OUR OPINIONS: Security in numbers; Use Social Security information to get better control of illegal immigrants' entry into U.S. workplace

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Body

The surest way to discourage **_illegal_** immigration is to make it hard for unlawful **_immigrants_** to land a job here. But with up to 12 million illegals in the country already, it'**_s_** obvious that neither the federal government nor employers have tried very hard to deny work to those who don't have the legal right to be here.

Improved enforcement of immigration laws requires changes: Inspections of **_workplaces_** that attract a high proportion of **_illegal immigrants_**; reducing the hodgepodge of documents that can be **_used_** by illegals for identification, and making them harder to counterfeit; making employers more responsible and stiffening penalties for putting illegals on the payroll.

Even with existing tools, though, federal agencies could do a **_better_** job simply by cooperating with one another.

Social Security numbers are a place to start. All **_U.S._** workers are required to have a **_Social Security_** card, and employers are required to ask new hires for their **_numbers_**. Generally, **_illegal_** workers **_get_** around that law by giving employers false **_numbers_**; for their part, most employers don't bother to check whether those **_numbers_** are valid because they simply don't want to know whether their work force is legal.

However, both the Internal Revenue Service and the **_Social Security_** Administration have the means to identify workers who **_use_** phony **_Social Security numbers_**. But according to a government study, the Department of Homeland **_Security_**, which is supposed to enforce immigration law, has not **_used_** data from the **_Social Security_** Administration that would raise red flags about worker status.

Some of the results of that investigation by the Government Accountability Office were startling:

* Some 295 **_Social Security numbers_** were **_used_** as many as 1,000 times each on earnings statements.

* About 1.4 million earnings reports cited **_Social Security numbers_** that had never been issued.

* In more than 300 cases, an employer **_used_** the same **_Social Security number_** on the earnings statements of 10 different workers.

That GAO study also found that the IRS fails to enforce a law requiring employers to report accurate **_Social Security numbers_**. The IRS "has no record of ever penalizing an employer for inaccurate" **_Social Security numbers_**, the GAO reported.

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When that report was issued a year ago, the IRS promised it would consider ways to improve enforcement. Last week the agency declined to disclose what if any changes have been made, noting that the law does not require employers to "validate identification **_numbers_** provided by employees."

The IRS also said it "has no legal authority to enforce immigration and **_Social Security_** Administration laws."

Clearly, there are ways to spot employers who may be **_using_** **_illegal_** workers. What'**_s_** missing is the political and bureaucratic will to do so.

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