

Austin American-Statesman

Immigration restrictions hurt Americans, too

Ilya Somin

April 13, 2017

Americans living along the Mexican border have begun to receive notices that their property will be condemned by the government in order to build President Donald Trump's border wall. The greatest damage likely to be inflicted by the Trump administration's severely restrictionist approach to immigration will probably fall on immigrants themselves. Trump advocates drastic cuts in legal and illegal migration alike. But the wall takings are a reminder that American citizens will suffer, too.

The most obvious harm is economic. Immigration restrictions interfere with the free market more than almost any other U.S. government policy. They literally prevent millions of people from freely seeking jobs and engaging in other market transactions. Free migration throughout the world could potentially double world gross domestic product and grow the economy more than almost any other policy change.

Many of those economic benefits will accrue to native-born Americans who hire immigrants, buy the goods they produce, or engage in other transactions with them. Many products we purchase every day are cheaper or have better quality because of immigrants' work. Many would not even exist at all without them.

On average, immigrants are more likely to start businesses than native-born citizens, which creates many potential benefits for the latter. Over 80 percent of the highest-achieving high school science students in the U.S. are immigrants or children of immigrants — many of whose parents came to the U.S. on H1B visas that Trump seeks to curb.

Immigration restrictionism also threatens the liberty and property rights of Americans. Most obviously, it curtails their freedom to work and otherwise associate with immigrants. If, like many conservatives, you believe government cannot be trusted to decide what types of food we should eat or what kind of health insurance we should buy, you have reason for skepticism about giving it the power to determine which potential immigrants we should be allowed to interact with.

There is no way to deport large numbers of undocumented immigrants — as the administration seeks to do — without also imperiling the civil liberties of natives. Under the Obama administration, the Department of Homeland Security concluded that immigration enforcement requires large-scale use of racial profiling in areas where some two-thirds of the U.S. population lives.

In practice, that subjects many Americans to racial discrimination by law enforcement agencies merely because they happen to look like they belong to the same ethnic or racial group as undocumented immigrants. Increasing deportation efforts likely means increasing the extent and severity of racial profiling.

As many U.S. police chiefs have noted, the fear created by deportations makes Hispanic communities less willing to cooperate with law enforcement, thereby potentially increasing crime. By contrast, immigration itself actually reduces the crime rate, since immigrants – contrary to the assertions about Mexicans by Trump — actually have lower violent crime rates than natives.

Building Trump’s border wall would require using eminent domain to seize property of many more Americans. The condemnations that have already begun are just the tip of the iceberg.

Though Immigration can occasionally have negative side effects on natives, most are either overblown or can be addressed by less draconian measures than restrictions and deportation. Contrary to critics’ fears, increased immigration does not actually lead to higher welfare state spending per capita. Even if it did, the right solution is not to build a wall across the border but to build a wall limiting access to welfare benefits. This is just one of many “keyhole solutions” that can mitigate potential risks of immigration without barring immigrants. Similar points apply to other common concerns about immigration, including fears that immigrants will vote for bad public policies, fail to assimilate or increase the risk of terrorism.

The world is not a zero-sum game where natives must lose out in order for immigrants to gain — or vice versa. If we truly want to make America great again, we must remember the many ways that immigrants and natives benefit each other. That is a big part of what made the nation great in the first place.

Ilya Somin is a Professor of Law at George Mason University. He is the author of Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter and The Grasping Hand: Kelo v. City of New London and the Limits of Eminent Domain, and coauthor of A Conspiracy against Obamacare: The Volokh Conspiracy and the Health Care Case. Somin is widely published in both the scholarly and popular press, including the Yale Law Journal, the Stanford Law Review, the Northwestern University Law Review, and also the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, LA Times, and USA Today