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Addressing Some Misperceptions About Mexican Immigration

By DAMIEN CAVE

Reading the comments attached to my article today – looking at how today’s illegal immigrants are more likely to be people who have roots and families in the United States – I was struck by something that advocates for and against expanded immigration told me while I was reporting: “This is a fact-free zone.”

In other words, the nuances of illegal immigration, no matter how you present them, are likely to be ignored because the only people involved in the debate have strong emotional connections to their views — connections unlikely to be broken by facts that do not already fit their arguments.

Needless to say, it was a depressing thing to hear. However, I figure that there are still a few misconceptions, popping up among readers, that deserve to be identified and addressed:

1. Illegal immigrants are all a drag on American society, or they are overwhelmingly beneficial.

This is the black and white view that dominates. One side (represented by this commenter and this one) sees only the costs that immigrants bring. Others, like this commenter, see illegal immigrants largely as victims, hard workers limited by American xenophobia.

The reality is more complicated. With an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States, the pool is large enough to include a little bit of everything. Yes, some immigrants are criminals, and yes, some are victims of exploitation.

What the United States, as a country, seems to be trying to figure out is: which is dominant, the good or the bad?

This is the multibillion-dollar question. Indeed, the debate over whether illegal immigrants bring more costs than benefits is a major preoccupation for organizations all around the immigration issue. The problem – experts will privately tell you, after hours of interviews – is that many of the numbers available leave large gaps that make it impossible to clearly determine which side is right. Because such immigrants live in the shadows because of their undocumented status, reliable data — on taxes paid, public benefits used and overall economic impact — are hard to find.

Thus, each side pushes its own anecdotes, rarely acknowledging that there are elements of accurate concern even among those they disagree with. What gets lost? The role of the immigration system itself – which is to sift, to draw in and assimilate the most desirable immigrants, while limiting those who are likely to bring problems.

The more advocates and politicians argue in absolute terms, the less discussion there is about how to actually build an immigration system that does a better job of separating the good (however society defines it) from the bad (again, as determined by the public).

“The dialogue has never progressed beyond the getting-in-at-the-border conversation,” said Demetrios G. Papademetriou, president and co-founder of the Migration Policy Institute, an independent research group. In a lengthy interview a few weeks ago, he said he was confounded by the unwillingness to move on to a conversation about improving and upgrading immigration laws and visas.

“It’s not rocket science,” he said. “Reasonable people can sit around the table and decide who goes first, second, third, and who loses out.”

2. People should just wait and go legally

This is a commonly expressed idea, mentioned by [this commenter from New York](#). It seems to be logical: if everyone else has to be obey American laws, immigrants should, too.

But built into this idea is a misconception about how the immigration system works. It assumes that it is, on its face, fair, efficient and accessible. The assumption seems to be that immigrants from Mexico or elsewhere are thumbing their noses at American law because they are not willing to pay a few hundred dollars and wait their turn for a year or two.

Generally, this is not the case. Try applying at age 20 and not being approved until 40 – if you’re lucky to be approved at all.

“It’s not that they are not willing to wait a year or two,” says David Shirk, an expert at the Transborder Institute in San Diego. “It’s that it would be 10, 20 years before they could come across the border, and that’s not realistic in terms of their need to eat. The lack of visa availability, especially with visas for low-skilled workers in the U.S. economy, creates an insurmountable obstacle to legal entry.”

3. “And they still don’t bother to learn English.”

So says Pete M from New Mexico.

Others frequently make the same comment. Indeed, at one point when I was writing a story about immigration in Florida, a Navy veteran said much the same thing – while being interviewed in perfect English, on camera, by an Ivy-League educated daughter of Cuban immigrants. Still, the idea persists, not entirely without reason. Many immigrants, legal and illegal, can still be heard at grocery stores or anywhere else speaking the language of their home countries. Americans often assume this means the immigrants – especially those speaking Spanish — do not speak English, and do not choose to learn it.

But a look overall at rates of acquiring English shows that the current batch of immigrants, with and without documentation, are moving along quite quickly – faster than, say, German immigrants in the 19th Century.

This is widely supported by an array of research, all of which happens to be well summarized in [this fact sheet \[PDF\]](#) from the libertarian Cato Institute.

Of course, since I started writing this post, dozens of other comments have come in. What questions or criticism do you think needs to be addressed head on? Ask and I will try to answer.