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Guest opinion: Border counties bear the brunt of illegal immigration costs

Law enforcement, court expenses place \$15M burden on Pima County

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Arizona's four border counties spent \$26.6 million in fiscal 2006 to process criminal undocumented immigrants through their law enforcement and criminal justice systems.

Pima County's share was the largest, \$15 million.

All 24 border counties - from Cameron County, Texas, to San Diego County, Calif. - spent \$192 million to provide these services.

The figures are contained in a study just released by the U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition and funded by the Department of Justice through the efforts of Sen. Jon Kyl.

On a per capita basis, it cost the 1.3 million residents in Yuma, Pima, Santa Cruz and Cochise counties more than \$40 in 2006.

These expenditures come out of the counties' general funds, which finance basic services and some discretionary services that enhance the quality of life of citizens and improve economic opportunities.

The vital services that counties forgo, as told by governing body members all along the border, include ambulances, after-school programs, jail security, programs for abused children and women, a soccer field, environmental cleanup on the border, health clinics.

In Pima County, the money could have been used for libraries, parks, recreation and revitalizing older neighborhoods.

Moreover, in the eight years from fiscal 1999 through 2006, border counties have cumulatively spent \$1.23 billion processing criminal undocumented immigrants.

The total for Arizona's border counties was \$187.3 million, or \$143.55 per person.

The federal government is responsible for all costs associated with illegal immigration, and it has created three reimbursement programs to meet its responsibility.

Only one, the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program, benefits counties directly by reimbursing them for the daily costs of incarcerating undocumented immigrants who commit a state felony or multiple misdemeanors.

But in 2006, the border counties received just \$4.8 million for costs that amounted to \$85 million - about 5 cents on the dollar.

Arizona's border counties fared better, receiving reimbursements of \$1.1 million for costs that totaled \$9.4 million, or 11 cents on the dollar.

While comprehensive immigration reform remains elusive, the federal government can fulfill its fiscal responsibility to border counties very simply.

It can create a new program that would reimburse border counties fully for the costs of processing undocumented immigrants who commit state felonies and multiple misdemeanors throughout the entire system.

This program would reimburse costs for patrol, investigation, detention, clerk of court, prosecution, indigent defense, adjudication, probation and juvenile-court services.

The U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition calls this program the Southwest Border County Law Enforcement Program.

Identifying a funding source for new programs is never easy, but recent studies have pointed out that the federal government receives more in taxes from undocumented workers than it provides in services - a possible funding source.

States and local governments, on the other hand, provide far more services to undocumented immigrants than does the federal government.

The biggest gap between taxes and services, arguably, would be found in county governments, where the principal source of revenue is the property tax. Few, if any, criminal undocumented immigrants own property.

Reimbursing border counties for all costs would enable governing bodies to redirect scarce funds to benefit their constituents in very tangible ways.

Border counties are, with few exceptions, the poorest counties in the nation.

Tanis J. Salant was the principal investigator for the study, "[Undocumented Immigrants in U.S.-Mexico Border Counties: The costs of law enforcement and criminal justice services](#)". She is a public policy lecturer in the School of Public Administration and Policy of the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona.