



An Over-Hyped Immigration Crisis

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Immigration issues sharply divide Republicans and Democrats, and efforts to enact reforms large or small have reached a stalemate in Congress. This leaves the door open to political posturing and media over-dramatizations of immigration problems, just as politicians gear up for closely fought 2014 elections and the looming presidential contest in 2016. Reactions to the latest "crisis" occasioned by the arrival of unaccompanied minors from Central America have unnecessarily heightened fears. These reactions are colored by the recent racialized history of immigration into the United States.

Present-Day Immigration in Perspective

Immigration in recent decades has in some ways been a return to America's past. The most recent estimates from the U.S. Census peg the total U.S. foreign-born population at 13.8%, compared to 14.9% a century ago. Yet of course the origins and legal status of contemporary migrants are different. Thanks to a legal shift in 1965, five times as many U.S. immigrants today come from Mexico than from China, the second-highest country of origin. In 1910 most immigrants were from various parts of Europe. Scholars have learned that the rise of immigration from Asia and Latin America rather than Europe has shifted public perceptions of the scope and impact of the newcomer population.

The governmental context has changed as well. Since 1965, over a dozen major pieces of immigration legislation have passed, creating a federal regulatory system that is slow, complicated, and understaffed. Even for would-be immigrants who understand the various steps to enter the country legally and have the necessary documents to apply for an entrance visa, there are often long wait times and expensive application fees; and delays also plague decisions about removals of undocumented immigrants.

The system has been further overwhelmed by recent surges of unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America, because back in 2008, then-President George W. Bush signed into law the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. That law guarantees minors access to an immigration judge to rule whether they should be returned to home countries. Immigrant minors are to be placed with families or friends while awaiting hearings.

Rampant Myths

Immigrants, especially the undocumented, have been publicly scapegoated, falsely blamed for problems ranging from violent crime to endangered public health and abuses in the welfare system. Recent work I have done with Maria Chávez and Melissa Michelson looking at immigrants in California, Oregon, Texas and Washington reveals that undocumented youth – especially those brought to the United States as children, the so-called "DREAMers" – continue to study, work, and contribute to their communities while being keenly aware

of the limitations they face as a result of their legal status. The young people we interviewed are not violent felons, did not bring contagious disease with them into the country, and do not qualify for welfare. Additional studies by various scholars, including me, reveal that immigrant children and the children of immigrants are steadily moving into mainstream U.S. society. They speak English, volunteer for the military, and participate constructively in many other ways.

More generally, undocumented immigrants cannot abuse welfare programs. Since 1996, they have been ineligible for temporary financial assistance, Food Stamps, Medicaid, and most other public benefits. Apart from pre-natal care, they do not qualify for government-provided medical insurance or treatment, except in emergencies. What is more, undocumented immigrants pay much more in taxes than they collect from any public benefits; by one estimate, immigrants earn about \$240 billion a year and pay about \$90 billion annually in taxes, while using only about \$5 billion in public benefits. Other data show that immigrant tax payments total \$20 to \$30 billion more than the amount of government services they use. Many undocumented immigrants also pay more income tax than they owe because they are afraid to file for refunds.

Harmful Overreactions to the Latest Border Issue

Some claim that recent influxes of unaccompanied immigrant minors are due to a breakdown of border security and President Obama's 2012 suspension of the threat of deportation for young undocumented immigrants brought to this country years ago, before 2007. But in fact, the minors currently arriving just turn themselves in at the border, because they are trying to get away from escalating violence in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. More people were killed per capita in El Salvador over the last few years than during the Iraq war from 2004 to 2009. According to the United Nations, Honduras has the world's highest murder rate. According to the Pew Research Center children 12 and under are the fastest growing group of unaccompanied minors arriving at the southern U.S. border, and most Americans understand that these children are fleeing violence and thus deserve refuge. In a late July poll from the Public Religion Research Institute, 69 percent of respondents said the children should be allowed to stay as refugees "if authorities determine it is not safe for them to return to their home country."

Official and highly publicized reactions to the arriving young refugees have been mixed. Although many communities and citizens have mobilized to help the vulnerable new arrivals, the President has proposed to fast-track deportation hearings; Congress has failed to respond in any constructive way; and Texas Governor Rick Perry has deployed 1,000 National Guard troops to the border area (despite the fact that they lack both training and any clear-cut mission). Protests and demonstrations, often anti-immigrant, have occurred in some places where unaccompanied minors are held; and a few militia groups have sent armed men to the border.

The upshot has been to arouse misplaced fears. A recent survey Bill Donner and I did of 614 Rio Grande Valley residents in Hidalgo and Cameron counties along the Texas-Mexico border revealed that almost 60 percent feel that the Valley is less safe today than it was five years ago – even though border cities have some of the lowest crime rates in the United States. Overheated political rhetoric, coupled with military and militia buildups, have stoked unnecessary popular fears – and all signs are that the same is true for Americans everywhere, not just at the border.

Read more in Maria Chavez, Jessica Lavariega Monforti, and Melissa R. Michelson, *Living the Dream* (Paradigm Press, 2014).