

STOP THE IMMIGRANT BASHING POLICY ANALYST DANIEL GRISWOLD EXPLAINS WHY A CRACKDOWN ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS WOULD BACKFIRE ON PENNSYLVANIA

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If you believe the majority of witnesses at recent House State Government Committee hearings in Harrisburg, you would think illegal immigration is the single biggest problem confronting the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Speaker after speaker blamed unauthorized immigrant workers for unemployment, crime and budget shortages.

As one of the witnesses, I understand the frustration over the failure of the federal government to fix our dysfunctional immigration system, but the raft of Arizona-style bills the committee is weighing would take the state in the wrong direction.

Pennsylvania faces many challenges, but the inflow of too many hardworking immigrants is not among them. Pennsylvania is already one of the slowest-growing states in the union. It ranks 30th in the share of the population that is foreign born, and illegal immigrants are only 1.3 percent of the state population, ranking Pennsylvania 40th among the states.

It may produce a good sound bite but it is misleading to claim that every low-skilled immigrant chased out of Pennsylvania will mean a job for an unemployed American. The real-world economy doesn't work that way. Low-skilled immigrants do not compete directly with the large majority of American workers.

More aggressive enforcement against illegal immigration would hurt the Pennsylvania economy. Removing low-skilled immigrant workers from the labor force would reduce investment and production in such industries as agriculture, retail, tourism, construction and landscaping. It would reduce related job openings in more skilled positions, worsening unemployment for native-born middle-class Americans. Less investment and employment would in turn reduce government revenue.

The answer to illegal immigration is not to criminalize honest work but to change our national immigration system to meet the future labor needs of our nation. We need to expand channels for legal immigration through a robust temporary worker program. Immigration reform would replace the current population of illegal immigrant workers with a legalized population, to the benefit of the immigrants and native-born alike.

It is wrong to blame undocumented immigrants for unleashing a crime wave, as more than one witness claimed. There is no evidence that illegal immigrants in Pennsylvania are causing a general increase in the crime rate. Nationwide, the rate of violent crime in the past two decades has plunged during a time when the undocumented population was rising rapidly. In fact, illegal immigrants typically seek to avoid any encounter with law enforcement that could lead to deportation.

Arizona-type laws would actually make life more difficult for Pennsylvania law enforcement officers. By deputizing them as agents for federal immigration enforcement, legislators would be diverting resources away from combating real crime. More police hours and jail space would be consumed with prosecuting dishwashers and janitors, rather than rapists and robbers.

A state-level crackdown would only push undocumented immigrants further underground. They would be less likely to cooperate with law enforcement and come forward as witnesses. Such laws unwittingly break down the trust that authorities have tried to cultivate through community policing. This is why the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police opposed that state's anti-immigration law.

As for the state budget, illegal immigration has not caused a surge in public-school enrollment. The share of Pennsylvania's population enrolled in K-12 public schools is almost exactly the same today -- 14.1 percent -- as it was 20 years ago, and significantly lower than in 1970 when Baby Boomers were crowding classrooms.

Pennsylvania's school-aged population -- future workers and taxpayers -- is the fourth lowest in the nation as a share of the total population. Legislators should be far more worried about why so few future workers and taxpayers are moving through the educational pipeline than about the relatively few additional students whose parents are here illegally.

As Texas Gov. Rick Perry will tell you, his state has led the nation in employment and economic growth in the past decade by keeping taxes and regulations in check. Texas is also a state with 10 times as many illegal immigrants in its workforce as Pennsylvania. The share of illegal workers in the Texas population is five times greater than the share in Pennsylvania.

Those low-skilled immigrant workers have not been a barrier to economic growth and job creation in Texas. In fact, they have helped residents there to be more productive and more competitive in global markets. The same can be true for Pennsylvania.

Legislators in Harrisburg should focus on creating a better business climate in Pennsylvania while urging the state's congressional delegation in Washington to expand opportunities for legal immigration through comprehensive reform.

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