

Hordes of 'Illegals'? No.

By Douglas S. Massey

PRINCETON, N.J. — Many people believe that the United States is being silently invaded by millions of illegal aliens who take away jobs and burden taxpayers.

While the clandestine nature of illegal immigration largely precludes an objective assessment of its impact on American society, there are a few facts that may serve as a guide to the thoughtful citizen trying to make sense of this complex issue.

How many illegal aliens are there? Speculation on their numbers ranges as high as 12 million nationwide, and up to two million in New York City. Such figures are widely quoted but scientifically indefensible because of dubious methods and questionable assumptions.

A common mistake is made in counting only those who enter the country illegally while ignoring the many who subsequently leave.

The best demographic evidence suggests that there may be about four million illegal aliens living in the United States at any time. Furthermore, recent work indicates that this population has not greatly increased since the early 1970's. However, while authorities agree that there are concentrations of illegal aliens in many cities, there are no adequate estimates for individual urban areas and no defensible methods for obtaining such figures.

A common misconception is that illegal aliens are a drain on taxpayers, making use of social services while paying no taxes.

A growing body of research indicates that this is simply not the case. Whether we consider welfare, food stamps, education, unemployment compensation or health care, all studies indicate that illegal aliens are very unlikely to use social services. Utilization rates are typically on the order of 5 percent or less.

On the other hand, illegal aliens are very likely to be taxpayers. Studies have consistently shown that most illegal aliens — between 65 percent and 90 percent of those studied — have Social Security and income taxes withheld from their paychecks; they necessarily pay state and local taxes in the form of sales and property taxes. Far from ripping off the system, illegal aliens are more likely to be subsidizing it.

It is often alleged that American workers are being displaced by illegal aliens who are willing to work for lower wages and under less-favorable conditions than American citizens. This emotional issue has been seized upon by some public officials who point to the presence of large numbers of illegal aliens as a cause of unemployment. However, it is unreasonable to suppose that unemployment would be eliminated — or even seriously reduced — if illegal aliens were somehow to be removed from the labor force. Some economists would argue that the effect of such a removal would be a loss of jobs to American citizens. Illegal aliens typically work in menial low-paying positions shunned by citizens, who often work in supervisory and administrative positions in the same firms. If illegal aliens were unavailable, it is argued, these firms would either leave the country or go out of business, taking the supervisory and administrative positions held by American citizens with them.

The point is not that illegal aliens represent a net loss or net gain for American workers but that it is a complicated question for which there is no clear and easy answer. Blaming illegal aliens for current levels of unemployment is scapegoating.

As for the frequent blurring of the distinction between foreignness and illegality, just because someone is poor, foreign, and speaks little English does not mean that person is an illegal alien — a fact sometimes overlooked by school, hospital and welfare officials faced with chronic budget deficits.

The muddling of foreignness with illegality can be particularly misleading when applied to children. Many people decry the expenditure of public money on services to children of ille-

gal aliens. What is overlooked is that many of these children were born here and are thus American citizens with a right to such services.

Because statements made in connection with illegal aliens inevitably reflect back upon other members of the ethnic groups to which they belong, public officials and journalists have an obligation to make sure of their facts before speaking out.

At this time, our best evidence suggests that the facts are these: The United States is not being inundated by an out-of-control "invasion" of illegal immigrants; nor is it likely that illegal aliens represent a burden to taxpayers; nor is there any clear evidence to indicate that, on balance, illegal aliens displace American workers.

Bearing these points in mind will help put the issue of illegal immigration into a reasoned perspective.

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