



How to Make Sure Immigration Reform Works for Everyone

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As Washington DC focuses on the legislative endgame for immigration reform, scholars and citizens would do well to think ahead to helping immigrants participate fully in a growing economy and a vibrant democracy. Recently, my colleagues and I at the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California issued a report laying out possibilities and challenges. The lessons we draw for California are surely applicable elsewhere.

The immigration reform bill passed by the U.S. Senate in June 2013 includes many important parts of a workable comprehensive reform – such as a roadmap to citizenship for millions of currently undocumented residents, shifts in future flows of immigrants to better meet economic demands, and changes in immigration enforcement at the border and in workplaces. But this bill and others currently being debated overemphasize militarized border fortifications and do not do enough to support ongoing efforts to draw newly legalized immigrants into mainstream American life. We know what needs to be done to foster healthy immigrant integration, and the overall economic benefits of reform can cover the cost.

The Best Ways to Welcome Immigrants

First, let's be clear about what "immigrant integration" means. It is *not* about forcing immigrants to give up their values or culturally distinctive ways of life. Conservative hard-liners may think that way, but constructive integration means helping individuals and families to get ahead economically and encouraging newcomers and current citizens to cooperate – for example, in community associations, churches, and public programs. Integration is a two-way process. Undocumented as well as documented immigrants already make significant contributions to their regions, and many undocumented adults are parents to children who are already American citizens. In California, one-sixth of all children have one or more undocumented parents. Ramped up efforts at constructive integration will therefore not only help individual immigrants contribute fully to the economy; such efforts will help families raise many of our future citizens.

Not just after reform legislation passes, but starting right now, here are some of the steps we should take:

- **Add more classes for learning English.** English-language skills improve the productivity of immigrant workers. But analyses from the Migration Policy Institute show that demand exceeds supply in California. Most immigrants want to learn English, but often cannot get access to classes at the right times and places.
- **Provide affordable opportunities for adult education.** Many currently undocumented immigrants have low levels of education. For example, two-thirds of them in California have not graduated from high school. Improving adult education will require reforms and new resources for community colleges

that are often overwhelmed and ineffective.

- **Extend health benefits.** Places like Santa Clara County have it right – they offer health care regardless of immigration status. Legislation under discussion in Congress would deny federally funded health benefits to currently undocumented immigrants, even if they gain legal status under reform. But states or localities may want to step in, because immigrants without health coverage, especially those with low incomes, will be vulnerable to bankruptcy and dire health problems that can spill over to others in their communities.
- **Encourage parents to be involved with schools.** Parental engagement with schools helps children to succeed, and research shows that, if given opportunities, even low-income undocumented parents who have difficulty speaking English make the effort to engage with teachers and school officials. According to sociologist Veronica Terriquez, immigrant mothers in Los Angeles are just as involved as native mothers from similar backgrounds.
- **Help legal immigrants become citizens.** Current reform discussions focus on the undocumented, but the United States has over eight million documented immigrant residents who have not yet become naturalized citizens. Encouraging them to apply and clearing backlogs will ease the administrative burden of handling future applicants who get on a new path to citizenship. Federal fees should be reduced, while local authorities and community organizations can encourage newcomers and help with paperwork.

Who Should Act – And Where Will the Money Come From?

National action will be necessary, yet integrating immigrants is also an important local challenge. The federal bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services will need new funding and personnel. In addition, localities and states should build new capacities to coordinate public and nonprofit services and assess future needs. An example is the Office of New Americans Policy and Advocacy already operating in the state of Illinois. Legislation has been introduced to create a similar state-level body in California, where some local jurisdictions like Santa Clara County and the city of Los Angeles are already taking organized action.

Adequate new services will cost money, but reform itself will bring economic benefits. Creating a provisional legal status and a pathway to citizenship could boost immigrant income by \$4.6 to \$7.9 billion a year in California alone, and this estimate does not include indirect economic benefits. Such future boosts to the economy are part of the reason the Congressional Budget Office estimates that immigration reforms similar to those passed by the Senate will reduce the federal deficit by nearly a trillion dollars over 20 years. The economic and fiscal benefits can be maximized if Congress authorizes funding to help immigrant integration, rather than spending all of the expected gains on border drones and a militarized southwestern frontier.

In short, now is the time to think ahead and envisage the benefits we can all reap from comprehensive immigration reforms that are properly designed. Considering future challenges and setting immigration reform on the right course – to include strong integration efforts – can ensure a brighter future for all Americans, newcomers and current citizens alike.

Read more in Manuel Pastor and Enrico Marcelli (with Vanessa Carter and Jared Sanchez), [“What’s at Stake for the State: Undocumented Californians, Immigration Reform, and Our Future Together,”](#) Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, May 2013.