

Impact of immigration overhaul could be wide, deep

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By Franco Ordonez

WASHINGTON — President Obama’s executive action to defer deportations will have a resounding impact on some 5 million undocumented immigrants and their families, who will no longer have to fear a late-night knock on the door and being separated from loved ones.

But, if past is prologue, the executive order also will reverberate far beyond those households to local schools, job sites and town halls, where the newly legalized will likely get more involved in their communities, and to the southern border, where ranchers and border agents expect a rapid influx of migrants hoping to cross the border and slip into the United States’ deferral program.

Evidence is mixed on whether new legalization programs, or talk of them, lead to increases in illegal immigration. Some observers blamed the 2013 Senate proposal that would have granted undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship for enticing more illegal immigration last year.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection made 479,377 apprehensions in fiscal 2014, marking a rise for a third straight year, according to the Center for Investigative Reporting, which collected the data that Border Patrol officials posted on their website and then immediately took down.

“Obviously our work load will go higher,” said a Texas Border Patrol agent who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters. “I see it being a nightmare. It’ll spread like wildfire.”

For Arizona cattle rancher John Ladd, there is no question what the impact of Mr. Obama’s executive order will be.

On any given day, about 30 people come through his 14,000-acre cattle ranch in Bisbee, which straddles the border, he said. But he estimates that those numbers have doubled in the past week as news spread of the pending executive order.

Fixing broken fences and corralling escaped cattle is a daily struggle — not to mention the Border Patrol agents on horseback and off-road vehicles chasing those migrants across his land, he said.

The 1986 Immigration and Control Act signed by President Ronald Reagan granted protection to undocumented immigrants who could prove they had lived in the United States for at least four

years. Three million immigrants signed up for the legalization, making their relatives also eligible for family reunification.

The main economic effect of the 1986 legalization was higher earnings for legalized immigrants. Latin American immigrants who legalized their status experienced wage increases of between 6 percent and 13 percent, according to the libertarian Cato Institute.

Legalization also decreases a lot of uncertainty, as immigrants become less fearful, more trusting of law-enforcement agencies and the government, and more involved in their children's schools, analysts say.

“People who managed to legalize do better on every possible dimension that you can think of,” said Susan Brown, a sociologist at the University of California, Irvine. “They earn more. Their families are more likely to learn English. They go out more. You name it, across the board, the outcome is better.”

The 1986 legalization began as an effort to restrict immigration, but the enforcement measures established to make it harder for companies to hire undocumented immigrants were barely enforced. The illegal immigration population continued to surge. An estimated 11 million to 13 million undocumented immigrants now live in the United States.