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Report Extols Economic Benefits of Immigration Reform

By David Adams | PODER Magazine

Comprehensive immigration reform that creates a pathway to legalization would help American workers and the U.S. economy.

Legalizing undocumented workers via comprehensive immigration reform would yield \$1.5 trillion to the U.S. GDP over a ten year period, generate billions in additional tax revenue and consumer spending, as well as create hundreds of thousands of jobs, according to a [groundbreaking new study](#) by [Dr. Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda](#) from the University of California.

The report, [Raising the Floor for American Workers: The Economic Benefits of Comprehensive Immigration Reform](#), co-released by the Immigration Policy Center and Center for American Progress, finds that legalization of undocumented migrants historically tends to raise the wages of all workers, and could serve as a vital tool to help revitalize the nation's economy.

"We need to reinforce the notion how immigration reform is critically important to the nation's economic future," said [Hinajosa-Ojeda](#), founding director of the [North American Integration and Development Center at UCLA in Los Angeles](#).

The report comes on the eve of a major debate brewing in [Congress](#) over [comprehensive immigration reform](#) expected to be presented soon by the Obama administration. But many advocates of legalization are skeptical that significant immigration reform can pass in the current economic climate with more than one in ten people out of work. Many conservatives argue that immigration policy needs to be tightened rather than relaxed, in order to protect jobs. Deporting foreign migrants who entered the country illegally would potentially open up existing jobs to the unemployed Americans, they argue.

But a string of recent reports contradict this perception, including the UCLA study.

"The results of this report are frankly startling," said Angela Kelley, Vice President for Immigration Policy and Advocacy at the Center for American Progress. Comprehensive immigration reform that creates a path to legalization would have an "overall positive ripple effect" throughout the whole economy," she added. An alternative policy of deporting undocumented allies would cause a \$2.5 trillion drain over 10 years, she noted.

The report is based on historical data over the last two decades following implementation of the most recent major immigration overhaul by Congress in 1986, Hinajosa-Ojeda said. It found that wages increased 15-20% over that time. Legalizing undocumented workers allows them to increase their productivity by giving them greater confidence to fully exploit their skills in the workplace, Hinajosa-Ojeda said. By reducing the pool of cheap, easily exploited, undocumented labor, legalization also pushed up wages nationally.

"We think these are solid numbers that have to be a wake up call to folks on Capitol Hill as the debate begins," Hinajosa-Ojeda said.

Despite the current down economy, analysts point out that previous legislation in the 1980s was also passed in the midst of hard times. [The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986](#) led to the legalization of 2.7 million "illegal" workers, but did not lead to greater unemployment. Wages also rose 15-20% in the following two decades, the study found. Data also suggests that a policy of mass deportation of migrants in the 1930s worsened the economic crisis.

The latest report showed "it's not simply hypothetical" to argue in favor of the economic benefits of [immigration reform](#), said Heather Boushey, Senior Economist at the [Center for American Progress](#). "We have prior experience from just a couple of decades ago. We did it once, we can do it again." The data is hard to argue against said Daniel Griswold, Director of the [Center for Trade Policy Studies at the conservative Cato Institute](#).

Cracking down on immigration was costly and has not worked, he noted. "We've tried enforcement and it only has failed," he said.

But immigration reform had to look beyond legalization, he argued, and needs to address future migrant flows. One option might be a temporary worker program, which has been used in the past. "Otherwise there is no provision to meet future workforce needs."