imagining America Without Illegal Immigrants

The millions of immigrants living illegally in the U.S. have long been a source of controversy. But what would life be like without them?

By Dean E. Murphy

"The one good thing you could say about it is, it takes seriously the fact that the United States is not going to deport 10 million people," he says. "We have to do something about these people."

Most everyone agrees that mass deportation is unlikely. But imagining what would happen in the U.S. if the illegal immigrants suddenly disappeared is one way of understanding the economic backdrop to Bush’s initiative.

CHEAP LABOR

The Pew Hispanic Center estimated in 2001 that the unauthorized labor force in the United States totaled 5.3 million workers, including 700,000 restaurant workers, 250,000 household employees, and 620,000 construction workers. In addition, about 1.2 million of the 2.5 million wage-earning farmworkers live here illegally, according to a study by Philip L. Martin, a professor at the University of California at Davis who studies immigration and farm labor.

That is a whole lot of cheap labor. Without it, fruit and vegetable prices rise. Meat prices rise. Prices of products that use labor rise. Prices of labor-intensive services rise. It is simply too expensive to pay the wages of the legal workers I am talking about. It is not that legal workers do not want more than the wages that many of the illegal workers are paid. It is that the legal workers will not work for them.

Dean E. Murphy is the San Francisco bureau chief for The New York Times.

PICKING MELONS IN TEXAS:
Many farm workers are in the U.S. illegally.

LEFT: LAWRENCE MELSLE

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vegetables would rot in fields. Toddlers would be without nannies. Towels at hotels in states like Florida, Texas, and California would go un laundered. Commuters at airports from Miami to Seattle would be stranded as taxicabs sat driverless. And home-improvement projects across the Sun Belt would grind to a halt.

"There would be a ripple effect across the economy," says Harry P. Pachon, president of the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute at the University of Southern California, a Latino research group.

But Borjas argues the disruption would not be long lasting. As proof, he says, look no further than places like Iowa, where foreign-born residents are relatively rare, but there are people working in hotels, fast-food restaurants, and all the rest.

Most illegal immigrants, in fact, are concentrated in a handful of states—California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida—leaving many parts of the U.S. relatively untouched by the influx. The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that 87 percent of illegal immigrants live in just 15 states.

AND IF THERE WERE NONE . . .

If there were no undocumented workers to tend to the gardening, Californians who wanted a nice lawn would pay more for it, eventually drawing low-skilled workers from other parts of the country, Borjas says, adding that American workers would be the better for it.

"The workers would be slightly wealthier, and the employers would be slightly poorer, but everything would get done," he says.

Laura Hill, a research fellow at the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California, says there would be a spike in prices for lettuce, spinach, and strawberries, which are typically picked by undocumented workers. But farmers and agricultural companies would eventually find cheaper ways to harvest the crops. "Who knows, but maybe it would turn into new technology being developed," she says. If not, Americans would look elsewhere, including other countries, for cheaper substitutes.

DEBATE OVER FINANCIAL IMPACT

Some immigration experts also suggest that American taxpayers would be better off financially if the country's illegal residents returned home. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors greater restrictions on immigration, argues that there would be less stress on the social-welfare system.

"Immigrants overall use at least one major welfare program at a rate 50% higher than natives," Krikorian says, referring to an analysis of 2001 data by his center that found Medicaid use particularly high among immigrants. "That is not because they are morally defective. It is because they are poor and don’t have any education, and they end up inevitably stumbling and having needs for the system."

But immigrant advocacy groups disagree. Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights organization, says the economic impact of immigration plays out differently at the local and national levels.

While hospitals and clinics in Los Angeles County, for example, bear huge health-care costs associated with uninsured illegal immigrants—one study put the total at $340 million in 2002—the federal government enjoys a "bonanza" from many of the same immigrants who pay federal taxes.
but receive no benefits in return, Yzaguirre says. Contrary to popular perception, many undocumented workers do have payroll taxes deducted from their paychecks. (In some instances, undocumented workers use false Social Security numbers, while others have valid numbers from when they had worked legally.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where Illegal Immigrants Come From</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top 10 countries of origin for illegal immigrants in the United States</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 MEXICO</td>
<td>4,808,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 EL SALVADOR</td>
<td>189,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 GUATEMALA</td>
<td>144,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 COLOMBIA</td>
<td>141,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 HONDURAS</td>
<td>138,000</td>
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<td>6 CHINA</td>
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<td>7 ECUADOR</td>
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<td>8 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC</td>
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<td>9 PHILIPPINES</td>
<td>85,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 BRAZIL</td>
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Yzaguirre adds that without illegal immigrants, all Americans would be punished by having to pay more for everything from a McDonald's hamburger to a new house.

**BLENDED IN WITH LEGAL IMMIGRANTS**

Which side to believe? The problem with gathering data about illegal immigrants—and the idea of an America without them—is that they tend to blend into the vast tapestry of legal immigrants. Someone living and working in the U.S. with a valid visa one year can become illegal the next by overstaying the visa. A single household can have both legal and illegal residents, sometimes brothers and sisters.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, chairwoman of the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado, is optimistic about President Bush’s immigration proposal. “The hope is that it would lead to some recognition that you don’t solve problems of illegal immigration by shutting down the border,” she says, “but reckoning with the problems in the home country.”

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