

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

More Judges Sought for Growing Immigration Backlog

by [Julián Aguilar](#) | June 17, 2015 | [3 Comments](#)



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Credit: Bob Daemmrich

In less than two years, the number of Texas-based immigration cases stuck in federal courts has swelled by about 60 percent.

Through April of this year, about 77,000 immigration cases in Texas were still meandering

through the system. That's one spot below California's 89,300, and an increase of 58 percent since [October 2013](#), according to data compiled by the [Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse](#) at Syracuse University.

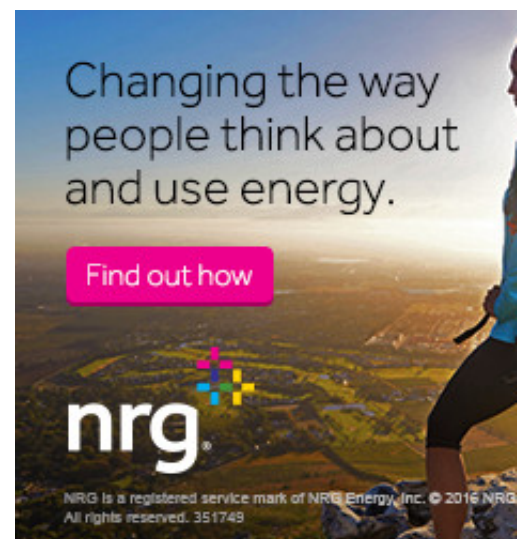
Now, a Texas lawmaker says he wants to make a dent in the problem by securing money for 55 new immigration judges and support staff. There are about 260 immigration judges in the nation, including 31 in Texas, [according to](#) the U.S. Department of Justice's Executive Office for Immigration Review.

"We got the [funding request] out of committee, we have it out of the House and now it's over on the Senate side," U.S. Rep. [Henry Cuellar](#), D-Laredo, said. "People always talk about more Border Patrol and more Border Patrol. But as you get more Border Patrol, you get a lot more cases. We're about 450,000 cases backlogged."

The Obama administration continues to remove undocumented

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immigrants at record levels. But a large number of immigrants whose court cases are lingering might be allowed to stay in the country legally if a judge rules in their favor.



Most deportation cases are resolved quickly, said Austin-based immigration attorney Jackie Watson. But people in limbo could be waiting on a judge to close their case and allow them to live here legally; some are victims of domestic violence or trafficking who might qualify for a visa, and others could be waiting to be awarded a green card.

“There are people who are waiting for relief and have really good cases for relief,” she said. “And they can’t go on with their lives.”

The wait also makes it difficult to get interim benefits like a work permit.

Cuellar, the only Texas Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, said more judges are already being hired under a 2014 directive from the White House.

How many new judges ultimately might be assigned to Texas is unknown, he said, but the state should see “a pretty good size in increases.”

“I would say that every court or processing center [in Texas] will go up,” he said.

In Texas, the Houston immigration court has the largest backlog, with 32,048 cases pending. That’s followed by San Antonio at 24,570, Dallas at 7,700 and El Paso at 6,515. Harlingen rounds out the top five at 5,800.

Cuellar said the expedited removal of deportable immigrants was the result of a June 2014 White House directive to process high-priority cases quickly, including recent crossers and unaccompanied children.

The hiring surge should also affect the number of cases that involve unaccompanied minors. That part of the docket has swelled to about 70,000 nationwide, according to the TRAC data. That’s compared with about 41,600 in June 2014. Kathryn Mattingly, a spokesperson for the Executive Office for Immigration Review, said that as of May 26, the number of pending cases for unaccompanied minors had

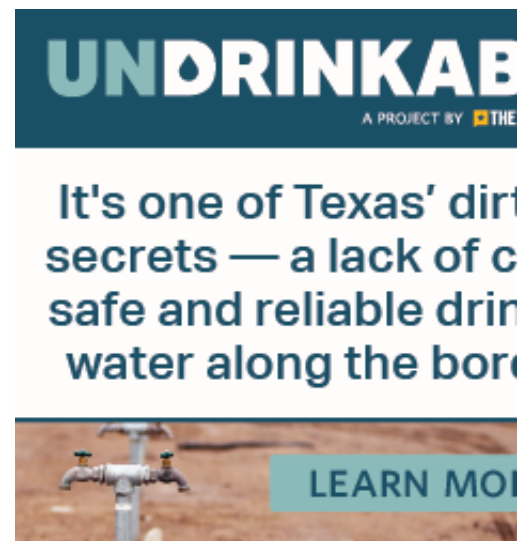


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dropped to about 22,000.

Despite the increase in the number of Central Americans who have crossed into the country illegally, Mexico is still the country of origin for the majority of people awaiting a final outcome. Through April 2015, about 130,800 undocumented immigrants with pending immigration cases were from Mexico, and about 69,560 and 57,600 from El Salvador and Honduras, respectively. In Texas, about 26,140 Mexicans were waiting on a final decision. That's followed by 17,870 from El Salvador and 16,240 from Honduras.

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