



Undocumented in Michiana - Part 2: Facts and myths about illegal immigration

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President Obama's immigration reform announcement in November may have raised hopes for some 5 million undocumented immigrants across the U.S. But it's also fanned the flames of a controversial policy debate.

Supporters of an easier route to legal immigration argue that a series of myths about the undocumented community have developed over time.

Sam Centellas, Executive Director of South Bend's La Casa de Amistad, says that while many of the statements certainly apply to some people, they should not be taken as blanket truths for all members of the unauthorized community.

"We at La Casa have estimated that between 2 to 3 thousand people here in the area are probably affected by this directly," Centellas said. "And they certainly don't all fall under the same categories."

A legal route

From the start, many critics point out there are already legal routes to citizenship.

But immigration attorney Rudy Monterrosa argues that it's not quite as simple as some people might believe.

"They say 'get in line' and they're getting in line, but the line is 10 or 20 years long," Monterrosa said. "And in the meantime you're still subject to deportation because of the fact that you can't finalize your status."

In general, if an immigrant is in the country illegally for more than a year, he or she must leave the country and are then barred from being re-admitted or re-entering the U.S. for ten years.

According to the State Department, the "immigration line" is currently about 4.4 million people long.

It's a fact that most people don't realize, Centellas said. He also points to what he calls a "list of myths" about immigration that he'd like to debunk.

Argument #1 -- Undocumented immigrants are a drain on social services

He says one of the big myths is that a lot of people are here to take advantage of the system.

"But a lot of the community, even if they qualify for the services, tend not to come and sign up for them," he said. "People are very hesitant. We have a food pantry and the minority of our clients are Latino."

According to a 2013 study by the Cato Institute, non-citizen immigrants are 25 percent less likely to be signed up for Medicaid than their poor, native-born counterparts, and 37 percent less likely to receive food stamps.

The Center for Immigration Studies, which brands itself as a "low-immigration, pro-immigrant" research group, disagrees.

"Welfare use tends to be extraordinarily high for some groups – immigrants from Mexico and Honduras, for example," said Steven Camarota, Director of Research, Center for Immigration Studies, in a Congressional Briefing in January. "A majority of households with children access one of the welfare programs, particularly the non-cash programs – food assistance, public housing, Medicaid, that sort of thing."

Argument #2: Authorized immigrants affect wages and take jobs away from citizens

Centellas says that for the most part, a lot of the undocumented in the community are taking jobs that other people don't want or can't work.

"They're not getting paid well for them because they can't advocate to say 'oh look, you're not treating me the way that I need to be treated' because they feel like they don't have the right to ask for those services," Centellas said. "Because a lot of the time they don't."

But Camarota argues that unemployment numbers tell the whole story.

"I'll tell you who's really struggling -- American workers," he said. "When we say unemployment that only counts people who have looked in the last four weeks. If you've looked in the last five, you've dropped out of the numerator and the denominator of that equation."

Argument #3 -- Immigrants don't want to learn English

Centellas says that while many immigrants never master the language, it's not for lack of trying.

“They want to learn English,” he said. “It’s a matter of do they have the time, because they’re working two jobs they’ve got kids in school. It’s trying to find the opportunity to do that.”

Argument #4 Immigrants don’t pay taxes

While that’s certainly true for many non-citizens, IRS figures estimate that anywhere between 50 and 75 percent of the nation’s 11 million unauthorized immigrants file and pay **income taxes** each year through avenues like the Individual Tax Identification Number.

One South Bend family interviewed earlier in this series has been paying with an I-TIN for the last 16 years, in addition to having state and income taxes automatically removed from their paychecks.

Argument #5 -- Immigrants send all their money back to their home countries and they’re a drain on the economy

“Yes, do they send some money back home? Absolutely.” Centellas said. “I think everybody sends money to different folks around the country. But it isn’t that they’re here to take money out of the community and send it home.”

Centellas says immigrants are the lifeline for many **businesses** on the west side in particular, where they support the local economy.

According to a report out this year from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the economic benefit of legalizing more immigrants could give a huge boost to Indiana.

The Hoosier state alone stands to increase its **tax** revenues by as much as \$66 million, the report says, if all of an estimated 44 thousand eligible undocumented residents were to participate in the president’s proposed action.

But the Center for Immigration Studies argues that immigrants don’t pay anywhere near enough in taxes to cover their use of public services. And it has a lot to do with education.

Camorota says a majority, or at least half, of the immigrants from Mexico don’t have a high school education.

“It just means that they’re income and tax payments and use of social services will reflect their education levels. And people with that level of education tend to be large fiscal drains, regardless of legal status, regardless of whether they were born in the United States or not,” he said. “And that’s important, because people will try to convince you it will be a good deal.”

It’s easy to see how the debate has developed -- and exploded -- over time.

But proponents of an easier route to legal citizenship say it’s the emotional level that debaters ought to consider.

Emotional aspect

“It’s easy to call someone an illegal alien,” Monterossa said. “I think sometimes people forget that you might be talking to somebody who is here undocumented and once they realize that these are human beings, I think that then you’ll see that there’s a human side in regard to immigration reform.”

Even so, the debate wages on.

“We should try not to let special interests and sentimentality dominate our decision making and try to base our policy recommendations based on sort of the national interests,” Camarota said.

President Obama's executive order would shield up to 5 million immigrants from deportation.

Part of that order had been set to take effect on February 18th, but a legal battle may have stopped the plan in its tracks.