

Border crossings by children decline as immigration debate intensifies

By Michael
Muskal

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The number of unaccompanied children apprehended by federal agents last month at the nation's Southwest border was down by 40% compared with last October, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The announcement comes as the nation prepares for a renewed battle over immigration issues.

President Obama has said he will issue an executive order changing some immigration policies. Among the proposals being considered is action that would protect more than 5 million undocumented workers from deportation. Republicans have vowed to fight the president, arguing that an executive order would poison relations with the new Congress.

Over the summer, the swell of children and their families illegally crossing the border, mainly from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, inflamed the political debate. In general, Democrats have argued for making legal in some way the status of the more than 11 million people living in the United States illegally, while Republicans insist on first toughening border enforcement.

The latest numbers show that in the nine sectors of the Southwest border from California to Texas, the number of unaccompanied children apprehended by federal border personnel fell from about 4,181 in October 2013 to 2,529 in October 2014, the agency said.

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Family apprehensions also fell, from 2,414 to 2,163, about 10%, the agency said.

The numbers are organized by federal fiscal year, which begins on Oct. 1, so it is too soon to make annual comparisons. But the monthly decrease is part of a continuing trend, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said last month. The border agency is part of Johnson's portfolio.

"Over the last 15 years, the number of apprehensions on our Southwest border — a major indicator of total attempts to cross the border illegally — has declined significantly; it is now less than a third of what it was in the year 2000, and it's at its lowest level since the 1970s," Johnson said Oct. 9 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"Without a doubt, we had a setback this summer, with the unprecedented number of unaccompanied children and others who crossed a narrow area of our southern border in the Rio Grande Valley, in search of a family member and a better life in this country," Johnson said. "We responded aggressively to this spike, and, in fact, now the numbers of unaccompanied children crossing into the Rio Grande Valley are at the lowest they've been in almost two years."

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Johnson said tougher law enforcement action at the borders reflected the reassignment of hundreds of patrol agents to the sector most affected — the Rio Grande Valley — and stepped-up efforts to curb illegal immigration rings. The government also added more flights to repatriate people to Central America, increased public awareness campaigns in Central America to stop people from leaving and pushed for increased enforcement by Mexican officials to stop immigrants from crossing that country en route to the United States.

Obama highlighted the seriousness of the immigration debate Friday in his answer to a question at a news conference with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Yangon, Myanmar. Obama noted the Senate had passed a bipartisan bill that had then lagged in the GOP-controlled House of Representatives.

“I indicated to Speaker [John] Boehner several months ago that if, in fact, Congress failed to act, I would use all the lawful authority that I possess to try to make the system work better,” the president said. “And that’s going to happen. That’s going to happen before the end of the year.”

Republicans have loudly denounced Obama’s pledge to issue an executive order.

“We’re going to fight the president tooth and nail if he continues down this path. This is the wrong way to govern. This is exactly what the American people said on election day they didn’t want,” Boehner (R-Ohio) said Thursday. “And so, all the options are on the table.”

The incoming Senate majority leader, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), said a unilateral move by Obama on immigration would “poison the well” for the new GOP majority in the Senate.

Obama is also considering taking action to extend deportation protections to parents and spouses of U.S. citizens and permanent residents who have been in the country for some years. He is also eyeing an expansion of his 2-year-old program that protects young immigrants from being deported.

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