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Illegal Immigration: Research and Public Policy

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In a recent controversial article, a knowledgeable academician and public servant (John Dunlop) lamented the fact that increasingly social scientists are following rather than leading policymakers.¹ For variety of reasons, he argued, academicians want to be listened to and to have an influence on public policy. But by the nature of their theoretical predilections; their instance on statistical validity; and their preference for the neatness of the abstract world over the muckiness of the real world they are increasingly being precluded from assuming this role. One need only to ponder briefly the major policy questions in recent years that are perplexing our nation--issues as inflation; youth unemployment; energy utilization; environmental degradation; and dependance upon foreign fuel sources; the continuation of urban decline; equal employment opportunity, and efforts to assure equal educational opportunities--to see that the necessity to act has forced policymakers to make decisions without the benefit of careful research. In some instances, the policy responses have included the establishment of major new agencies--as The Department of Housing and Urban Development; The Department of Education; The Department of Energy; The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission--and the initiation of comprehensive policy actions--as public service employment, the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act, affirmative action, busing, deregulation of gas prices, the implementation of windfall tax proposals, and budget balancing. In these complex areas, the policymakers have not hesitated to act first and to make adjustments later in response to the hindsight findings of the research community if any such findings should prove to be useful.

Yet there is one major policy area in which this pattern does not exist: immigration reform. Despite the fact that the nation is now experiencing the largest aggregate immigration flows in its history (if both legal and illegal immigration are combined), the policymakers of the nation seem moribund to react. For despite the fact that there is a prima facie case that the existing immigration statutes of the United States are totally unenforceable, there has been no inclination to initiate reform. Instead, one constantly hears the plea that we need more research before we can do anything. Yet can anyone seriously believe that immigration reform is more difficult to address than are the problems of energy, unemployment, inflation, environmental pollution, equal employment opportunity, or urban decline? There has been little hesitation to move in these areas of perceived needs despite the fact that in none of these critical areas have research findings been used to prepare the way.

When one reviews the record of congressional hearings or reads the numerous journalistic accounts of the problem of illegal immigration, one immediately meets resistance to reform premised on an alleged lack of knowledge. For example, there has been the recurring obstacle to action due to debates over the numbers of persons involved. But this issue is merely a diversionary ploy. It cannot be a serious barrier to action. For by the very illegal nature of the movement, precise data will never be available. Only figures pertaining to apprehensions exist. These are suspect due to numerous duplications and biases that occur due to the way in which enforcement is carried out. Yet the staggering growth of apprehensions over the past decade with virtually no increase in enforcement capability convincingly indicates that the direction of change is upward.

Public discussion of illegal immigration should not be diverted by debates

over the actual numbers themselves. It makes little conceptual difference whether the stock of illegal immigrants is three, six, nine, or twelve million persons. The precise number is irrelevant if one concedes--as all available research indicates--that the number of persons involved is substantial and that the direction of change is toward annually increasing numbers. Estimates and anecdotes are all that is going to be available. But before one despairs that little action is justified because the data is so poor, it should be realized that this is also the case with respect to most of the major social problems of the day. Reliable data are unavailable about the size of energy supplies, local labor market conditions, crime, narcotics usage, health, and mental illness, to name only a few crucial subjects. In fact, in my review of social science issues, I have a basic law--Briggs's law if you will--it is that if good and reliable data exists about any major social problem, the problem must not really be important by definition. The lack of data is not an issue that has stopped comprehensive policy initiatives in other areas. It should not be a barrier to immigration reform. For even without any data, one should be mindful that the fundamental concern is to make our immigration system capable of accomplishing its stated goals regardless of how few or how many people are involved. The current system cannot begin to do this. This gross inadequacy is where the whole policy discussion should be focused. Attention should not be diverted to how many people there are who illegally enter this county but, rather, on what policy initiatives are needed to make the current system enforceable. Far too much research has been devoted to this academic question as to the numbers of illegal aliens. As a result, most of the voluminous literature on illegal immigration has often bogged down over debates over methodology. But while this issue is a logical topic of intellectual interest, it should be

seen as being an irrelevant concern to the present policy discussion.

Unfortunately, the policy debate over illegal immigration has been allowed to be shifted away from the primary issue of enforceability. Instead, it has tended to center on the secondary topic of the impact of illegal immigration. Without question the impact issue is important. But it is of far less significance than is the aforementioned enforceability issue. Nonetheless, because the impact issue has become the prominent issue of discussion, the topic needs to be addressed. Here there has been some limited research that should be useful to the policy making community.

Data on employment patterns of illegal immigrants are limited. Only two studies have made serious efforts to discern the employment patterns of illegal immigrants with any semblance of scientific reliability. One was a nationwide study made of apprehended illegal immigrants by David North and Marion Houston in 1976.² The second was a study made of unapprehended illegal immigrants in Los Angeles in 1978 by a research team from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).³ Both studies were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. Both studies do have their limitations but the conceptual weaknesses of both tend to be offsetting. The North and Houston study was composed entirely of apprehended illegal immigrants. Because a disproportionate number of apprehended Mexican illegal immigrants are employed in agriculture, the North and Houston study has a bias in the number of farm workers in their study. Conversely, the UCLA study was done entirely within the urban center of Los Angeles. As a result, it disproportionately underestimates the employment of Mexican illegal immigrants in agriculture.

Table 1 contains an occupational break-down of the employment patterns

Table 1. Employment Patterns of Illegal Immigrants from Two Research Studies. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor.

	Detention Site Study 1974-5A All Apprehended Aliens	Los Angeles Community Study 1972-1975B		
		Total	Previously Apprehended Aliens	Never Apprehended Aliens
<u>White Collar:</u>	5.4	10.5	6.6	12.1
Professional and Technical	1.6	4.3	2.7	5.0
Managers and Administrators	1.3	0.7	.8	.7
Salesworkers	1.1	1.9	.8	2.3
Clerical	1.4	3.6	2.3	4.1
<u>Blue Collar:</u>	55.2	73.0	79.0	70.4
Craft Workers	15.3	28.8	32.8	27.1
Operatives	25.1	31.8	31.1	32.1
Non-Farm Laborers	14.8	12.4	15.1	11.2
Service Workers	20.6	16.1	14.2	16.9
Farm Workers	18.8	.4	.2	.5
Total Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sources: ^ADavid S. North and Marion F. Houston, The Characteristics and Role of Illegal Aliens in the U.S. Labor Market: An Exploratory Study, Washington, D.C., Linton & Company, 1976, p. 104.

^BMaurice D. Van Arsdol Jr., Joan Moore, David Heer, Susan P. Haynie, Non-Apprehended and Apprehended Undocumented Residents in the Los Angeles Labor Market. Final Draft submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor under Research Contract No. 20-06-77-16, (October 1978), p. 95.

from both of these studies. Clearly, the illegal immigrants are concentrated in the unskilled occupations of farm workers, service workers, non-farm laborers as well as the semi-skilled occupations of operatives. A significant number are also in the skilled blue collar occupation of craft workers.

In comparison, Table 2 shows a distribution of the occupational patterns in the United States of all workers; of all Hispanic workers (i.e., Mexican origin, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and others of Spanish origin); all Mexican origin; and all black workers for 1977. The match between the data contained in Table 1 and that in Table 2 are almost identical. With respect to Chicanos (i.e., those persons of Mexican origin who are citizen workers), it is obvious that most Chicanos are employed disproportionately in exactly the same occupations as are most illegal immigrants. The employment pattern of Chicanos, in fact, better resembles the pattern of illegal immigrants than it does the distribution pattern of all U.S. workers. The fact that both Chicano workers and illegal immigrants are highly geographically concentrated in the same selected urban and rural labor markets of the five states of the Southwest makes it certain that the two groups are highly competitive in the same labor markets. These figures should dispel the popular myth that somehow illegal immigrants only take jobs that U.S. citizens shun. The data on blacks in Table 2 is only given as a reference to add to the fact that there are millions of citizen workers who are employed in the same occupations as are illegal immigrants. Black workers, of course, are not geographically concentrated in the same labor markets as are Chicanos or Mexican illegal immigrants. But, nonetheless, in a number of specific labor markets (e.g., in Los Angeles, San Antonio, Miami, and Houston) they do compete. Likewise, it is increasingly the case that black

Table 2. Percent Distribution of All Employed Persons in U.S.; All Employed Hispanic Persons, all Employed Mexican Origin Persons, and All Employed Black Persons, 1977.

	All U.S. Workers	All Hispanics	Mexican Origin	Black Workers
Total Employed	90,546,000	3,938,000	2,335,000	9,812,000
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Occupations:				
White Collar:	49.9	31.7	27.2	35.3
Professional and Technical	15.1	7.4	5.6	11.8
Managers and Admin.	10.7	5.6	4.9	4.8
Salesworkers	6.3	3.7	3.0	2.6
Clerical	17.8	15.0	13.7	16.1
Blue Collar:	33.3	46.6	49.3	37.6
Craft Workers	13.1	13.7	15.0	9.0
Operatives	11.4	20.9	20.4	15.1
Transport Operatives	3.8	4.1	4.6	5.2
Non-Farm Laborers	5.0	7.9	9.3	8.3
Service Workers	13.7	17.1	16.5	25.0
Farm Workers	3.0	4.4	6.9	2.2

Source: Morris Newman "A Profile of Hispanics in the U.S. Work Force," Monthly Labor Review (December 1978), pp. 3-13; and Employment and Training Report of the President, 1979 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979) pp 262-3.

workers in labor markets in the East and in the North-Central States are feeling the adverse effects of competition from illegal immigrants from nations other than Mexico.

As every economist knows, it is impossible to separate the employment effects from the wage effects whenever there is a change in the supply of labor.⁴ Hence, the presence of illegal immigrants would not only affect job opportunities but also affect wage levels in any given labor market. It is the wage effects that are part of the attractiveness of illegal immigrants to American employers. These employers are able to obtain workers at less cost than would be the case in their absence. This does not mean that most employers exploit these workers by paying wages below the federal minimum wage. Obviously, some malevolent employers do pay wages lower than legal wages but this is clearly the exception in the present era. The research by North and Houstoun have shown that the vast majority illegal immigrants receive at least the federal minimum wage and many receive much more.

Most of the wage exploitation that occurs is simply the result of the fact that illegal immigrants are available at wage rates that are lower than would be the case if the same employers had to hire only citizen workers. This situation, of course, can only be exacerbated by the additional supply of illegal immigrant workers. This is exactly the impact that the braceros had in the past. Research on the bracero program is limited but it is instructful about what happens in a specific labor market when the supply of labor is increased.⁵ For example, the detailed report of the President's Commission of Migratory Labor in 1952 found, with respect to wage levels for agricultural workers, "that wages by States

were inversely related to the supply of alien labor" as a result of the influx of braceros.⁶

All research shows that illegal immigration is highly concentrated with respect to the occupations and industries in which illegal immigrants concentrate. In addition, the research uniformly agrees that illegal immigrants are also geographically concentrated in the urban and rural labor markets of the Southwest and in a selected number of urban labor markets (usually where there are large numbers of citizens who share the same ethnic heritage) outside the Southwest. Thus, logical assertions about adverse employment and wage impacts on citizens as the result of increase in the number of illegal aliens do not require any specific empirical validations.⁷ Their contentions are simply the application of elementary economics. When the supply of anything increases in a specific market, the price (or wage) will be either depressed or moderated from what it would have been originally in the absence of the increase in supply. The principle is the same with respect to any increase in the supply of wheat, of oil, of elementary school teachers, of Ph.D.s in philosophy, or anything else. The responsibility for making the case that an increase in the supply of illegal immigrants does not have the same impact as anything else whose supply increases must be made by those persons who attempt to downplay the significance of the presence of large numbers of illegal immigrants. They must explain why the laws of supply and demand work in the aggregate for all other commodities and in all other labor markets but, for some unusual reason, they do not apply to the increase in illegal immigrants in the specific local labor markets where they are present.

Yet, surprisingly, a whole body of speculative writing has developed that does rest upon this specific contention. These scholars argue that there is no

adverse impact on citizens due to the presence of illegal immigrants in the local labor markets where they congregate. One scholar, Wayne Cornelius, argues that illegal aliens work in jobs that U.S. citizens will no longer take.⁸ Another Michael Piore, argues that American employers have a real need for workers to fill secondary labor market jobs (i.e., those jobs with low wage, low job security, few fringe benefits, few promotion opportunities, etc.) because minority workers, women, youth in this country will not do these types of jobs under any circumstances. If their views are true, then, of course, there is no real reason to be concerned about the labor market impact of a growing number of illegal immigrants. But even if they are right, there still are reasons to be concerned about illegal immigration. I will note the nature of these concerns shortly.

But, you will notice that I referred to the work of these scholars as being "speculative pieces". They are not research findings. There is not a single shred of empirical support provided by either of these writers to document this fundamental underpinning of their entire analysis. Piore's work is entirely based on assertions. He makes no pretense that there is an iota of empirical support for his views. Cornelius, however, has attempted to cloak his assertions with an impression that these are derived from some reliable empirical base. But in all of the work of Cornelius, there is almost no indication of where he gets his numbers. One of his studies was based entirely upon research done in Mexico (there were no interviews done in the U.S.).¹⁰ This is hardly a credible way to draw conclusions about impact in the United States. In a subsequent study he based his conclusions on interviews with 180 people in 10 separate labor markets.¹¹ Of these, half of the interviewees were illegal immigrants. The other half (90 interviews) were either legal immigrants from Mexico or in the process of

becoming so. That is an average of 18 interviews per city (or 9 illegal immigrants per locality). There is absolutely no indication as to how these 18 persons were selected. Certainly, they were not randomly selected. What we really have here is tabulated gossip that is being passed off as research.

But the refutation of these positions is so obvious that one can only be baffled that there is anyone who would listen to such fiction. I have repeatedly asked both Cornelius and Piore to name a single occupation or industry in the United States labor market in which the overwhelming majority of the workers now holding such jobs are not citizen workers. Be they maids, hotel workers, construction laborers, garment workers, or farm workers, or any others that could be cited, the vast majority of the persons doing these jobs in the United States today are citizen workers.

Recent studies by both George Johnson and Michael Wachter support the position that it is the low income citizen work force who bare the burden of the economic cost of illegal immigration.¹² For how can it be seriously argued that blacks, Chicanos, women and youths will not work in secondary labor market jobs when we have the most solid statistical work available to the nation's research community--namely, U.S. Census data--which shows that millions of these citizens do these very jobs everyday. It simply cannot be the type of work that makes illegal immigrants attractive to U.S. employers. Rather, it is the prevailing wage rates and working conditions in these specific labor markets that determine worker availability. Each year thousands of persons apply for the privilege of collecting garbage in San Francisco and New York City but they do not do so in many other communities. Why the difference in worker supply? It is because garbage collectors in these

two cities are very highly paid, they are unionized, and they enjoy liberal fringe benefit packages. The same can be said of applicants for apprenticeship positions in the building, machinist, and printing trade. Supply always exceeds demand although the jobs are often dirty, dangerous, and highly physical. Again, it is not the "type" of job but, rather, the fact that the associated economic benefits are good which explains why applicants seek such jobs in such great numbers. For the contentions of Piore, Cornelius, and their followers to be valid, they must be willing to argue that, no matter what the wages or benefits that are associated with certain occupations in the American economy there will be few citizen workers who will want to do the work. Certainly no one can seriously argue this point when it is regularly refuted by everyday practice.

Studies can show that in selected labor markets that there are employers who hire illegal immigrants and who simultaneously contend that U.S. citizens are increasingly difficult to find. But it is just as valid as a counter argument to say that it is precisely because of the presence of sizable numbers of illegal immigrants that citizen workers are more difficult to recruit. In other words, these employer arguments are self-fulfilling prophecies. It is because illegal immigrants crowd into certain industries that many low income citizen workers are often forced to withdraw. Few citizen workers can satisfactorily compete with illegal immigrants when the ground rules are who will work for the least pay and under the most arbitrary types of employment.

Cornelius also tries to minimize the impact of illegal aliens from Mexico by claiming that many aliens have no intention of staying in the United States and that many of them simply come only to work on a seasonal basis. Even if this is true, the fact remains that this does not minimize their impact. Because

a disproportionately high number of illegal immigrants do find work in seasonal jobs in agriculture, construction, and service industries does not negate the fact that these same jobs are seasonally available for citizen workers too. Hence, the impact on these industries is the same as if the illegal immigrants remained in the United States year round. Also, of course, there are many illegal immigrants from other countries that are more distant and less convenient than Mexico. It is very unlikely that these non-Mexican illegal immigrants return home in any significant numbers.

The essence of the rationale for the attractiveness of illegal immigrants is the uncontested fact in all research that illegal immigrants can be expected to be docile workers (relative to citizen workers). Citizen workers know that they have job entitlements. These entitlements include minimum wage protection but extend into a number of other areas such as overtime pay provisions, safety requirements, equal employment opportunity protection, and collective bargaining rights. It is these additional employee entitlements that an employer can often escape if foreign workers are available. For technically even though illegal immigrants may be covered by these work standards, their presence creates a situation in which these safeguards cannot be guaranteed in practice. For the enforcement mechanisms for most of these laws are based largely upon employee complaints. It is highly unlikely that illegal immigrants will know their rights. Even if they are so knowledgeable, they will probably be reluctant to do anything about abuses for fear of losing their jobs and, relative to the job alternatives available in their native lands, they may not even perceive the violations as being exploitive.

Thus, even if the wage rates that an employer must pay are identical for

illegal immigrants and for citizen workers, the illegal immigrant will be preferred. It is the knowledge that the illegal immigrants will be less likely to make demands for job rights or to join unions that makes them highly prized. Thus, it is these critical considerations that provide the crucial advantages of illegal immigrants for employers.

Related to the wage and employment issues is also the question of unemployment. Unemployment rates in the United States are the highest of any of the Western industrialized nations. Unemployment rates among Hispanics, blacks, women, and youth far exceed the national aggregate unemployment rates. Yet we as a nation continue to tolerate a growing number of illegal immigrants who compete for precisely the same secondary labor market jobs in which these citizen workers with the highest unemployment rates are already found. It can safely be said that if these illegal immigrants were doctors, professors, lawyers, or business executives that we would have immediate policy responses to stop such unfair competition. It is because illegal immigration benefits in the short run the privileged and only adversely affects the less fortunate and the least politically organized groups in American society that this flow is allowed to continue unchecked.

There is one area where Piore at least crosses over (but Cornelius does not) to support the conclusions of Briggs, Fogel, North, and Houstoun. That is with the regard to the fear that the nation is rapidly producing a sub-class of truly rightless workers within our society. Although technically able to avail themselves of many legal rights and protections, many illegal aliens do not now do so. In addition, they and their family members are being legislatively

excluded from many 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, and participation in public service employment and manpower training programs to individual state exclusions from unemployment compensation protection, Aid for Families with Dependant Children coverage, and even in some cases, from attending free public schools. At all levels, illegal aliens are denied political rights to vote and to hold political office. These are all signs of growing displeasure by the general populace of 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. This alone should be a sufficient fear to warrant a policy response.

Concluding Observations

The barriers to immigration reform are not due to the inadequacies of existing research. They are purely political. The socio-political factors that are associated with migration issue are so complex that they dictate that only a comprehensive approach could possibly offer hope for a solution. But comprehensive solutions run counter to the American political system. The fragmentation of congressional and executive branch decision-making units of the federal government inhibits the ability to address problems comprehensively. The only way to enact a comprehensive policy is if there is a strong coalition of supporters who are unified in their purpose. This is definitely not the present situation in the United States. The migration issue has divided all

established coalitions and it has thrown usually hostile groups into the same camps on both sides of the issue. At this juncture, there is no indication that any of the new coalitions have been able to develop the base of support needed to address the issue in a comprehensive way.

Also, it must be noted that a comprehensive solution affects numerous groups. A resolution of the illegal immigration issue will require a determination by our governments to force changes internally upon a multiple number of powerful groups who currently benefit from leaving things exactly as they are.

Hence, in this one area one can expect increasing amounts of research to study the obvious. There will be more congressional hearings to give the illusion that someone actually cares about reform. But, as the old adage goes "after all is said and done, more is said than done." If this saying were ever true, it is certainly true with regard to this issue.

Footnotes

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