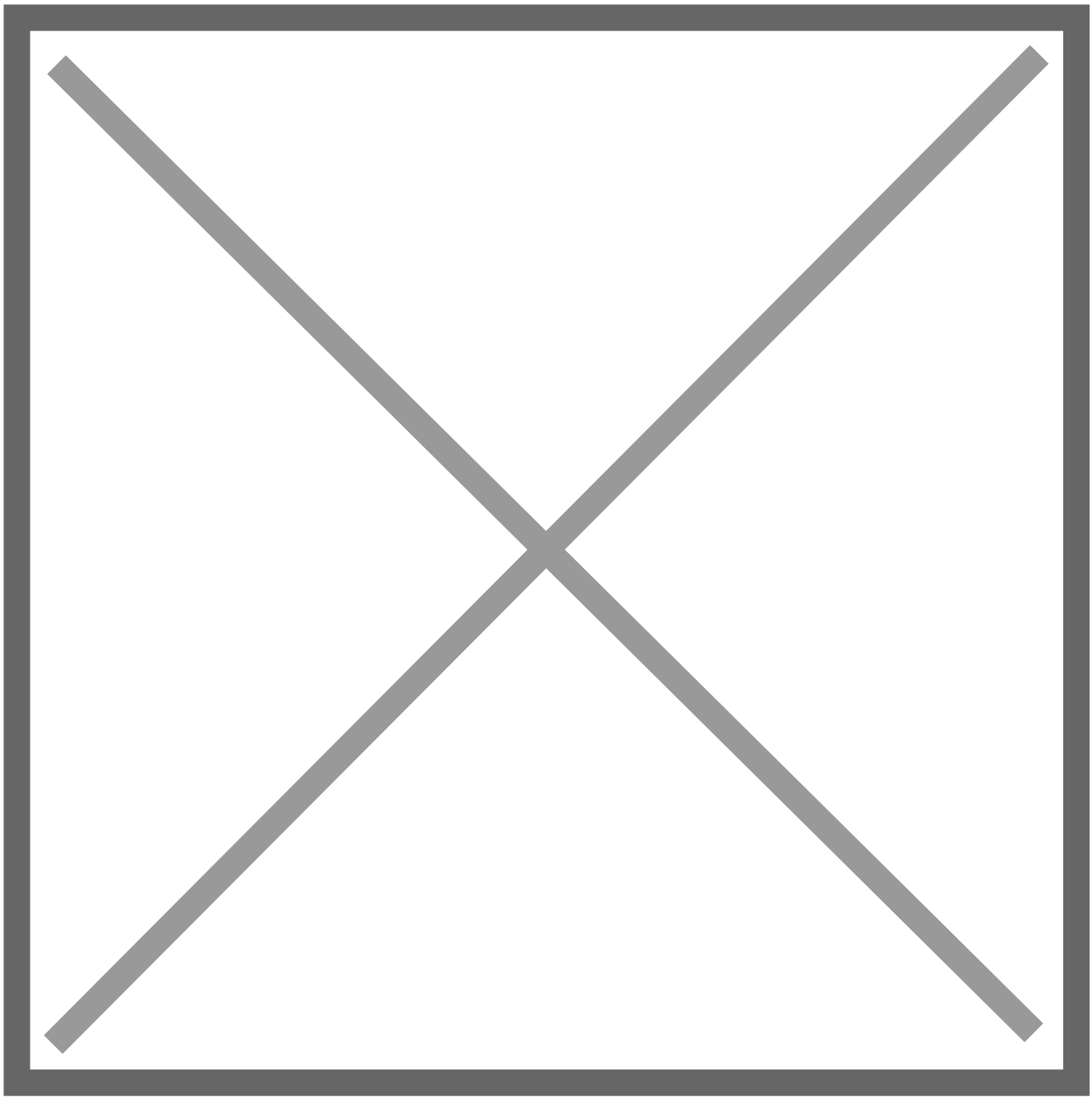
News



A view of the area where a new section of the border wall is being built in Santa Teresa, New Mexico, on the US.-Mexico border, as the U.S. State Department says the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is suspending processing for immigrant visas for applicants from 75 countries, as seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Jan. 14, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters)

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A Catholic legal network and other opponents of the Trump administration's suspension of immigration from 75 countries are calling into question a key claim the government made in support of that policy.

When it announced the policy in January, the State Department said on social media it would pause immigrant visa processing from 75 countries "whose migrants take welfare from the American people at unacceptable rates."

"The freeze will remain active until the U.S. can ensure that new immigrants will not extract wealth from the American people," the post said. The State Department called the 75 countries it chose for a suspension "Nationalities at High Risk of U.S. Public Benefits Reliance."

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment from OSV News about the data behind that claim.

A lawsuit, CLINIC v. Rubio, was filed Feb. 2 in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, challenging that policy by a group of American citizens, immigration nonprofits including the Catholic Legal Immigration Network and other legal organizations.

Opponents of the policy, as well as the lawsuit challenging it, disputed the government's claim that immigrants from the 75 countries disproportionately use public benefits.

The State Department currently recognizes 197 independent states around the globe, meaning the restriction in effect bars migration from nearly 40% of the world's countries.

"At its core, this case is about families," Charles Wheeler, senior attorney at CLINIC, told OSV News. "By halting lawful immigrant processing across nearly half the world, the administration has left U.S. citizens separated from their spouses, parents and children, in direct conflict with the law Congress enacted. Family reunification is central to our immigration system and to Catholic teaching. Blaming immigrants may be expedient politics, but it undermines both the rule of law and our nation's commitment to keeping families together."

As of Feb. 26, the government had yet to respond to the suit in court.

The complaint argues that the claim by the administration that nationals of the 75 countries "migrate to the United States to improperly rely on cash welfare and are likely to become 'public charges'" is "unsupported and demonstrably false."

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"In fact, nationwide, many applicants for immigrant visas are not eligible for cash welfare and remain ineligible for years," the lawsuit stated.

Wheeler said, "The administration has offered no evidence that immigrants from these 75 countries are more likely to become a public charge."

"In fact, most immigrants are barred from receiving federal public benefits for years, and many never become eligible at all," he said. "This appears to be an attempt to use speculative concerns about 'public charge' as a pretext to shut down lawful immigration. The courts rejected similar efforts during the president's first term when the administration attempted to dramatically expand the definition of public charge beyond what Congress authorized."

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, recently published an analysis finding that immigrants consistently have lower welfare participation than native-born Americans for nearly every program across income levels.

"What we did was we just took a look at the government surveys on this topic, the Survey of Income and Program Participation, and this is the one designed to understand the amount of welfare benefits used by people in the United States, both native born Americans and immigrants," Alex Nowrasteh, senior vice president for policy at Cato, told OSV News. "And what you find consistently is, when you look at immigrants in the United States, they use less welfare than native born Americans."

Nowrasteh attributed this to multiple factors.

"Partly, it's because immigrants are more likely to work. Partly, it's because they are barred from using some of these programs. And partly, it's because the people who are admitted, who decide to come to the U.S., are just less likely getting welfare, are less interested in getting welfare, (and) more interested in working and building themselves up," he said.

The Cato brief noted that other analyses that use a household as the unit of measurement might find other results. One such analysis, from the Center for Immigration Studies, which is critical of immigration, argued that households headed by immigrants are more likely to receive benefits than households headed by the U.S.-born.

The competing analyses prompted some debate between the groups.

But Nowrasteh argued that evaluating immigrant welfare participation by households as the unit of analysis counts native-born welfare consumption as immigrant consumption, improperly inflating estimates of immigrant use.

"So if an immigrant marries a native-born American, they count the welfare consumed by the native-born American as welfare consumed by the immigrant," he said, adding that households are more generally an imprecise measurement for such studies because they vary in size.

"As a researcher, you should want to control the unit of analysis. You should want to make sure that it is the same size between the two different groups," he said.

The policy from the Trump administration was one of several it issued to reduce forms of legal migration in the wake of the November shooting of two National Guard members in Washington. The suspect in that shooting was an Afghan national who had been granted legal status to be in the U.S.

The National Immigration Law Center, Democracy Forward, the Legal Aid Society, the Western Center on Law & Poverty, and the Center for Constitutional Rights are among the other organizations involved in the lawsuit.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.