

Illegal Immigration: Perceptions and Realities

May 2010

Until the 1990s, the presence of undocumented immigrants in Arizona was a familiar and generally tolerated fact. They were — and remain — an essential component of the state’s economy. However, the large influx of undocumented immigrants over the past 20 years has sharpened public attitudes and presented Arizona with serious public-policy challenges. Addressing these challenges in today’s highly charged atmosphere have been further complicated by the divisive effects of potent and oft-repeated assertions concerning illegal immigration. Some assertions are well founded, while others are either demonstratively false or not clearly established because data are not available to support or disprove them. Such claims fuel strong feelings on both sides and reduce the chances of an impartial collective resolution of this critical public-policy issue. Reviewing several of the more prominent assertions may help move Arizona’s debate onto a more productive path. Here are some of those assertions, followed by facts:

1. Virtually all Arizonans consider undocumented immigration a major threat.

Recent polls have reported that most Arizonans favor Arizona’s new law directing police to be more vigilant about finding undocumented immigrants. However, while a April 15 Rasmussen poll found that 70% of Arizonans said they favored legislation that “authorizes local police to stop and verify the immigration status of anyone they suspect of being an illegal immigrant,” support dropped to 55% in an April 27 poll.

Nearly two-thirds of Arizona voters (64%) said they favor the state’s toughened immigration rules, according to a *Rasmussen Reports* poll released on April 28. The poll found 30% of Arizonans against the law.

The Rasmussen report released on April 28 also stated, “most Arizona voters (57%) favor an immigration policy that welcomes all immigrants, ‘except national security threats, criminals, and those who would come here to live off our welfare system.’” Those who report themselves angry about the immigration situation, however, are more likely to be angry with the federal government (85%) than at immigrants (10%).

2. Most violent crime in Arizona is committed by undocumented immigrants.

The phrase “crimes by illegals” often mixes up four distinct issues: 1) Crimes committed among rival human smugglers and their clients; 2) Crimes committed by residents — legal and illegal — involved in drug trafficking between Mexico and Arizona; 3) General crimes committed by undocumented residents; and 4) The shocking violence erupting between rival drug cartels in Mexico. As Arizona state Sen. Ron Gould, R-Lake Havasu, said: “Essentially, we’ve given up American territory 60 miles from the border. People are living in no man’s land. They’re being attacked by foreign invaders. They’re being killed by drug smugglers.”¹ Few of these offenses target or harm Arizonans who are not themselves involved in drug or human smuggling, as the vast majority of undocumented people

come to Arizona to work and have no connection to drugs or criminals. It's also worth noting that Arizona is currently enjoying a low-crime period; the state's crime rate has been flat or dropping for years. In fact, a report by the Americas Majority Foundation found that "between 1999 and 2006, states like Arizona with high numbers of immigrants witnessed a greater percentage drop in all types of crime than the national average."²

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the actual numbers for the "crimes by illegals," when we look at crimes by immigrants in general, national studies have repeatedly concluded that immigrant men have *lower* rates of crime and incarceration than native-born residents.³ But what makes even this difficult to estimate is that Arizona crime data — like that of other states — seldom records suspects' immigration status.

3. Undocumented immigrants are entering Arizona in record numbers.

It is always difficult to make definitive statements about population movements, but the flow of undocumented immigrants into Arizona is thought to have peaked about 10 years ago, in the late 1990s or early 2000s. During the latter half of the 1990s, the average was perhaps 35,000 to 40,000 per year, dropping to around 25,000 annually in the first half of the 2000s. Most experts believe that migration into Arizona has actually dropped significantly — and perhaps essentially stopped — since the beginning of the national economic recession, and that hundreds of thousands of undocumented individuals have left Arizona as jobs disappeared.

The Office of Immigration Statistics of the Department of Homeland Security estimated there were 460,000 undocumented immigrants in Arizona in 2009. *The Arizona Republic* reported May 18: New U.S. Border Patrol statistics show arrests on the Arizona border were up 6 percent — by about 10,000 — from October to April, even as apprehension of illegals dropped 9 percent overall. The agency uses arrests to gauge the flow of migrants; there are no precise figures on the number of illegal crossings.

In 2007, Arizona passed the *Legal Arizona Workers Act*, which requires Arizona businesses to use a federal verification program to ensure they do not hire undocumented individuals.

4. Undocumented immigrants are a drain on Arizona's economy.

It's clear that undocumented immigrants create jobs and contribute to the economy through their labor, their purchase of goods and services and by their payment of sales and payroll taxes, user fees and other common revenue sources. In fact, the federal government gains billions of dollars annually in payroll taxes paid by undocumented workers who will never use the benefits.⁴

They also lower the costs of new housing, tourism, and food service.

But it's also clear that most undocumented residents are lower-income individuals and families that may rely heavily on public services, and that many send money back to their country of origin, rather than spending it in the Arizona economy. Studies of this issue have come down on both sides. It is probably impossible to measure this in a way that both sides would find conclusive. A 2008 report by the America's Majority Foundation found that states like Arizona with high numbers of immigrants also saw high growth rates in "Gross State Product, Personal Income, Per Capita Personal Income, Disposable Income, Per Capita Disposable Income, Median Household Income, and Median Per Capita Income" in the preceding decade.⁵

5. Arizona's prisons are bursting with undocumented immigrants.

The Arizona Department of Corrections reports that about 15% of inmates are “criminal aliens.” These are not individuals arrested due to their undocumented status, but rather are people imprisoned for “ordinary” crimes — with drug-related crimes comprising a third of inmates. There is no comparable statewide figure for jail populations, but a recent estimate from the Maricopa County Jail system — by far the state’s largest — is that about 19% of suspects are undocumented. The high cost of Arizona’s prison system (nearly \$1 billion per year) is not a function of illegal immigration but of the state’s longstanding place among the top 10 states in “incarceration rate,” meaning the number of prison inmates per 100,000 of state population. This, in turn, is largely a result of a series of changes in state law and policy such as mandatory sentencing, longer prison terms, the War on Drugs, and restrictions on release and the abolition of parole. The state’s prison growth has been substantial: In 1980, Arizona locked up 3,857 inmates; today there are more than 40,000 prisoners.

6. Stiffer laws and tougher border enforcement will rid Arizona of undocumented immigrants.

Stricter measures and more enforcement likely will drive some undocumented individuals from Arizona and discourage others from entering. That is probably already happening, as leaders in Arizona and Congress call for much greater effort to “secure the border.” However, most experts believe that the economic recession and Arizona’s massive loss of jobs are more important causes of what’s thought to be a recent large-scale exodus of undocumented residents. Since a peak in 2000 of more than 600,000 illegal crossers apprehended by border patrol agents, the number fell to 241,000 in 2009.

In any case, it’s hard to imagine any scenario in which most undocumented immigrants would permanently leave the state. Illegal immigration, after all, is far from a recent phenomenon. Arizona’s porous southern border has been a fact of life and a mainstay of the state’s economy for generations. Over the decades, Arizonans have generally welcomed undocumented people as customers and workers. Some undocumented immigrants became citizens while others did not, resulting in today’s complex patchwork of “blended” families — citizens, legal non-citizens, and undocumented immigrants living together in the same families and households. Many of those households contain children who are U.S. citizens, having been born here.

In 2006, 471,000 Arizonans under age 18 had at least one foreign-born parent.

--U.S. Census Bureau

A look to the future suggests that immigrants and their descendants will become an even more essential part of the state’s population. Nearly one in every three Arizona children is an immigrant or a native-born son or daughter of immigrants; an estimated 61% of Arizona children age 6 and under have foreign-born parents.

7. Undocumented immigrants flood Arizona’s public health system.

Undocumented immigrants have been ineligible to vote or to receive any public services — including indigent coverage provided under the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) — since 2004. While undocumented people — and everybody else — legally must be treated at hospital emergency rooms, such treatment is partially reimbursed by the federal government.

The Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association says that state institutions lose about \$24 million annually, after federal compensation, for treating undocumented immigrants.⁶ Though a sizable number, that sum is only a small proportion (about 6 percent) of the total annual cost to Arizona

hospitals of \$392 million for treatment of all uninsured and underinsured patients. Some national studies have indicated that undocumented immigrants even use ER services proportionately less often than native-born people.

8. Undocumented immigrants hurt native-born Americans by taking jobs and depressed wages.

Undocumented immigrants are overrepresented among low-skilled American workers in part because our native population is aging. The upcoming wave of retirements by baby boomers means that immigration is likely to be the only source of growth among workers 25 to 55 in the decades ahead. These younger immigrant workers will be paying taxes to support Social Security and Medicare. On the other hand, an influx of new workers does tend to push wages down and, as the Center for Immigration Studies notes, this primarily affects the lowest-skilled native workers. In addition, because undocumented immigrants tend to prompt low incomes, their tax payments also tend to be low.⁷

But immigration also stimulates growth by creating new consumers, entrepreneurs and investors. A recent report from the Migration Policy Institute⁸ concluded that “illegal immigration’s overall impact on the U.S. economy is small,” with low-skilled native workers being the “clearest losers,” while employers and the immigrants themselves gain the most benefits. Undocumented immigrants are likely to be overrepresented in those jobs less attractive to documented and citizen workers (seasonal agricultural work, for instance), but competition among such jobs may increase during fiscal downturns like the one Arizona is currently experiencing.

9. The influx of children of undocumented immigrants is overwhelming Arizona’s public schools.

The number of undocumented children in schools is not currently counted in Arizona. A bill sponsored by state Sen. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, was introduced March 31, requiring the Department of Education to collect and report data on students enrolled in Arizona school districts but cannot demonstrate proof of legal U.S. residence. The bill was held up in the House. Whatever

In a 1982 case, *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Texas had unlawfully withheld state funds for educating children who had not been legally admitted to the United States. A 5-to-4 majority found that this policy was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment.

the number, children of undocumented immigrants *do* add to the state’s student population and thus its education costs, but there is no evidence that the system is overwhelmed.

The Casey Foundation, Urban Institute, and Pew Hispanic Center report that nationally there are 11.9 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Of the approximately 5 million children of undocumented immigrants, an estimated 1.5 million also are undocumented, but more than 3 million are U.S. citizens (leaving approximately half a million with other legal

status). They also report that almost 47 percent of undocumented households are comprised of a couple and children. Most of the parents of undocumented children help pay school costs through taxes and user fees. Children of undocumented parents may also add to the cost of English Language Learning programs, but the programs as a whole only include about 150,000 students out of a total state school population of more than a million.

¹ KNAU Arizona Public Radio broadcast, 4/20/10

<http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/knau/news.newsmain/article/0/0/1638971/Southwest.Book.Reviews/State.Senators.Send.Sweeping.Immigration.Mesaure.to.Governor.Brewer>

²Richard Nadler, *Immigration and the Wealth of States*, Americas Majority Foundation, 2008, <http://www.amermaj.com/ImmigrationandWealth.pdf>

³ For example, Rubén G. Rumbaut, et al., *Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality: Imprisonment Among First- and Second-Generation Young Men*, Migration Policy Institute, 2006, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=403>

⁴ Eduardo Porter, "Immigrants Pad Books, Balance Social Security," *New York Times*, April 10, 2005

⁵ Richard Nadler, *Immigration and the Wealth of States*, Americas Majority Foundation, 2008, <http://www.amermaj.com/ImmigrationandWealth.pdf>

⁶ Conversation with Kristin Davis, Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association, May 12, 2010

⁷ Steve Camarota, *Immigration, Both Legal and Illegal, Puts Huge Strain on the Country*, Center for Immigration Studies, 2007, <http://www.cis.org/node/464>

⁸ Gordon Hanson, *The Economics and Policy of Illegal Immigration in the United States*, Migration Policy Institute, 2009, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Hanson-Dec09.pdf>