

## **The Wise Way to Stem Illegal Immigration**

Gary S. Becker. Business Week. New York: April 26, 2004, Iss. 3880; pg. 28

Many young men and women want to come to the U.S. and Western Europe from poor nations such as Mexico, Morocco, Poland, and Turkey. Since rich countries do not want so many immigrants, the result is large numbers of illegal entrants, who pose a fundamental challenge to immigration policies. Is it fair or wise to place strict controls on legal immigration when little is done to stem illegal entry?

There aren't many good ways to resolve this challenge. I believe that the best politically feasible option is to increase substantially the number of legal immigrants. Preference should be given to younger persons who will get jobs and are likely to make a long-term commitment to the country, such as the many men and women who want to study at American universities. Even unskilled young immigrants can easily get jobs because few native-born Americans are willing to take such positions as farm laborers, dishwashers, or gardeners.

I also support a more radical step: giving priority to legal immigrants from Canada, Mexico, and other nations with whom the U.S. has free-trade agreements. Freer movement of people is one aspect of more open trade. Moreover, giving preference to citizens of free-trade partners would make more nations eager to enter into such accords with the U.S.

UNDER THE PRESENT SYSTEM in America and Europe, illegal immigration continues to grow despite highly vocal political opposition from the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Jorg Haider in Austria, and Patrick J. Buchanan in the U.S. Some visitors violate their tourist and student visas by working and staying longer than they should, while others illegally cross the borders of richer nations to find better-paying jobs. The U.S. has by far the largest number of illegal residents, estimated at more than 7 million, most from Mexico. To stanch the flow, a 1986 law authorized the feds to beef up patrols along the Mexican border. The budget of the Border Patrol unit of the Immigration & Naturalization Service increased sixfold, making this one of the fastest-growing units in the government. The 1986 act also provides penalties for employers that hire illegal aliens without checking their credentials, although this has been weakly enforced.

Despite the patrols, about 600,000 people succeed in entering the U.S. illegally each year, even though the number of illegals apprehended annually has risen to more than 1 million. Beefed-up border patrols along the Mexican border have been ineffective because only a small fraction of those apprehended are punished. The vast majority of them are simply sent back to Mexico, or wherever they came from. Most of these try to cross again, often succeeding on the second or third try.

To get past the border guards, immigrants from Mexico hire smugglers -- called coyotes - - to guide them through crossing points. A study by Christina Gathmann at the University

of Chicago shows that smugglers' services are not expensive, even to poor Mexicans. They cost about \$400, or two weeks' earnings in the U.S. for most illegal immigrants, primarily because few smugglers are caught and punished.

Jail terms and other sanctions could deter illegal entry, but democratic nations apparently cannot bring themselves to crack down on immigrants whose only crime is that they want to come and work. This also explains frequent amnesty programs, such as the 1987 U.S. ruling that granted permanent-resident status to most persons who came before January, 1982, had jobs, and lived continuously in the U.S.

My suggestion to expand the number of legal immigrants is better than President George W. Bush's recently proposed compromise between pro- and anti-immigration groups that would allow illegal immigrants who continue to have jobs to stay up to six years. The President's plan would be useful if the six-year limit were enforced. But would Americans be willing to return immigrants to Mexico or elsewhere if they worked hard for six years and made useful contributions to the country? In all likelihood, they would receive permanent status.

Expanding legal immigration is a more efficient and fairer policy than the present half-hearted enforcement of laws against the large number of illegal entrants. By also giving priority to immigrants from nations with whom the U.S. has free-trade agreements, the legal movement of human capital across borders would begin to resemble more the movements of goods, services, and physical and financial capital.