

Illegal Mexican workers: why they come

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The cumulative number of illegal Mexican aliens living today in the United States has been estimated by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at between eight and twelve million. There may be as many as three million illegal border crossings to and from Mexico in a year. Because the entries are illegal, there is no way to obtain accurate data on the magnitude of the phenomenon, but Donald Cameron, the Border Patrol Chief in San Ysidro, California, calls the boundary there "the 16 hottest miles of border in the world." In 1979, there were 998,761 illegal entrants returned to Mexico from the United States, a number that may be inflated by repeaters, who usually agree to return "voluntarily" and then try again.

In an interview published by the *Los Angeles Times* in December, 1979, Secretary of Labor F. R. Marshall claimed that, if two million jobs currently held by undocumented workers were available to Americans, our unemployment rate would drop to 3.7 percent. Others contend, however, that most jobs held by foreigners would not be desired by domestic workers.

Although concern has been expressed that the illegal visitor-workers will place a severe drain on our health, welfare, and educational systems, research has shown that 73 percent of a sample of apprehended aliens paid federal income taxes, 77 percent paid Social Security, but less than 2 percent received food stamps or welfare assistance, and less than 3 percent had children in school here. Furthermore, because undocumented Mexican aliens are mostly young adult males, they should make few demands on our health system.

There is no doubt that the estimated \$2 billion sent or taken back to Mexico in a year is an important contribution to that nation's economy. This income, together with dollars from tourism and from winter vegetable sales, has made up over 50 percent of Mexico's gross national product (\$70.9 billion in 1977). It is more difficult to ascertain the real impacts on the economy and on the employment scene in the United States. With only guesses, opinions, and counter-opinions to go on, the determina-

tion of consistent public policy regarding the problem has been nearly impossible. It is more than likely, however, that this group has promoted our economic growth just as most past immigrations have.

A number of theories have emerged about why these workers come north in such numbers. Each theory is a plausible partial explanation, but each has shortcomings, and no one theory can be taken as an explanation by itself. We propose, therefore, a synthesis of three theories using each as a contribution toward a fuller understanding of the immigration process. The first, the push-pull theory, may explain the forces behind the decision to immigrate. It can be called the motivational step. The second, institutionalized migration, describes the setting in this country that allows so much illegal migration to occur. This is the action step, the actual migration. The third, the dual labor market thesis, accounts for the assimilation process whereby newcomers are blended into our society.

The push-pull hypothesis

Behind the motivation to leave are the "push" of a surplus labor supply in Mexico and the "pull" of demand for cheap labor in the United States. Socioeconomic conditions in Mexico have produced a shortage of wage-earning opportunities, leaving 1.5 million unemployed and 40 percent of the work force underemployed. The Mexican population growth rate is among the fastest in the world, outstripping the growth rate of the gross domestic product. (Between 1960 and 1974, the annual population growth rate was 3.4 percent; the growth of the gross domestic product 3.3 percent.) The population is expected to almost double in the next 20 years, if birth control measures are not adopted; 46 percent of the population is under 15 years of age. Immigration to the United States has been called by many "Mexico's safety valve," providing relief from the pressures of population, surplus labor force, and unequal income distribution.

The pull, the demand for cheap labor in the United States, has drawn both legal and illegal aliens northward. Although jobs

taken by aliens here may pay low wages (even below the minimum wage) by American standards, the pay may be three or four times what a comparable job would pay in Mexico.

Still, the push-pull theory is insufficient to explain Mexico's loss of the most able, aggressive labor, the very persons who could be expected to compete most effectively for jobs at home. Furthermore, migration runs counter to deep feelings most Mexicans have for their language, culture, and family ties.

Institutionalized migration

Once the decision has been made to migrate, institutional factors in this country have facilitated the action. It can safely be said that illegal immigration is a problem at least somewhat of our own making. In the 1940s and 1950s, the active recruitment of Mexican farmworkers (braceros) firmly established the pattern. In the 1950s, the Border Patrol performed "drying out" services for illegal immigrants—that is, having them step across the border, touch Mexican soil, and then be readmitted as legal braceros.

Although this legalized farmworker program ended in 1965, half-hearted enforcement of immigration laws today means that the composition of the hired farm labor force actually has not changed much. Forty-eight percent of the workers in the California-Arizona-Nevada region in 1977 were Hispanic. Ninety-five percent of the aliens from Mexico apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service are simply allowed to return home. Since there is no penalty, there is little discouragement from reimmigrating.

Another institutional support for illegal immigration is the relatively easy availability of Social Security cards. The U.S. Social Security Administration has resisted becoming part of the control system on aliens, and so no statement of citizenship is required when applying for a card. The card holder then has a seemingly legitimate access to the job market.

Similarly, in California, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board requires no proof of

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citizenship for the privilege of voting in union elections. Thus, election participation may also be construed as a legitimizing factor.

Labor contractors, licensed under federal contract, provide jobs and assistance in housing and transportation for farmworkers and, therefore, are major employers of undocumented Mexican aliens. Few contractors are ever penalized for their illegal employment activities. Also, the Border Patrol has not conducted ranch searches for illegal aliens on a regular, consistent basis, so once across the border, aliens may be relatively free of danger from being deported.

The green card system entitles card holders to reside and work in the United States or to commute to work across the border from their homes in Mexico. Supposedly, the U.S. Department of Labor is to certify that a labor shortage exists in the occupation for which the immigrant is seeking employment and that his or her presence will not adversely affect the prevailing wages or working conditions.

The certification process, however, has many loopholes; it is said that only one in thirteen card holders is subjected to the certification process. Although legalizing the immigration of some job seekers, the green card system may actually further illegal immigration. For one thing, it is not difficult for a Mexican to purchase a false card. Also, it is relatively easy for illegal immigrants to infiltrate the large influx of border commuters (about 20,000 a day into California).

White cards allow holders to enter the United States for a 72-hour visit within 25 miles of the border, but they do not serve as permits for employment. Because the cards are not stamped with a date, however, it is simple to mail the card back to Mexico and proceed to a job. Then, if apprehended, the person returns to Mexico, recovers the white card, and reenters.

Other institutions supporting the illegal alien phenomenon include church groups and other humanitarian organizations, which, by providing food and clothing for migrant farmworkers, help the undocumented Mexican aliens among them. Large farms frequently provide housing for the farmworkers and thus for illegals as well.

A final institutional factor leads us directly to the third step, the assimilation process. The liberalization of welfare and food stamp programs and unemployment insurance coverage may have led to a decline in the availability of domestic workers in this country for low-wage jobs. Accepting welfare and unemployment compensation is a better alternative for many than doing menial—especially agricultural—work for relatively low pay.

The dual labor market

The third theory, then, concerns the existence of a dual labor market. The employment world consists of two distinct sectors. The first offers high-wage, “good” jobs for skilled labor; the second, low-wage, “bad” jobs for unskilled labor. The secondary market is characterized by job instability with movement between jobs and also in and out of employment. The theory is that an industrial society generates jobs at the very bottom of the social structure that its own labor force is reluctant to fill. Foreign workers then come and fill the labor vacuum. In the process, these workers become assimilated into American society, albeit into a sector undesirable to others in that society.

This third theory differs from the first. The pull theory, the U.S. demand for cheap labor, is toward the lower end of a continuous spectrum of job opportunities with some advancement possibilities. The dual labor market is sharply segmented, with minority workers beginning and ending their working lives in the secondary sector. If the third theory is, in fact, a good description of reality, then the issue about alien workers competing with domestics for jobs evaporates.

If the secondary sector were upgraded through social legislation, minimum wage requirements, collective bargaining, health and safety standards, perhaps domestic workers would be attracted to these jobs, and the labor vacuum would disappear. This course of action is not without cost, however. The cost of producing certain U.S. goods would rise, and perhaps these goods would be priced out of world markets. Furthermore, those persons currently filling the secondary sector jobs would be displaced. There is a chicken-egg

question about the dual labor market theory: are the secondary-sector jobs generated when workers are available to fill them, or do the jobs exist and attract the workers, particularly undocumented Mexican aliens, to come?

Conclusion

The United States has never had a consistent policy with respect to illegal aliens, because there have always been so many constituencies to satisfy: employers, unions, other disadvantaged employees, and the Mexican government. It seems there is something wrong with any policy alternative suggested. We have already discussed the impacts of upgrading the secondary sector. Upgrading the socioeconomic scene in Mexico so that the push factors are not so strong is, practically speaking, out of our control. Improved birth control practices south of the border would in time alleviate the population pressure.

To enforce tighter controls seems desirable at first glance. Employers of illegal aliens could be severely penalized, as could the illegal aliens themselves. Such action, however, could merely serve to drive the illegals underground the make the problem even more difficult to solve. Worker exploitation would no doubt increase, because workers in hiding lose their rights and social protections, and may have to accept lower wages in exchange for the employer's silence. Similarly, tighter border controls discourage aliens from visiting home and make permanent stays out of what would otherwise be temporary visits.

It seems, then, that the problem has no simple solution. Perhaps a better understanding of the reasons why undocumented Mexican aliens come here in such numbers can serve as a basis for future policy formation. Obviously, if more could immigrate legally, there would be fewer illegal immigrants. Also, if movement across the border were somewhat freer, there might be more who would work here and then simply go home where many want to be.

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