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Migrants of different nationalities walk toward the U.S. in a caravan called "Viacruzis migrante" from Tapachula, Mexico, on March 25. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Torres)



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Former President Donald Trump — now the Republican 2024 nominee for president — has again proposed a [plan](#) to deport millions of undocumented immigrants in the country, an idea he first introduced in 2015. It would involve every level of law enforcement [plus the U.S. military](#) to implement, with [detention camps](#) — think of the Japanese internment camps in World War II — set up to house migrants as they await their deportations.

The costs of the plan — both economically and socially — are almost too numerous to list. It also would exact a moral cost, as a nation built on the backs of immigrants would be betraying its heritage and traumatizing its fellow human beings.

On the economic front, such an initiative would have an estimated cost of at least [\\$500 billion](#), if not more, to implement, even without the use of the military. It also would cost the federal budget on the accounts receivable end, as an estimated [\\$100 billion](#) in taxes and \$26 billion in Social Security taxes paid by undocumented workers would be lost annually.

Moreover, gross domestic product would be [reduced](#) by 2.6 percent, or nearly \$5 trillion over ten years if millions of undocumented workers were deported. If the undocumented population was legalized, however, the GDP would rise by [\\$1.5 trillion](#) over 10 years.

Labor shortages also would occur in sectors where undocumented immigrants work, such as agriculture, service and construction. This would drive up food, housing and [other everyday costs](#) for the average American. In fact, the work of undocumented immigrants has helped bolster the post-pandemic economy, according to [experts](#).

Despite assertions to the contrary, such an operation would make us less safe, not safer, as a nation. Studies have consistently found that immigrants have [lower crime rates](#) than U.S.-born citizens. With fear permeating immigrant communities under a Trump enforcement sweep, immigrants might stop notifying law enforcement about crime in their neighborhoods and elsewhere. Using military personnel and resources in such an operation would take away from the main mission of the U.S. armed forces: to protect the nation from foreign security threats.



A human trafficker passes an asylum-seeking migrant child to a member of the U.S. National Guard in Roma, Texas, after crossing the Rio Grande into the United States from Mexico, on June 10, 2021. At a briefing at the Capitol June 6, 2024, representatives from the Alliance to End Human Trafficking and the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd urged passage of three measures they said would aid efforts to combat the practice. (OSV News/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

Of course, the human cost of this proposal would be immeasurable. U.S. citizens and lawful residents would certainly be caught up in the sweep and wrongly detained based on ethnic or racial [profiling](#). Families would be torn apart, with parents ripped away from their U.S.-citizen children, likely in the middle of the night. It would be akin to the [family separation policy](#) from Trump's first term, but on steroids. As a study from the Center for Migration Studies of New York shows, it would [impoverish](#) U.S. families with mixed-status, where one parent — often the main breadwinner — was undocumented but the other was not.

These are some of the tangible costs of this policy, but there are intangible ill-effects as well. It would cause more division in society, as U.S. citizens would certainly feel pressured to report undocumented immigrants, pitting neighbor against neighbor. As we have seen at the border, [vigilante groups](#) would also form, roaming U.S. communities in search of immigrants. A climate of fear would permeate many areas of the country.

And the Catholic Church — an immigrant church — would not be immune to the effects of this misguided proposal. Local parishes, which happen to attract immigrant families on Sundays and Holy Days, would be [monitored](#) by immigration enforcement. Mass attendance would likely fall significantly in immigrant communities.



Migrants, mostly from Venezuela and Haiti, gather outside Our Lady of the Solitude Church in Mexico City at a makeshift tent city camp Nov. 27, 2023, as they wait for an appointment to be set up with U.S. Customs and Border Protection through the agency's CBP One smartphone app. (OSV News/Reuters/Gustavo Graf)

More damaging, the church would have to deal with the social consequences of mass deportations, with immigrant families seeking support and [protection](#) from parishes and Catholic social service agencies. Parish priests would likely be caught between the demands of law enforcement personnel and the needs of members of their flock.

It would place the Catholic bishops in a difficult position as well, divided between their role as pastors to their people — regardless of their legal status — and in being pressured to cooperate with law enforcement. For example, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago felt compelled to instruct his priests in 2017 — the first year of the Trump administration — not to let U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel into their parishes without a [warrant](#).

Do not take my word for it. The recent [legal attacks](#) by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton against two Catholic migrant shelters, not to mention Republican [allegations](#) against Catholic Charities, are evidence of things to come, with the church being placed in the legal cross hairs of a second Trump administration and Congress.

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In fact, Trump's deportation plan is in direct opposition to the [position](#) of the U.S. bishops on immigration reform. The U.S. bishops' conference correctly supports the legalization — not the deportation — of undocumented immigrants, particularly those who have resided in the country for years and established equities in our country. Trump's proposal is contrary to Catholic teaching on many levels, but especially in its violation of the principles of family unity and human dignity.

As all Americans should agree, there are problems with our nation's immigration system. It has to be fixed. A mass deportation effort, however, is not the way to go.

The United States needs the contributions of immigrants, even those who are here without legal status. A system must be devised to ensure that immigrants in the future can come legally to work and reunite with their families, while policies must be initiated that address the root causes of flight — the long-term solution to irregular migration.

There is a lot at stake with this proposal, not only for the nation but also the church. Regardless of which presidential candidate Catholic voters may support, they should oppose this plan, if not on moral grounds then because it sacrifices our nation's best interests and traditions.

Editor's note: This is an adapted version of a [previous column by the Center for Migration Studies of New York](#).