



KEY POINTS:

“WILLING WORKERS : Fixing the Problem of Illegal Mexican Migration to the United States” by Daniel T. Griswold, Trade Policy Analysis no. 19, October 15, 2002 (<http://www.free-trade.org/pubs/pas/tpa-019es.html>)

A reformed immigration system must accomplish three broad goals: creating a legal channel for future workers to enter the United States, granting legal status for workers already here, and sharply reducing illegal immigration.

The failure of the current system. By any real measure of results, the effort to constrict illegal immigration since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act has failed. The number of undocumented immigrants in the US today has doubled since then, from an estimated 4 million to 8 million, with the undocumented population growing by more than 300,000 a year.

Tighter border control backfires. By raising the cost and risk of crossing the border, the campaign to suppress Mexican migration has backfired by making it more likely that migrants, once in the US, will stay longer before undertaking another round trip across the border. Passage of tough anti-immigration policies in the mid-1980s and 1990s has resulted in the median stay in the US of undocumented Mexican migrants to rise from 2.6 to 6.6 years.

The economic case for legalization. With the number of low-skilled jobs expected to grow by more than 700,000 a year, and a shrinking pool of Americans willing to fill those jobs, Mexican migrants provide a ready and willing source of labor to fill the growing gap between demand and supply on the lower rungs of the labor ladder. Legalized immigration would allow American producers in important sectors of our economy to hire the workers they need to grow.

Concern 1: The “flood of immigrants.” While more Mexicans may migrate to the US if allowed to legally, others already in the US may decide to return home. If Mexican migrants knew they could return to the US legally to work should the need arise, they would be more likely to return to their families and communities in Mexico after they had achieved their objectives in the US labor market.

Concern 2: The impact on low-skilled Americans. Competition from immigrants actually gives native-born high school dropouts a greater incentive to complete their education and enhance their skills. Barring low-skilled Mexican workers from the US workforce may keep wages for some native-born workers higher than they would otherwise be, but it would not reverse the underlying trends arrayed against the least skilled and educated. What these workers need for their long-term success is not less competition from immigrants but more skills and education.

Concern 3: A burden on taxpayers? Immigrants make our economy more productive and efficient, lowering costs for consumers and raising real wages and returns on investment for native-born Americans. The cost to taxpayers tends to be front-loaded, as immigrant families gain a foothold in the US economy, while the benefits to the economy from the higher productivity and lower prices accumulate over the years and decades.

Concern 4: A permanent underclass? Latinos are dispersing geographically at a rate faster than the great waves of European immigrants of a century ago. A study of southern Californian and southern

Floridian Hispanic immigrant enclaves found that 88% of the children of immigrants preferred to speak English to Spanish, and by the third generation most spoke only English.

Concern 5: The war on terrorism. Legalizing and regularizing the movement of workers across the US / Mexican border could enhance our national security by bringing much of the underground labor market into the open. Legalization would encourage newly documented workers to cooperate fully with law enforcement officials, would reduce the demand for fraudulent documents, which in turn would reduce the supply available for terrorists trying to operate surreptitiously inside the US, and would free resources for border security and the war on terrorism. Legalization would free up thousands of government personnel and save an estimated \$3 billion a year – resources that would then be available to fight terrorism.

Concern 6: Fairness and the rule of law. To argue that illegal immigration is bad merely because it is illegal avoids the policy question of whether it should be illegal in the first place. The US government should fix the problem of illegal Mexican immigration in the same way it fixed the federally mandated 55 miles per hour speed limit on American highways, illegal consumption of alcohol during Prohibition, and illegal settlement of the American frontier – by changing the laws and making it legal.

Civil rights issues. Beyond economics, America's prohibition of low-skilled immigrant labor indirectly threatens the civil liberties of all Americans, native and immigrant alike. Proposals such as a national ID card or a centralized government database of legally qualified workers would result in Americans surrendering an important aspect of their freedom.

Legalization, not amnesty. Undocumented workers should not be granted automatic permanent residence status, and instead should be issued temporary worker visas, valid for a limited period only. They should be assessed a one-time fine of a significant but not prohibitive amount. To gain permanent residence status, they would then need to apply for permanent residency through existing channels.