

Did Operation Streamline Slow Illegal Immigration?*

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Introduction & Background

Border Patrol apprehensions of unauthorized migrants have fallen by over one-half since 2007 and appear to reflect a declining volume of illegal immigration into the U.S. via the Southwest border. The decline in immigration could be due to a number of factors. The drop-off coincides with the U.S. housing bust and ensuing recession, which led to a decline in employment opportunities and downward pressure on wages. The timing also coincides with both more border enforcement and the implementation of more state-level enforcement, such as the Legal Arizona Workers' Act, enacted in 2007.

Most research suggests increases in border enforcement have had little effect on illegal immigration (Massey and Espinosa 1997). While studies find that heightened border enforcement has driven up smugglers' rates, this has apparently failed to translate into significant reductions in the volume of illegal immigration (Gathmann 2008). Migrants have been able to finance the rising costs of illegal crossings by relying on their migrant networks, many of them U.S.-based.

The studies finding little deterrent effect of enforcement are largely based on migrants' experiences in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1990s, border enforcement was essentially a ramping up of Border Patrol manpower. By heavily fortifying migrants' typical routes through metropolitan areas, Operations Hold-the-Line and Gatekeeper successfully shifted crossings away from urban areas and into the wilderness, which resulted in more dangerous and costly crossings (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). Nevertheless, when [Mexican] migrants were apprehended, they were typically released back into Mexico after signing a "voluntary departure contract" (VDC). This policy became known as 'catch and release'.

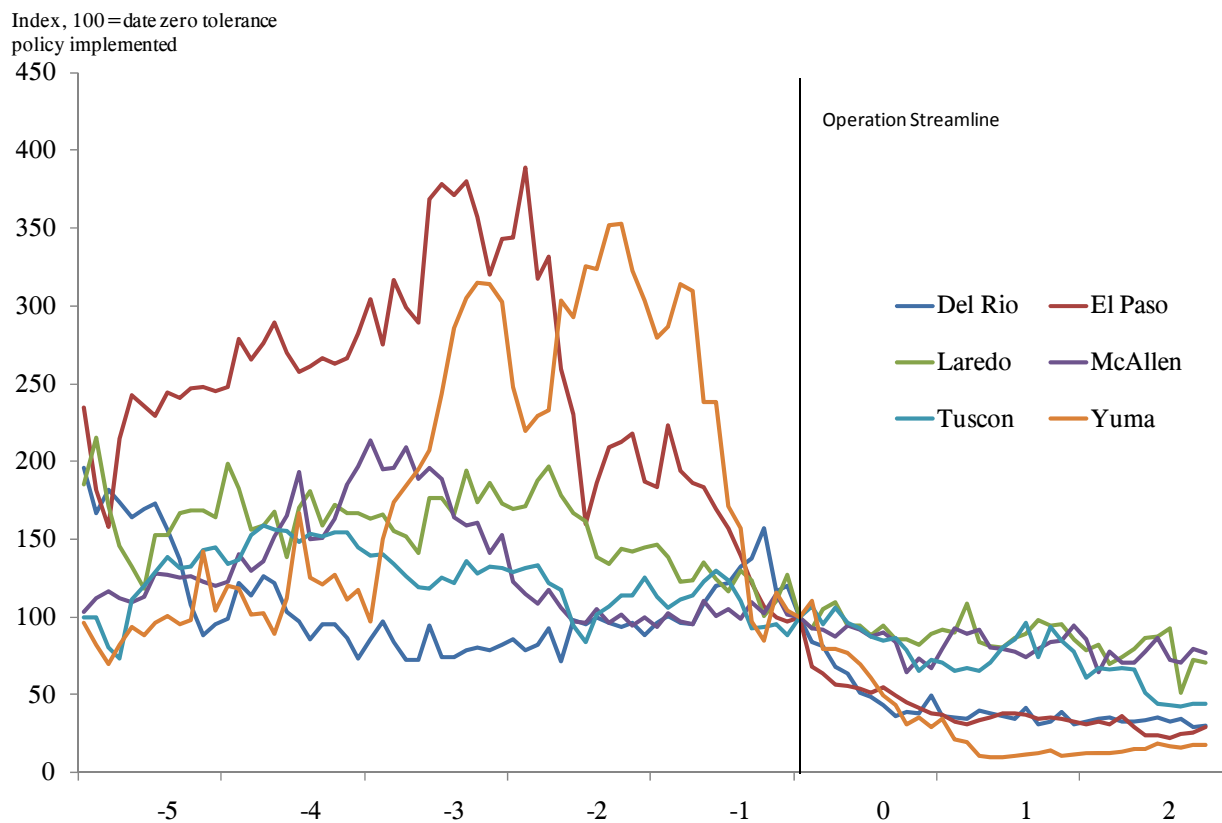
'Catch and release' policies came under heightened scrutiny in the mid-2000s. In the wake of 9/11, authorities were pressured to "secure the borders," and it was largely recognized that migrants who were apprehended, issued a VDC, and returned to Mexico typically turned around and tried to cross the border again. Many repeated their attempts until they were successful. In order to provide a greater deterrent, authorities came up with consequence policies—a broad class of enforcement actions intended to impose greater costs on migrants once they were apprehended. Operation Streamline is one type of consequence policy.

Operation Streamline (OS) was launched in Del Rio, Texas, in 2005 through joint action by the Border Patrol and the Assistant U.S. Attorney (in the Department of Justice). By collaborating with the AUSA and pressing federal criminal charges against apprehended migrants, migrants were jailed for several days

or weeks and prosecuted and convicted. They were also informed that repeat offenses could land them several years in federal prison (Lydgate 2010).

Following the launch of OS in Del Rio, sector apprehensions fell drastically. In light of this apparent success, other Border Patrol sectors quickly adopted similar consequence policies. Between 2006 and 2008, six more sectors adopted OS or “zero tolerance policies.” The chart below normalizes the timing of OS implementation in order to demonstrate the effect on the volume of apprehensions in each sector.

Apprehensions by Sector Before and After Operation Streamline



Data, Methods and Results

This paper asks whether Operation Streamline has provided additional deterrence to would-be unauthorized immigrants. Can OS be associated with a significant effect on the volume of apprehensions in recent years? In order to address this question, we construct a panel data set consisting of monthly Border Patrol sector apprehensions from 2000-2011. We add economic variables to control for the changing economic environment in Mexico and the U.S. We don't have data on Border Patrol enforcement intensity, such as number of agents or linewatch hours, so we use border MSA data on federal government employment as a proxy. We then run multivariate regressions in log first differences

to ensure stationarity and consider whether a policy dummy variable capturing the impact of Operation Streamline is negative and statistically significant.

The table below shows some preliminary results. Federal employment, our proxy for enforcement, is positive and significant, implying that a larger federal presence is correlated with higher apprehensions volumes. The Mexican coincident index, a measure of Mexico economic growth, is negatively correlated with apprehensions as one would expect as long as apprehensions reflect underlying migration. US employment growth and construction activity (housing construction permits) are positively related to apprehensions, although the housing variable is not significant. The OS dummy is negative and statistically significant, which suggests Operation Streamline has depressed apprehensions.

Table 1 Determinants of Migrant Apprehensions: Effect of Operation Streamline (OS)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic
C	-0.01	0.01	-1.87
Federal Employment	0.31	0.15	2.09
Mexico's Coincident Index	-5.02	2.26	-2.22
US Employment	6.26	2.46	2.55
Housing Starts	0.06	0.05	1.19
OS	-0.08	0.03	-2.78
OSO	0.00	0.00	-0.25
Interaction	0.02	0.01	2.57

Ongoing Work and Preliminary Conclusion

There are a number of issues still to be resolved with the data and methods. Apprehensions are not migration, they are simply a migration volume proxy, but it might be useful to know how correlated they are with migration. Another issue is the endogeneity of policy implementation. Operation Streamline was not a random event, particularly not in Del Rio where it was first launched. The paper will need a discussion of the biases caused by endogenous policies.

While the results suggest OS has had a negative and significant effect on apprehensions, the magnitude of the effect is small. This is in line with past research that shows that enforcement at the border has, at best, a small deterrent effect.

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