

An Honest Debate About Immigration.

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Byline: Marcela Sanchez

WASHINGTON -- What part of "illegal" don't you understand?

For anyone who writes **about immigration**, as I do, this is a familiar question. It was posed to me again this week as I read e-mails from readers who have been distressed with my views on illegal **immigration**. Put simply, many dislike the fact that I do not condemn outright those immigrants who are here illegally.

Last week I replied to a few dozen of those readers and asked them to relay a personal experience that has helped shape their current view of illegal **immigration**. Some described horrors of being victims of Mexican gang violence, others shared their plans to pick up and move out of their homes in frustration over what they consider the disrespectful behavior of Hispanic newcomers in their neighborhoods.

Many sounded particularly tired of politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, big business and the media that seem happily blind to the impact that immigrants have on jobs and communities. The rage is real and is echoed in the 49 percent of Americans who want to reduce **immigration**, according to a Gallup poll in July.

For more than 50 years it has been illegal to enter the country without proper documentation. Yet for many it is obvious that the law is not enforced sufficiently, if at all. Indeed there are not endless busloads, trainloads or planeloads of people being deported in an effort to rid the country of the estimated 8 million to 12 million illegal immigrants currently living here.

What there is, instead, is a system in place that seems ever more accommodating to their presence. Their children can attend public schools. The federal government furnishes them a tax identification number if they want to pay taxes, which many do. In some states they can obtain driver's licenses, and some local governments provide shelters for day laborers who previously waited at gas stations and shopping malls for a day's work.

Too easily the "negative" impressions of those directly affected by illegal **immigration** are ignored or held in disdain because they might sound irrational or racist. The truth is, as I learned from readers, many are speaking their minds in a way that is more **honest** than the public **debate** on this issue.

Leaders in Washington do not match their sincerity and directness. If anything, their winning strategy this electoral season has been to avoid the issue altogether. President Bush and Sen. John Kerry only briefly addressed it during their last **debate** last week, even as moderator Bob Schieffer noted he got more e-mails **about** that issue than any other.

Kerry promised he would seriously control the borders and enforce employer sanctions. President Bush, for his part, suggested that the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico is unstoppable as long as workers make 10 times less there than here.

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What both candidates know but Washington in general won't admit is the role the United States played and continues to play in creating the situation that readers decry. Thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled wars that were financed in part by the United States in the 1980s, and came north. While some have managed to legalize their situation, others hold temporary permits to work. Either way they continue to attract others who come without papers.

Despite the success of the North American Free Trade Agreement, it has led to more than a million people losing their jobs in rural areas of Mexico. Signed by President Clinton and now touted by Bush as the model for the rest of the region, NAFTA should send the signal that more immigrants are to come as other free trade agreements such as CAFTA, with Central American countries, are pursued so lustily.

For the third time over the last quarter-century the level of U.S. uneasiness about immigration is at a peak. The previous two times the country took two very different paths in response. The first, in the 1980s, culminated with an amnesty program for some 3 million people living here illegally. The second led to the immigration reform of 1996 that, combined with other laws passed that year, amounted to some of the harshest measures adopted against immigrants in decades.

In other words, both amnesty and hard-line approaches have been pursued before and today's uneasiness is only bound to increase as long as current and future leaders in Washington fail to speak with the candor that readers used to share their experiences with me about the good and bad behind immigration.

Marcela Sanchez's e-mail address is desdewash@washpost.com. Copyright 2004 Washingtonpost Newsweek Interactive742NOAX (North America)USA (United States)

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