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# Comments on Mexican and Caribbean Migration to the United States: A Report to the Ford-Foundation by Wayne A. Cornelius

## **Keywords**

Mexican, United States, Caribbean, migration, illegal, aliens, study, Van Arsdol, INS

## **Comments**

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Comments on Mexican and Caribbean Migration to the United States:  
A Report to the Ford Foundation by Wayne A. Cornelius

Comments by: Vernon M. Briggs Jr.

The study under review seeks to accomplish two very interrelated tasks 1) to review the immense literature of the topic and 2) to portray the state of existing knowledge on immigration from Mexico and the Caribbean. It portents to deal "with facts--known and unknown." (p. 10). The study is comprehensive in its coverage but its presentation of "facts" leaves much to be desired. It is not a neutral report that simply reports findings in an even handed manner. Rather, it is an effort to strengthen the perception that the author has on the topic as reflected in his own research. In some instance, contrary views are either neglected or made the subject of disparaging comments. In other instances, there is a pretense of fact that is based upon interviews that the author alone has done which are unavailable to others who are forced, therefore, to rely on the reputation of the author as to their universal validity. In other instances, available contrary evidence is not cited when it conflicts with the authors preconceptions. Also, there are enough factual errors to cause doubt as to the understanding of the author of the institutions involved. Lastly, there is no warning given to readers as to the serious methodological flaws in many of the works cited (including the authors own works). As a result, I am more than disappointed in its presentation of the "facts;" I am very concerned about its integrity as a scholarly document.

I realize that these are serious charges and the responsibility is on me to justify my impressions. I shall try to do so but, of necessity, I am limited in what I can present. I received the report on April 23-- only four days prior to the meeting. Hence, the following are only a sample of some reactions; much more could be said.

Before proceeding, however, let me say that I am very familiar with the literature on Mexican immigration but only generally familiar with Caribbean literature. Hence, I have decided to restrict my comments to the Mexican experience. But because I am so troubled about what I find in the review of the Mexican literature, I worry about the interpretations given to the Caribbean literature as well. My silence about that aspect of the study should not imply that it is adequate. It is just that I am less qualified to comment on that portion of the study.

Specific Comments.

1. At several crucial junctures in the study the author invokes findings from a personal study that is totally unscientific and for which there is no available methodological statement. Readers are led to think that there is substantial content to interviews from a sample so small that they are in reality little more than tabulated gossip. Yet the reader must put together the research design from

scattered fragments throughout the study. I would suggest that if the design were precisely stated that the references would be totally dismissed by any fair-minded reader as being totally useless. From what I can piece together, there were 185 interviews conducted by the author and his assistants in ten cities in two states. Half of these were with illegal aliens; half were with people from Mexico who were legal immigrants or in the process of ~~doing so~~. This would mean that on average about 10 illegal aliens in each city were contacted. Certainly such a sample is not scientific and the results could not possibly be considered a basis for anything. To make matters worse, there is absolutely no mention of how the interviewees were chosen or their personal characteristics. Mention is also made of interviews with other knowledgeable people who, strangely, all seem to agree on the nature of problems. Since I too have talked with numerous business, union, government, civil rights groups who have differing views I am very skeptical as to how such a collection of uniform views from such diverse groups was obtained. The fact that this study of 185 persons is constantly referred to in the study to prove points is grossly unfair and misleading. It can give a false impression of precision when it does not exist. *becoming*

2. Other studies are also cited that have gross inadequacies in methodology with no warning given to any unsuspecting reader. Only a person who already knows the study would know that the study is so methodologically flawed as to preclude any ability to generalize from its findings. One example is the Cardenas (of Edinburg) study. It had a sample of 100 illegal aliens who were found by basically knocking on doors in a certain section of San Antonio that was known to be the home of large numbers of poor illegal aliens. No attempt was made to randomly sample or to select people on any scientific basis. The control groups of blacks and Chicanos were chosen the same way. The statistical bias are so obvious that the findings have never been published in any professional journal.
3. Studies are cited when they are helpful to the author but data from the same studies are ignored when they are counter to the authors notions. I speak specifically of the Van Arsdol, et al., study. This study, which is cited throughout the author's paper, is not listed in the lengthy bibliography at the end. In fact, the Van Arsdol study was done for the U.S. Department of Labor but has not been published. Very few people have ever had a chance to see it. I have. Hence, most people reading this review must trust the author to give an adequate presentation of the findings. He has chosen to selectively draw from it when it is supportive but ignore it when it conflicts. The Van Arsdol study is important because, like the Cardenas study mentioned above in #2, it is a study of unapprehended aliens in Los Angeles. As most other studies that are widely cited (e.g., North and Houston, Samora, etc.) are with apprehended aliens, the Van Arsdol study provides insight into the larger pool of illegal aliens about which only speculation prevails. The Van Arsdol study is not a random selection either but, rather, it is drawn from a short questionnaire given to visitors to a one-stop immigration adjustment center

run by a community organization in Los Angeles. Despite this selection problem, the merits of the study come from the fact that it is based on a large sample size (2,905 people) who were in a non-threatening environment. The Van Arsdol study is generally supportive of the views of Cornelius and it is cited often. Yet, in the case of one of the most important contentions of Cornelius the Van Arsdol study is sharply at odds with the early findings of Cornelius. That pertains to the critical question of the duration that Mexican aliens remain in the United States. On this question, the author has chosen to omit any reference to the Van Arsdol data. Instead ~~it cites only the~~ <sup>(he</sup> contrary North-Houston data that aliens in their study of apprehended aliens had been in the United States for an average 2.7 years duration (with a sample size of 712). The N-H data is criticized as being flawed. The author's own work from an earlier study done only of returnees to Mexico of an average stay of only 6 months is cited. But the Van Arsdol study (with a sample size for this question of duration of stay of 2,503) found the mean stay to be 4 years (with a standard deviation in years of 5.7 years). The Van Arsdol study also found that when other Latin American groups were deleted that the mean stay for Mexican illegal aliens was 4.9 years since "Mexicans tend to have been in the United States on the average substantially longer than other 'Latin Americans.'" (p. 69 of Van Arsdol draft of October 1978). Why of all the things in the Van Arsdol study that are cited, was this crucial difference omitted? The finding is a central one in all of Cornelius work. In fact, much of what he offers as policy prescription hangs on the crucial assumption of his work that Mexican aliens only come here for short periods. To be sure, there are data problems in the Van Arsdol study but they are by no means as severe as are those in Cornelius's own works. It seems to me that this is a case of selective omission. This point is critical because the Van Arsdol study is not yet (and may never be) available to the general public. A reader must trust the review to give an adequate representation of all the findings -- not just those that are friendly to the author's notions.

4. There is very little warning given to the fact that there is much uncertainty in the literature of the meanings ascribed to the <sup>paucity</sup> ~~parity~~ of data that does exist. Again, I cite the Van Arsdol study. Here there is a curious problem. The conclusions reached by the Van Arsdol study team do not flow from the data that they present. This is the main reason that the study has yet to be made public. Hence, it may prove to be the case that the final report will differ from the draft that is referred to in the report. Let me elaborate. The Van Arsdol study is very sympathetic to the position of illegal aliens and tries to downplay their adverse impact despite their own findings to the contrary. Take the critical question as to the effectiveness of the

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The Van Arsdol study concluded that the deterrant efforts of the INS "have been far more successful than its officials imagine." Yet, in the same study they found that 73 percent of all of the survey group had never been apprehended by the INS. I say that if 73% of the people -- whose mean stay is 4.0 years--have never been apprehended, that is is no testimony to the effectiveness of the INS. To the contrary, it shows how weak the deterrance is. Unfortunately, Cornelius accepts the Van Arsdol conclusion (because it is supportive of his thesis in this case) in total (see p. 44 where he unquestionably accepts the Van Arsdol conclusion that INS is very effective). No warning is given the reader who may never see the Van Arsdol study that the study's own findings disprove its conclusions.

5. The author either does not understand the "green-card" phenomenon, or does not know the literature on the issue, or both. As a result the discussion of this critical dimension of institutional manipulation of Mexican immigrants is certainly confused and obviously inadequate. The author (p. 36) equates green carders and commuters and cites Warren as saying they number only 45,000. To begin with, a green carder is a holder of an I-151 card. While it is true that all commuters are "green carders", it is not true that all green carders are commuters. Moreover, the INS (based on actual records, not guesses) reported in 1975 that there were 4.2 million "green carders" (i.e., resident aliens) in the U. S. in 1975. Of this number 868,198 were held by persons from Mexico. A study by Ericson in 1970 (not cited by Cornelius) estimated that 70,000 "green carders were daily." Estimates--and that is all that is available to anyone--made by INS officials in San Antonio to me in 1978 place the number of commuting "green carders" at 100,000. There is no doubt that the number has increased over the years although it is more difficult to obtain a green card now than it was prior to the early 1960's. Since commuters account for about 10 percent of all employed persons in the border counties of the United States, they are a substantial force in border labor markets from California to Texas--especially if recognition is given to their occupational concentrations. Commuters.
  
6. The author chose to conclude that standard labor market analysis of supply and demand is nonsense or that, for some unexplained reason, does not apply to the influence of illegal aliens. He argues (p. 211) that "it is a basic tenet of the new, post-Keynesian economics theories of labor markets and unemployment holds that the U. S. labor market no longer operates as a "market" in the usual sense..." I am afraid that I simply do not understand what is being said here and I do not believe that this observation is sufficient to build his case. Keynesian economics is aggregate in its analysis and, at the aggregate level, no one can assert what the impact of illegal aliens on the labor market

but this is not the issue. All of the studies indicate that illegal aliens tend to be concentrated in selective occupations in selective industries in selective geographical areas. This is not a dispute with post-Keynesian analysis since I know of nothing in the economics literature that would say that a substantial increase in supply can have anything other than a depressing effect on wage increases. Now, I am not a person who believes that market forces alone can set wages. In fact, it is precisely because I am convinced of the power of institutional practices to influence wage determination that I am critical of prevailing immigration policy. It is because the prevailing policy is so inadequate in its operations that there is a depressing impact on wages. There is only one comprehensive study that has been made that has focused specifically on the impact of illegal or both employment and wages. That monograph by Walt Fogel (entitled Mexican Illegal Workers in the United States, Institute of Industrial Relations UCLA) is not even mentioned in the current review. One can disagree with Fogel but to omit any reference to this analysis in what claims to be a survey of the literature is either selective omission or else unawareness of a major work on the most critical policy questions of all. It is an important contribution of Fogel that he shifts the emphasis away from sole concern with the employment displacement question to inclusion of the wage impact. He shows that by ignoring the wage effects (which is a major defect of the survey under review and of all of the work by non-economists) that "nonemployed domestic workers are simply unwilling to accept the jobs filled by illegals" (Fogel, p. 104). He goes on to show that "in some markets the reason that domestic workers are not available is that the already available foreign workers establish a market wage which is too low to be attractive to domestic workers". (p. 105) Fogel then adds that to ignore the wage effect "is disingenuous, if not deceitful, to contend that foreign workers must be employed because domestic workers are not available". With that conclusion, I am in full accord.

assert ...

that "they can

It should be pointed out that the wage that prevails need not be the minimum wage. Any wage that is below the wage that would prevail in the absence of the presence of illegal aliens will produce the same result.

7. The study simply dismisses the findings of adverse impact as being purely speculative or "vocal" rather than based upon "empirical" findings. As I am one of the people who is the subject of this criticism, I do think a response is in order. To be sure, all of the works of labor economists who have claimed that illegal aliens adversely affect citizen workers are based on soft data. But nothing done by the author or cited

by the author as the counter evidence of others is based on anything better. Certainly, Piore's work is purely speculative and all of the work by Cornelius cannot possibly be defended as being "empirical" (see point # 1 above). All that exists in either camp is speculation. But there are differences. Marshall, Fogel, Schmidt, and myself, have spent many years living and working in areas in which illegal aliens are disproportionately found. All of us have, over the course of our careers, talked to hundreds of people who are in positions to know what aliens do to local labor markets. Our conclusions, independently reached, are that there are selective adverse impacts. They are not views that are recently arrived at or are the result of simply blue-sky, off-the-wall conjectures, or theoretical abstract conclusions. I do not expect anyone to be impressed by our knowledgeable assertions but, at the same time, I think it is grossly unfair to distort our views as is the case on p. 202. No where have either Marshall or myself ever stated that illegal immigration, if allowed to continue, will replicate "the labor market conditions of South Texas...throughout the country." What we have said is that the presence of illegal aliens will adversely affect selective occupations and selective industries in selective geographical areas. Where illegal immigration is substantial, we say, it will adversely affect citizen workers in low wage occupations the most. It is because of our sincere concern for improving opportunities for low wage workers that led us to be concerned with the issue in the first place. We do believe that it is low wage workers who compete with illegal aliens that bear the burden of the impact. The work of North and Houston would seem to add strong support to our beliefs. But Cornelius dismisses the N-H study as not being based on "empirical" findings (p. 212). The N-H data, is without question far superior to any contrary data that the author uses even though he calls his data "empirical".

This leads to the point that is still up in the air. Cornelius believes (as does Piore) that illegal aliens take jobs that citizens will not take. I defy him (or Piore) to name a single occupation in which illegal aliens work in which the vast majority of workers in that occupation are not citizen workers. It cannot be done. Whether it be farm workers, maids, laborers, hotel workers, bus boys, or what, the fact is that most of the workers in these occupations are citizens. This fact defies the assertion (for there is absolutely no empirical evidence to the contrary) that citizen workers are not willing to do the work. If there are difficulties in recruiting citizen workers, it is because the wages are depressed and are not competitive with alternative occupations. The study simply dismisses all of this on the assertion that citizens will not do certain jobs.

8. Also, I think it is unfair to imply that those favoring stronger border restrictions are part of a "nativist" movement. This is



an undeserving smear on the intentions of people who believe that the issue is real and harmful. The only policy issue involved here is whether our current-legal immigration is capable of doing what it claims to do. Obviously with illegal immigration being as sizeable as it is, the policy is in need of strengthening. This is not a call for a police state; it is only a plea to address what we perceive to be a real issue.

9. As for subject coverage, there is one critically important area that is omitted from discussion in the review. It is the future generation effects of continuing and growing numbers of illegal aliens in our society. It is a speculative topic that Piore, North, and myself have raised. It is not touched in the review except for a cynical reference to Marshall's fear of a new civil rights explosion in the late 1980s. I think this question is in urgent need of research. When I raised this issue at a meeting in Washington a month ago, Cornelius astonished everyone present with a reply that it is a non-issue since illegal aliens have for years been absorbed into our nation with no deleterious consequences. Holding such a view, it is not really surprising that he would ignore the issue in this review. But again, if this is supposed to be a state of the literature review, this issue should be mentioned regardless of whether the author thinks it worthy.

Obviously many of us are very worried about the long new consequences of an increasing number of rightless persons in our society. Cornelius is not because he believes most of the Mexican alien workers return to Mexico and that the residual will be absorbed as always. What this misses is the scale effect of increasing numbers of illegal aliens and the fact that there are increasingly hostile legislative actions in the form of denial of coverage of basic social legislation that were not present in earlier times. This issue needs to be examined regardless of the preconceptions of Cornelius.

10. Although I sympathize with the recommendation for localized impact studies, I would candidly say that such studies would be a waste of time and money. As Fogel has pointed out, to test the displacement issue it would be necessary to make estimates of number of illegal aliens employed, their locations, and knowledge of the industries which employ them. It would also require detailed studies of the domestic labor supply that is available to these same industries and locations. Such information on either group is not now available and, frankly put, is virtually impossible to obtain (Fogel, p. 126). We do not need local labor market impact studies in which a handful of people are interviewed, with absolutely no deference given to standard sampling techniques, and from which gross generalizations are drawn about the population.

In fact, the author accuses those of us who have spoken out on the adverse impact of illegal aliens of making "huge inferential leaps" in our work. He claims that there is no substitute for local impact studies. He even says that this is "perhaps the single most

important type of research which the Foundation could support in this field" (p. 29). If I thought that it were possible to do such a study, I would concur. But I am convinced from long years of anguish that it cannot be done on any reliable basis. What we do not need is anymore interview studies of 8-10 aliens in a city from which broad conclusions are drawn. There are so many other topics about which research is needed and which are feasible that I would strongly urge that this recommendation by Cornelius be ignored. The exception would be where a research design can be established in advance about which there is agreement that the results (whatever they are) can be accepted. Please do not fund any more self-anointed "empirical studies" that cannot meet the aforementioned criteria--especially if the researchers <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ unaware of the gross limitations of their work. Mis-information can be worse than no information.

### Concluding Observations

As is apparent, I do not find the review of illegal immigration from Mexico too satisfactory. It has assumed a massive undertaking to review the literature but it is deficient in its ability to objectively portray what is known. Perhaps it is impossible to address this issue in a neutral way but that does not mean that extremely weak studies should be relied upon to draw major conclusions or that counter evidence should be omitted or given unequal attention. I am shocked that when the works that are counter to the authors preconceptions are cited, the methodology of the studies is questioned; but when studies that support the authors notions are cited (including his own works) there is not a iota of methodological criticism. As I know all of the major studies that have been conducted, I can assure you that the methodological deficiencies on both sides of this issue are immense.

What is needed now is not local interviews with illegal aliens as this is a hopeless pursuit. But perhaps several concentrated studies in selected cities (e.g., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio and Houston) with business, union, civil rights, school, and government officials could be done about the prevalence and impact of illegal immigrants in the labor market. We do need a careful review of the mounting anti-alien social legislation and practices that are occurring at the federal, state, and local level for I am convinced that we are developing an institutionalized underclass in our society. I support preventative legislation to stem the flow of illegal aliens but I am adamantly opposed to punitive legislation for those who are here. We need to explore ways to find joint efforts to assist sending ~~governments~~ <sup>countries</sup> to reduce some of the "push" factors involved (e.g., tariff reductions, economic development assistance, family planning, or even the creation of a North American common market). I do think that a special study of the effects of illegal immigration on black workers is essential. Of necessity, this would have to focus upon selected cities--as Houston, New York, Miami, and New Orleans where there are both substantial black labor forces and numerous illegal aliens.

Also, I would hope that the red-herring about illegal aliens coming here to take social services would be buried. I do not know who

keeps raising this issue but I do not think it needs to be a topic for research. On the other hand the real issue is how many citizen workers are on welfare or UI recipients because of the fact that illegal aliens are holding jobs that they would take if the wage rates were more attractive and/or the jobs were available to them.

There are numerous other points that I would debate in this study. But they are minor when compared with the major deficiencies noted above. I hope the Foundation will maintain its interest in this critical issue despite the fact that it is very complex and controversial.