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Thursday, July 22, 2010

Immigration Myths [\[Mark Krikorian\]](#)

There's too much wrong-headed commentary about immigration to bother with most of it, but the [op-ed](#) in Thursday's *Washington Post* by the last two heads of the INS is worth comment, both because of the venue and the particular myths its authors purvey.

The first half is about the Arizona law specifically, most of it a rehash of the Obama Justice Department's lawsuit (the [first hearing](#) on which was Thursday). The only thing that struck me was the apparent claim that states may not do anything on immigration without "specific delegation" from the feds. I'm no [lawyer](#), but this would seem to be the opposite of the claim that states have been affirmatively preempted from enforcing immigration laws — a false claim, to be sure, but a different one. In other words, states either have wide latitude in helping enforce federal immigration laws, except where they are specifically prohibited by Congress from doing so, *or* they have absolutely no right to get involved in any way in immigration enforcement, except where specifically permitted to do so.

But it's the second half of the piece that includes two dubious [claims](#) that underlie much of the debate over illegal immigration. First this:

The most important fact driving the [Arizona](#) action is a question: Why are an estimated 11 million people in this country illegally? . . . The simple answer is that our [immigration laws](#) provide inadequate legal avenues to enter the United States for employment purposes at levels that our economy demands.

Well, I don't doubt that's the simple answer at the [Migration Policy Institute](#), the high-immigration think tank where both Meissner and Ziglar are fellows. But the correct answer to why 11 million people came here illegally is that *they can get away with it*. It's simply foolish to imagine that at any given time there's a fixed demand for foreign labor, which would come here legally if only we'd permit it, thus eliminating virtually all illegal immigration. If we were to double or triple legal immigration tomorrow, within a couple of years (if that) the demand would again outstrip supply and open-borders people would again bemoan our "inadequate legal avenues" for the admission of peasant labor from abroad.

The second myth:

Tightening border controls, while essential, has exacerbated the problem. Today, our borders are more secure than ever — so those here illegally stay because re-entry is perilous.



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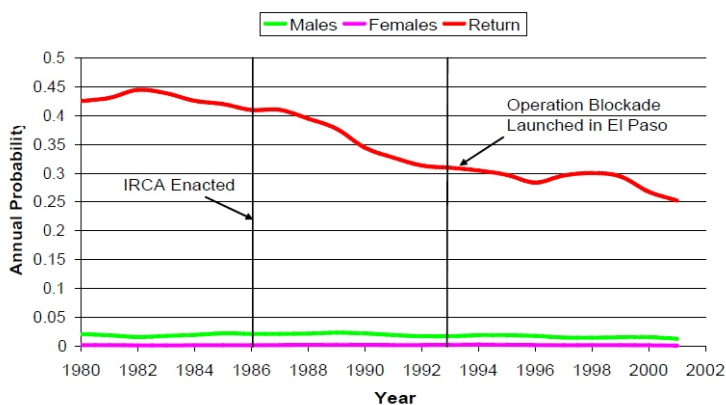


The open-borders folks delight in making this point: Border controls *increase* illegal immigration! You obscurantist gun-clingers are making the problem worse! Here's how I described it in [congressional testimony](#) a few years back:

The story line goes like this: Illegal aliens — Mexican illegals, in particular — had been happily coming and going across the border since time immemorial, never even entertaining the idea of remaining permanently in the United States. "Circular migration" is how such a process is described by scholars. Then, increased border enforcement — the additional agents and fencing authorized by Congress in 1996, as well as new tactics already being implemented by the Border Patrol — made it more difficult and expensive to cross the border, interrupting the "circularity" of the flow by forcing illegals to stay here, so they wouldn't get caught up in the dragnet the next time they left and tried to return. In other words, the claim is that border enforcement causes illegal immigration.

But the data show no such thing. Noted Princeton sociologist Doug Massey is the originator of this line of argument, which he has spread quite widely (including for the [Cato Institute](#), which is ironic since Massey is also author of [Return of the "L" Word: A Liberal Vision for the New Century](#)). But Massey's findings simply don't support his conclusions. Here is his [testimony](#) from the same congressional hearing, and Figure 7 on p. 20 is the foundation of this idea that enforcement is causing increased permanent illegal settlement by interrupting back-and-forth migration.

Figure 7. Probability of First Undocumented Migration and Return 1980-2001



The graph shows that the proportion of Mexicans who migrate seasonally has been dropping pretty steadily since Massey started collecting data in 1980 (when it was already less than half — i.e. even then, most illegals settled permanently). But "steadily" is the key; the new enforcement measures that Massey and Meissner and Ziglar point to as the cause of this trend don't have anything to do with it. Instead, what we've been seeing for three decades is the same thing as in every other country during economic modernization — the movement of excess peasantry off the land and into the cities. But because of our lax immigration policies, they've been moving to *our* cities rather than their own. And only through genuine immigration enforcement — both at the border and the interior — and reductions in the future legal immigration that serves as the catalyst for illegal immigration can we interrupt that process.

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