

MEMO Published September 27, 2024 • 8 minute read

Trump's Mass Deportation Is Not Feasible



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A central promise of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was to build a wall spanning the entirety of our southwest border. The idea was so popular among his supporters that "build the wall" became a central campaign slogan. When all was said and done, he built just 52 miles of new wall for a border nearing 2,000 miles and cost taxpayers billions of dollars in the process. Now in 2024, Donald Trump's campaign has a new slogan: "mass deportation now." Attendees at the Republican National Convention held signs adorned with this slogan as Trump accepted his party's nomination. And in his acceptance speech, Trump promised to "launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country." While Trump may be vocal about his support for mass deportations, he is silent about the specifics.

Here, we take Donald Trump at his word and examine the feasibility of carrying out deportations at the scale he's promising.

Identification

Deportation, even of just one person, is a lengthy and complex process. Conducting a mass deportation operation of millions would pose enormous logistical and financial challenges. At a high level, it would necessitate three key steps: (1) identification of where undocumented immigrants live, (2) apprehension of these immigrants, and (3) removal back to their home countries.

We begin with identification, as we need to know both how many undocumented immigrants are currently living in the United States and where they are located. This is our first major obstacle. There is no official database containing the exact number of undocumented immigrants, because they come to the country in a variety of ways. As a result, we must rely on unofficial approximations to understand the size of this population. Our best data comes from the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, which, using survey data, estimates the undocumented population to be about 11 million. For context, deporting 11 million people is akin to removing the entire population of Michigan from the country.

Even with this population approximation, we still have the problem of identifying their exact locations. Precise location data for each of the 11 million simply does not exist. We do know they are distributed across red and blue states in all parts of the country. Their top five states of residence are: California, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois, but this is the extent of our knowledge. Federal agents would have to go state by state, city by city, door by door, trying to find undocumented immigrants, leaving the door open to (or perhaps even inviting) racial profiling of US citizens.

Apprehension

If we suspend disbelief and assume that federal agents will be able to locate 11 million people, there remains the problem of apprehending them. Data from previous administrations illustrates this issue. Donald Trump's administration conducted some of the largest Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in our nation's history. Trump's largest raid came in August of 2019 when federal agents arrested 680 undocumented workers at a plant in Mississippi. If ICE could consistently replicate the Mississippi raid's size, they would have to conduct over 11 raids per day over a four-year period to apprehend all undocumented immigrants in the country. This is an untenable task.

Recognizing the impossibility of this action, prior administrations have relied on local law enforcement to fill in the gaps. Although immigration enforcement typically falls under the purview of the federal government, section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) allows ICE to deputize local law enforcement to assist in identifying and removing noncitizens. Donald Trump

praised the program and tried to heavily recruit local law enforcement to participate, but police departments generally don't want to take part in immigration enforcement. Of the over 18,000 police departments in the United States, only 137 have active 287(g) agreements. Over 99% of police departments have rejected these agreements as they divert critical resources, harm public safety, and saddle communities with debt.

Understanding why is straightforward: 287(g) agreements ask busy police departments to take on additional work with little additional training or resources. The result is often disastrous. Arizona's Maricopa County had a 287(g) agreement that was eventually terminated for misuse. An independent report found that the Maricopa Sheriff's Office diverted resources away from critical law enforcement functions to focus on highly publicized immigration raids. By the time of Maricopa's 287(g) termination, the county had over 77,000 outstanding warrants and more than 400 sex crimes that went unsolved. Police departments simply do not have the bandwidth to uphold both community safety and conduct federal immigration enforcement duties.

Aside from harming public safety, 287(g) comes with a large financial burden. ICE does not pay for the training or implementation of the program, meaning localities must cover the cost. Counties with 287(g) agreements in Arizona, Arkansas, Maryland, and Virginia took on millions of dollars in additional costs after implementing 287(g), with some even going into debt.

Trump cannot rely on ICE alone to arrest all undocumented immigrants, as they lack the requisite capacity and resources to do so. But the 287(g) program's use of local law enforcement is both costly and detrimental to public safety. With so many police departments opting out of the program, it's unclear how Trump would conduct arrests of the size and scope he is proposing.

Removal

We have seen the challenges inherent in identifying and apprehending undocumented immigrants, and while substantial, they pale in comparison to the final step: removal. Before they can be removed, undocumented immigrants must be given due process according to US law and placed into removal proceedings. The type of proceeding is determined by a few different factors, but among the most common methods are expedited removals and formal deportations.

Expedited removals, a favorite of the Trump administration, allow Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials to remove an undocumented immigrant in as little as one day without an immigration hearing or appeals process. In just their first year in office, the Trump administration removed 23% of all apprehended noncitizens using expedited removals. But this process requires noncitizens to have been arrested within 14 days of the removal proceedings and within 100 miles of a land border. Given that 79% of the undocumented population living here entered before 2009, expedited removals are not an option for most of them.

This leaves as the only option the formal deportation process that requires adjudication through the immigration court system. Unfortunately, these courts are historically understaffed and overloaded. On average, deportation cases take over two and a half years to be heard. And this is to say nothing of the over 3 million cases currently waiting before the courts, meaning any new cases would have to be added to the back of a line already containing millions. If Trump wants to deport 11 million people in just four years, then the immigration courts as currently funded are not a viable option.

Assuming the Trump Administration could somehow process 11 million removal proceedings, there remains the final hurdle in a mass deportation operation: repatriation. Repatriation means returning an immigrant to their country of origin. To repatriate immigrants *en masse* is not a one-sided decision; it necessitates coordination between the sending and receiving countries. But of the top 10 countries of origin for undocumented immigrants already here, we only have formal repatriation agreements with two.

The top 10 countries of origin for undocumented immigrants currently in the United States are:

1. Mexico
2. Guatemala
3. El Salvador
4. Honduras
5. Philippines
6. Venezuela
7. Colombia
8. Brazil
9. India
10. China

Of this list, the United States only has formal repatriation agreements with Mexico and Venezuela. For immigrants of Mexican and Venezuelan origin, we can streamline their repatriation once their deportation proceedings have concluded. But for the remaining eight countries, we must negotiate consent to repatriate on a case-by-case basis. For each immigrant, we would have to confirm their nationality, issue pertinent paperwork, and confirm the physical acceptance by the country of

origin. And at any point, the receiving country has authority to slow or stop the removal if it so chooses.

To add further complexity, China is classified as a “recalcitrant country,” meaning they refuse to participate in repatriation efforts. How we would repatriate the hundreds of thousands of undocumented Chinese immigrants given this lack of cooperation is unclear—and Trump has offered no answers.

Conclusion

When you are the presidential nominee of one of the two major political parties in this country, your words matter. So when Donald Trump promises to launch mass deportations, we should take him seriously. While we could have easily focused on how the promise of a mass deportation operation is anti-immigrant, we chose instead to lay out the practical challenges of this political slogan. The deportation of 11 million people would be a financial, logistical, and cultural nightmare. Workplaces would be raided, communities would be less safe, families would be separated, and taxpayers would be left with a bill in the tens of billions of dollars. We need to restore order at the border, but mass deportations are not the way to do so. By any account, they would only ensure mass chaos.