

New argument that immigrant reform vital to economic recovery

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Critics of undocumented immigration and of granting a path to citizenship to the undocumented currently living in this country often argue that immigrants are a drain on our country's resources, and the U.S. can simply not afford to continue to support an illicit population that thrives off of government-funded services and programs. However, an ever-increasing number of studies show that the cost of immigrants to this country is wildly inflated, and in fact the contributions the immigrant population makes to the U.S. outweigh their expense.

On Sunday, Nashville newspaper The Tennessean published an op/ed by Ted Rayburn which put a new spin on the argument that reforming the U.S. immigration system would benefit the economy. Rayburn argues that in an increasingly competitive global market society, the U.S. is in danger of falling behind, as the world's highly skilled workers are moving en masse to countries with growing economies, such as Brazil and India. He concludes that if the U.S. does not revise its immigration laws to allow these skilled individuals to legally come to the U.S. and work, we will be at a perpetual international disadvantage.

The cogent arguments made by Rayburn regarding the importance of skilled immigrant labor in this country, however, does not preclude the similarly vital importance of unskilled immigrant laborers to the U.S. economy.

In Arizona, recent changes in the state's immigration laws have illustrated the vital necessity of flexible migrant labor to local industry. As this labor has become increasingly scarce since the passage of SB 1070, many Arizona industries, most notably agriculture, have experienced the negative effects of a worker shortage.

In addition, a recent report by the Immigration Policy Center revealed that undocumented immigrants in this country are an important source of tax revenue. All individuals living in this country, whether or not they are citizens, can not escape paying property and sales taxes, and many pay income taxes as well. In Arizona, families headed by undocumented immigrants paid over \$433 million in taxes last year. Nationwide, the figure is over \$11 billion.

In fact, a 2004 study by the University of Arizona's Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy effectively debunked the myth that the undocumented are a drain on the state's economy, revealing that these individuals pay more to the state in taxes than the state spends on them. In figuring the cost to the state of undocumented immigrants in 2004 as well as the total contributions of this population, the study concluded that these individuals were actually responsible in this year for \$941.5 million surplus. And this does not even take into account the importance of undocumented immigrants as consumers of goods and services in the state.

In short, just as Rayburn evidences the necessity of attracting skilled immigrant workers to the U.S., it is important not to forget the vital role played by unskilled individuals as well.

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