

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION: FACTS AND MYTHS

The media report unrelenting arrests and deportations of immigrants and the problem of illegal immigration continues to create controversy and unleash emotions. We would like to clarify some misconceptions that are often voiced in this public debate in an effort to help our community better understand the complexity and ramifications of this serious social and economic problem.

1. UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS TAKE AWAY JOBS FROM U.S. CITIZENS AND DEPRESS WAGES.

Undocumented immigrants are an intrinsic part of our economy and our daily lives. They clean our homes and offices, care for our children, tend our gardens, prepare our food, build and improve our homes. Those who say that these jobs would be filled by native workers, if undocumented workers were removed, may not be aware of the lack of willing workers for these unskilled, low-paying occupations, even in times of high unemployment. Only 8% of Americans have not completed high school. The unemployment rate in Mercer County has increased significantly in 2009, but continues to run well below the national and state averages. Some argue that immigrant workers should be fired and deported to resolve the unemployment problem, so their jobs can be taken over by Americans. But after the recent and much-publicized immigration raids in meat and poultry plants across the country, employers were not able to replace but a small portion of the jobs performed by unauthorized workers, in spite of offering higher wages. Foreign-born workers generally do not compete with native workers but, rather, complement the jobs of U.S. workers. It is unrealistic to propose that bankers and engineers take jobs as gardeners and laborers. On the other hand, immigrants are also consumers and taxpayers. In the last two decades, New Jersey would have had a negative population growth without the influx of foreign-born immigrants who have gone from being 12.5% of the population to 20% currently. According to a recent report from the Immigration Policy Center, immigrants contribute 23% of the economic activity in the state.

2. UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS SHOULD BE DEPORTED.

Undocumented immigrants are not a separate and distinct group who can be neatly "removed" from our midst. These neighbors are part of "us". According to the Urban Institute, 85% of immigrant families are of mixed-status. This means that undocumented immigrants live mostly with other family members who have legal immigration status, or are U.S. citizens. We know of the emotional and economic devastation visited on the families affected by the numerous deportations in our area when the main or only breadwinner in the household is taken away. It is not just the U.S. citizen dependents of these undocumented immigrants who suffer. Their employers, the religious congregations where they worshiped, the businesses they patronized, society at large suffers when hard-working, tax-paying, productive members are taken away. The "pie" gets smaller. A recent study by the Perryman Group estimates that the deportation of the some 8 million unauthorized workers in the U.S. would result in the loss of 2.8 million jobs and a reduction in GDP of \$245 billion.

3. UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS ARE CRIMINALS.

Lack of immigration status is not a voluntary choice in most cases. Many of those deported in our area had attempted to obtain legal status, but after a complex and very expensive process were rejected because in the years it took to decide on their petitions, the situation in their country might have marginally improved. Others had been denied the opportunity to even start the process, because they come from a country, like Mexico, where visa quotas are set unrealistically low, ignoring economic, geographic and historical links between the two countries. The inability to achieve legal status has nothing to do with the mostly exemplary behavior of these undocumented immigrants, or a perverse desire on their part to remain disenfranchised. There are willing employers and relatives who wish to sponsor them, but the barriers put up by a dysfunctional immigration system stand in the way of legalizing the status of many undocumented immigrants. Immigrants have consistently been found to commit less crime than natives. A report from the Star Ledger indicated that non-citizen foreign born were 5% of those incarcerated in New Jersey but 10% of the general population. Yet, we have criminalized people for seeking a better future through hard work, doing what we and our ancestors did since this country was founded. Rather than dedicating resources to decreasing the backlog of immigration petitions so that families can be reunited, and employers can fill job vacancies, Congress has chosen to increase expenditures in more border enforcement, hiring more detention agents, and readying more jail cells.

4. UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS ARE A NEGATIVE DRAIN ON OUR SOCIETY.

There are some who allege that these immigrants consume more social services, like health and education, than what they contribute in taxes and through their work. Most studies reflect just the opposite. Some question why children of immigrants should be entitled to education and health care at taxpayers' expense. As is true for children in general, the answer is simple: because they are our future, the workforce that will sustain our growing retiree population. In the last two decades, New Jersey would have had a negative population growth without the influx of new immigrants. The Social Security Administration receives some \$8 Billion annually in payroll taxes for wages reported under "unmatched" Social Security numbers, which are likely to belong in large part to undocumented immigrants. At a time when we are contemplating the need to reform our Social Security system because of the unsustainable demands imposed by the retirement of the Baby-Boom generation, how can we responsibly consider removing immigrants from our society? As the previous head of the Federal Reserve Bank, Alan Greenspan, said, referring to unauthorized immigrants: "most economists agree that the economic benefits of these workers exceed the costs". However, it is also true that a big part of these benefits accrue to unscrupulous employers who exploit these workers and evade taxes, while those who comply with regulations face unfair competition. The more fair and equitable way to resolve this problem rests in legalizing this underground population and turning it into a legal workforce. The outcome of the last legalization in 1986 suggests that this would result in improved salaries and working conditions in certain sectors, and to a smoother integration of immigrants.

PREPARED BY

THE LATIN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND

PO BOX 80, PRINCETON NJ 08542 E-MAIL: INFO@LALDEF.ORG

609.688.0881 WWW.LALDEF.ORG