

A Discussion of Unauthorized Immigration:
The Myths, the Realities, and Possible Solutions

Julieta B. Rodrigo

St. Joseph's College

Sociology 247: Professor R. Gamboa

11 May 2014

The recent mass influx of immigrants into the United States has spurred much discussion. Whether it is deliberated by media pundits, government legislators, or average citizens, feelings toward unauthorized immigration vary widely. On one hand, some support the tightening of immigration enforcement, increased militarization of the border, and deportation of undocumented migrants. On the other, some encourage amnesty and granting residency to immigrants, and gradually restricting the immigration policy to curb the prevalence of illegal immigration. However, it is impossible for citizens to choose a side without attaining factual information. This paper seeks to identify the current state of illegal immigration within the country, evaluate the effects of undocumented migrants on the fiscal health of the economy, analyze the success and failures of legislations aimed to improve immigration policies, and briefly note on future forecasts while providing guidance for possible actions.

What the Statistics Show

For numerous reasons, illegal immigration is difficult to study. Perhaps the main obstruction rests in the fact that the number of undocumented immigrants entering the United States is not accurately known, as there is no census that asks respondents about their legal status. Because of

this, the government uses other indicators, such as employment and poverty rates, to infer the economic and social impact of unauthorized immigration. This phenomenon oftentimes leads to a public skewed perception of the nature and consequences of illegal immigration, and results in negative attitudes toward those migrants.

In 2012, the Department of Homeland Security estimated that 11.1 million undocumented presently reside in the United States. Half of the undocumented population comprises of individuals who arrived to the United States on a legal temporary visa and then later lost their legal status when they overstayed their visa, while the other half originally entered the country without proper authorization and most probably crossed U.S. land borders between official ports of entry.

Public Feeling toward Unauthorized Immigrants

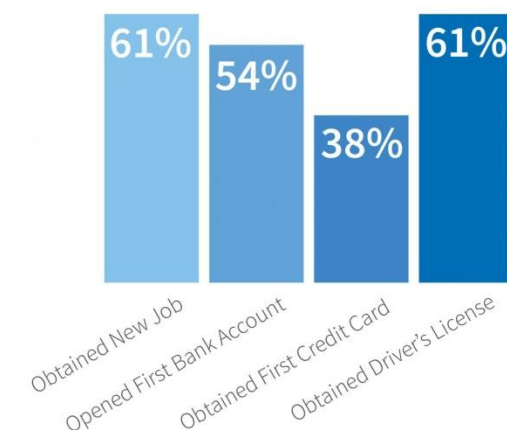
For centuries, the American public has held conflicting attitudes toward the concept of immigration and the migrants themselves. Despite priding themselves in being a nation built up by the hard work and determination of millions of immigrants, many ironically react to foreign populations with hostility, disdain, and fear. From the Industrial Revolution onward, immigrants have been slewed with a number of criticisms and attacks, ranging from their assumed tendency to take jobs away from native workers, their abuse of social services, their evasion of taxes, and their likelihood to impose a fiscal burden on taxpayers. In a study analyzing thousands of print media coverage of immigration within the United States, Simon & Alexander (1993) proved that immigrants continue to be viewed in a negative light. As with many issues, Americans tend to be poorly informed about immigration (Scheve & Slaughter 1961) as much of what they learn

comes through the biased routes of the mass media. It should not be surprising, therefore, that opponents of immigration always outnumber supporters.

Hence, it becomes important to counter these claims. Statistically, it is difficult to find strong evidence of negative effects on native workers. There is only slight evidence that undocumented workers take jobs away from U.S. citizens, and most of it originates from case studies in specialized occupations or single labor markets (Huddle et al 1985). After reviewing studies of immigrant impact on labor prospects, Bean et al (1987) concluded that the effects of immigrants on the wages of other groups are either nonexistent or small. They also noted that overall findings are more consistent with the thought that undocumented workers hold jobs that other groups find unattractive than with the widely held notion that illegals competed with natives for jobs. Additionally, there is almost no evidence to indicate that immigrants impose burdens on other taxpayers through their use of social services. Furthermore, more than half of undocumented workers pay payroll taxes, and all pay property and sales tax (White House 2005). Thus, the notion of damaging effects on job opportunities and financial stability of citizens is grossly exaggerated, and the public is left with a distorted view of reality.

A recent study by the National UnDACAmented Research project noted that recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals were successfully incorporating in American society and economy.

Figure 1: Economic and Social Incorporation Since Receiving DACA



This study shows that undocumented youth are particularly interested in integrating into American society and, if given the legal chance to, they will largely contribute to the national economic success.

Past Attempts to Curb Immigration

Legislations that restricted the number of immigrants were first introduced in the nation after 1875, a period during which popular opinion strictly focused on the negative impacts of immigrants (Simon 1985). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted to prohibit the migration of Chinese workers to the U.S. In the 1920s, quantitative restrictions on immigration only proved to intensify illegal immigration, and thus led to the creation in 1924 of the U.S. Border Patrol. In response to widespread public support of the belief that the United States did not have enough control of its borders, President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986. With its main goals to curb the flow of undocumented immigrants into the country and to decrease the number of illegal immigrants living within the U.S., IRCA sought to restrict the hiring of undocumented workers, increase enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border, and grant legalization programs for the current immigrants (Bean et al 1989). Subsequent

research showed that IRCA had only a minute and temporary effect in reducing the flow of unauthorized immigrants (Donato et al 1992).

Recent Attempts to Curb Illegal Immigration

One important trait that differentiates contemporary immigration from past immigration is the presence of large numbers of undocumented immigrants (Passel 1986). While past legislations focused on reducing the immigrant population as a whole, it was not until the early 1970s that Americans began focusing heavily on illegal immigration.

It is commonly known and accepted that millions of unauthorized immigrants reside in California. In the early 1990s, California's economy experienced steep economic decline that led to widespread job loss and cuts of social service expenses. In the gubernatorial elections, Pete Wilson was reelected by an overwhelming majority as Governor of California, particularly for his support of Proposition 187, which denied social services and educational opportunities to undocumented immigrants. Although there was no clear connection between California's large numbers of illegal immigrants and the economic downturn, Wilson took advantage of the weakness of California citizens and pushed tough policies that were not guaranteed to improve the economy's state. Nevertheless, Wilson succeeded and enacted harsh legislations that made life difficult for undocumented immigrants and did not improve the economy or reduce the level of immigration.

Instead of seeking to deport all undocumented immigrants, new modernized programs are being installed with the goal of encouraging migrants to leave the U.S. on their own accord by making it difficult to attain jobs and succumb to poverty. Recently, the use of E-Verify, an Internet-based system that helps employers verify the legal work eligibility of new hires, has gained popularity.

Operated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, E-Verify is available in all 50 states. While its usage remains voluntary throughout the U.S., some states have enacted legislations mandating the use of the system for certain businesses. Passed in Alabama in 2011, the Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act, known more commonly as HB 56, is widely regarded as the nation's toughest immigration enforcement law at the state level. It requires all public and private businesses to use E-Verify and suspends business licenses for those businesses that choose not to comply. Mississippi, South Carolina, and Arizona have also passed strict legislation requiring use of the system, while several others have passed less strict laws. Only Illinois and California limit the use of e-Verify and do not require businesses, both local and public, to screen their employees.

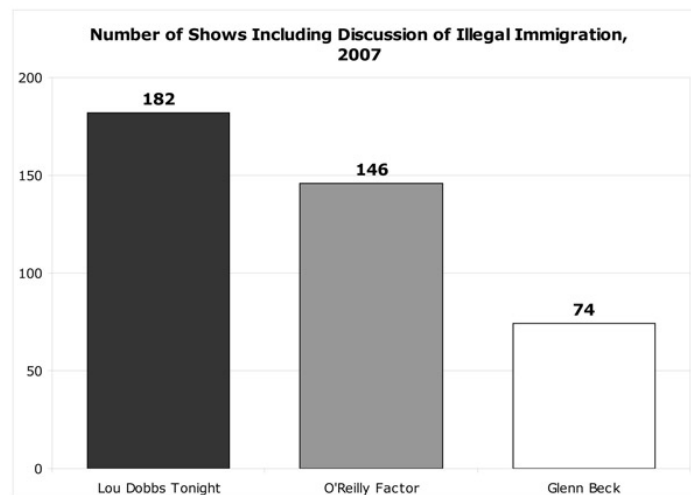
Over the last few years government legislators have campaigned to enact a comprehensive immigration reform. In March 2013, the Gang of Eight, a name for a group of senators lobbying for immigration overhaul, released their agenda for restructuring of the immigration policy. It would seek to grant citizenship to undocumented migrants currently in the United States, but only after the successful securing of the U.S.-Mexico border. It would integrate E-Verify with DMVs around the country to ensure that unauthorized immigrants do not attain jobs using false licenses and increase business fines for hiring illegal workers. While this reform has not yet been approved by the national government, it maintains as the most progressive and inclusive reform in recent decades.

Who Benefits from Changes to Immigration Policies?

Fueling the debate over immigration is discussion over the benefits of stricter immigration policies. After all, it seems like some politicians and agencies are a bit *too* supportive of new legislations.

Golash-Boza (2009) exposed how three specific groups are profiting from policies targeting immigrants: media pundits that rely on bashing immigrants for their ratings, politicians who use immigrants as scapegoats for social issues, and contractors who profit from escalating government expenditures.

Media pundits, specifically Glenn Beck, Bill O' Reilly, and Lou Dobbs, are utilizing verbal attacks on undocumented immigrants to increase televised ratings by broadcasting immigration raids, sensationalizing crimes by immigrants, and dehumanizing immigrants with provocative accusations and misrepresentative facts. A study by Media Matters Action Network found that these pundits propagate anti-immigration hysteria.



In their constant coverage of immigration ‘news’, the three talk show hosts have spread misleading information warning viewers about the creation of a “NAFTA superhighway” and the reconquering of the American Southwest by Mexicans. The constant exposure to hate-filled

rhetoric leads viewers to become more accepting of tough law enforcement, stricter immigration policies, and larger police efforts to deport immigrants.

Similar to media pundits, politicians try to instill fear in the mass society in order to capture more votes for their election campaign. Politicians racialize immigration, and often point to specific groups for the ills of the economy. Most notably, the Mexican population was heavily blamed for the economic decline and rampant job loss in California in the early 1990s; by abusing the weakness of the economically-deprived citizens, politicians used immigrants as scapegoats and advocated harsh anti-immigrant policies.

Government contractors receive direct financial benefits from immigration enforcement practices. Specific sectors have profited largely as a result of harsher policies, including privately run immigrant detention centers and telephone companies. As the Corrections Corporations of America faced massive losses as the rate of incarceration level off in the early 2000s, they sought to fill prison beds with the increasing numbers of immigrant detainees (Mattera et al 2003). In the post-9/11 society, the United States has expended large sums of money in contracts to private prison companies out of fear of terrorism and immigration. In fact, a significant portion of the CCA's success is due to its lobbying efforts and political connections, combined with higher rates of immigrant detention (Wood 2007).

What the Future Holds

It is important to discuss why illegal immigration continues, and even increases, despite intensifying efforts on behalf of the U.S. population to rid the nation of the undocumented. Once migration from one country to the United States has begun, several factors contribute to its sustainability. One important factor is the support system from which new migrants can draw

from; previous immigrant populations, particularly families, provide financial assistance, information on housing and jobs, and emotional support to new immigrants. These migrant networks help to lower the costs and risks of migration (Massey et al 1993), and thus may assuage the fears of prospective immigrants and encourage them to come into the United States.

International migrant flows are also facilitated by underground institutions, such as black markets that produce fraudulent documents (such as work visas and driving licenses) and the increasing use of coyotes (hired smugglers) to help avoid capture by the American immigration authorities. The collective efforts of these migrant networks and underground institutions help pave the way for more authorized migrants to come in later waves, a process Myrdal (1957) referred to as the cumulative causation of migration.

The latest statistics report that the process of illegal immigration may add as many as 300,000 new individuals to the United States population each year. In order to be efficient and effective, future U.S. immigration policy must focus on three target parts of the immigration process: 1) when an unauthorized trip is being planned but before it has been enacted; 2) while immigrants are in transit across the U.S.-Mexico border; and 3) after undocumented immigrants have established themselves within the United States. Donato et al (1992) reported that the threat of border apprehension does not deter most immigrants, as apprehended immigrants continuously attempt to try to enter until they succeed. Moreover, the skills of underground coyotes make it difficult for Border Patrol to effectively detain all illegal migrants, despite their ever-increasing budgetary allowances. Consequently, the best way to ameliorate the issue of unauthorized migration is by focusing on the undocumented immigrants that already reside in the U.S. Legislators, immigrant activists, the media, and ordinary citizens must vote on effective strategies to improve the situation.

In the short term, granting legal amnesty to all immigrants would solve the issue, but it will not be helpful in reducing incoming waves of immigrants. Therefore, the government must think long-term. In the long run, free trade with poorer Latin American nations, particularly Mexico, will improve their economy and weaken the incentives for unauthorized immigration. A report by Clark et al (2007) predicted that a 10% increase in a source country's income per capita reduces the immigration rate by 4.4%. And so, the question now arises: Is the United States willing to put forth the time, effort, and money into enacting long-term goals by improving the economies of poorer nations and reducing their citizen's needs to emigrate, or will it continue to focus only on the short term and seek to reverse hundreds of years of immigrant progress? Only time will tell, but for the sake of the nation and all of its loyal citizens, the former is more appealing.

References

- Bean FD, Lowell BL. 1985. *Metropolitan Labor Markets and Earnings Attainment: The Effect of Undocumented Immigration. Texas Population Research Center Pap No. 7.017*. Austin, TX: Univ. Tex.
- Bean FD, Vernez G, Keely CB. 1989. *Opening and Closing the Doors: Evaluating Immigration Reform and Control*. Washington, DC. Urban Inst.
- Donato KM, Durand J, Massey DS. 1992. Stemming the tide? Assessing the deterrent effects of the Immigration Reform and Control Act. *Demography* 29(2):139-57

- Golash-Boza, T. 2009. A Confluence of Interests in Immigration Enforcement: How Politicians, the Media, and Corporations Profit from Immigration Policies Destined to Fail. *Sociology Compass* 3/2:283-294.
- Gonzales, Roberto G., and Veronica Terriquez. "How DACA Is Impacting the Lives of Those Who Are Now DACAmented." *Immigration Policy Center*. American Immigration Council, 15 Aug. 2013. Web.
- Huddle DL, Corwin AF, MacDonald GJ. 1985. *Illegal Immigration: Job Displacement and Social Costs*. Alexandria, VA: Am. Immigration Control Found.
- Massey DS, Arango J, Hugo G, Kouaouci A, Pellegrino A, Taylor JE. 1993. Theories of international migration: a review and appraisal. *Popul. Dev. Rev.* 19(3):431-66
- Matter, Philip, Mafruz Khan and Stephen Nathan 2003. *Corrections Corporation of America. A Critical Look at its First Twenty Years*. Corporate Research Project of Good Jobs First.
- Myrdal G. 1957. Rich Lands and Poor. New York: Harper and & Row.
- Passel JS. 1986. Undocumented immigration. *Ann. Am. Acad. Politic. Soc. Sci.* 487:181-200
- Scheve, Kenneth F., and Matthew J. Slaughter. 2001. *Globalization and the Perceptions of American Workers*. Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics.
- Simon RJ. 1985. *Public Opinion and the Immigrant: Print Media Coverage 1880-1980*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- Simon RJ, Alexander SH. 1993. The Ambivalent Welcome: Print Media, Public Opinion and Immigration. Westport, CT: Prager.

Waldman, Paul, Elbert Ventura, Robert Savillo, Susan Lin, and Greg Lewis. "Fear and Loathing in Prime Time: Immigration Myths and Cable News." *Media Matters Action*. Media Matters for America, n.d. Web.

White House 2005. 'Economic Report of the President' Online at "http://www.gpoaccess.gov/eop/2005/2005_erp.pdf Accessed 7 May 2013.

Wood, PJ. 2007. 'Globalization and Prison Privatization: Why Are Most of the World's For-Profit Adult Prisons to Be Found in the American South?' *International Political Sociology* 1(3):222