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# The Undocumented Worker and Job Opportunities for Hispanics

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# 19

The Undocumented Worker and Job Opportunities  
for Hispanics

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.\*

I. Introduction

Although undocumented workers in the United States have existed since entry restrictions were imposed in the 1920's, the issue has become of national importance only since the 1960's. One reason for the interest in the topic now as opposed to earlier eras is the magnitude of their numbers now as compared to before. The "push" factors of rapid population growth, rural to urban migration, and technological displacement in Mexico and the Caribbean area in particular but also in other countries of Central and South America and Asia have accelerated in recent decades. A second causitive factor was the termination of the Bracero Program in 1964. The result was that hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers who had been exposed to the higher pay and broader array of job opportunities of the United States economy simply decided to keep coming. With them, undoubtedly, came many of their relatives and friends who had been told by the former braceros of the job opportunities.

But perhaps the major reason for the mounting concern over illegal immigration in the 1970's is that the United States is entering a new period in its historical evolution. It has been referred to as the "era of limits." The ways of the past cannot be extended into the future. The United States is no longer a nation of boundless resources, of endless

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frontiers, and of relatively scarce labor. Whether the topic be energy usage, resource conservation, equal employment opportunity, population growth, or immigration, current events and future prospects demand that sharp breaks be made from the way things were done in the past. The policy problems of the current age were never even conceived by our forefathers. The economic parameters that shape human action in this country have changed dramatically and so must the related public policy responses.

It is ironic that the time period in which national attention has turned to the topic of illegal immigration has also been the same period in which the nation's Hispanic population has begun its quest to assert its legitimate claim for equal economic opportunity. Some Hispanics--especially those of Mexican origin--are very suspicious of the attention being now given to the illegal immigration issue. They are mindful of the sorrowful re-patriation drive of the federal government in the 1930's. During that frightful period, rising unemployment was used as a justification for the forced removal of thousands of persons back to Mexico. These persons were made scapegoats for far more serious domestic policy shortcomings.

But, I feel, it is wrong to believe that these are the motivations of the present era. Rather, as I will try to show in this paper, it is precisely because there is concern for Hispanic economic welfare now when it was absent in the past that the issue of restricting illegal immigration is being pursued. In the past, public policy showed little interest in how it affected the Hispanic population. But because of the growing national awareness of the needs of Hispanics during the past decade, it is now vital that all factors that are barriers to Hispanic economic advancement be both identified and corrected.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that illegal immigration is a

factor that adversely affects economic opportunities for Hispanics in particular but also many other non-Hispanics as well. It is an issue about which all citizens who are genuinely concerned about equal economic opportunity have a legitimate interest.

## II. The Context of the Issue

As the nation's formal immigration policy has developed, it has passed through three distinct periods: no restriction of any kind (prior to 1888); numerical restriction based upon ethnic discrimination (from 1888 to 1965); and numerical restriction with ethnic equality (since 1965). With the coming of the legal and numerical restrictions, of course, has come the problem of illegal immigration.

The Immigration Act of 1965 ended the period of blatant discrimination that had been contained or condoned in all previous immigration statutes. Under the 1965 act the number of legal immigrants admitted to the United States has averaged about 400,000 persons a year (or twice the annual flow allowed prior to enactment). About 65 percent of the legal immigrants directly enter the labor force. The United States is today one of less than a half dozen nations in the world still accepting substantial numbers of legal immigrants. If not the only, it is certainly among the few admitting persons impartially with respect to race and ethnic background.

Yet the formal immigration system of the United States has been rendered a mockery. Illegal immigration is by far the major avenue of entry. In 1978, for instance, a total of 1,047,687 illegal aliens were apprehended by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the U.S. Department of Justice. This figure represents a 1,000 percent increase over the <sup>apprehension</sup> figure of 1965. To be sure, these apprehension figures include an element of double-counting (resulting from the fact that some persons are caught more

than once). On the other hand, the vast majority of illegal aliens are not caught. It is believed that for every person apprehended, four or five are not. When the annual number of legal immigrants is combined with conservative estimates of the annual number of illegal immigrants, it is apparent that the United States is in the throes of the largest infusion of immigrants in its history. But illegal immigration is the dominant entry route.

### III. Hispanic Employment Patterns

Although the Hispanic population is diverse in its ethnic composition and it is also becoming dispersed in its geographical locations, it still remains true that the Hispanic population is highly geographically concentrated relative to either the Anglo or black population. For instance, over 83 percent of the Chicano population remains in five states of the Southwest; the majority of the Puerto Rican population remain in a few urban labor markets of the northeast--the New York City area in particular. Thus, in aggregate terms, group economic welfare is tied very closely to job opportunities in a selected number of local labor markets.

Likewise, as can be seen from Table 1, the employment patterns of Hispanic workers are quite different from those of all workers in the labor force of the United States.

Table 1 contains an occupational comparison of all employed workers; all Hispanic workers; and a breakdown of the Hispanic group into Mexican Origin and Puerto Rican Origin categories. I have excluded Cuban Origin and other Hispanics. For this reason, the addition of the Mexican Origin and the Puerto Rican Origin does not total to equal the all Hispanic group.

The obvious patterns that are drawn from Table 1 are that Hispanic workers are disproportionately concentrated in the blue collar, service,

Table 1. Percent Distribution of All Employed Persons; All Employed Hispanic Persons; all Employed Mexican Origin Persons, and All Employed Puerto Rican Origin Persons, 1977

	All U.S. Workers	All Hispanics	Mexican Origin	Puerto Rican Origin
Total Employed	90,546,000	3,938,000	2,335,000	434,000
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Occupations:				
White Collar:	49.9	31.7	27.2	32.0
Professional and Technical	15.1	7.4	5.6	7.4
Managers and Admin.	10.7	5.6	4.9	4.1
Salesworkers	6.3	3.7	3.0	4.6
Clerical	17.8	15.0	13.7	15.9
Blue Collar:	33.3	46.6	49.3	48.1
Craft Workers	13.1	13.7	15.0	11.5
Operatives	11.4	20.9	20.4	26.0
Transport Operatives	3.8	4.1	4.6	3.9
Non-Farm Laborers	5.0	7.9	9.3	6.7
Service Workers	13.7	17.1	16.5	18.4
Farm Workers	3.0	4.4	6.9	1.6

Source: Morris Newman "A Profile of Hispanics in the U.S. Work Force," Monthly Labor Review (December 1978), pp. 3-13.

and farm worker occupations. The Mexican Origin and Puerto Rican Origin populations are even more concentrated in blue collar occupations than are all Hispanics. The Mexican Origin population/<sup>remain</sup>extremely over-represented in the farm worker occupations relative to the national figure.

#### IV. Employment Patterns of Illegal Immigrants

Although data on illegal immigrants is limited, there are two major studies that have made efforts to discern this information in a scientifically reliable manner. One is a nationwide study made of apprehended illegal immigrants by David North and Marion Houston in 1975. The other is a study made of unapprehended illegal immigrants in Los Angeles in 1978 by a research team from the University of California at Los Angeles. Both have their limitations but, in my estimation, they are the best studies available on this subject. Both studies were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.

The employment patterns of illegal immigrants from both studies are presented in Table 2. In the North-Houston study, 60 percent of the illegal aliens were Hispanics; in the UCLA study, 92 percent were.

The obvious employment patterns of illegal immigrants are that they too are employed disproportionately in blue collar occupations and service occupations. In the North and Houston nationwide study, farm workers represented a significant percentage of all apprehended illegal immigrants. The UCLA study, which was conducted entirely within the City of Los Angeles, understandably had few interviewees who were farm workers. It is for this reason also that the percentage of blue collar workers is higher in the UCLA study than the North-Houston study.



Table 2. Employment Patterns of Illegal Immigrants from Two Research Studies.

	Detention Site Study 1974 <sup>A</sup>	Los Angeles Community Study 1972-1975 <sup>B</sup>		
		Total	Previously Apprehended	Never Apprehended
<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:

<sup>A</sup>David S. North and Marion F. Houstoun, The Characteristics and Role of Illegal Aliens in the U.S. Labor Market: An Exploratory Study, Washington, D.C., Linton & Company, 1976, p. 104.

<sup>B</sup>Maurice D. Van Arsdol Jr., Joan Moore, David Heer, Susan Paulvir 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.

## V. The Employment Impact of Illegal Immigrants on Hispanics

Clearly when Table 1 and 2 are compared, the patterns are almost identical. Illegal immigrants are employed precisely in the same occupational categories as are Hispanics--especially those of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin. The comparison makes a prima facie case that illegal immigrants influence Hispanic job opportunities. It is not possible to prove that illegal immigrants displace Hispanics but it does strongly suggest<sup>that they</sup>/are strong competitors for the same occupations.

The effect of illegal immigrants is much more than simply that they take jobs. For perhaps even more important is the depressing effect that the presence of illegal immigrants has on wage levels. I am not one of those people who believes that economics is a precise science with laws that are universally and mechanistically operational. There is much room for human manipulation. On the other hand, there is general truth to the laws of supply and demand. When the supply of anything increases, the effect is either to reduce the price (or wage) or to restrict the rate of price (or wage) increase from what it would have been in the absence of the increase in supply. There simply cannot be any debate over this point. It is a truism.

In fact, it is precisely because of this phenomenon that the labor supply in the Southwest has historically been kept in surplus. Conscientious human efforts have been made to keep wages low, to keep incomes depressed, and to keep unions out by using waves of legal immigrants (from China, Japan, Mexico, and from Europe as well), braceros (from Mexico), green-carders (from Mexico), and now illegal aliens (mainly from Mexico but by no means exclusively so). The results of these<sup>conscientious</sup> efforts have been generally effective. These efforts have <sup>kept</sup> / the labor market for low wage workers in

a constant state of surplus. The results have been especially harmful on efforts to enhance the income and employment levels of the Chicano community of the Southwest.

The three poorest metropolitan areas in the nation are found in South Texas. Among the poorest rural counties in the United States are many in the Southwest. Unionism in the Southwest is hardly known outside of California, and even there unionism has had its organizational problems due to the availability of hordes of willing strikebreakers. The effect of past border policies in the Southwest has been to create a labor surplus throughout the region. It is precisely to end this institutional manipulation of the supply of labor that there is a need to control illegal immigration. It is the starting point for all efforts to provide rising income levels, to increase the holding power of educational institutions, to organize workers into unions if they so wish, and to provide hope to youngsters in the region that human capital investments do pay off.

In many of the local labor markets in which illegal immigrants are known to be present in substantial numbers, their presence explains why many employers justify the employment of illegal aliens by claiming that citizen workers cannot be found to do the work. Few citizen workers can compete with illegal immigrants when the competition depends upon who will work for the lowest pay and longest hours and accept the most arbitrary working conditions. Hence, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy for employers to hire illegal aliens and claim simultaneously that no citizen workers can be found to do the same work.

Hence, it is clear that illegal immigrants hurts all low income workers --not just low income Hispanics. Poor blacks, poor Anglos, poor Indians,

poor Puerto Ricans, and all other low income groups are adversely affected. Anyone seriously concerned with the problems of the poor of the nation must include an end to illegal immigration as part of any array of policies to improve economic opportunity. Let me be clear on this point: illegal immigration is not the total cause of the widespread economic disadvantage among the Hispanic population. But it certainly is a factor. Any effort to improve the life options to Hispanics must include a control of illegal immigration. Nothing else can hope to be effective until that regulation occurs.

In recent months, there has been an increasing effort made by some people to try 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. Aside from the fact that there is very little reliable data to know if this is correct or not, the fact remains that, even if it is true, 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 the jobs are seasonally available for citizen workers too. Hence, the impact of 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.

## VI. Related Considerations

### A. Creation of a Sub-class of Rightless Persons

The growing stock of illegal immigrants is creating 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 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 programs, AFDC programs, and even in some cases, from attending free public schools. At all levels, illegal aliens are denied political rights to vote. 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.

### B. Separating Political Friends

Perhaps the greatest political danger that is latent in the illegal immigration issue is the fact that the issue is rapidly separating many Hispanics defenders of illegal immigration from their traditional friends. In addition, it is uniting those defenders with groups who have historically opposed Hispanic advancement. There is an old adage that you can tell the nature of a person by the friends he or she associates with. The

same can often be said of policy issues. This issue has seen a sharp break of historic alliances. The trade union movement of this country is strongly in support of a policy of control of illegal immigrants. Black civil rights groups and groups associated with other ethnic groups are privately very critical of present policies. They know that blacks are severely affected by illegal immigration in the competition for entry level jobs. It is only a matter of time before the black community openly attacks the issue of illegal immigration and those people who try to defend it. The April 1979 issue of Ebony magazine with its article entitled "Illegal Aliens: Big Threat to Black Workers" is clearly a sign of this development. The Catholic Church is divided in its feelings as are many liberals in general. In fact, the only groups who are most consistently in support of the prevailing immigration anarchy are ranchers, low-wage employer groups, anti-union groups, and conservative politicians who have historically fought every effort of Hispanics to advance themselves. Certainly this should tell something about the merits of this issue.

Some short-run private-sector gains may be realized from the hiring and often the exploiting of illegal immigrants. But in the long run the presence of a growing number of workers (and their dependents) who are denied minimum political, legal, and job protections, who are under the constant fear of being detected, who work in the most competitive and least unionized sectors of the economy, and who are easily victimized by criminal elements cannot possibly be in the public interest. Over the two centuries of its existence, the United States has slowly developed numerous laws, programs, and institutions designed to reduce the magnitude of human cruelty and the incidence of economic uncertainty

for most of its citizens. For illegal immigrant workers, however, these benefits are often nonexistent. It would be self-deception to believe that this situation can continue without eventual dire consequences for all concerned.

### Concluding Observations

The renewed policy interest in the topic of illegal immigration in the 1970's has triggered a round of fierce and often emotional public debate. For this reason, it is difficult for many interested citizens, public officials, or scholars to gain an objective perspective on the issue. Attention is constantly distracted by peripheral issues away from what should be the central point of inquiry: recognition that the prevailing immigration policy of the United States is unenforceable. As a result, immigration is increasingly being perceived by many people as a threat to the welfare of the domestic labor force. The relevant issue for public concern is whether the immigration policy of the nation should remain impotent, or should the United States, like other nations of the world, implement an immigration policy that can accomplish its stated purposes?

In addition, as has been discussed in this paper, it would seem that Hispanic workers would benefit directly from the adoption of an effective immigration policy. Similarly, it is vital that the leadership of the Chicano community recognize the threat posed by the continuation of the de facto open border policy that now exists. It is the blue collar, service, and farm workers who are bearing the burden of competition with illegal aliens. It is also disproportionately youth, women, and racial minorities. It is imperative that the Chicano community not

isolate itself from other groups in our society who are dedicated to the achievement of a society of fully employed workers and to an end of both poverty and economic disadvantage within our midst.

It is also vital that this nation's legal immigration system not be endangered by reactions to the illegal alien problem. Presently, the legal immigration system of this country is more liberal and more impartial than that of any nation in the world. The present immigration reform efforts are designed simply to make the laws enforceable. These efforts are deserving of widespread support.