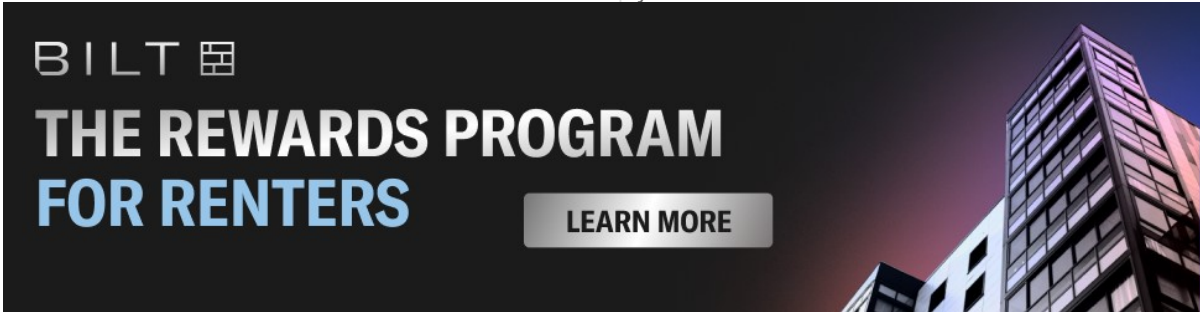


Lance Conklin

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The New York Times

The Morning

October 4, 2024

Good morning. Today, my colleague Hamed Aleaziz explains how well President Biden's border rules have worked. We're also covering Israeli strikes across the Middle East, the port strike and food voyages. —*David Leonhardt*



The U.S.-Mexico border. Pool photo by Jae C. Hong

A quick plunge



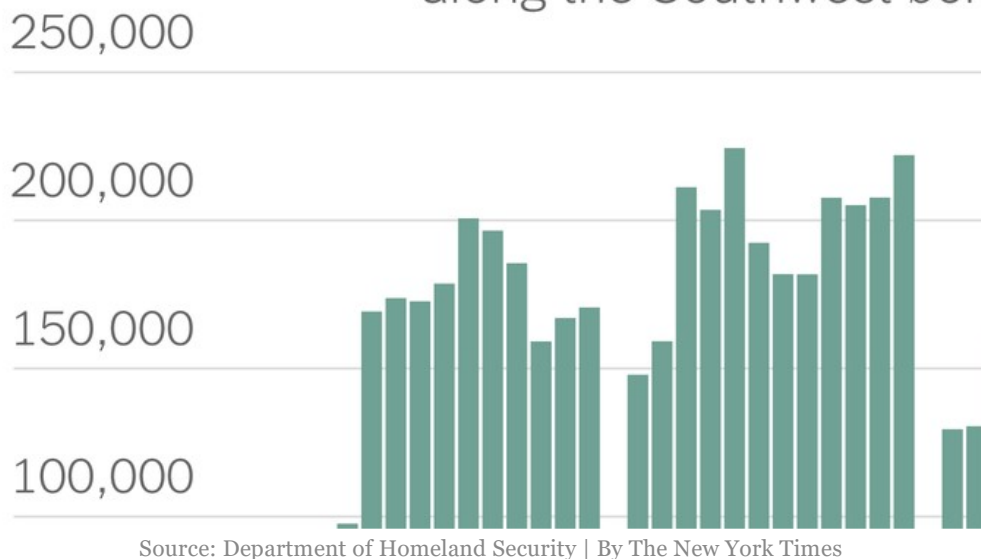
By **Hamed Aleaziz**
I cover immigration.

For much of the Biden administration’s first three years in office, migration surged at the Mexican border. Administration officials frequently argued that the problem was beyond their control — a reflection not of U.S. policy but of global forces pushing people toward the border.

Then, starting in December, when the issue threatened President Biden’s re-election, he began a crackdown. The traffic of people crossing the border plummeted. Today, it remains near the lowest point since 2020 and not so different from levels during parts of the Trump and Obama administrations. This week, the Biden administration imposed tough new rules to keep it that way.

After a crackdown, fewer arrivals

Encounters with U.S. Border
along the Southwest border



In today's newsletter, I'll explain how the policy has had such a big effect and why it took so long for the administration to enact.

The crisis deepens

Border crossings reached record levels this past winter, with almost 250,000 migrant arrests in December alone. At one point, U.S. officials shut down rail crossings and one port of entry, frightening businesses that ship goods between the countries. Just [32 percent](#) of Americans thought Biden was handling immigration wisely.

Two efforts this year by the Biden administration made a big difference.

First, it pushed Mexico to clamp down on the number of migrants headed to the southern border. Mexico had run out of money to deport those people to their home countries. Then the secretaries of state and homeland security visited in late December to ask for more enforcement. Soon, the authorities there found the money to [bus migrants](#) far away, to southern Mexico. Arrests at the U.S. border dropped by half in January and stayed steady for several months.

At the same time, Democrats in Congress were trying to pass an immigration bill to slow the number of arrivals and save Biden's candidacy. Although

Republicans had largely backed those objectives, they voted against the measure for political reasons, and it failed.



Colombian asylum seekers in September after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. John Moore/Getty Images

After that, Biden made a second major decision. He issued an executive order that barred migrants from asylum if they crossed illegally, even if they were fleeing oppression back home — a measure similar to one part of the failed bill. It changed the way people could ask for asylum.

Before, when migrants got to the border, U.S. officials asked if they feared returning home. Government officials believed many were saying yes regardless of whether it was true — and also that smugglers were coaching them how to answer. Now, to qualify for asylum, a migrant had to volunteer his or her worries unprompted. Officials say many fewer did so.

Because fewer people could get asylum under the new rules, the Department of Homeland Security could deport them much more quickly. The process can

take a day or two if someone is from Mexico and does not have an asylum claim.

A turnaround

With all those moves together, immigration to the U.S. changed quickly. Arrests in September fell to around 54,000, the lowest figure in years. And with fewer people entering the asylum system, it was easier for the government to deport them.

In the first few years of the administration, detention centers were often overwhelmed, so officials released people with notices to appear in immigration court years down the line. Policymakers think that word of these strains spread into Latin America and induced more people to come illegally. “There was a message of, ‘this is not permissible,’ but everybody was being permitted to do it. So there was this kind of juxtaposition of public statement and then action,” said Matthew Hudak, a former U.S. Border Patrol official.

Now, as strains on the system have eased, officials react differently. Detention centers have space to hold people while they wait to see if they’ll be deported.

Democrats have traveled a long arc in the last four years. When Biden took office, he spoke warmly of migrants seeking asylum and even tried to pause deportations altogether. (A court said no.) As his political fortunes sank, he turned toward deterring migrants. Finally, in June, he took a hard line. Now Kamala Harris says she would make sure Biden’s order is kept in place.

Related: Immigration is a major issue in this election. [Watch a video version of The Daily](#), where Michael Barbaro and Times correspondents discuss the state of the race.
