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Column: Citizenship for undocumented immigrants would boost economy by \$1.7 trillion, study says

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The economic impact of granting legal status to undocumented immigrants, and policies to give them that standing, were on full display this week.

On Monday, a new study was released that concluded putting the more than 10 million undocumented immigrants in the United States on a path to citizenship would boost the nation's gross domestic product by up to \$1.7 trillion over the next decade.

The report, by the Center for American Progress and the University of California, Davis' Global Center for Migration, also said the economy and immigrants would benefit if smaller-scale citizenship actions were taken.

On Tuesday, the Senate Judiciary Committee convened a hearing on the House-approved American Dream and Promise Act, H.R. 6, which provides the opportunity for permanent legal status for young undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children — known as “dreamers” — and immigrants currently allowed to stay under the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program.

Symbolically, the hearing was held on the ninth anniversary of President Barack Obama's launch of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides temporary legal status to those who qualify.

Also on Tuesday, the Biden administration announced the expansion of a program to allow Central American youths into the United States. On Wednesday, the administration lifted policies enacted by former President Donald Trump that made it more difficult for Central American immigrants escaping violence to qualify for asylum.

Immigration, of course, remains one of the most polarizing issues in the U.S. and legitimate debate over how to regulate it is often overshadowed by anti-immigrant vitriol. Just days before this recent string of developments, widely circulated commentary suggested deadly violence against migrants.

Lara Trump, the former president's daughter-in-law and a Fox News contributor, said Americans who live along the southern border should arm themselves and prepare to confront migrants trying to cross into the U.S.

"I guess they better arm up and get guns and be ready, and maybe they're going to have to start taking matters into their own hands," said Trump, who is married to Eric Trump.

"It's bad for Americans, it's bad for the migrants," she added about efforts to cross the border. "It is bad all around."

There's little dispute that the current immigration system is broken, to the detriment of many migrants, and that some border communities have been overwhelmed.

Despite widely different views — from sharply reducing to vastly increasing immigration — there are rational arguments about how the system should be changed. Shooting people is not one of them.

President Joe Biden and Democratic lawmakers have proposed an overhaul of the immigration system, including a path to citizenship for undocumented people living here. However, reports out of Washington suggest the comprehensive U.S. Citizenship Act has fallen by the wayside, and the administration and congressional Democrats are now taking a more piecemeal approach.

That tack still could produce substantial macroeconomic dividends, while improving the financial wherewithal of many undocumented immigrants, according to the report by the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, and UC Davis.

Researchers calculated what creating a pathway to citizenship would mean in terms of direct benefits under four scenarios:

- All undocumented immigrants: \$1.7 trillion GDP boost over a decade; 438,800 new jobs; those eligible would earn annual wages that on average are \$4,300 higher after five years and \$14,000 after 10 years.
- Undocumented essential workers: \$989 billion to the GDP over a decade; 203,200 new jobs; \$4,300 in higher wages in five years and \$11,800 in 10 years.
- Those covered by the Dream and Promise Act: \$799 billion; 285,400 new jobs; \$4,300 in higher wages in five years and \$16,800 after a decade.
- Dream and Promise Act-eligible immigrants and undocumented essential workers: \$1.5 trillion; 400,800 new jobs; wage growth of \$4,300 over five years and \$13,500 over 10 years.

This report puts new, detailed numbers on a familiar theme: Study after study has shown immigrants provide a boost to the U.S. economy. Further, research suggests immigrants are needed to shore up the workforce because of shrinking domestic birth rates.

As for taking jobs that American-born citizens would otherwise perform, that apparently doesn't happen to any great degree. Studies by organizations ranging from the Brookings Institute to the American Civil Liberties Union to the Cato Institute agree on that.

Adds the libertarian Cato Institute: “Immigration doesn’t much affect the wages of native-born Americans in the long run.”

None of this is likely to close the political divide over giving legal status to undocumented immigrants. The relatively narrowly focused Dream and Promise Act passed the House with only nine Republican votes. Previous iterations of the legislation languished in Congress in the face of Republican opposition.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act, a bill that offers a path to legal status for undocumented agricultural workers, was approved by the House with 30 Republican votes.

The broader Citizenship for Essential Workers Act, co-authored by Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla of California, likely faces a mostly party-line fate as well.

While Biden’s Citizenship Act appears dead, immigrant advocates aren’t surprised. A growing number had noted comprehensive legislation has failed for decades, so more targeted bills may be the way to go.

That doesn’t mean a bill-by-bill effort will be any easier. In recent years, polls have shown the public overwhelmingly wants permanent legal status for “dreamers,” including those with temporary standing under DACA.

Yet the politics have not allowed that to happen.