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Report Warns Easing Immigrants' Path to Citizenship Will Further Harm Economy

By Kelley Vlahos

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EXCLUSIVE: President Obama says reforming immigration policy will help the nation's economy, especially in the form of job creation.

Research cited by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce says there is no correlation between immigration and high unemployment.

But one major critic disagrees and says that illegal immigrants are already competing with native-born Americans for jobs, particularly low-wage, unskilled service jobs.

In a new report released today, "Immigration, Poverty and Low-Wage Earners: The Harmful Effect of Unskilled Immigrants on American Workers," FAIR (Federation for Immigration Reform) says the president's vision for comprehensive immigration reform would add thousands, if not millions, more unskilled workers to the labor force, which is still struggling under the recession.

FAIR finds that out of 1.1 million new legal immigrants accepted annually, less than 6 percent "were admitted because they possessed skills deemed essential to the U.S. economy."

Click here to view the poverty report.

Making illegal workers legal, and opening up the process to let more immigrants into the country, would only make that worse, said Ira Mehlman, FAIR's media director.

"Here we have a policy that actually increases poverty," Mehlman tells FoxNews.com, noting that 7.1 million Americans with a high school diploma or less are already unemployed.

"Some family-based immigrants may be highly educated or skilled, but the vast majority of admissions are made without regard for those criteria," charges the FAIR report.

"The immigrant population reflects the system's lack of emphasis on skill. Nearly 31 percent of foreign-born residents over the age of 25 are without a high school diploma, compared to just 10 percent of native-born citizens."

High school dropouts and those with only a high school diploma – native or immigrant – are having the hardest time finding a job in today's labor market, which is still suffering from an 8 percent national unemployment rate and has yet to recover the 7.2 million jobs it lost after the recession hit in 2007, according to reports.

Illegal immigrants, according to the FAIR report, are "the least educated group," with 75 percent having a high school education or less. They are also more likely to be living in poverty and lack health insurance."

If the president had his way and some of those illegal immigrants were allowed a path to citizenship, said Mehlman, "they will still be unskilled and poorly educated. The only difference is they will be legally able to stay here. They will file a tax return and will be able to claim all sorts of benefits."

Steven Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies, agrees, noting that, according to the U.S. government, there are about 10.8 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. today.

"Unskilled legal immigrants are eligible for a host of programs that unskilled illegal immigrants are not," including the Earned Income Tax Credit, he told Foxnews.com.

"The question here is, does allowing millions of people who haven't graduated high school into the modern American economy with the modern American welfare state a good deal for us? Probably not," said Camarota.

Dan Griswold, who heads the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the CATO Institute, says FAIR "has a narrow view of the world" and is ignoring long-standing evidence – including the amnesty granted to 1.7 million undocumented workers in the 1980s under the Reagan administration – that legalization helped immigrants become "more productive and more skilled. FAIR missed that."



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He said legalizing immigrants allows them to invest more into the marketplace, which grows jobs – a point that Mehlman and Camarota dispute.

In a January 2010 report, "Raising the Floor for American Workers: The Economic Benefits of Comprehensive Immigration Reform," the Center for American Progress declared that comprehensive immigration reform – creating a pathway to legalization and establishing "new, flexible legal limits to permanent and temporary immigration"-- could add as much as \$1.5 trillion to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) while increasing wages for all American workers.

"Immigrants do not 'steal' jobs from American workers. Immigrants come to the United States to fill jobs that are available, or to establish their own businesses," said the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which just put out its own report, entitled "Immigration Myths and Facts."

"Immigrants go where the jobs are, or they create jobs of their own," reads the report.

But FAIR insists "there is no such thing as an 'immigrant job.' The reality is that immigrants and natives compete for the same jobs and native workers are increasingly at a disadvantage because employers have access to a steady supply of low-wage foreign workers."

While critics say Obama raised the issue of comprehensive immigration reform to renew his ties to the more Democratic-leaning immigrant population for his 2012 re-election bid (Latino voters now make up 7 percent of the electorate and play a huge role in swing states like New Mexico, Colorado, Florida and Nevada), others say it will be much more difficult to pass anything that remotely spells "amnesty" in today's divided Congress – especially before a heated presidential contest.

"Its amnesty for 2 million people," said Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. "I just don't see it when you are still talking about amnesty."

Griswold warned, however, against maintaining the status quo. "Both parties are going to make political hay out of it and we're not going to be any closer to fixing the problem."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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