

Should America's illegal immigrants be offered legal status?

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Americans are justifiably frustrated that 11 million unauthorized immigrants now live in the United States. Yet the majority of them would have preferred to come legally; there was simply no way under current immigration laws. Moreover, most of them are working, paying taxes, and buying US goods. Other than lacking legal status, most are law-abiding residents. Many are married to US citizens, with children who are citizens.

The problem is that they are often willing to accept low wages and poor working conditions, which creates unfair competition for US workers and gives unscrupulous employers an unfair advantage over law-abiding employers.

We could continue on the same path we have pursued for two decades: spending more money on enforcement and passing increasingly harsh laws in an attempt to drive unauthorized immigrants out. But despite the billions of dollars we've spent building walls, hiring border patrol agents, and detaining and deporting hundreds of thousands, the unauthorized population hasn't decreased significantly.

Instead of "enforcement only," we should offer unauthorized immigrants a chance to come forward, register, pay a fine, learn English, pass background checks, and legalize their status.

Legalizing them would inject a new level of certainty into their lives, allowing them to invest more in themselves and their communities. Legalized immigrants will earn more, pay more taxes, consume more, buy houses, start businesses, and contribute more to the economy.

Americans want real solutions to the problem of unauthorized immigration that are practical and fair. Enforcement alone has failed. We need comprehensive immigration reform that includes a legalization program.

- Michele Waslin, senior policy analyst, American Immigration Council's Immigration Policy Center

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