



Economists Say Legalizing Immigrants Won't Hurt U.S. Workers

A group of economists argued Friday that immigration reform will positively impact the U.S. economy.

By: Catalina Lehmann- July 26, 2013

Critics of the immigration bill approved by the Senate last month say that legalizing millions of unlawful immigrants will encourage more immigration in the future and will crowd the job market for American-born workers.

But those who discussed the issue today at The Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank based in Washington, D.C., disagreed with that premise, especially when it comes to high-skilled immigrants.

“When you go through and systematically look at the data, as economist after economist has done, there’s surprisingly little evidence of negative effects on competing or similar U.S. workers,” said Madeline Zavodny, a professor of economics at Agnes Scott College and adjunct fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. “It would be very difficult to walk away from the economics literature with the conclusion that immigrants hurt competing natives in the labor market.”

Zavodny argued that the nation’s current immigration system is in dire need of repair.

“What I tell my [international] students at Agnes Scott College is if you want to remain in the United States — and these are bright and talented women — how should they remain? They should marry a U.S. native,” she said. “Our immigration policy is very, very messed up when your best way to stay in the United States is assortative mating — to marry a U.S. native.”

Ethan Lewis, an associate professor of economics at Dartmouth College, argued that one solution to reducing illegal immigration would be to award more work visas to unskilled immigrants who have little opportunity in their native countries.

“I think we need to take a step back and say, ‘why are they coming here despite the fact that it’s not legal to do so?’” Lewis asked.

He then answered his own question.

“They have this enormous incentive — they have these big economic gains from coming here, and on top of that, we want them to come — we benefit from them coming. We demand their labor, which is essentially why they want to come. So maybe the problem really isn’t illegal immigration, it’s why don’t we have more low-skill visas? Why don’t we have more legal ways for immigrants to come?”

As Michael Clemens, senior fellow and research manager at the Center for Global Development, put it, “there is an enormous inequality of opportunity in the world.”