

Illegal Aliens Depress Wages for Some in U.S.

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Body

Illegal aliens are depressing wages and worsening working conditions for legal immigrants and native Americans in low-skilled and low-paying jobs, the General Accounting Office says.

Citing empirical data and several case studies, the accounting office, an investigative arm of Congress, said Friday that United States-born citizens and legally documented immigrants were being hurt, especially those working as janitors and food processors.

The report identified restaurants and companies producing automobile parts, shoes and clothing as others that often employ illegal aliens. The aliens' willingness to work in low-skill jobs for less than the minimum wage in those industries has depressed wages and benefits for comparable native and legal immigrants, the G.A.O. said. But it also said the low wages paid illegal aliens allowed some of the businesses to grow or survive foreign competition, indirectly expanding job opportunities and wages for higher-skilled workers in the same trades.

Without a pool of illegal immigrants willing to be garment workers or shoemakers, the accounting office said, many companies would shut down.

It also said restaurants' practice of using illegal immigrants as dishwashers and busboys allowed the businesses to keep their prices low and expand, providing more jobs for more highly skilled waiters and chefs. The Labor Department disagreed, saying none of the studies surveyed by the accounting agency offered any concrete evidence of a positive effect from using illegal workers.

The department also disputed the accounting agency's premise that legal workers would not take many of the low-wage jobs, particularly in the shoe and garment industries. "The fact is that large numbers of native and legal U.S. workers are in the same labor market as illegal workers," the department said. "Furthermore, if wages were not depressed by illegal workers, even greater numbers of native and legal workers would be in that labor market."

The G.A.O. said the 1986 immigration law and its fines for hiring illegal aliens, if successful, would force wages up for legal immigrants and natives and cause "considerable stress" financially for growers and shoe and garment manufacturers.

Congress asked the accounting office to survey all available studies and data on illegal immigrants' impact on native and legal immigrant workers in 1985, when it was considering the employer sanctions that were adopted a year later.

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The accounting office has now submitted the study to Congress, saying that after examining 230 academic and other treatises on the issue it found scarce useful information. The biggest problem, the G.A.O. said, is that **illegal aliens** are a hidden population, making it hard to identify them for use in any empirical study.

About two dozen case studies, however, suggested that employers' use of **illegal aliens** has displaced native workers and legal immigrants from their jobs and driven down **wages** of those who remain.

The most dramatic examples were among janitors and farm and food processing workers in California.

Under contracts negotiated by the Service Employees International Union, blacks and legal Hispanic immigrants working as janitors at office buildings in downtown Los Angeles had won **wage** and benefits reaching a peak of \$12 an hour by 1983. But a group of nonunion janitorial services hiring predominantly **illegal immigrants** began to wrestle the best building contracts away from the unionized companies, driving the union scale back down to \$4 an hour and less. Of 2,500 black janitors under high-**wage** contracts in 1977, 100 were still paid comparative **wages** by 1985.

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