

# Proxy? Schmoxy! PolitiFact misleads its audience on DeSantis and illegal border crossings

An Oct. 4, 2023 fact check by PolitiFact alleged that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis was guilty of “conflating” border encounters as reported by government agencies with the total number of immigrants who crossed illegally and stayed.

PolitiFact correctly pointed out that authorities may encounter some illegal entrants more than once, and that the Biden administration expels some others. PolitiFact’s fact check encouraged readers to take the number of encounters and subtract those who were expelled to reach an approximate number of illegal entries.

But obviously that’s not a good estimate because many enter the United States illegally without encountering government agents. PolitiFact doesn’t mention that anywhere in its fact check. And PolitiFact fails to inform readers that apprehensions have long been used as a proxy for illegal entry.

[The number of apprehensions in the San Diego border region was used as the proxy variable for the number of individuals who crossed during these years; it has been demonstrated to be a valid proxy for the total number of crossers.](#)

And:

[Figure 1 shows that the number of illegal alien apprehensions \(as a proxy for illegal crossings\) has declined gradually since the late 1990s except for one sector—Rio Grande Valley.](#)

And:

[Rather, apprehensions—arrests, interdictions, deportations of illegal aliens—serve merely as a proxy for the rate at which border crossings are attempted and thus for the rate at which they succeed. Because they do proxy for crossing success rates, apprehensions continue to be an important supply determinant.](#)

And:

[The number of apprehensions has long been considered a reasonable proxy for the number of illegal border crossings, but recent analyses have suggested that apprehensions are generated by a complex combination of enforcement intensity.](#)

[number of undocumented immigrants, and migrant behavior \(e.g., seeking out border enforcement officers to seek asylum\).](#)

And:

[Using monthly data from 1968 until 2004, we estimate a distributed lag model with the number of apprehensions at the USMexican border as a proxy for illegal migration.](#)

And:

[US Border Patrol apprehensions, which immigration scholars often use as proxy for undocumented migration trends, have decreased in that agency's Tucson Sector since the mid-2000s.](#)

See the problem?

Experts get to use border apprehension numbers to approximate illegal border crossings. That's perfectly fine. But if DeSantis uses border apprehension numbers to approximate illegal border crossings, then he's supposedly conflating two different things and exaggerating. [DHS in 2021](#) estimated 660,000 illegal border crossers evaded apprehension. If similar numbers hold for the whole of President Biden's four years in office, that should exceed 2 million evading detection.

For review, [PolitiFact more-or-less estimated](#) the 7.2 million encounters should be decreased by at least 3 million (not counting multiple encounters) for purposes of estimating new illegal residency under Biden:

The encounter data also does not reflect expulsions. From February 2021 to May 2023, there were about 2.5 million expulsions under Title 42, a COVID-19 pandemic-era policy that allowed officials to quickly expel migrants. Besides the Title 42 removals, about 591,000 removals have been initiated by border authorities during Biden's tenure.

PolitiFact's handling of the data does not appear to improve on DeSantis'. If voluntary returns of those entering during the Biden years do not pull significantly from the total, then DeSantis' estimate may hold. The traditional proxy may remain fairly accurate. And the fact checker, PolitiFact, apparently didn't even bother to look at voluntary returns.

There's one more factor in DeSantis favor overlooked by PolitiFact. It would make sense for DeSantis' estimate of illegal residents allowed in under Biden to include an estimate of those entering and staying during the whole of 2023 and 2024. That's consistent with DeSantis' pledge to remove illegal residents allowed in under Biden. Assuming that DeSantis did not include those illegally entering after the date he spoke implicitly suggests an amnesty arrangement for which there is no evidence. Either that or it assumes no illegal entry leading to residency under Biden after 2023.

PolitiFact made no perceptible effort to include such an estimate. That's a criticism I did not make to PolitiFact.

## A Scrupulous Corrections Policy? Or Scrupu-less?

I pointed out the hole in the story to PolitiFact co-author [Samantha Putterman](#) before submitting a correction request to PolitiFact ([Oct. 6, 2023](#)). I emphasized the importance of explaining to readers that apprehension statistics omit illegal entrants not apprehended, and that apprehensions have long been used in professional literature as a proxy for illegal entry.

[A full week later](#), PolitiFact has made [no detectable effort](#) to issue a correction or fill the hole in its story.

PolitiFact's slapdash methodology results in a fact check unfair to Gov. DeSantis, violating the IFCN requirement to perform fact checks fairly and impartially.

PolitiFact's failure to correct the misleading interpretations and omissions counts as a failure to scrupulously adhere to an open and honest corrections policy.

In a final note, it sure would be nice if the International Fact-Checking Network had the time and/or inclination to actually read and approve valid complaints. The evidence suggests the IFCN has no interest in doing either in recent years, let alone offering complainants or the public an explanation for withholding approval of complaints.

Thanks for your attention to this matter (a sentiment which grows in irony with every formal complaint I submit).

Sincerely,

Bryan W. White  
Editor and publisher, Zebra Fact Check