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## **Walls, deserts and rivers: A study of spatial-temporal variations in apprehensions of illegal Indian immigrants at southwest land border of U.S.A.**

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### **Abstract**

Between 2007 and 2022, a total 51046 Indian immigrants attempted to cross the U.S. international border illegally. 2022 saw an increase of 6829.25% in the number of apprehension by U.S. Border Patrol. This tremendous increase in the number of apprehensions of illegal Indian immigrants is the direct result of more and more Indians attempting to cross the border with the help of alien traffickers of Mexico and Central America. These absolute numbers of Indian apprehension are not without reasons. Yearly fluctuations in the number of apprehensions and its spatial variation along the southwest land border along Mexico can be analyzed and interpreted through careful scrutiny of the data provided by the U.S. Border Patrol annually on their official portal. This study can be termed as a pioneer effort in the direction of understanding the underlying spatial-temporal patterns due to myriad of factors affecting the illegal Indian immigrants.

**Keywords:** Illegal immigrants, apprehensions, Indian citizens, south-west land border, U.S.A.

### **Introduction**

Many aspire of living 'The Great American Dream', but not all are able to achieve their goal of getting into the United States. Some of those who are extremely motivated to enter U.S.A. due to a variety of factors, resort to the illegal means of entry. The most common methods since historical times is to smuggle into the U.S. through U.S.-Mexico border with the help of traffickers. 1954 Mile long border along the U.S.A-Mexico is divided into various patrol sectors. Since its inception in 1924, the Border patrol has been the guarding the U.S. nation's international borders in the North, South and coastal areas (Border Patrol History, n.d.). U.S. international border has been divided into 3 regions-northern border, South west land Border, coastal Border. One of the main challenges of the U.S. Border patrol is to thwart the illegal entry attempt at the southwest land border along Mexico. The last decade saw a tremendous increase in the inflow of illegal Indian migrants, primarily from the southwest land border. The study is a pioneer effort to understand the various patterns of apprehensions of Indian illegal immigrants along the southwest land border of U.S.A. An attempt has been made to understand and bring to the light various factors governing the spatial-temporal pattern of Indian illegal immigrants attempting to cross the borders.

### **Region of the Study**

U.S. National border is divided into 3 components-

1. The Southwest land border along Mexico
2. The Northern border along Canada
3. Coastal border

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Fig 1: TRAC immigration (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.)

**Sectors of the Southwest land border**

**Big Bend Sector, Texas**

Composed of 77 Texas counties and the state of Oklahoma, this sector covers an area of 165,154 Square miles (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.). This sector is responsible for guarding 517 miles of river front along the Rio Grande River, which is the international boundary between U.S and Mexico in the eastern section of the Southwest land border (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Del Rio, Texas**

Responsible for 245 miles of Rio Grande River (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.). Geography of this sector mainly consists of farms and ranches, being sparsely populated with even topography this area has been the hotspot for illegal drug and human smuggling activity (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**El Centro, California**

Located in Southern California in the Imperial Valley, this region has a diverse terrain consisting of desert and the Rockies. It is one of the most challenging areas for both border patrol and smugglers (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Laredo Sector, Texas**

Responsible for the 136 Mile long border along the Rio Grande in the state of Texas (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Rio Grande Valley Sector, Texas**

Serves more than 34000 Sq. miles of southeast Texas. It is the most active sector along the southwest land border and a famous route for Mexicans and Central Americans (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**San Diego Sector, California**

Encompasses coastal beaches, rugged canyons and high desert (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Tucson Sector, Arizona**

Covers most of the state of Arizona. It is one of the busiest

sectors in the eastern section of the southwest land border (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Yuma Sector, Arizona**

Covers the desert terrain between California and Arizona (Border Patrol Sectors, n.d.).

**Research Method**

The current study is largely based on the extraction and interpretation of year wise and sector wise data of apprehensions of illegal Indian immigrants along the southwest land border. Extensive use of graphs and tables has been done to make the data visualization and interpretation easier for readers.

The data for year 2022 has been presented by excluding the Title 42 expulsions which was put in force during COVID-19 Pandemic.

**Results and Discussion**

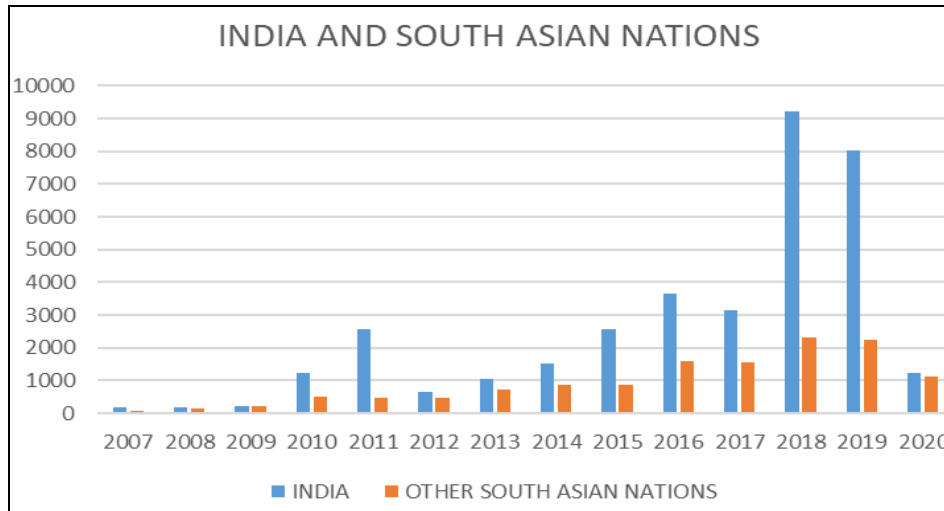
**Why so many illegal migrants from India get apprehended?**

Between 2007 and 2022, a total of 51046 Indian citizens were apprehended at the international borders of U.S.A. along the Southwest border, Northern Border and coastal borders. Northern border and Coastal borders made for a very small percentage of total apprehensions and most of the apprehension were from the Southwest land border along the U.S-Mexico border. These staggering numbers of arrest put India at 5<sup>th</sup> position worldwide in terms of the number of apprehensions taking place annually. Out of the total 51046 apprehended at all the three borders, 48676 apprehensions were made at the southwest border alone, making up for the 95.35% of total apprehension. This figure alone is enough to indicate the relative importance of the Southwest land border along US and Mexico and this is why this portion of the international border has been selected for the study of apprehensions of illegal Indian migrants.

If compared with other south Asian nations, India stood first among the countries of Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Of the total 48663 south

Asian citizens apprehended on U.S international borders from 2007 to 2020, India accounted for 4.1 72.86% of the

total apprehensions.



**Fig 2:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol data, 2022

Fig 2. Shows year wise comparison between apprehensions made of Indian nationals and other South Asian nation citizens. This estimate was arrived at by the interpretation of data collected by the U.S. border Patrol annually. It is evident by the interpretation of the graph that in all the years from 2007 to 2020 the apprehensions rate of Indian immigration was higher than the other South Asian nations. This is due to the huge difference in the number of citizens between Indian and other South Asian nations, attempting to illegally migrate to U.S.A. mainly through southwest borders.

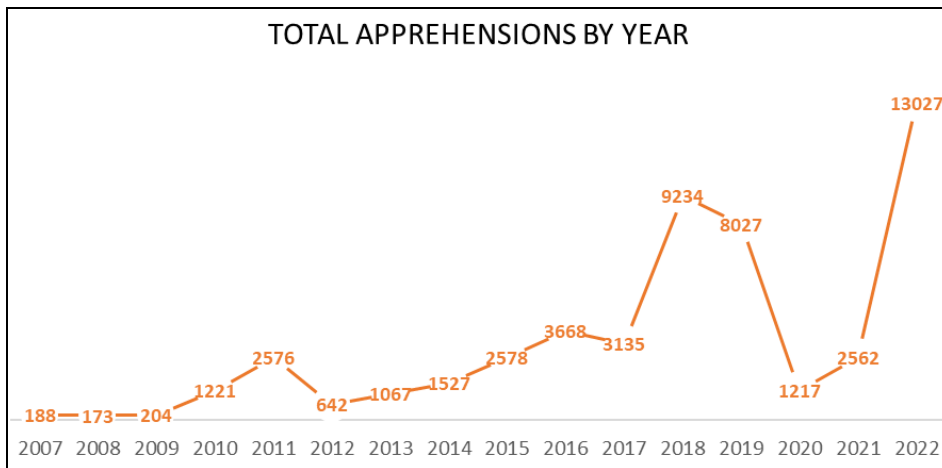
Reasons for such a high number of illegal migration from India can be attributed to the following factors:

- a) There are many personal factors at play when it comes to choose the destination of migration.
- b) The illegal migration from India to U.S.A. is largely due to the Push and Pull factors occurring at the origin and the destination respectively.
- c) Many are lured by the American lifestyle and its economic opportunities, most of the immigrants are those who couldn't get a decent standard of living at their original location. Some site the power of cell phone videos as lure for many young men. As most of the illegal migrants are unaccompanied children and young adults, they are eager to escape India's poor economic situation (Bhargava, 2020) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Some reports have indicated that legal immigration from India spurs illegal migration to the U.S.A. (MUNRO, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. Indian citizens who legally migrated to the U.S.A. play an influential role in the encouragement of teenagers to take such a long and arduous journey of illegal migration from India also known as 'The Donkey Migration'. Having

previous knowledge that they will be taken care of by their relatives or other Indian citizens in U.S.A. is a great influencing factor for most young adults and UAC's. Relatives and small business owners from the hometown of illegal migrants help them to find jobs illegally or legally (MUNRO, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. It's a win-win situation for both the groups, local businessmen can get cheap labours and the illegal migrants get to live their dream of living in U.S.A. Immigration policies of the host nation also has a significant impact on the extent of illegal migration. Many of the illegal immigrants try to seek asylum by filling pleas on the ground of political and religious discrimination in India (MUNRO, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. Border officials report that every story of the illegal Indian migrant caught is pretty much the same, seeking asylum on the grounds of political and religious persecution. In Sikh individuals cases most of them request political asylum stating that the Indian government does not treat Sikhs at par with the rest of India and targets them for fear of another Khalistan uprising (MUNRO, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. But reality strikes hard to these immigrants, when their asylum pleas get rejected by the U.S government. In year 2020, U.S. A received 5449 cases for defensive asylum (Baugh, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>. Defensive asylum application is an asylum application filed by the defendant as a defense against removal from the U.S.A (Refugees and Asylum, n.d.). All the illegal migrants caught at US borders seek asylum through filing defensive pleas. Of the 5499 cases filed in 2020 only 8.1% of cases i.e 1179 were approved (Baugh, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>. According to the Homeland security reports, India experienced the greatest proportional decrease of 41% in granting of asylum (Refugees and Asylum, n.d.). Mainly due to tough policies on immigrations imposed by the trump administration.

**Yearly fluctuations in apprehension rates**



**Fig 3:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol and CBP data, 2022

The pattern of apprehensions of Indian migrants is highly fluctuating and irregular. There is no uniform increase or decrease in the number of illegal migrant apprehension rate. Due to scarcity of data on factors affecting apprehensions we cannot for sure determine various factors which govern the year wise apprehension rate. Nonetheless, we can make some assumptions by correlating the amount of apprehensions with other variables.

Some of the variables which can affect the rate of apprehensions are:

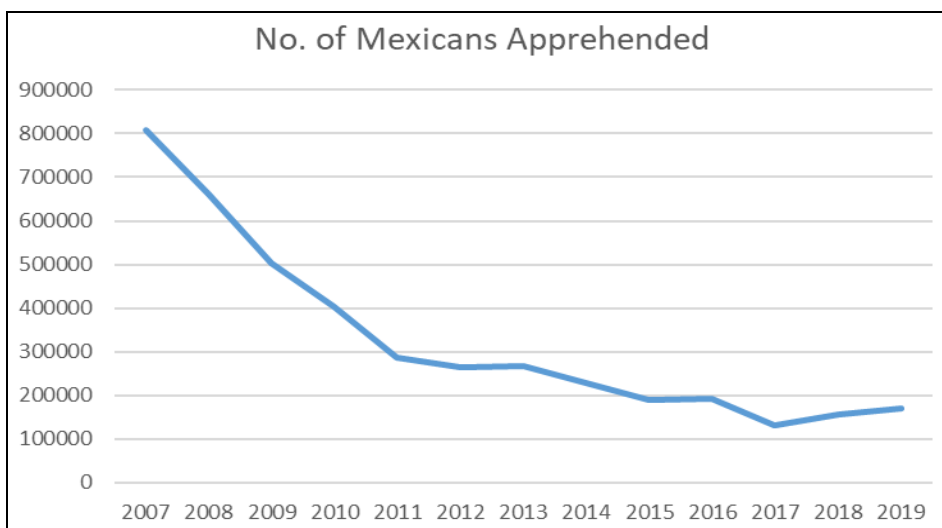
- a) Politico-economic situation in the host nation.
- b) Level of security at the borders.
- c) Discouragement caused by the high number of apprehensions in the preceding year.

Through interpretation of the number of arrest/year given in the Fig 2. We can see that there are certain years in which the amount of apprehensions were high and then there were years in which the amount of apprehensions decreased to significant level. This rhythmic rise and fall in the number of apprehensions is due to various factors mentioned above. The year of interest to us which can help understand the pattern of apprehensions are 2007 to 2009, 2010 to 2011, 2018 to 2019 and 2022.

**The period of 2007 to 2009**

The year between 2007 and 2009 was a special period during which the influx of Central Americans and Mexicans decreased significantly because of the poor economic scenario in the U.S. caused by the housing market crash, which was the largest employer for the foreign born immigrants from Mexico and Central America (Bowers, 2007) [8]. It was established that there was a strong connection between incoming of illegal immigrants and economic scenario in the country. As migrants entering illegally through the U.S.-Mexico border want to make it worth their while if they are risking that much. When the word got around about the economic conditions in the country and availability of jobs, fewer migrants attempted to cross the border (Bowers, 2007) [8].

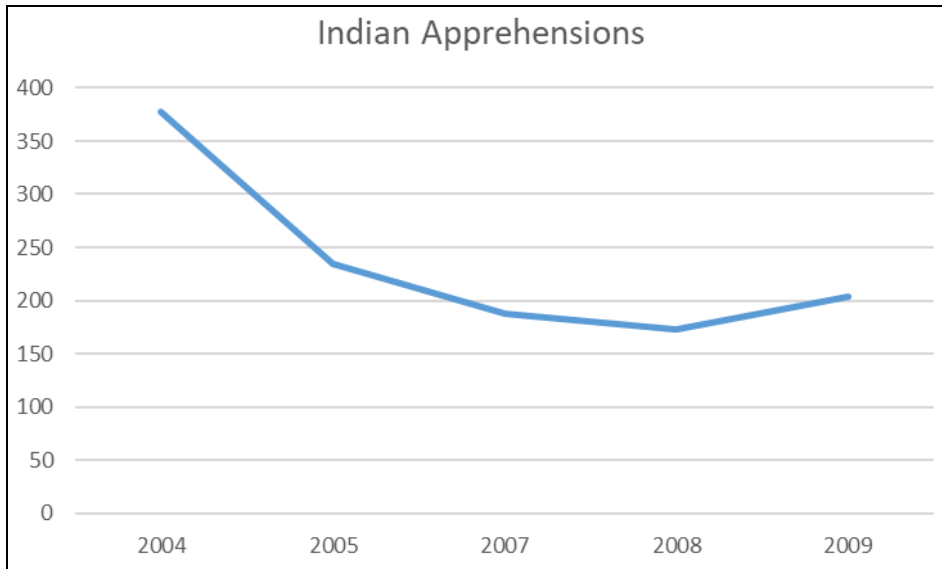
Another reason that might have caused a decrease in the number of Central Americans and Mexicans was the increased level of security along South West border by the addition of National Guards along the border under the operation ‘Jump Start’ of President Bush to increase the apprehensions of illegal Immigrants (Bowers, 2007) [9]. Thus the combined effects of economic scenario and increased security caused a decreased flow of immigrants.



**Fig 4:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

The reason for mentioning the above trends among the Mexican apprehension is that the rate of Indian citizen apprehension during the period of year 2004 to 2008 underwent the same pattern, wherein the number of apprehensions decreased due to the above mentioned

factors. In Fig. 4 a similar trend can be seen among the Indian apprehension rate in which the number of apprehension decreased sharply from year 2004 and decreased continuously till 2008 and remained more or less stationary till 2009.



Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

Fig 5: Apprehension rate of the Indian citizens during the America’s economic recession

Table 1: Indian apprehensions during the Economic recession in the United States of America

Year	Apprehension
2004	378
2005	235
2007	188
2008	173
2009	204

Source: Processing of US Border Patrol,2022

1.2.2 2010-2011 spike in apprehensions

U.S Border Patrol apprehension data is a key indicator of illegal immigration, more apprehensions mean more attempts at illegal entry (Jones, 2014)<sup>[10]</sup>.

The Period following 2007 was a period of dropped illegal migrant apprehensions among Central American citizens, largely because of the sluggish American economy. Fewer

Central Americans and Mexicans had crossed the border due to lack of opportunities caused by the Great recession from 2007 to 2009 after the bursting of U.S Housing bubble and global economic crisis (Press, 2015)<sup>[13]</sup>. It diminished the opportunities for Mexicans and Central American in the U.S.A.

This was also the period which saw a significant increase in apprehension of OTM (Other than Mexicans) citizens. This trend was largely seen in Asian countries too which saw a spike in the number of apprehensions during 2010-2011. Fig. 6 shows the trends seen in south Asian nation. It can be seen that during 2010-2011 large increase in apprehension was seen after a decrease during 2007. Comparing it with the trends seen in India (Fig. 6). It is clear that both the curves showed a peak during 2010-2011 after the dip during recession period.

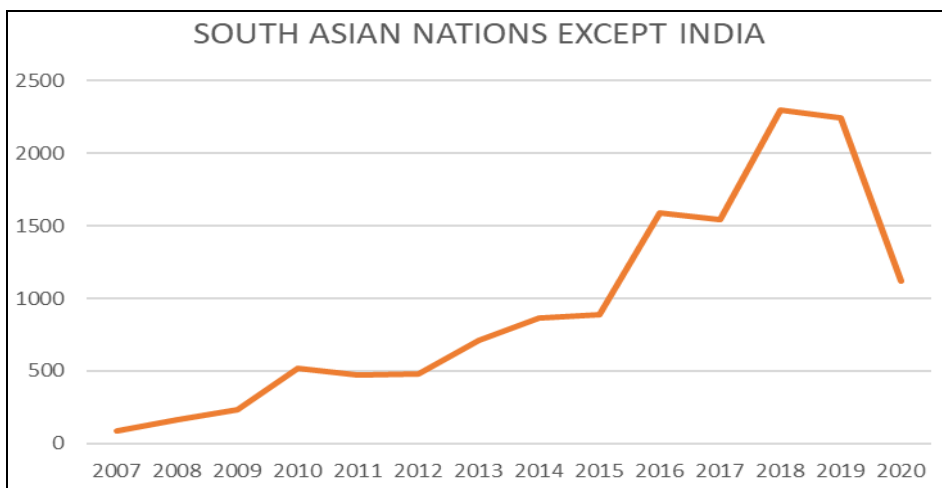
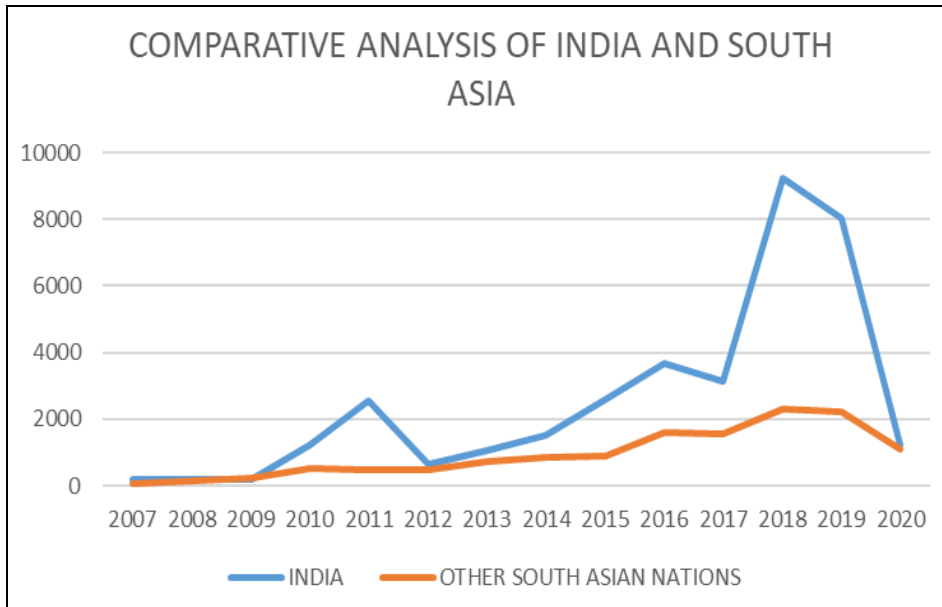


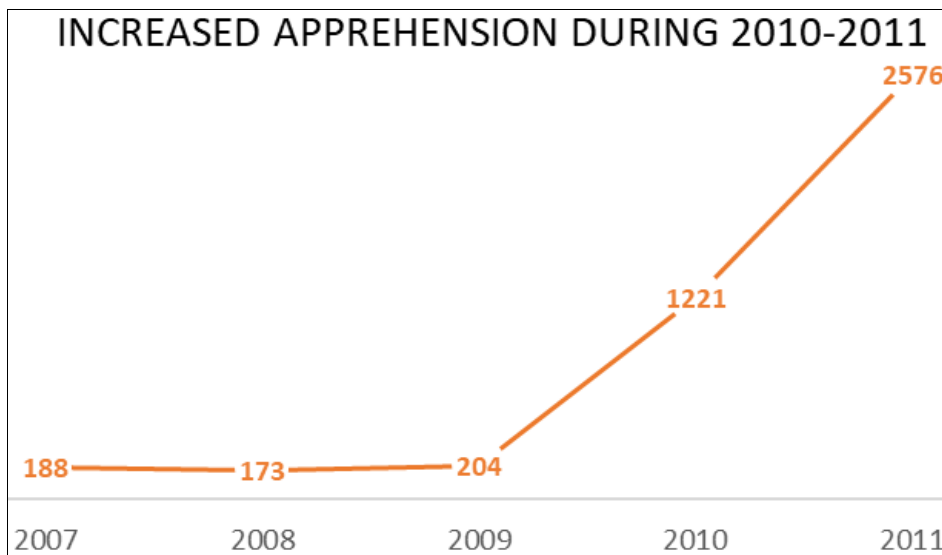
Fig 6: Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022



**Fig 7: Source:** Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

U.S. Mexico border crossings are a part of a greater illegal trafficking system in which humans are also considered as a cargo. The border crossings are controlled by the drug cartels and areas along the U.S.- Mexico border is divided into territories called 'Plazas'. It is these cartels who control and steer the migrant flow through their plazas. With fewer Mexicans and Central Americans crossing the border, smugglers were eager for "high value cargo" like Indian citizens and other Asian nationals, most of whom were ready to pay \$20,000 or more (Press, 2015)<sup>[13]</sup>.

The word got out about these migration routes among the Indian nationals through various travel agents located in the states like Punjab who have direct links with the traffickers in the Central America and Mexico. These agents started luring more and more Indians and convinced them to pursue these illegal routes to reach the US. The result was a 498% increase in the amount of apprehensions by the Border Patrol from year 2009. Total apprehensions in 2009 were 204, which increased to 1221 in 2010 and to 2576 in 2011.



**Fig 8: Source:** Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

This increase in apprehensions in the number of immigrants was part of a greater general trend observed across South Asia. One other factor that might have led to increased attempts by illegal immigrants from India was the political scenario in the U.S at that time. This was the period of Obama administration which has been known for its lenient policies towards immigrants. This may have led to some additional motivation among the Indian migrants.

**Decrease in 2012**

An interesting pattern observed during the period between

2011 and 2022 is that whenever the peak year of apprehensions was reached, the succeeding year saw a phenomenal decrease in the number of apprehensions, mainly because of the decrease in number of attempts. This might be due to the discouragement caused by the rising apprehensions rate and continuous increase in the staff of the U.S Border patrol along the south-west border, especially along the Rio Grande sector which was the hotspot for illegal Indian migrants till 2013. After reaching its peak in 2012, 2013 saw a 75% decrease in the

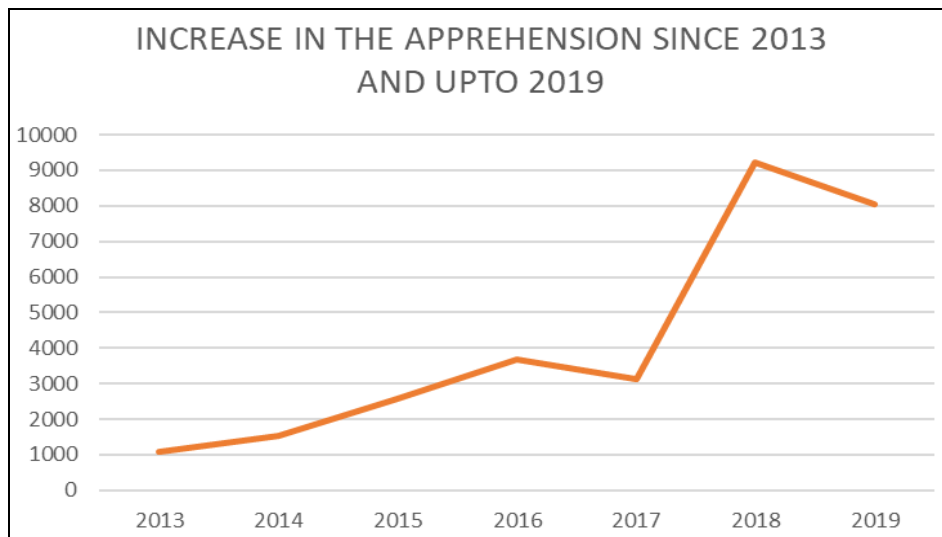
apprehensions mainly because of above stated reasons.

**Trends from 2013 to 2019**

After a sharp decrease in 2012, the apprehension rate started to rise again steadily till 2019. This was also the period of the rise of BJP's ascent to power under the Prime Minister Modi. Many immigrant lawyers have tried to link the rise in the apprehension rate of Indian Immigrants to the Hindu nationalist ruling party of BJP and its policies. Though no direct evidence has been found to link the rise in immigrants to the BJP rise in power but various immigrants had cited the reason as stated above (Sundaram, 2020) [15]. Nonetheless, the rate of apprehension continued to rise until it peaked once again in 2018, when 9234 Indian citizens were apprehended along U.S. borders. The dramatic increase in the number of apprehensions in

2018 and 2019 can be attributed to the following factors :

- a) The Trump administration's harsh immigration policies.
- b) Increase in the number of travel agents in India attracting youths to go through illegal route
- c) Before 2013 nearly all of the Indian migrants came through the eastern sector of Rio Grande. But after 2013 there has been a continuous increase in the number of apprehensions from the western sectors such as El Centro, Yuma and San Diego. This shows the change in the methodology and strategies of human traffickers.
- d) The changes in the routes can be seen as a part of a larger trend, when word got out about the relatively easier route from the various gaps in the walls and fences of western sectors ('Illegal Indian migration into U.S. on the rise', 2018) [1].

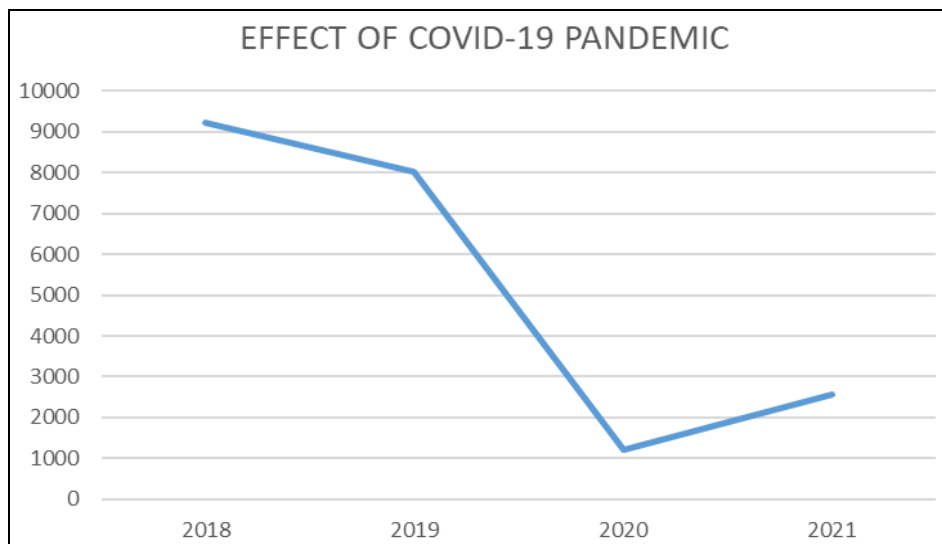


**Fig 9:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

**Effect of pandemic on the migration**

The period of 2020-2021 saw the effect of Covid-19 pandemic on the rate of illegal migrations and apprehension. Compared to the 8027 apprehensions which took place in

2018, only 1217 were apprehended in 2020, a sharp decrease of 85%. The decrease can be cited as the effect of pandemic on the global mobility of individuals.



**Fig 10:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

**‘The Biden Effect’**

The dramatic increase in 2022 in which 13027 Indian citizens were apprehended at U.S. borders was a shock to everyone. But this increase can be explained by the following factors:

- a) This increase in number can be seen as a result of pressure release when most of the prospective immigrants were not able to migrate because of Covid-19 pandemic.
- b) President Joe Biden’s reversal of policies of the Trump era, especially the immediate halt on the deportation policy of Trump and discontinuation of the construction of the wall along U.S- Mexico border may have been interpreted as a positive sign by the illegal migrants. Thus, more and number of Indian migrants tried to cross the U.S border illegally.
- c) Adoption of new and easy routes in the western section of the southwest border by human traffickers. Sectors of El Centro and Yuma became the new hotspots, leaving the Rio Grande sector in the eastern section behind, which once accounted for the largest share of

apprehensions.

Southwestern sectors were flooded by Indian immigrants, especially in the eastern sectors of Yuma and El Centro. Year 2022 saw all time high influx of illegal Indian immigrants. Compared to 2007, year 2022 saw an increase of 6829% in the apprehension of illegal indian immigrants. This was the most number of Indian apprehension ever recorded in the US history of illegal Indian immigration.

**1.3 Why choose the south west border?**

Since historical times of illegal migration, the southwest border has been the hotspot of illegal immigrant activity. Between 2020-2022, a total of 1639784 apprehensions took place nationwide, out of which 1628466 took place in the south west border alone, accounting for 99.3% of total apprehensions (Nationwide Encounters, n.d.).

One simple reason for such high apprehension rate along this border is because of the high share of Central Americans and Mexicans apprehensions. This is the easiest and the shortest route for these citizens to reach U.S.A.

**Table 1:** Year wise and sector wise apprehension of Indian illegal migrants

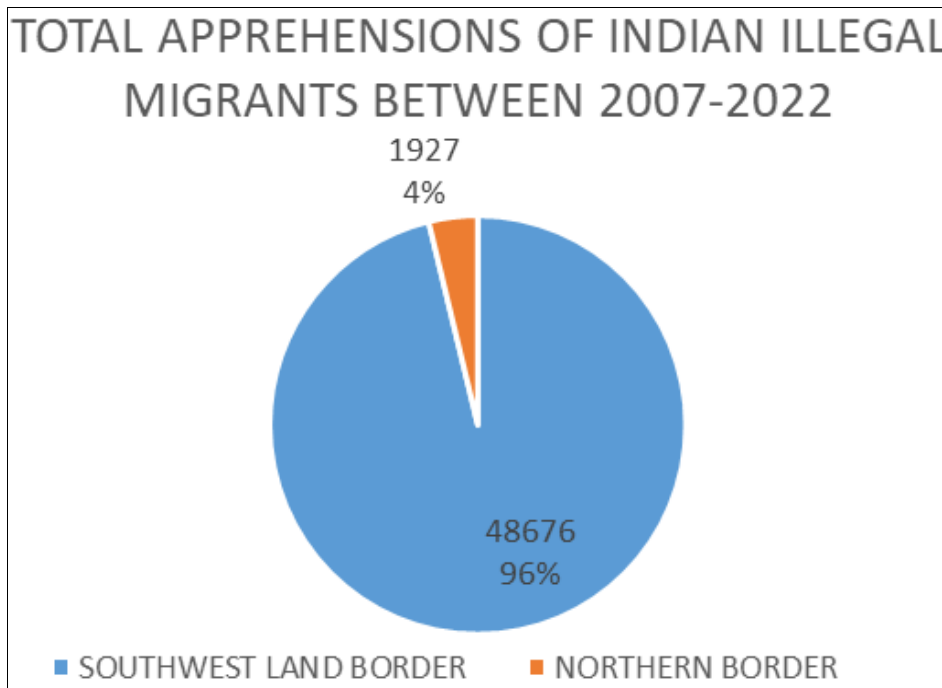
Year	Southwest land border	northwest border
2007	76	93
2008	77	83
2009	79	83
2010	1049	135
2011	2414	135
2012	495	147
2013	949	117
2014	1425	93
2015	2484	88
2016	3480	144
2017	2943	168
2018	8997	182
2019	7675	339
2020	1092	129
2021	2552	9
2022	12869	158

*Source:* Processing of US Border Patrol,2022

In case of Non-Mexicans and Non Central Americans, this route is the most frequent of all taken because of the intense smuggling activities by numerous cartels who also run this whole operation of bringing illegal foreign immigrants including indians through the U.S-Mexico border. These cartels have world wide connection with numerous agents who are on constant the lookout for potential customers. In the India too, many fake travel agents sprung up in Punjab and NCR region for luring youths to undertake this illegal path (Bhargava, 2020) [3]. Between 2020 and 2022, a total of 283451 Non-Mexicans and Non-Central Americans were apprehended, of this total 99% i.e 281034 took place along

the southwest border alone (Nationwide Encounters, n.d.). Paying smugglers between \$25000-\$50000 large number of north Indians comprising mainly from Punjab and Haryana tried to enter through the U.S. Mexico border with the help of cartel backed agents (‘Illegal Indian migration into U.S. on the rise’, 2018) [1]. Many youths from Punjab and Haryana region have a craze to get settled in the USA and are thus, easily influenced by agents to take these dangerous routes through Central America and Mexico. Most of these individuals came from well off farmer families who were able to afford the hefty fee of \$25000-\$50000 through selling off of their assets (Bhargava, 2020) [3].





**Fig 11:** Source: Processing of US Border Patrol, 2022

**Sectoral trends along the Southwest land border**

From year 2007 to 2014, the Rio Grande was the leading sector in terms of percentage share of apprehension of illegal Indian immigrants. From 2007 to 2014, a total of 5535 illegal Indian immigrants were apprehended across the southwest border. Of this total, 3628 apprehensions took place in the Rio Grande valley sector alone, accounting for 65% of total apprehensions.

Things started to change since 2015 when smuggling cartels started using new routes in the western section of the southwest border and abandoned the old routes of the eastern section such as the Rio Grande sector. This shift was such significant that percentage share of the Rio Grande in total apprehensions that took place from 2015 to 2022 was just 5%. Only 2120 illegal Indians were apprehended in the Rio Grande sector out of the total 42092 apprehensions that took place from 2015 to 2022 along the south west border.

2016 was the year when we could see significant changes in the pattern of migration in terms of share of sectors. A sudden shift from the eastern section to the western section of the southwest border was seen in form of increased apprehension at San Diego, Yuma, El Centro and Tucson sectors.

The first major shift was seen in the Tucson sector in 2014. 2014 saw an increase of 70% in the apprehensions from year 2013. 842 illegal Indian immigrant were apprehended in 2014 at Tucson sector against 251 in 2013. This number subsequently increased to 1291 in 2005 and since then has seen an increased number of apprehension compared to pre-2015 period.

The greatest increase in the number of apprehension along the western section was seen in 2016, when 2 sectors El Centro and San Diego saw a sudden spike in the number of apprehensions. El Centro sector which saw only 6 apprehension in 2015, witnessed 1455 encounters in 2016, an increase of 99.5%. San Diego also observed a similar pattern, wherein 506 apprehensions were made in 2016, compared to just 7 in 2015, an increase of 98.6%. Since then, El Centro and San Diego have witnessed increased

apprehensions.

El Centro became the leading contributor to the amount of total apprehensions at the southwest border and nationwide. This continued until 2020, when Yuma sector took over as the leading apprehender.

The first sign of increased apprehension at the Yuma sector were seen in 2018 and 2019 when it saw an increase of 95% and 96% respectively against year 2017. In 2021 and 2022 it became the leading contributor to the amount of apprehensions nationwide. In 2021 it accounted for 71% of total apprehension and this number increased to 75% in 2022.

**Demographic characteristics of illegal Indian immigrants apprehended**

Demographics of illegal migrants for UBSP are:

- 1) Individuals in a family unit (FMUA)
- 2) Single adults
- 3) Unaccompanied Children (UAC)/ Single minors.

In year 2022, 13027 illegal Indian migrants were apprehended by U.S Border Police, out of which 3377 were FMUA, 9323 were Single adults and remaining 327 were Single minors/ UAC Nationwide Encounters, n.d.).

In year 2021, 2562 illegal Indian migrants were apprehended by U.S Border Police out of which 1000 were FMUA, 1328 were Single adults and remaining 234 were Single minors (UAC Nationwide Encounters, n.d.). In year 2020, 1217 illegal Indian migrants were apprehended by U.S Border Police out of which 517 were FMUA, 503 were Single adults and remaining 197 were Single minors (UAC Nationwide Encounters, n.d.). In all the years except 2020, the share of Single adults has been the highest, followed by FMUA and Single minors.

Of the total apprehensions which took place from 2020 to 2022 along US international borders, 66% of the total apprehended illegal Indian immigrants were single adults, next largest group comprised of FMUA with 29% apprehensions and UAC were the last in terms of the total

percentage share with just 5% of total apprehensions. These figures show that single adults are more prone to getting influenced to undertake illegal route and more likely to undertake the journey. FMUA are the second largest group, but lags far behind the single adults. The lower percentage of FMUA might be due to the difficult and dangerous nature of this journey which might discourage them from undertaking the illegal route.

### Conclusion

Rising numbers of apprehension among illegal Indian migrants is an alarming issue. It is a direct indicator of great dissatisfaction among the unemployed youth. Lack of employment opportunities is driving these youths to undertake such perilous journey. It's a proof of the fact that everything is not right in this country. The Youth is unsatisfied, a poor standard of living is pushing them to take this path of illegal entry. No walls, no enforcement can deter them from undertaking this journey once they have made their mind. Perhaps solution lies not at the border but at the origin

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