

Chronicle - Independent

Who's an 'illegal immigrant'?

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On Tuesday's front page, we published a story I wrote about 42-year-old Gheorge Iordache, who pleaded guilty in late August to 60 of 97 counts of criminal conspiracy in connection with ATM "skimming" incidents in and around Camden during the past year or so.

I learned about Iordache (I think it's pronounced "Ee-or-dahsh") while randomly perusing online Kershaw County Clerk of Court records. When I saw one name with dozens upon dozens of charges, I knew there had to be a story. If I hadn't been checking those listings, I would never have known law enforcement arrested Iordache back in April.

In any case, I made some phone calls and -- at first off the record and then later confirmed on the record -- learned Iordache was not only from Romania, but that he was in the country illegally.

Now, one can debate whether or not the outcome of this case was a good one. A circuit court judge sentenced Iordache to five years in jail, minus the 127 days he spent at the Kershaw County Detention Center. That left him with an approximately four and a half year sentence.

But he never served a single day of that sentence.

Apparently, as soon as the judge handed down the sentence, agents from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) took him into their custody and immediately deported him out of the country.

The case is an interesting object lesson on immigration and crime.

When we think of "illegal aliens" or "undocumented immigration," many of us in this country immediately think of Hispanic/Latino stereotypes.

(By the way, an admittedly simplified little language lesson here: "Hispanic" refers to people of Spanish-speaking origin. "Latino" refers to people of Latin American origin who do not necessarily speak Spanish. Brazilians, for example, are not Hispanic because they speak Portuguese, not Spanish.)

Immigration has always been contentious in America, no matter the century, and no matter how much we romanticize the fact -- and it is fact -- that this country was founded and built by immigrants.

During the 19th century, for example, there was the Nativist Movement, which used an anti-foreign, anti-Catholic sentiment to try to push back at the mass migration of Irish Catholics to the

U.S. escaping the Potato Famine. Much earlier than that -- even before the American Revolution -- one of my personal heroes, Benjamin Franklin, sadly spoke out against letting Germans become part of the country.

During the many years of our country's history, there have been laws to contain various types of immigrants: Chinese, in California (1860s); the Asiatic Barred Zone Act (1917) making it difficult for Asian and Pacific people to come here; quotas for Italians, Greeks and eastern Europeans (1924).

Even during World War II, America turned away Jewish refugees.

Immigration quotas were scrapped in 1965 (the year I was born) and only put back in place for some Arab and Muslim-majority countries after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

So, who are "illegal immigrants?" Anyone those in power seek to name as such.

Of course, this doesn't mean I want completely unrestricted immigration where people simply come ashore or cross our borders without any kind of process. That way lies anarchy.

At the same time, some Americans have equated undocumented immigrants with crime or as living off a government well of assistance at taxpayers' cost. There are some who assume that Hispanic immigrants are trafficking in drugs or trying to lure our kids into gangs.

In March, the Cato Institute released a study showing that both illegal and legal immigrants "have incarceration rates far below those of native born Americans." Less than 1 percent of illegal and legal immigrants (.85 percent and .47 percent, respectively) are jailed versus 1.53 percent of "native-born" Americans.

Some of the most conservative people I talk to admit that undocumented people are hard-working individuals who actually pay taxes. (In 2010, they paid an estimated \$10.6 billion in state and local taxes, according to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.)

Then there's Gheorghe Iordache -- an undocumented Romanian who actually committed a series of crimes.

Does that mean all undocumented Romanians are criminals? Of course not.

It means that every ethnicity, race, religion and so on has its bad apples. We should never paint any group of people with a broad brush based on the actions of a few.

And we should never blame children for their parents' decisions to come here illegally -- a choice they likely made because they felt they had no choice.

Punish the criminals like Gheorghe Iordache, by all means, but let's make it easier for those who wish to become citizens to realize their dreams.