

## How is this legal? Many immigrants must wait 20 years or more for papers

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“Why don’t they get in line?”

That’s often the first question about unauthorized immigrants, and it sounds reasonable enough. If newcomers would just follow the law, critics often say, they’d be welcome in America.

Except there isn’t a practical way for many foreign-born workers to legally join the U.S. labor force.

“There is no line to get in,” said Jim Baron, CEO and co-owner of [Blue Mesa Grill](#).

Many years ago, he tried to help workers get legal papers, Baron said last week at a business event in Grapevine. But they had to return to Mexico, apply for visas and have Baron prove that no one else could do the job, even if it was just washing dishes.

“How long does that take? Oh, seven years and about 20 grand,” he told the audience.

That wasn’t going to happen. Instead, he and prospective workers developed their own version of “don’t ask, don’t tell” — relying on papers that looked good enough.

“We live in a schizophrenic state where they lie and I lie,” Baron said during a panel discussion on the economic impact of immigrants in North Texas.

It’s rare to hear such blunt talk from an employer, but it has the ring of truth. How else to explain the fact that 41.5% of immigrants in the Dallas-Fort Worth area are unauthorized?

That’s a big number, significantly higher than the 24.7% share for the nation as a whole. And it’s one indicator of the importance of foreign-born residents, especially in the booming D-FW economy.

Last week’s event, hosted by the North Texas Commission, focused on [a study by New American Economy](#), a bipartisan research and advocacy group. The report tallies the economic contributions of all local immigrants, including the unauthorized.

Among the headlines: In 2017, they paid \$10.5 billion in taxes, earned \$2.9 billion in business profits and operated over 100,000 businesses. They filled a big chunk of local jobs, including nearly half of the jobs in construction.

Almost 86% of local immigrants are also 16 to 64 years old, compared with 61% of the U.S. population being of prime working age. With 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 every day and D-FW unemployment at a record low, employers are desperate for more workers.

That's one reason business groups have long pushed for immigration reform, and they plan to use the study to rally local support.

The most surprising details related to unauthorized migrants. They're a much bigger force in D-FW than in the nation as a whole. They accounted for twice the share of taxes paid here and a higher portion of people eligible for the program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA.

Many folks believe immigrants make a community more resilient and vibrant, said Jeremy Robbins, executive director of New American Economy. But they blame unauthorized workers for many problems, from crime incidents to stagnating wages.

Robbins said the U.S. shares responsibility for having 11 million unauthorized immigrants: "We hang out a help-wanted sign," he said. "We have jobs to fill, and people are coming here to work."

President Donald Trump has railed against illegal immigration since announcing his campaign in 2015. He pledged to build a big, beautiful wall on the southern border and insisted that Mexico would pay for it.

His administration wants to reduce legal and illegal immigration, and the most heated rhetoric has been around the unauthorized.

The biggest misconception about immigration is that illegal entry is the problem, said Laura Collins of the George W. Bush Institute.

"But it's not," she told the audience, noting that laws have not been updated for decades. "The problem is in our legal immigration system. We don't have enough legal opportunities for people."

Many face long wait times to get permanent residency, often over 20 years for those from Mexico and the Philippines, she said.

Some waits are absurd: Indian immigrants with advanced degrees face a projected wait of 151 years, according to David Bier of the Cato Institute.

Last year, wait times were roughly twice as long as in 1991, Bier wrote, but "overall averages disguise significant variation." In 1991, just 3% waited a decade or more; by 2018, 28% waited at least a decade.

"Applicants with exceptionally long waits have become normal in America's legal immigration system," he wrote.

If more people understood the reality, real solutions could be possible, said Francisco Hernandez, an immigration lawyer.

“Every single hater says I have no problem with them coming here if they’ll just sign the guest book,” Hernandez told the audience. “They cannot apply to come here legally. There is no line to form.”

In the past, elected leaders generally agreed on many improvements even if they couldn't pass a bill, Collins said. That included addressing border security, DACA immigrants and a path for the unauthorized.

The real dispute: “It’s about how many people are we gonna let in and who’s it gonna be?” she said.

One way or another, we need more immigrants, the panelists insisted, because they’re crucial to the economy. As more natives leave the labor force, foreign-born workers will become even more important.

Hernandez said he tried to drive home the point with Sean Hannity, the conservative Fox News host. During one segment, Hernandez agreed to a plan to build the wall first, prompting Hannity to ask why he conceded so easily.

“Because we’re gonna have to legalize 100,000 Mexicans to build it,” Hernandez said.