



The Daily Dish

On the Border

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Eakinomics: [On the Border](#)

President Trump [reiterated](#) his call to close the U.S.-Mexico border yesterday, tweeting “Congress must get together and immediately eliminate the loopholes at the Border! If no action, Border, or large sections of Border, will close. This is a National Emergency!” Perhaps, but it immediately raises three questions: (a) What is the emergency? (b) What does it mean to “close” the border? and (c) What are the benefits and costs of such a move? Fortunately, AAF’s Jacqueline Varas has provided a nice [guide](#) to the issues.

First, while the attention is focused on the sheer number of border crossings, the emergency appears to be the changing composition of those seeking asylum in the United States. As Varas puts it, “According to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, the United States is [on track](#) to apprehend the largest number of unauthorized border crossers in a decade – more than 100,000 in March of this year. This number would be the highest monthly total since [May of 2006](#), when 105,000 unauthorized individuals were apprehended by Border Patrol agents.” But here’s the catch. Over 60 percent of the individuals were either unaccompanied children or those apprehended with family members, many seeking asylum — vastly outnumbering single individuals. Only one year ago, the reverse was true. The greater degree of administrative screening and processing required of these migrants has strained the capacities at the border.

Second, what does it mean to close the border? It could mean simply tougher enforcement of legal crossing — close inspection of every individual and vehicle crossing the border. This was the approach in 1969 and 1985, which disrupted commerce and precluded migrant workers from reporting to their jobs. Or, it could mean a complete stop of the average of 529,000 people, \$1.7 billion in goods, 17,000 trucks, and 3,000 trains that legally cross the border every day. Supply chains that cross the border are a fact of modern economic life. Closing the border would cause a tremendous disruption that is unlike anything in recent experience (the closest analogue is probably the closure of [West Coast ports](#) in recent years).

This brings us to the third issue: the benefits and costs of closing the border. The benefits appear quite meager. It would do nothing to remedy the fact that the mix of migrants and their processing has changed, or that the United States has the obligation to hear all asylum claims and determine their legitimacy. And the costs would be quite high, perhaps dramatically high in the case of a full closure. It is hard to argue that the president’s latest immigration initiative would pass a benefit-cost test. A better strategy would be to revamp the efforts at the border.