

Decent wages would secure U.S. borders

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Body

Ever since President Bush unveiled his first guest worker plan, employer claims of labor shortages have dominated the economic side of the national immigration debate. Moreover, as Bush and his allies keep repeating, legal and illegal immigrants alike are mainly doing "the jobs Americans won't do" --- physically demanding labor in low-paying but essential industries.

However, the most important statistics available show conclusively that, far from easing shortages, illegal immigrants are adding to labor gluts in America.

Specifically, when adjusted for inflation, wages in sectors that are highly dependent on illegals have either been stagnant or have actually fallen.

When too many workers are chasing too few jobs, employers typically cut wages, confident that beggars can't be choosers. What U.S. Labor Department data reveal is that the wage-cutting scenario is exactly what has unfolded recently throughout the economy's illegal immigrant-heavy sectors.

Take restaurants. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, illegal immigrants comprise 17 percent of the nation's food preparation workers, 20 percent of its cooks and 23 percent of its dishwashers.

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, though, inflation-adjusted wages for the broad Food Services and Drinking Establishments category fell 1.65 percent between 2000 and 2005.

Ten percent of the nation's hotel workers are illegal immigrants, the Pew Center estimates. But the BLS data show that their inflation-adjusted wages fell nearly 1 percent from 2000-2005.

In the booming construction industry, illegal immigrants make up some 12 percent of the work force. But from 1993 ---when median home prices began surging at a record pace --- through 2005, inflation-adjusted wages in the sector rose only 3.02 percent. And from 2000 to 2005 --- the height of the boom --- inflation-adjusted construction wages actually fell by 1.59 percent.

These wage trends in illegal immigrant-heavy industries make clear that these sectors are not facing shortages of native-born workers. They're facing shortages of native-born workers who can accept poverty-level pay.

Decent wages would secure U.S. borders

If the president and Congress have any interest in ensuring that American immigration policy helps raise and not depress living standards, they'll tell these employers to stop the special-interest pleading and do what their predecessors throughout American history have done: Raise pay high enough to attract the U.S. workers you need.

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