

# Labor and Immigration

Exploring the push pull of immigration

*He [the king of Egypt] said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. Exodus 1:9-11a*

## Information:

Immigrants, documented and undocumented, impact the labor market in the US and the US labor market impacts the rates of immigration which affect the price of goods and services in the US. The taxes that immigrants pay contribute to the overall economy of the US including social programs. Further, immigrants are more likely than US born individuals to open their own businesses and this supports US job creation. Many immigrants are highly skilled and bring technical expertise that furthers US scientific and technological innovations.

While there are a myriad of factors that contribute to migration, for many there is no greater push/pull factor than economics. Immigrants who leave home in search of a better future for their families in the US contribute greatly to the labor force in the US. They are also able to provide for their families in ways that are not possible in their countries where often unemployment rates are high and wages low. For the US, there are benefits to having a young healthy and talented workforce especially when there has been little investment in their education.

Trade policies factor significantly into the economic situation of both the "sending" and "receiving" countries of immigrants. Since NAFTA went into effect in 1994, there has been a tripling of US/Mexico trade. At the same time there was a dramatic increase in unauthorized immigration from Mexico. An average of 260,000 undocumented immigrants coming each year during 1990-1994 increased

to approximately 485,000 per year in 2000-2004.<sup>1</sup>

This provided a source of cheap and flexible labor in the US that was not available due to the high rates of education in the US. Additionally, research shows that foreign born workers are not a substitute for US workers, rather their roles are complimentary.<sup>2</sup> Low skilled foreign workers are concentrated in agricultural and personal service jobs, while US born workers fill positions in mining and manufacturing.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is not just low skilled immigrants we come to the US. Until recently the percentage of immigrants holding a bachelor's or other advanced degree was greater than the percentage of US born population but today both are about 25%. This population has helped increase the wage of US workers with at least a high school diploma by 1.5% since 1994.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Immigration Policy Center, *In Focus* February 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Immigration Policy Center, *In Focus* March 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Immigration Policy Center, *In Focus* March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Immigration Policy Center, *In Focus* March 2006.

**Insight:**

Since 1994 the US has exported \$2.5 billion of corn, which is subsidized by the US government at a cost of \$10.5 billion annually, 10 times the total Mexican agricultural budget.<sup>5</sup> As a result of the flood of cheap American corn, sold below production costs, Mexican farmers have not been able to compete and 1.7 million of them have been displaced.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that the collapse of the Mexican corn production preceded the marked increase of immigration to the US from Mexico.

Foreign born workers provide a benefit to the aging and declining US born workforce. In the coming years the baby boom generation, 77 million Americans, will begin to retire and birth rates in the US continue to decline. This has resulted in fewer workers contributing to Social Security and Medicare trust funds; programs to which immigrants contribute.

While there is a connection between labor and immigration, it is unfortunate that US policy does not reflect labor demands in determining caps on work visas. Demand for both high and low skilled worker visas far exceeds availability and American businesses are suffering as a result. For example: Ski resorts have shut down early because of the lack of workers; a grower in South Texas lost \$250,000 in income because there were no workers to harvest his cabbage; and Bill Gates testified to congress last year that Microsoft could not fill 3,000 jobs because of the lack of skilled workers.

**Invitation to Act:**

Contact the Obama administration using one of the means suggested at this website, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/CONTACT/>, and urge President Obama to make Comprehensive Immigration Reform a national priority.

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<sup>5</sup> The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, [http://www.nilc.org/DC\\_Conf/dc-conf2007/wrkshp\\_materials/a-4\\_NNIRPowerPoint.pdf](http://www.nilc.org/DC_Conf/dc-conf2007/wrkshp_materials/a-4_NNIRPowerPoint.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/07/31/MNGIVK8BHP1.DTL>

Contact your elected officials and encourage them to co-sponsor and support AgJOBS (S1038 and HR2414). Write a letter or call congressional offices to voice your support for farm workers so that they may have a legal pathway to work in order to protect their health and safety as well as continue to provide US growers a stable source of labor.

**Inquire:**

The king of Egypt was at once nervous that the Israelites had become too numerous and that they would leave his land. He was mindful of the contribution they made to his culture but fearful of their difference.

In our communities we can do more to recognize the contributions of immigrants to innovations and the labor force. While some immigrants may want to live and work in the US, many would like to simply work here while traveling freely across the border to be with their families at home. Join in prayer for the families separated and for workers everywhere.

*Creator God you made us each different yet all bearing your image. As we work to live in community with our brothers and sisters, help us discern that image in those around us as further truth about your love for us. Help us not be fearful of change and difference but to love with reckless abandon, just as you do. We ask that you protect workers coming to this country and nurture their bodies as they labor and hold close their dreams for their families. Help us learn to be advocates and allies in order to bring justice to all. We ask for these things in Christ's name. Amen.*

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