

## Legalize 'Em

By: [Emily Badger](#)  [Print](#)

The [Center for American Progress](#) and the Immigration Policy Center released a [report](#) today quantifying the potential economic benefits of comprehensive immigration reform. Legalize unauthorized workers, the study concludes, and the American GDP would grow by an additional \$1.5 trillion over the next 10 years (kick them all out — never mind the cost of deportation — and we'd lose \$2.6 trillion in the process).

The figures read like a rosy assessment from a left-leaning think tank sympathetic to the man in the White House — which would seem suspicious were it not for this counter-balancing effect: The right-leaning [Cato Institute](#) came up with some pretty similar numbers last year. (The Cato study looked at both public expenditures and benefits, which offset some of the gain, while the CAP study looked only at the benefits.)

"We have two very different organizations coming to very similar conclusions, and that is that enforcement-only is a policy that has not only failed, it poses significant costs on Americans as taxpayers and on our economy," said [Daniel Griswold](#), a Cato economist who attended CAP's unveiling today. "If Congress and the president want to create better jobs and stimulate the economy, then comprehensive immigration reform, including a temporary worker program, should be very high on their agenda."

This logic — that legalization will help fix the economy, not harm it, and will be good for both the American worker and the undocumented one — runs counter to the main opposition argument that now is a terrible time to tackle this problem. Unemployed American workers can ill-afford competition for jobs in a recession, opponents say. And our cash-strapped government can barely afford to dole out social services to the already legal.

The Cato [study](#) found that the economic benefits of legalization would overwhelm any associated costs and concluded that American households in 2019 would have a \$180 billion gain in welfare as a result (over keeping current policy). The CAP study, which was authored by University of California, Los Angeles, professor [Raul Hinojosa Ojeda](#), estimates that in 2019, comprehensive reform would lead to \$189 billion more in GDP (a broader measure than just welfare of U.S. households).

The CAP study was modeled in part after the actual gains that followed from the 1986 passage of the [Immigration Reform and Control Act](#), which legalized some undocumented workers at the time but made no provisions for the immigrants who followed (a mistake both organizations urge Congress to avoid this time).

Both studies seek to underscore the idea that legalizing immigrants would benefit not just them, but all workers, raising the wage floor for both and increasing consumption and tax revenue in the process. Legislation to create a legal path for unauthorized workers would invariably have to consider the status of their dependents, people who would individually bring more of an immediate burden than a benefit to the U.S. economy. The Cato analysis, though, suggests such costs would still be obscured by the benefits of bringing so many workers out of the shadows.

The studies also try to debunk another objection dear to legalization opponents.

"The problems that an unemployed worker in Detroit — whether it's a welder or an auto worker — the

problems that unemployed worker faces can't be resolved by removing an immigrant laborer in central California who is engaged in agricultural work or is a landscaper," said Benjamin Johnson, executive director of the [American Immigration Council](#), which collaborated on the CAP report through its Immigration Policy Center. "Confusing the issue of immigration with that in a simplistic way not only distorts reality, but I think it's a distraction from the real challenges we face in terms of those issues."

Warned Hinojosa: "The real danger at this point is that we basically get it wrong in terms of the relationship between immigration reform and unemployment."

The two issues will undoubtedly be hard to decouple in the public imagination as Congress takes up immigration this year. And therein lies one of the biggest obstacles ahead: If there's one public policy debate even more impervious than health care to fact, logic and reason, it's immigration reform.

Maybe the economists on the left agree with the economists on the right, which should be a good sign. But consensus economic modeling data makes for dull cable TV — and political theater — around a topic that will mostly be debated outside of think tanks.

"Even though it is often a fact-free debate," Johnson said after CAP's press conference had concluded, "all you can do is to continue to shine a spotlight on the economic facts regarding immigration reform and what's at stake, and hope ultimately that making those kind of facts known will make it more difficult for politicians to ignore them."

*[Sign up for our free e-newsletter.](#)*

*Are you on Facebook? [Become our fan.](#)*

*Follow us on [Twitter.](#)*

*[Add our news to your site.](#)*