from Canada, 1 percent of them overstayed. Of nearly 3 million legal Mexican visitors who arrived in planes or boats, 1.63 percent breached their departure.

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