



A Threat to Americans

President Donald Trump's immigration restrictions will have an enormous economic cost.

Ilya Somin

April 21, 2017

As the Trump administration seeks to cut H-1B visas for skilled workers and ramps up arrests of immigrants without legal status, including thousands who do not have a criminal record, it is worth remembering that immigrants are not the only ones harmed by the new administration's harshly restrictionist immigration policies. Severe restrictions on migration condemn hundreds of thousands of potential immigrants to lives of poverty and oppression in underdeveloped nations, yet such policies severely harm American citizens, as well.

Perhaps the biggest negative impact of immigration restrictions is the enormous economic cost. Restrictions prevent millions of people from freely seeking employment and other opportunities. Economists estimate that abolishing migration restrictions around the world could potentially double world GDP. No other potential policy change is likely to have anything like the same massive beneficial effects.

These enormous benefits do not go to immigrants alone. Every day, millions of Americans profit from hiring immigrants, working with them, or using the many innovations they produce. That bounty would increase greatly if we make it easier for immigrants to enter the U.S. and seek out jobs.

Immigration restrictions also threaten the liberty and property rights of Americans. Most obviously, they curtail American citizens' freedom to associate with immigrants. Jim Crow segregation laws restricted the freedom of association of whites as well as African-Americans. Similarly, immigration restrictions curtail the freedom of natives as well as immigrants. In both cases, laws that classify people based on conditions of birth dictate where they are allowed to live and work and who they can interact with.

The Trump administration seeks to greatly increase the number of immigrants in the country without legal status deported by the government. There is no way to do that without also imperiling the civil liberties of American citizens. In 2014, 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. As a result, Americans are subjected to

racial discrimination by law enforcement, merely because they appear to belong to the same ethnic or racial group as the targeted immigrants. The more we attempt to increase deportations, the greater the extent of racial profiling.

Building Trump's much-ballyhooed wall across the Mexican border would require using eminent domain to seize the property of thousands of Americans. Numerous homeowners and businesses are likely to suffer, often getting compensation far below the true level of their losses. Condemning property and building the wall is also likely to cost taxpayers billions of dollars.

The deportations advocated by Trump would cost far more. According to the conservative American Action Forum, mass deportations on the scale envisioned by the administration would cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars, a figure that does not include the cost of losing the goods and services that would have been produced by deported workers.

Immigration does sometimes have negative effects on Americans. But they are often overblown, and can usually be addressed by "keyhole solutions" that limit risk without barring immigrants. Despite the claims of restrictionists, immigration does not lead to higher welfare state spending per capita. Even if it did, the best approach is not a wall across the border, but a wall limiting access to welfare benefits.

Similarly, far from increasing the crime rate, immigration actually reduces it, because immigrants have far lower crime rates than natives. That includes immigrants both with and without legal status.

Many other common concerns about immigration are also either exaggerated, or fixable by keyhole solutions. Examples include oft-expressed fears that immigrant voters will change public policy for the worse, fail to assimilate as did their counterparts in earlier generations, or create a major risk of terrorism.

Immigrants and American citizens are not locked in a struggle where one group can only "win" if the other "loses." Cutting back on deportations and immigration restrictions can help both groups win together.

Ilya Somin is professor of law at George Mason University, an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute and author of "Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter."