



Impact of Foreign-born Workers on American Jobs a Contentious Issue in US

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The colossal impact of immigrant labor in the United States extends to Louisiana's struggling fisheries.

"I've been hiring workers from Mexico, Honduras and everywhere else for 20 years," Dean Blanchard, president of Blanchard Seafood, Inc., told VOA. Operating on the Gulf Coast, the company accounts for 5-10% of shrimp caught annually in the United States.

Blanchard said foreign workers made his company more efficient and profitable. The difference wasn't a matter of wages. Rather, he said, it was how much harder they worked than their non-immigrant peers.

"I've got to hire 12 Americans to do the same amount of work five Mexicans used to do for me," he said.

U.S. law allows companies to petition to hire documented foreign workers for temporary jobs. Blanchard says federal agents raided his operation and informed him he lacked the proper paperwork for the immigrants he employed.

He's since hired an entirely American crew while rival outfits continue to employ immigrants.

"It's impossible to compete, man, I don't know how much longer I can do this for. They [immigrants] were so important to the work we did."

But Blanchard's sympathetic view of the importance of migrant labor is far from universal in the U.S.

The impact of foreign-born workers on American jobs and wages remains a contentious issue as President Joe Biden calls for an overhaul of the U.S. immigration system at a time when the labor market continues to heal from severe pandemic disruptions.

Debate is also overshadowed by a steep increase in mostly unskilled migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. The U.S. Border Patrol reported apprehending more than 170,000 people in March attempting to enter the United States without permission. It's a monthly figure unmatched since 2001.

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Washington-based Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, notes that many Americans struggle to separate objective economic analysis from the passions surrounding the larger immigration debate, one of America's thorniest hot-button issues.

"Something that a lot of people seem to miss," he explained, "is that updating our immigration policy would be amazing for the economy."

Having more people in the economy, Nowrasteh said, helps it grow. Barring immigrants has the opposite effect.

"Without robust immigration," he added, "we won't have enough workers, entrepreneurs and consumers to build the 21st century American economy we want."

What's good for America?

Not everyone sees immigration benefiting the entire country. While immigration's role as a driver of economic growth is well documented, economists say the benefits often aren't evenly distributed across the U.S. population.

And some sectors do see increased competition when newcomers enter the labor pool. A common complaint among U.S.-born tradesmen is that their bids for jobs are undercut by outfits employing immigrants willing to work for less money. Some U.S.-born workers believe their wages would be higher with less immigration.

Rob Sauerstein drives trucks in the suburbs of New York City. While he believes legal immigration plays an important role in America's history and economy, he feels unauthorized immigration can be damaging.

"I think some employers seek out illegal immigrants because they can pay them more cheaply," he said. "But if they couldn't find illegal immigrants, they'd have to raise their wages to pay American workers more money, and that seems like it'd be better for the economy."

George Barisich, a fisherman in the suburbs of New Orleans, Louisiana, draws a distinction between lawful and undocumented immigration. He voted twice for former President Donald Trump, who championed restrictive immigration policies. Even so, Barisich agrees with Blanchard that immigrants play a vital role in his industry.

"During shrimping season, we need legal immigrants to work in those factories," he said. "It's hard work, it's decent pay, and it's stuff young Americans just don't want to do anymore."

Immigrant workers aren't only in demand for low-skill, low-wage jobs. They also fill key positions in higher-paying sectors such as medicine and technology.

"We're only constrained by the supply of potential engineers available to us, not the demand [for output]," said Mills Baker who has been involved in hiring at tech companies such as Quora and Facebook. "There's a lot of competition for talented American-born employees, so we also make

sure to set our sights on the most exceptionally talented folks around the globe.”

Economic debate

“There’s no economic evidence that immigrants take jobs from native-born American workers,” Nowrasteh said. “They occupy jobs, of course, but they also create them.”

They do that through entrepreneurship - 30% of small businesses in the U.S. are owned by immigrants, according to the National Immigration Forum - and through their purchasing power.

“Immigrants are spending money in their communities and that creates work in America and supports small businesses,” Nowrasteh explained, “but even when they send money back to their family in their home country, the United States benefits. Those families buy products with that money, many of which are American exports that American workers played a part in creating.”

Barisich said he’s worked with immigrants from Mexico and Central America who started in the shrimping and oyster industries 20 years ago. Many of those workers eventually brought their families to join them and gained their citizenship.

But as the Gulf seafood industry has shrunk in recent years, many of those workers have moved on.

“They work in carpentry or some other job now, and I don’t blame them. They have to take care of their families just like I do,” Barisich said, “but they’re competing for work against American-born workers in those other industries now. It’s complicated.”

Nowrasteh said that’s exactly how a vibrant economy should work.

“Immigrants come to America when there is work for them, and they find work in industries where jobs are available. Sometimes they even change jobs - just like we do. This isn’t feudalism and that’s a good thing. We all go where the opportunities are.”

Contentious debate

Economists like Nowrasteh say, if U.S. immigration policy isn’t revamped to allow a larger number of immigrants at various skill and education levels to legally enter the country, the U.S. economy could be constrained for decades.

A Gallup Poll from last year showed that Americans are more accepting of legal immigration than at any time since the poll was first conducted in 1965. For the first time, the percentage of Americans (34%) who would like to see authorized immigration to the country increase has eclipsed the percentage (28%) who want to see it decrease.

Unauthorized immigration, on the other hand, is something that provokes a viscerally negative reaction from many Americans.

“I think they need to go through the process to come here legally,” Barisich said. “I don’t think

it's okay for people - sometimes some bad people who are criminals - to just come into the country and not pay taxes. Then they get freebies like healthcare, and education for their kids, and American taxpayers have to foot the bill.”

The idea that undocumented newcomers consume an outsized proportion of U.S. social services and don't pay taxes is a common talking point in America's immigration debate. Immigration experts say it's not true.

“The IRS estimates as many as 75% of undocumented immigrants pay their taxes,” said New Orleans-based attorney Salvador Longoria, referring to a report that estimated 50-75% of undocumented immigrants pay federal, state and local taxes.

“The estimate was more than \$23 billion in federal taxes in 2016, alone,” said Longoria, who came to the United States from Cuba.

A 2018 Cato Institute study found, with the exception of food and nutritional programs, “immigrants are less likely to consume welfare benefits and, when they do, they generally consume a lower dollar value of benefits than native-born Americans.”

But Longoria said focusing on the taxes and welfare programs misses so much more that immigrants bring to their adopted country.

“We're twice as likely as native-born Americans to start a business and 40% of U.S. Nobel Prize winners in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics since 2000 are immigrants,” he said. “America was founded on the premise that it was a nation of diversity, and from that diversity comes its strength. We are the next chapter of immigrants in that history.”