The Myth of "Self-Deportation"

How Behavioral Economics Reveals the Fallacies behind "Attrition through Enforcement"

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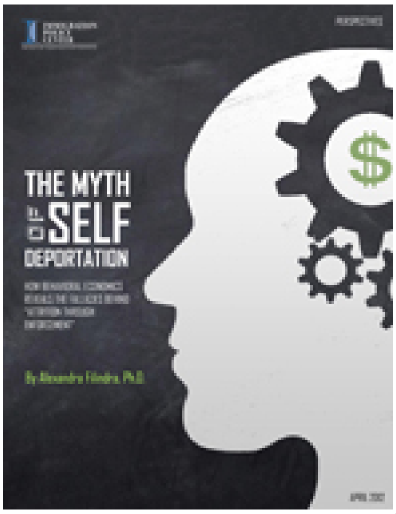

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The concept of "self-deportation" rests on a deceptively simple premise. According to its supporters, if the federal government invests more in enforcing immigration laws, and if states and localities take on additional immigration control responsibilities, the costs and risks of staying in the United States will increase substantially for undocumented immigrants. Faced with a high risk of being caught and imprisoned, "rational" undocumented residents will "give up and deport themselves" returning to their home countries rather than remain in the U.S.

However, preliminary evidence from studies conducted in states where such enforcement laws have been enacted shows that immigration restrictionists have gotten it wrong. Immigrant population in these states has remained in place and the predicted exodus never materialized. Economic factors, rather than enforcement, have played a far more important role in reducing the rate of undocumented entry into the United States.

This report uses important research findings from cognitive psychology and behavioral economics to explain why restrictionists have gotten it wrong and people do not behave in the "rational" way that restrictionists expect them to.

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