

New immigration laws expose downside of getting tough

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Body

When Congress gave up trying to pass a balanced **immigration law** last year, it opened the door for states, counties and towns to write their own **immigration laws**. The result has been a disquieting national experiment in handling illegal **immigration** almost solely with arrest and deportation.

Several states have enacted **laws** that show no mercy, even for immigrants with steady jobs, deep community roots, a history of paying taxes and children who are citizens. They have just one goal: **Get** illegals out.

As a matter of ice-cold reasoning, those states make a case that would pass any logician's test: The **law** must have meaning, so if the federal government won't act against wanton **law**-breaking, then the states must. Oklahoma, which has one of the **toughest new laws**, now bars illegal immigrants from receiving state services, requires employers to verify that **new** workers are legal, gives people a way to sue companies that hire illegal immigrants, and makes it a felony to transport, harbor or conceal an illegal immigrant. It was meant to be harsh, and it is.

It's also undeniably effective. Oklahoma Hispanic groups estimate that as many as 25,000 left the state after the **law** was approved last year. School attendance dropped, workers disappeared, church attendance shrank and Latino businesses lost customers.

What's missing is simple humanity -- a recognition that the vast majority of those affected lack any malicious intent. They came not to rob banks but to improve their lives through hard work. Yet families are uprooted, and parents are separated from their kids.

Legal residents and citizens are hurt, too. When spouses, parents or children are illegal, a relative can be placed at risk for "harboring" them at home or "transporting" them to church. There are persistent reports that police in some places target Hispanic drivers for roadside stops and document checks. Some citizens have taken to carrying passports or birth certificates to avoid being jailed.

By intent, the **laws** have also hit businesses, which have scrambled to replace lost workers. Employers say they're being asked to become **immigration** police with imperfect tools. A study in Oklahoma predicted that the **law** could cost the state's economy more than \$1 billion a year, and a firm that specializes in finding **new** locations for businesses said some companies have crossed Oklahoma off their lists. The state Chamber of Commerce and other business groups filed suit to block the **law**.

If there's virtue in all this, it is to highlight the hypocrisy that has long been at the heart of ineffectual federal **immigration law**. The nation doesn't want illegal immigrants, but it does want the cheap labor they provide. So it passes **laws** then doesn't pay to enforce them.

Laws such as Oklahoma's may now **expose** the **downside** of being harsh, just as federal **law** has **exposed** the **downside** of being lax.

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There's a better remedy, of course, but Congress gave up on it last year. President Bush's immigration bill would have toughened workplace enforcement with a strong verification system and effective ID requirements. It would also have acknowledged reality by fostering a temporary worker program and providing a rigorous path to citizenship for the most qualified of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already here. That's still a worthwhile proposal.

Laws such as Oklahoma's are satisfying for those who seethe over illegal immigration. But they worsen a polarized, anti-immigrant atmosphere that ill-serves the nation.

Graphic

GRAPHIC, B/W, Julie Snider, USA TODAY, Source: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Line graph)

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