

Variety of measures can cut illegal immigration

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Body

The number of **illegal** visitors deported from the United States last year rose by 15% over 1994, a fact trumpeted by the Clinton administration as proof that it is serious about fighting **illegal immigration**.

Few really doubt the White House is serious about **illegal immigration**. The subject has even emerged as a prominent foreign policy issue, figuring in our diplomatic relations with Mexico and other nations from which **illegal** immigrants come. And the 15% jump, caused by the expedited deportation of criminals and an increase in enforcement spending, is encouraging.

But more is required. Each year, 300,000 illegals join the 2 million to 4 million already here. In that context, the 51,600 deportations of 1995 seem trivial, especially since most of the deportees were prison inmates. If you **can**'t deport an **illegal** who's also a criminal, you **can**'t deport anyone.

The real difficulty is not deporting illegals who also are criminals. Nor is it confined to people crossing the Mexican border. It is figuring out how to track and deport visitors who enter legally and then overstay their visas, a group that accounts for as many as half of all illegals.

While enforcing visa deadlines is difficult, several new strategies show promise.

The main one is to create a national worker registry to help employers verify the status of new employees. Unfortunately, this is stalled in Congress, where some members have tried to shanghai the idea into a full-fledged national ID system, an idea loaded with privacy problems.

Other ideas are common sense. Washington **can** stiffen penalties for those who repeatedly hire illegals. And it **can** do better at targeting law enforcement resources on industries known to use and abuse illegals: agriculture, for instance, and food service.

Another intriguing idea is to create a database of visitors who overstay their visas. Embassies could then check visa applicants for past violations before issuing new visas. Or how about requiring employers or schools that sponsor visitors on temporary work or student visas to pay a bond if those visitors don't leave on time?

Some of these are big ideas, some are little and some are better than others. But none is as bad as the competing idea that the best way to fight the **illegal** flood is to dramatically relax **immigration** laws.

There's little popular support for any version of an open-borders policy, and with good reason. Even heavily modified, the policy would swamp some states. Some social services that are now stretched thin would be strained to the breaking point. And the distinction between legal and **illegal** would vanish, exposing millions of legitimate immigrants to a backlash.

There's a strong case to be made for a generous approach to legal **immigration**. But the best way to make room for legal immigrants is to send **illegal** visitors home.

Notes

THE EDITORIAL PAGE; Today's debate; CURBING **ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION**; OUR VIEW; Deportations rose in '95 but barely made a dent. There are many things the U.S. **can** do. Here are a few.

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