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POLICY BRIEF

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The Value of Undocumented Workers The Numbers Behind the U.S.-Mexico Immigration Debate

A study by the Pew Hispanic Center suggests that new immigration initiatives must find a balance between controlling labor flows and homeland security. The report shows immigrant workers provide most major sectors of the U.S. economy with valuable labor.

Migrant Workers Stabilize Economy

Although border security measures have become a significant part of bilateral talks between the U.S. and Mexico since September, the central immigration issues must still be addressed. A new report released by the Pew Hispanic Center¹ concludes that for nearly a century now the U.S. has relied on Mexican migrant workers to fill domestic labor shortages in nearly every area of U.S. commerce.

The composite report, authored by several professors from around the country, explains that from the early 1940s implementation of the "Bracero Program" to the most recent legalization program in 1986, history proves that U.S. economic progress and stability can be greatly enhanced by the contributions of immigrant labor.

Important Considerations

As President Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox continue discussions on the framework of a comprehensive immigration reform, researchers at the Pew Hispanic Center expect several major elements will be considered for any permanent improvements:

- A measure to permit undocumented workers currently living in the U.S. to gain legal immigrant status.
- A program to legalize the flow of future immigrants that is linked to employment.
- Separate measures that would legalize immigrant workers already in the U.S. and ensure a supply of workers in the future.

Still, even with all of these issues incorporated into an agreement, researchers agree that policymakers are faced with a greater dilemma of deciding if only Mexicans will be able to receive these reforms or if they will be extended to the undocumented of other nations.

Using a mid-range estimate of 7.8 million total undocumented workers in the U.S., Frank Bean, a demographer at the University of California-Irvine, estimates that 4.5 million are from Mexico while the remaining 3.3 million are of other nationalities. Professor Bean calculates that just by

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simply using these numbers, Mexico is the country that would benefit the most by any new immigration policies.

Eligibility

Another controversy that both governments must resolve, according to the report, is the eligibility criteria for an undocumented worker to qualify for a legalization program. Proposals of this nature often place emphasis on the duration of time an undocumented worker has resided in the U.S. These requirements are designed to determine to what extent the individual has established himself in the country.

Professor Bean estimates that if ten years of residency were required only 3.8 million would be eligible, and 5.8 million if at least five years were required. Bean's findings indicate that nearly a quarter of the undocumented population arrived within the last five years, which is perhaps an indicator of the U.S. economy's demand for workers during a period of rapid growth.

Urban Workers

As immigration discussions progress between the U.S. and Mexico, the authors of the report believe it is important to recognize the labor force breakdown by industry.

B. Lindsay Lowell, director of research at the Pew Hispanic Center, calculates that there are nearly 5 million undocumented workers in the U.S. economy. He believes that these estimates prove immigrant workers to be a very substantial presence in sectors where they are concentrated. More than a million unauthorized workers are employed in manufacturing and a similar number in the service industry. More than 600,000 work in construction and more than 700,000 in restaurants.

Total Undocumented Estimates

Of the 8 million undocumented workers living in the U.S., Professor Bean estimates that 58 percent are Mexican, 20 percent are from Central America and the remaining 20 percent from all other origins. Bean contributes the large percentage of Mexican residing in the U.S. to a large common border and a long history of Mexican migration to the U.S. The potential for growth among the relatively recent stream of immigrants from Central America is difficult to determine, according to Bean.

The Agricultural Laborforce

In the same study, agricultural labor economist Philip Martin estimates that from 1 to 1.4 million unauthorized workers are employed in the agricultural sector. His research also suggests that between 430,000 to 530,000 currently unauthorized workers would be eligible to participate in a guest worker program where participants are required between 90 to 120 days of agricultural work to qualify for permanent immigration status.

If specific legalization privileges were given to agricultural workers in a joint agreement, Martin concludes the need to fill jobs would be tremendous as many of the migrants would leave the agricultural sector in search of higher wages in other areas of the economy.

Conclusion

Recent statistics compiled by the Pew Hispanic Center suggest Mexico contributes more to the U.S. labor force than any other foreign country. With the creation of a new legalization program, nearly half of all undocumented workers could be eligible for legal status. The agriculture sector estimates that it will require approximately a half a million workers over the next decade to maintain its current rate of production.