



# United States Senate

## Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman  
“Securing the Border: Progress at the Local Level”  
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee  
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**As Prepared for Delivery**

Good afternoon, I thank the witnesses for being here. Today’s hearing is the second in a series that the Committee is holding to examine the progress made over the past decade as a result of the infusion of substantial federal support to secure our borders - particularly our border with Mexico - and how we can build on the current level of border control.

At our first hearing, the panel of experts outlined the significant increases in manpower and resources that have been sent to the border over the past decade. They all agreed that progress has been made toward securing the border but that of course much more still needs to be done before we can say we’ve done everything we can do.

Last week’s hearing also raised important questions about how we define and gauge border control and about the inadequacy of our current measurements of what is inherently a difficult question. Our witnesses agreed that the metrics collected and disseminated about border security must be improved to provide us with the best possible understanding of how well our border is being secured.

Right now, for example, apprehensions of illegal border crossers are at their lowest levels since the early 1970s—with 465,000 people apprehended last year compared to 1.6 million in 2000. This is interpreted by many as a clear sign of progress because substantially decreasing apprehensions means that Border Control operations are deterring people from crossing illegally. I guess it also assumes the same basic percentage of apprehensions as compared to the total number of people attempting to go over.

But at various points in the last decade, the Border Patrol itself has turned this formula upside down and pointed to increases in apprehensions of illegal crossers as evidence of progress, arguing that increasing apprehensions meant that agents were targeting their efforts better. Apprehensions are obviously one indicator of border security. But we need to find a better, more direct way to compare the number of people being apprehended to how many people are trying to enter the country illegally.

I realize that this is not an easy undertaking, but some Border Patrol sectors—including the Tucson Sector—are already using cameras, sensors, and footprint analysis to conclude how many illegal entries are occurring. It gives them a little more data to make a conclusion that, in the end, is an estimate, but we’re trying to make it as educated an estimate as possible. We need to expand this across the entire border in order to give us a better idea about whether our border security strategies are succeeding and to help the Border Patrol marshal its resources more effectively.

The panel we heard last week also agreed that the apprehension rate of illegal border crossers cannot be the only way we measure border security. Other factors, they said, must be considered as well, including a subjective factor: public perception. That is, can we measure and consider how secure people in border communities believe they are?

In confronting the problem of illegal immigration, we must also take into consideration a statistic that would probably surprise most people: Nearly half – 35 to 45 percent - of the people now in this country illegally originally entered the U.S. on valid visas that subsequently expired. In other words, these people were legal immigrants who became illegal. Most of these people did not enter the U.S. across our border with Mexico.

To help us get beyond the statistics and understand the situation on the ground, we have called a panel of witnesses today with real first-hand experience along our entire southern border—from Texas to California. They are the people who confront illegal immigration and border-related crime every single day in their jobs as sheriffs and judges.

The Committee is very interested in the status of control of the border closest to them. I am particularly interested in their thoughts on the violence in Mexico and the degree to which it has or hasn't spilled over into their communities. I would like to know whether the FBI statistics on decreased rates of violence in a lot of their border communities reflect their experiences, and if not, why not? I hope our witnesses will shed light on what they think it will take for people living and working on the border to feel safe.

Last week, we heard testimony that border security cannot be achieved in isolation from our immigration game plan, and that hundreds of thousands of people will continue to risk their lives illegally crossing our borders unless and until we reform our immigration laws, presumably to create a system that allows immigrants to enter legally for temporary work opportunities and then to return. So, I will ask our witnesses today to address the relationship between immigration reform and border security.

The ultimate aim of these hearings is: One, to do oversight on what we're getting in return for the considerable federal investment in border security; two, to see what we can do to improve it; and three, to look at the political equation here that has to do with the relationship between border security and our current immigration system, which just about everyone agrees is broken.

With answers to these questions, I hope we can get a picture that the numbers don't begin to explain about whether the billions in taxpayer dollars that we have invested in securing the border are dollars that have been spent wisely, and what we must do in the future to improve security for all our citizens, particularly those living and working along the border.

Senator McCain?