

Immigration and the Labor Force
Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.*

Although long an issue, it appears that illegal immigration has increased significantly in its scale since the mid-1960s. Today it would appear that more people immigrate to the United States illegally each year than do so legally. This is despite the fact that the legal immigration system of the United States already admits twice as many persons each year as all of the other nations of the world combined. Thus, it should be clear that movements of illegal immigrants of this magnitude must have labor force implications.

How Many People Are Involved?

Obviously, a crucial concern to any discussion of illegal immigration is the number of persons involved. But by the very illegal nature of the movement, precise data will never be available. Only figures pertaining to apprehensions exist and even they are suspect due to numerous duplications. The staggering growth of apprehensions, however, over the past decade does imply itself that the direction of change is toward increasingly larger numbers.

It makes little conceptual difference whether the stock of illegal immigrants in the nation is 3 million, or 6 million, or 9 million or 12 million persons. All of these numbers have been cited in various official reports and research studies. Actually, the precise number is irrelevant if one concedes--as everyone familiar with this issue does--that the number of persons involved is substantial and that the direction of change is toward annually increasing numbers.

Frankly stated, there will never be any better data available on this question. The illegal character of the entire process forestalls the possibility that we will ever know much more about the actual number of persons involved. Estimates and anecdotes are all that is ever going to be available. But before one despairs that little can be learned because the data is so poor, it should be realized that this also is the case with most of the major social problems of the day. Reliable data are unavailable about the size of energy supplies, local labor market conditions, crime, health, and mental health, to name only a few issues of national concern. The problem of illegal immigration is real and it is going to get much worse in the near future.

* Professor of Labor Economics and Human Resource Studies, Cornell University

Who Is Adversely Affected?

All of the limited research on the characteristics of illegal aliens show that the major reason that they come is to find jobs. The evidence also indicates that they are largely successful in their quest. Some of the jobs are sub-standard. They exist only because of the availability of an easily exploitable group (i.e., people who will seldom complain and who are grateful for anything they receive). The vast majority of illegal aliens, however, are not exploited in the sense that they receive wages below the Federal minimum wage. But they do work disproportionately in the low wage labor market. Many illegal aliens, however, work in good paying jobs in manufacturing and construction. Brief mention should be made of each of these situations.

For those who work under exploitive conditions, it is likely that they do not take jobs that citizens would tolerate. Yet this is certainly no excuse for the perpetuation of their presence. If it is wrong for citizens to work under unfair working conditions, it is also wrong for illegal aliens to do so.

With respect to the low wage labor market (i.e., in the range of the federal minimum wage and slightly above), it must be recalled that there are millions of citizens who are confined to this sector as well. In 1982, for instance the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that there were 29 million workers (or 30 percent of the employed labor force) were employed in "the kinds of low skilled industrial, service, and agricultural jobs in which illegal aliens typically seek employment." [Hearings U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy, April 20, 1982].

In many of the local labor markets in which illegal aliens are known to be present in substantial numbers, it is likely that the presence of illegal aliens explain why certain industries remain low wage industries over time. Their very presence also explains why many employers in these same industries attempt to justify the employment of illegal aliens by claiming that citizen workers cannot be found to do the work. Few American workers are capable of competing with an illegal alien when the end result of the competition depends upon who will work for the lowest pay and longest hours and accept the most arbitrary set of working conditions. Hence, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy for employers to hire illegal aliens and then to claim simultaneously that no citizen workers can be found to do the same work. Illegal immigration hurts all low income workers. Poor blacks, poor whites, poor Chicanos, poor Puerto Ricans, are adversely affected. Anyone sincerely concerned with the problems of the working poor of the nation must include an end to illegal immigration as part of any possible policy of improved opportunities.

One of the major ways to increase the job opportunities and the income rewards for working, for our present working poor population, is to reduce the uncontrolled supply of new entrants into the existing low wage sector of the economy. Many of the jobs performed by low wage workers are essential to the operation of our economy. Farm workers, dishwashers, laborers, garbage collectors, building cleaners, restaurant employees, gardeners, maintenance workers, to name a few occupations, do perform useful and often indispensable work.

The tragedy is that the remuneration is so poor and this is largely due to the fact that there is such a large pool of persons available. Most of these tasks are not going to go away even if wages increase slightly. One way to make these jobs more attractive to low wage citizen workers is to reduce the unfair addition of millions of illegal aliens into this sector of the economy. If the illegal aliens were flooding into the legal, medical, educational and business executive occupations of this country, you can be sure that this problem would have received the highest national attention and it would have been solved by now. But because it is the blue collar and service workers who must bear the burden of the competition, the issue remains largely unaddressed.

As for the better paying jobs, (e.g., in construction and manufacturing), no one will debate that the illegal aliens employed in these positions cause a displacement effect. Even here, illegal aliens are often "preferred workers" since they are less likely to join unions, or to complain about denial of equal employment opportunity or to make other demands upon employers. Because of their unfair competition, it is in this sector that the federal government is most vigilant in its limited enforcement activities. Helping the most privileged of our society has always been a popular role for government agencies. It is only when government helps those who really need it that questions about government's proper role are asked. This inequality of attention needs to be stopped.

What Are The Long Run Consequences?

Aside from the obvious adverse effects of illegal aliens on employment and income opportunities for citizen workers, there are other serious long run consequences. The nation is rapidly accumulating a growing sub-class of truly rightless persons within our society. Although technically able to avail themselves of many legal rights and protections, few illegal aliens do so. In addition, they and their family members are increasingly being legislatively excluded from much of the basic social legislation in this nation. These exclusions vary from the Federal level where illegal aliens are excluded from receipt of Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, to individual state exclusions from unemployment compensation programs, and even in some cases, from attending public schools without being charged tuition. At all levels, illegal aliens are denied the political right to vote. These are all signs of growing displeasure by the general populace with the presence of illegal aliens within our midst. Certainly the growth of a sub-class of rightless illegal aliens is in no one's long term interest. It is a time bomb. The adults may be grateful for the opportunities provided them, but it is certain that their children will not be nor should they be.