

## ***Immigration as a Moral Issue***

### **A Six Week Introductory Curriculum**

**for the 2010-2014 Congregational Study/Action Issue**

**of the Unitarian Universalist Association**

Delegates at the 2010 General Assembly in Minneapolis, MN selected "Immigration as a Moral Issue" to be the 2010—2014 Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA).

This study guide is meant to help Unitarian Universalist congregations and individuals engage in our new CSAI. This PDF file (155 pages) contains Section I, which is organized as a six week curriculum, intended to give a broad overview to this complex issue. Section II lists additional organizations and resources that might be helpful to more deeply study and act on this issue. It can be found here:

<http://www.uua.org/justice/issuesprocess/currentissues/immigration/studyguide/index.shtml>

(Multiple views are represented in the resource list; inclusion should not be interpreted as endorsement by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.)

[Week One](#): Understanding the Causes of Migration

[Week Two](#): History of Immigration in the U.S.

[Week Three](#): Economics of (Im)migration

[Week Four](#): Security, Enforcement, and Human Rights

[Week Five](#): Who Benefits from a Broken System?

[Week Six](#): Seeking Solutions

# Week Three

## Economic Pressures Around (Im)migration

### Goals

- To “experience” the standard of living disparities between the U.S. and Mexico (and by extension, other parts of the world)
- To see the working conditions under which migrant workers toil

### Learning Objectives

- Understand the economic forces that drive immigration
- Understand the deleterious effects forced low-wage labor has on the working conditions of everyone who works in the U.S., both with documentation and without

### Handouts for Week Three

- 3.1 Shop Til You Drop on a Mexican Wage
- 3.2 NAFTA and Immigration
- 3.3 Effects on Worker Conditions
- 3.4 Stories of Farm workers
- 3.5 Immigration Myths and Facts, from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

### Workshop-at-a-Glance

1. 5” Chalice Lighting and Opening Reading
2. 10” Check-in
3. 15” Activity 1: Comparing Shopping Lists
4. 25” Activity 2: “Focal Point: Standards of Living”
5. 20” Activity 3: Cost Benefit Analysis
6. 10” Debrief
7. 5” Closing

### Chalice Lighting and Opening Reading

Show me the suffering of the most miserable;  
So I will know my people's plight.  
Free me to pray for others;  
For you are present in every person.  
Help me take responsibility for my own life;  
So that I can be free at last.  
Grant me courage to serve others;  
For in service there is true life.  
Give me honesty and patience;  
So that the Spirit will be alive among us.  
Let the Spirit flourish and grow;  
So that we will never tire of the struggle.  
Let us remember those who have died for justice;  
For they have given us life.  
Help us love even those who hate us;  
So we can change the world  
Amen

—Cesar Chavez, “*Prayer of the Farm Workers’ Struggle*”

## **Check-in**

Participants are invited to share where they are spiritually/emotionally with respect to the class.

## **Activity 1: Comparing Shopping Lists**

Have participants break into small groups and compare their shopping spree results. What things jumped out at them? (Note: If the overall group is small, facilitators can just do the exercise with the overall group.) After 5-10", report back to the larger group. In light of the shopping results and handout 3.2 on NAFTA's effects on the Mexican economy, have people's thoughts changed about Mexican immigration to the U.S. If so, why? If not, why not?

## **Activity 2: "Focal Point: Standards of Living"**

This activity depends on the ability to show a [23 minute internet video \(http://bit.ly/mPFOvh\)](http://bit.ly/mPFOvh) during the session (Note: make sure to hit the full screen button in the lower right hand corner of the video for easier viewing.), which means internet access and a laptop or other way to display the video. (Best to set this up before the session starts.)

If viewing the video during the session is not possible, and we recognize that this will be the case for many congregations, then facilitators are encouraged to lead a discussion around handout 3.4

## **Activity 3: Cost Benefit Analysis**

According to handout 3.3 from Interfaith Worker Justice, the presence of large numbers of undocumented immigrant workers hurts all workers, but it is fact that their undocumented status makes them vulnerable to exploitation that is the problem, not their presence itself. According to handout 3.5 from the ACLU, immigration has a positive net effect on the federal level but state and local levels do feel a financial impact, since they are the ones who provide health care and education. With the group, make a list of pluses and minuses regarding immigration, based on the readings. What other benefits and strains can people come up with that are not part of the readings? How do people feel about it overall?

## **Debrief**

Participants are invited to share anything that strongly moved them during the session.

## **Closing Reading and Extinguishing the Chalice**

Bless the hands of the people of the earth,  
The hands that plant the seed,  
The hands that bind the harvest,  
The hands that carry the burden of life.  
Soften the hands of the oppressor and  
Strengthen the hands of the oppressed.  
Bless the hands of the workers,  
Bless the hands of those in power above them  
That the measure they deal will be tempered  
With justice and compassion. Amen.

*—Farm Worker Blessing Prayer*

### **Homework for Week Four**

- 4.1 Militarization of the Border
- 4.2 What Happens When a Town Implodes? —the Postville Raid
- 4.3 Housing Immigration Detainees in a Prison
- 4.4 Hazing Arizona—Sheriff Arpaio and the 287(g) agreement
- 4.5 Mahmud’s Story—A Family Torn Apart

### **Further Study**

To explore the topics covered in this session, as well as related topics, see the resources listed in [section II.C \(PDF, 11 pages\)](#) of the study guide.

### Handout 3.1 – Shop Til You Drop on a Mexican Wage

(To be completed before Session Three)

Visit <http://www.ueinternational.org/shop/>.

Pick a profession to compare. Then choose six products from the “store.”

Record the results. Do this three times for different occupations.

	Wage in U.S.	Wage in Mexico
Occupation:		

product	Time in U.S.	Time in Mexico
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
Total		

	Wage in U.S.	Wage in Mexico
Occupation:		

product	Time in U.S.	Time in Mexico
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
Total		

	Wage in U.S.	Wage in Mexico
Occupation:		

product	Time in U.S.	Time in Mexico
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
Total		

## Handout 3.2 – NAFTA and Immigration

By Kat Liu

Inspired Faith, Effective Action, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

(<http://socialjustice.blogs.uua.org/2010/10/18/nafta-and-immigration/>)

### ***A Tidal Wave of Migration***

Last week we learned that people have been migrating freely across the U.S.-Mexico border since there was a border, and they continued to do so even after the border was created. In fact, the U.S. has a long history of relying on Mexican migrant labor. It officially started with the Bracero program of the mid-1940s, where Mexican farm workers were “invited” in to work on U.S. farms that were short-handed due to the war, but migrant farm work had been going on unofficially well before that. Migration across the border to look for work is nothing new. However, it is also true that the influx of Mexicans into the U.S. looking for work has jumped dramatically in the last couple of decades. Pundits are actually not exaggerating when they describe a relative tidal wave of immigration that is stressing public services and changing the demographics of many U.S. states. In the early 1990s, Mexican migration to the United States was less than 400,000 a year. By 2007 it was 500,000 a year. As Alejandro Portes wrote for [ssrc.org](http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Portes/) in 2006 (<http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/Portes/>):

*“From a purely regional presence in the west and southwest, it has become a truly national phenomenon. States that had barely a handful of “Hispanics” in 1990 now count a sizable Hispanic population. In Georgia, for example, the Latin-origin population went from 1.7 percent in 1990 to 5.3 percent in 2000, a 312 percent increase due to an inflow of 300,000 persons, overwhelmingly from Mexico. Cities like Charlotte, North Carolina, whose “Hispanics” in 1990 consisted of a few wealthy Cuban and South American professionals, now have upwards of 80,000, mostly undocumented Mexican laborers.”*

What is causing this massive migration? Many U.S.Americans – regardless of political leaning – operate under the assumption that everyone else in the world would prefer to live in the U.S. but were not fortunate enough to have all been born here. This belief is even stronger towards those we perceive to be living in “un(der)developed” countries. Starting from that assumption, some seek to restrict the number of foreign-born people who can immigrate, fearing that a shortage of resources will hurt their own standard of living. Others are more sympathetic, believing that as it was chance that determined who would be lucky enough to be born in the U.S, the least we can do is to let people in who make the effort to come for a “better lifestyle.” Yet both groups of people are laboring under false assumptions.

It is true that there many people from all over the world want to come to the U.S. But not everyone who comes here really wants to. Many would actually have

preferred to stay in their own country. Emigrating from one's home country often means leaving behind family and culture, having to adopt a second language, and a loss (or dramatic shift) of one's identity... It is not an insignificant consideration to think of one's children growing up with a different national identity than one's own. Many here in the U.S. were not attracted by the lure of "America" and its fabled gold-paved streets so much as they were driven out of their home countries by extreme poverty. To understand this is the key to developing public policy that humanely and effectively stems the flood of humanity coming to the U.S., as it means that we must do more than just put more guards at the border and instead address the reasons why people are so desperate to cross it.

### ***Sold A False Bill of Goods***

When the presidents of Canada, the U.S., and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, it was supposed to benefit the economies and workers of all three nations. "Free trade" was also supposed to alleviate Mexican immigration into the U.S. – which had been an issue by the mid-90s but was nothing like it is now - by boosting the Mexican economy and creating enough job opportunities to keep its people there. Instead, it has done the exact opposite.

As U.S. American workers know, NAFTA had a catastrophic effect on them. 800,000 to 1 million jobs that used to be done in the U.S. were "out-sourced" to factories (maquiladoras) just south of the border and to other countries. Entire communities were devastated by plant closures and mass layoffs. It may have seemed to U.S. workers that our government sold them out to benefit the workers of other countries. However, as bad as NAFTA has been for U.S. workers, it has been far worse for the people of Mexico.

Mexico's economy, which had consisted mainly of small self-sufficient farms and jobs in state-owned industries, was supposed to have been "modernized" into a free-market economy.

What happened when the market became "free" was that U.S. corn flooded Mexico, increasing from 2.7 to 6.1 million metric tons as of 1997. The price of Mexican-grown corn dropped by 70%. Mexican subsistence farmers, most of whom were indigenous farmers who had been on their land for generations, could not compete with U.S. government-subsidized, factory-farmed corn. The expectation was that Mexican farmers would "transition" from growing corn, to which they were accustomed, to growing strawberries and vegetables for U.S. consumption. However, the "foreign investment" that was supposed to fund such a transition never happened. Coupled with the "free-market" lifting of restrictions on the sale of peasant (ie – indigenous) land, two million farmers and their families were thus driven off their lands. Desperation forced everyone except the

elderly and young children to leave their villages in search of work, thus becoming migrants. Entire villages were decimated.

On the manufacturing end, the foreign company-owned factories, or maquiladoras, were supposed to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Indeed, U.S. businesses flooded into Mexico with NAFTA to take advantage of the cheap labor, leaving workers in the States high and dry. However, the maquiladoras never ventured further into Mexico than within 300 miles of the border. The Mexican government was supposed to build roads and infrastructure for more companies to move south, but a financial crisis just months after NAFTA went into effect dashed all hopes of that. Meanwhile, Mexican manufacturers who were once protected by tariffs could not compete with U.S. products and were driven out of business, taking jobs with them. At the same time, many companies who had moved their manufacturing from the U.S. to Mexico subsequently moved their factories to even cheaper localities (ie – where they would pay workers even less). A free market free-for-all. As a result, jobs in the manufacturing sector declined from a high of 4.1 million in 2000 to 3.5 million in 2004. Even where such jobs were available, they usually paid close to the Mexican minimum wage of U.S. \$1/hour. In 1975, the average Mexican wage was 23% of the average U.S. manufacturing wage; by 2002, Mexican wages were only 12%, amounting to about \$1,600 a year. For many migrant workers, one hour of the California minimum wage is more money than they make for an entire day in Mexico.

Since NAFTA was enacted in 1994:

- Economic growth in Mexico has been anemic, averaging less than 3.5 percent per year
- Mexico has created only about half of the one million new jobs needed per year for young adult Mexicans entering the job market. Thus, unemployment has skyrocketed.
- Half of the labor force works at improvised jobs in the “informal economy,” a figure ten percent higher than before NAFTA.
- Mexican worker productivity has increased by 45% yet their real wages have dropped by 22%.
- Of the 110 million people in Mexico, some 67 million live in poverty with incomes less than \$3 a day. (13 million of them on less than \$1 a day.) That is 19 million more Mexicans living in poverty than before NAFTA.
- By the Mexican government’s own estimates, 82% of the working population has less income than what is needed for “basic subsistence”

### ***Open Markets and Closed Borders***

All of this is just part of the larger problem of globalization. If goods move freely across borders that means that jobs do too. Think about it. By sending tons of U.S.-grown corn to Mexico for sale in its markets, the demand for Mexican-grown

corn is lowered and the demand for American-grown corn is raised. That means fewer farmers are needed in Mexico while more (low-wage) factory farm workers are needed in the U.S. “Free-market” forces are causing this movement of both goods and jobs across borders. Despite that, we do not allow the free movement of workers across those same borders. Mexican farmers know that if they go north there are jobs there waiting for them. (Jobs that are in essence degraded versions of the jobs that were taken from them but pay better than anything they can get in Mexico now.). Yet, they are at the same time told that they cannot legally go north.

If you were in their situation, what would you do?

Note: For the sake of clarity, we have been exclusively discussing NAFTA and its effects on Mexico. However, other countries further south of Mexico have even weaker economies. Despite the obvious failings of NAFTA, it has been used as the model for trade agreements with “developing” Latin American countries, including CAFTA (United States-Dominican Republic- Central American Free Trade Agreement), which was enacted in 2005, and free-trade agreement proposals with Panama, Columbia and Peru. Agreements with Panama and Columbia are still in process; the agreement with Peru was passed in 2007.

## Handout 3.3 - Effect on Worker Conditions

What is the effect of millions of undocumented workers on working conditions in the U.S.?

Excerpted from Interfaith Worker Justice’s “For You Were Once A Stranger.”

In the latest wave of immigration, when much focus is placed on undocumented workers from Mexico and Central and South American countries, conflicting interests and fears are expressed.

- **Many businesses want access to pools of immigrants as a cheap and reliable source of labor.** Undocumented workers, who fear being reported to immigration authorities, are less inclined to complain to their employers or to authorities about labor abuses than are workers who are legal residents of the U.S. Therefore, they are more likely to accept sub-standard wages.
- **Native born U. S. workers have seen their standard of living decline steadily since the late 1970s,** for a host of related reasons: the decline of the manufacturing sector and outsourcing of jobs, falling rates of unionization, and the widening of the income gap between the wealthy and the rest of us. Many blame their problems on immigrant workers, who have become more prominent in many industries—services, hospitality, construction, garment manufacturing, agriculture—as wage levels and standards have fallen. In fact, research has shown that low-wage workers are negatively impacted by competition with undocumented immigrants.<sup>27</sup>

The current immigration “system” reflects these contradictory interests. On the one hand, workplace raids by ICE are sending a message that the U.S. is getting “tough” on undocumented immigrants and employers who hire them. (In fact, unscrupulous employers call ICE on themselves as a way to avoid paying their workers).<sup>28</sup> But outside of a radical fringe such as the Minuteman and some talk show hosts, there is not a clamor for wholesale deportation. Some industries would collapse if unauthorized immigrants were removed from the workforce. Undocumented workers make up less than five percent of the U.S. workforce.

The following table shows that these workers are heavily concentrated in occupations that demand hard labor and are often poorly paid.

Undocumented Workers’ Share of Selected Occupations, 2005 <sup>29</sup>	
Occupation	Share
Total, Civilian Labor Force (with occupation)	4.9%
Insulation workers	36%
Miscellaneous agricultural workers	29%
Roofers	29%
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers and tapers	28%

Helpers, construction trades	27%
Butchers and other meat, poultry and fish processing workers	27%
Pressers, textile, garment and related materials	26%
Grounds maintenance workers	25%
Construction laborers	25%
Brick masons, block masons and stone masons	25%
Dishwashers	23%
Helpers—production workers	23%
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	22%

Increased enforcement activity results in family separations and it drives immigrant further underground. But ICE raids and border patrols cannot stop the influx of undocumented immigrants, which is part of a global phenomenon created by trade and foreign policies that push people from their homes and countries and pull them to areas where a livelihood can be eked out. A new system is needed that can help immigrants gain legal status and can protect native-born workers from unfair competition.

- Undocumented workers compete with legal permanent residents and native-born and naturalized citizens on an uneven playing ground.** This harms all workers and lowers standards for everybody, to the advantage of unscrupulous employers. Because undocumented workers are under constant threat of deportation, they accept inferior wages and conditions and cannot effectively assert their rights in the workplace. **The problem isn't with the workers, who live, work and pay taxes in the U.S., but with their legal status.**
- Guest workers and work visa programs replace permanent jobs with benefits with temporary jobs without benefits or the legal protections guaranteed to most U.S. workers.** Importing workers from various countries is nothing new. During World War II, the U.S. developed the Bracero program to bring Mexican workers for temporary work all over the country, mostly as agricultural laborers. Although the Bracero program ended in 1965, the importation of temporary workers under various off-shoot programs has continued. Guest workers come from many countries and are employed in multiple industries and professions, from farm labor and meat processing plants to nurses and high-tech jobs.

Guest worker programs create a second-class workforce with fewer rights and lower wages. Large guest worker programs give corporations the ability to bring in a new, low-wage workforce while undercutting recent immigrants and native-born U.S. workers. Some guest workers such as those in the *H-2A* (agricultural) and *H-2B* (nonagricultural) visa programs are not allowed the freedom to leave abusive employers and secure other jobs. Employers can fire and deport H-2A workers if they demand freedom of association for higher wages or better working conditions. H-2A workers are not entitled to disclosure about job terms when they are recruited. Even H-1B visa holders, who have college degrees and specialized training, are exploited, frequently working for lower wages than their

American counterparts. But American citizens and legal permanent residents are not even allowed to apply for H-1B advertised jobs. What ever happened to the American concept of equal opportunity?

The myth behind these programs is that there are jobs that American workers won't or can't do. Just as U.S. corporations claim they cannot find American workers to work in shoe or electronics factories and must move operations overseas, so companies import workers rather than pay prevailing wages and allow full labor and workplace protections. Employers who advocate for guest worker programs want a workforce that can be paid less than one hired from local communities in the U.S.

References:

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Mishel, et al., Economic Policy Institute, "The State of Working America 2004/2005," ILR Press, pp. 187-188.

<sup>28</sup> Interfaith Worker Justice, "Working on Faith: A Faithful Response to Worker Abuse in New Orleans," available at [www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org).

<sup>29</sup> Adapted from Jeffrey Passell, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.," op. cit.

## Handout 3.4 - Farmworkers

Nearly 80% percent of farm workers are migrant workers. Their back-breaking labor brings cheap fruits and vegetables to our tables. Yet their working conditions are some of the worst.

Before attending week three, if possible, please watch this two minute video on farm workers, created by the National Farm Worker Ministry:

<http://vimeo.com/7604731>

### **With or Without Papers—The Same Life in a Labor Camp**

By David Bacon. New America Media:Immigration, Aug 31, 2010

(<http://bit.ly/aF2iMU>)

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA - On a ranch north of the Bay Area, several dozen men live in a labor camp. When there's work they pick apples and grapes or prune trees and vines. This year, however, the ranch has had much less work, as the economic recession hits California fields. State unemployment is over 12%, but unemployment in rural counties is always twice what it is in urban ones. Despite these statistics, however, unemployment among farm workers is largely hidden.

In the case of these workers, it's hidden within the walls of the camp, far from the view of those who count the state's jobless. Because they work from day to day, or week to week, there are simply periods when there's no work at all, and they stay in the barracks.

In the past, the ranch's workers were mostly undocumented immigrants. In the last several years, however, the owner has begun bringing workers from Mexico under the H2-A guest worker program. While there are differences in the experiences of people without papers and guest workers, some basic aspects of life are the same. For the last several weeks, all the workers in the camp have been jobless, and neither undocumented workers nor guest workers can legally collect unemployment benefits. Everyone's living on what they've saved. And since the official total of the state's unemployed is based on counting those receiving benefits, none of the men here figure into California's official unemployment rate.

The camp residents share other similarities. Poverty in Mexico forced them all to leave to support their families. Living in the camp, they do the same jobs out in the fields. All of them miss their families and homes. And that home, as they see it, is in Mexico. Here, in the U.S., they don't feel part of the community that surrounds them.

A permanent resident visa, or "green card," would allow them to bring their families, and perhaps eventually to become integrated into the community. But for people coming from Mexico to look for work in California fields, green cards are not available. Their only alternative is what they call "walking through the mountains" -- that is, crossing without papers -- or signing up as a guest worker. In addition, as one man points out, because farmers are in the U.S. during planting season, the fields they'd normally cultivate at home go unplanted.

Some of their options as unemployed workers are different, however, because of their different immigration status. Ironically, in one way, guest workers have a disadvantage they don't share with the undocumented. Guest workers have a visa, but they can only work for

the rancher or contractor who brought them to the United States. If they're out of work and leave the ranch to look for a job with another employer, they violate the terms of their visa and can be deported.

Undocumented workers, however, can and do look for jobs outside the ranch when work there gets slow. The dangers of deportation and working without a visa hang over their heads every day they're in the United States.

JOSE CUEVAS:

I'm 38 years old, and I come from Leon, Guanajuato, where there are a lot of factories making shoes. I spent 10 years working in those factories as a cutter. If you work a 10-hour day, you can make 1,100 pesos (about \$100) a week. That's not enough to support a family, even there. And I have three kids, who are still living there with my wife.

I came to the U.S. because of the economic pressure of trying to provide for them. I wanted them to get an education and just eat well, just so they'd be healthy. We all felt terrible when I decided to come here nine years ago. The kids were little -- they didn't really understand. But when they got older, they'd ask me why I had to be gone so long.

It's been five years since I've been able to go home. I came without any papers, just crossing the border in the mountains. When I think about my friends with papers, I wish I'd had the chance. But the truth is, I couldn't come that way.

There always used to be times when you could go back to Mexico. But it's too difficult now. To begin with, it costs about \$5,000 now to cross the border coming back. And the border has become very dangerous. It's not like it was before. If you leave, you're not sure you'll be able to get back, even walking through the mountains.

So I've been trapped here for five years. But I tried to take advantage of it, and not think too much about going back. I work here in the grapes and the apples. I knew about the work here from my wife's brothers. Years ago, a lot of people came here from Leon. Now I'm the only one. Lots of those other folks left, and I was the only one who stayed.

This year it's been harder. I've hardly worked on the ranch this year -- just a couple of months. I looked for other work, but there wasn't a lot. In January and February, I went to the day labor center near here, and got work pruning apple trees. I'm very grateful to them.

Even when there wasn't work on the ranch here, we could work other places and still live in the camp. They never charged us rent. When they have work, they expect you to work for them. You're living in their housing. Some of the jobs are paid by piece-rate. When they pay by the hour, it's about \$9.85 per hour.

Sometimes, if we're working, we eat meat every day. But when you're not working, you eat tortillas and salt. That's the normal thing. Before coming here, when I was living in Mexico, we didn't eat meat very often.

When you're here, you're always thinking about Mexico. This is going to be my last year. I've decided to stay in Mexico, and to try not to think about coming here anymore. I've put some money into a house and a little land. I'll go back to work in those shoe factories. I still know how to do all the work there. We'll suffer economically, but I hope we'll be OK. Who knows?

Here everything is just work. It's all very serious. Mexico feels more free. Living here, it's not

your country.

My oldest son is studying psychology, and will go to the university in Leon. He has a good future because he studies, and I support him. I hope for a good future for my other kids too, and I'm hoping that they'll have a future in Mexico. I don't want them to leave. With more education, I hope they won't have to.

RODRIGO HUERTA:

I'm 21 -- not married yet. I come from Tlazezalco in Michoacan, where my father works in the fields. My grandfather has some land, and so his sons rent from him.

My father worked in the U.S. many years ago, in the 80s, before I was born. He just worked one year and never went back. Then my brother went to Atlanta eight years ago.

I actually never planned to come here. I always said, I'm not going. But now look. Here I am. I have a dream -- to build a house, get married, and have a family. I have someone in mind, but you can't rush it. She told me to go, so I'm hoping she'll wait for me.

I never wanted to come to the U.S. by walking through the mountains. But one Christmas Eve, my aunt asked me if I'd ever thought about coming here. At first I wasn't that enthusiastic, but then I began thinking about it.

Every Christmas, she goes back to Michoacan. She said, "They're hiring people, and they asked me to give them a hand." So they brought me here, on an H2-A visa. Now I've been coming this way for three years.

The bosses here on the ranch arrange for the visa. Then the foreman meets us at the border. We have to pay our own expenses to get there from our town. They pay for transportation and food from the border to the ranch here. The first two times we came in at Nogales, and this last time through Tijuana.

The foreman takes us to the appointment with the consulate, where they tell you if you've been approved or not. If they don't approve you, you have to go back home. This last time, two of us weren't approved. The consulate asked them if they had experience working in the fields. They'd worked in factories. They said you need two months experience working in the fields to come here.

The visa only lasts for six months. We're only supposed to work on this ranch. I guess we could work other places but you'd be breaking the agreement, so it's better not to risk it. But we haven't had work here for several weeks.

In the last two years, I really haven't made a lot of money. But the pay is better here. It's easier to save, because you're not spending so much. In six months, you can save what it might take you two years at home.

In my town there aren't any factories so the work is all in the fields, but there's not much work there. Some weeks you work three days, and in other weeks, you don't work at all. The economy is bad all over. Here you can eat meat every day if you want. The way things are in Mexico, you can't buy meat every day.

To me, I just have a temporary life here. I have friends here who invite me to play football, but it's not a real team. I could never join one, because I'm not here during part of the football

season. So I just play with friends.

Here I'm always living against the clock. I'm not here to make a home. That's just the way my life is here. Temporary. In reality, my home is my town, Tlaxezalco. I wouldn't trade it for any other.

ANTONIO PEREZ:

I came here because of the poverty. There's work at home, but just a little. I rent a little land on which I plant corn and garbanzos, and raise some animals. But you can't actually live on the money you make farming. It just helps a little.

I'm always working in other jobs, in someone else's fields, or on a hog farm. When I work for someone else, I get paid by the day. When I work for myself, it depends on the price of what I'm able to grow, or how much I get for an animal I raise. The corn price has been the same for a while -- 70 or 80 pesos. Sometimes, you can sell it, but other times you just feed it to the animals.

There are times when my family can survive this way. But if you have a big family, it doesn't really give you anywhere near enough money.

So my aunt got me to come here on an H2-A. We'll see how it works out. I haven't decided if it's worth it yet. We're not here for that long, but you always want to be with your family.

I'm not planting anything this year either, because I'm here during the planting season.

## Immigration Myths and Facts — January 2008

**MYTH: Immigrants are a drain on our social services.**

**FACT: By paying taxes and Social Security, immigrants contribute far more to government coffers than they use in social services.**

In its landmark report published in 1997—arguably the most thorough national study to date of immigration’s fiscal impacts—the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that on average, immigrants generate public revenue that exceeds their public costs over time—approximately \$80,000 more in taxes than they receive in state, federal and local benefits over their life times.<sup>1</sup> This same conclusion was reached in 2007 by the Council of Economic Advisers in their report to the Executive Office of the President where they state that “the long-run impact of immigration on public budgets is likely to be positive,” and agree with the NRC report’s view that “only a forward-looking projection of taxes and government spending can offer an accurate picture of the long-run fiscal consequences of admitting new immigrants.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, most non-citizens are not even eligible for the majority of welfare programs unless they are legal permanent residents and have resided in the United States legally for at least five years. This includes benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SSI, Medicaid, and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Moreover, according to government reports, noncitizens are much less likely than citizens to use the benefits for which they are eligible. For example, immigrants, especially the undocumented, tend to use medical services much less than the average American.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the average immigrant uses less than half the dollar amount of health care services as the average native-born citizen.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the claim that immigrants account for high rates of emergency room (ER) visits is refuted by research; in fact, communities with high rates of ER usage tend to have relatively small percentages of immigrant residents.

Likewise, according to Department of Agriculture reports, noncitizens who are eligible for food stamps are significantly less likely to use them than are all other individuals who are eligible for the program. For example, about 45 percent of eligible noncitizens received food stamps in 2002, compared to almost 60 percent of eligible individuals overall.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the fiscal impact from immigration is felt at the state and local levels. The Council of Economic Advisors points out in its report to the Executive Office of the President that “the positive fiscal impact tends to accrue at the federal level, but the net costs tend to be concentrated at the state and local level,” which bear primary responsibility for providing not only health care but education.<sup>6</sup>

Still, according to recent studies from a number of cities and states—including the states of Arizona, Texas, Minnesota, California, New York, North Carolina and Arkansas, and cities or counties of Chicago and Santa Clara—while the cost of educating the children of immigrants may be high, the overall economic benefits of immigrants to the states remain positive.<sup>7</sup> A University of Illinois study found that undocumented immigrants in the Chicago metropolitan area alone spent \$2.89 billion in 2001, stimulating an additional \$5.45 billion in total local spending and sustaining 31,908 jobs in the local economy.<sup>8</sup>

The Udall Center at the University of Arizona found that the fiscal costs of immigrants, starting with education, totaled \$1.41 billion in 2004, which, balanced against \$1.64 billion in state tax revenue attributable to immigrants as workers, resulted in a fiscal gain of \$222.6 million.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in its Special Report about undocumented immigrants in Texas, the Comptroller of

Public Accounts found that in 2005, even counting the costs associated with education, “the state revenues collected from undocumented immigrants exceed what the state spent on services, with the difference being \$424.7 million.”<sup>10</sup>

**MYTH: Immigrants have a negative impact on the economy and the wages of citizens and take jobs away from citizens.**

**FACT: Immigration has a positive effect on the American economy as a whole and on the income of native-born workers.**

In June 2007, the President’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) issued a report on “Immigration’s Economic Impact.” Based on a thorough review of the literature, the Council concluded that “immigrants not only help fuel the Nation’s economic growth, but also have an overall positive effect on the American economy as a whole and on the income of native-born American workers.”<sup>11</sup> Among the report’s key findings were that, on average, U.S. natives benefit from immigration in that immigrants tend to complement natives, not substitute for them. Immigrants have different skills, which allow higher-skilled native workers to increase productivity and thus increase their incomes. Also, as the native-born U.S. population becomes older and better educated, young immigrant workers fill gaps in the low-skilled labor markets.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to wages, in a 1997 study, the National Research Council estimated the annual wage gain due to immigration for U.S. workers to be \$10 billion each year<sup>13</sup> in 2007 CEA estimated the gain at over \$30 billion per year.<sup>14</sup> The CEA acknowledges that an increase in immigrant workers is likely to have some negative impact on the wages of low-skilled native workers, but they found this impact to be relatively small and went on to conclude that reducing immigration “would be a poorly-targeted and inefficient way to assist low-wage Americans.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to having an overall positive affect on the average wages of American workers, an increase in immigrant workers also tends to increase employment rates among the native-born. According to a Pew Hispanic Center study, between 2000 and 2004 “there was a positive correlation between the increase in the foreign-born population and the employment of native-born workers in 27 states and the District of Columbia.” These states included all the major destination states for immigrants and together they accounted for 67% of all native-born workers.<sup>16</sup> California, for example, saw an increase in wages of natives by about four percent from 1990 to 2004—a period of large influx of immigrants to the state—due to the complimentary skills of immigrant workers and an increase in the demand for tasks performed by native workers.<sup>17</sup>

**MYTH: Immigrants—particularly Latino immigrants—don’t want to learn English.**

**FACT: Immigrants, including Latino immigrants, believe they need to learn English in order to succeed in the United States, and the majority uses at least some English at work.**

Throughout our country’s history, critics of immigration have accused new immigrants of refusing to learn English and to otherwise assimilate. These charges are no truer today than they were then. As with prior waves of immigrants, there is a marked increase in English-language skills from one immigrant generation to the next.<sup>18</sup> In the first ever major longitudinal study of the children of immigrants, in 1992 Rumbaut and Portes found that “the pattern of linguistic assimilation prevails across nationalities.” The authors go on to report that “the linguistic outcomes for the third generation—the grandchildren of the present wave of immigrants—will be little different than what has been the age-old pattern in American immigration history.”<sup>19</sup>

While many first-generation Latino immigrants are unable to speak English, 88 percent of their U.S.-born adult children report that they speak English very well.<sup>20</sup> And studies show that the number rises dramatically for each subsequent generation. Furthermore, similar to other immigrants, Latinos believe that they need to learn English in order to succeed in the United States, and believe they will be discriminated against if they don't.<sup>21</sup> Most Latino immigrants (67%) report that they use at least some English at work.<sup>22</sup>

California's second-generation immigrants experience a large drop in "low levels of English proficiency" compared to first generation immigrants, from 27% to 6%, and the proportion of immigrants with high levels of English proficiency rises from 49% in the first generation to 79% in the second generation. The proportion of both Asian and Latino immigrants, who speak English exclusively rises from 10% in the first generation to 29% in the second and 94% in the third.<sup>23</sup>

Notwithstanding the current levels of English language acquisition for the newest wave of immigrants, there is a demand for English language classes that far exceeds the supply and which, if met, would greatly advance immigrants' integration into American social and cultural life.

**MYTH: Immigrants don't want to become citizens.**

**FACT: Many immigrants to the United States seek citizenship, even in the face of difficult requirements and huge backlogs that can delay the process for years.**

Most immigrants are ineligible to apply for citizenship until they have resided in the U.S. with lawful permanent resident status for five years, have passed background checks, have shown that they have paid their taxes, are of "good moral character, demonstrate knowledge of U.S. history and civics, and have the ability to understand, speak and write English." In addition, people applying for naturalization have to pay a fee, which increased by 69% in 2007 from \$400 to \$675, making it much harder for low-income immigrants to reach their dream of becoming Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these barriers, The Pew Hispanic Center's report on U.S. Census data shows that the proportion of eligible immigrants who have acquired citizenship rose to 52% in 2005, "the highest level in a quarter of a century."<sup>15</sup> In the 2007 fiscal year, DHS received 1.4 million citizenship applications—nearly double from last fiscal year<sup>26</sup>—and between June and July of 2007, naturalization applications increased 350% compared to last year.<sup>27</sup> In his testimony to Congress, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Director, Emilio Gonzalez, referred to this increase as "unprecedented in the history of immigration services in our nation."<sup>28</sup>

Yet, despite the promise by USCIS that backlogs would be eliminated, applications for naturalization can take a year and half to adjudicate and of the 1.4 applications it received in 2007, less than 660,000 have been decided.<sup>29</sup>

**MYTH: Immigrants don't pay taxes.**

**FACT: Almost all immigrants pay income taxes even though they can't benefit from most federal and state local assistance programs and all immigrants pay sales and property taxes.**

According to the 2005 *Economic Report of the President*, "more than half of all undocumented immigrants are believed to be working 'on the books'...[and]... contribute to the tax rolls but are ineligible for almost all Federal public assistance programs and most major Federal-state programs." According to the report, undocumented immigrants also "contribute money to public coffers by paying sales and property taxes (the latter are implicit in apartment rentals)."<sup>30</sup>

All immigrants (legal and undocumented) pay the same real estate taxes and the same sales and other consumption taxes as everyone else. The University of Illinois at Chicago found in 2002 that undocumented immigrants in the Chicago metro area spent \$2.89 billion annually from their earnings and these expenditures generated \$2.56 billion additional spending for the local economy.<sup>31</sup>

Legal immigrants pay income taxes and indeed many undocumented immigrants also pay income taxes or have taxes automatically withheld from their paychecks—even though they are unable to claim a tax refund, Social Security benefits or other welfare benefits that these taxes support. In the Chicago metro area for example, approximately seventy percent of undocumented workers paid payroll taxes, according to the University of Illinois study from 2002.<sup>32</sup> In the Washington Metro Region, immigrants paid the same share of the region's overall taxes (18 percent) as the rest of the population (17.4 percent), according to a 2006 Urban Institute study.<sup>33</sup> This study also points to the fact that immigrants' tax payments support both local and state services in addition to the federal government.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) holds that undocumented immigrants “account for a major portion” of the billions of dollars paid into the Social Security system—an estimated \$520 billion as of October 2005.<sup>34</sup> The SSA keeps a file called the “earnings suspense file” on all earnings with incorrect or fictitious Social Security numbers and the SSA's chief actuary stated in 2005 that “three quarters of other-than-legal immigrants pay payroll taxes.”<sup>35</sup> Their figures show that the suspense file is growing by more than \$50 billion a year, generating \$6 to 7 billion in Social Security tax revenue and about \$1.5 billion in Medicare taxes.

**MYTH: Immigrants send all their money back to their home countries instead of spending money here.**

**FACT: Immigrants do send money to family members, making it possible for more people to stay in their home countries rather than migrating to the United States. Importantly, sending remittances home does not keep immigrants from spending money in the United States.**

It's true that remittances are the biggest sources of foreign currency for most Latin American countries and surpass any amount of foreign aid sent by the U.S. The money sent by immigrants to their family members allows many people to stay in their home countries who might otherwise feel compelled to migrate to the U.S.

And while 51 percent of Latino immigrants send remittances home,<sup>36</sup> they are spending their money in the United States as well. In fact, a 1998 study found that immigrants become net economic contributors after 10 to 15 years in the U.S.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to paying taxes and Social Security, immigrants spend money on goods and services in the United States. A study of Latino immigrants in California found significant gains in home ownership between those who had been in this country for ten years (16.4 percent are homeowners) and those who had been here for over thirty years (64.6 percent).<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, a 2002 Harvard University study of U.S. Census data found that there were more than 5.7 million foreign-born homeowners in the United States.<sup>39</sup> The study found that foreign-born new homeowners are buying their homes by saving more than native-born homebuyers and stretching their incomes more.

While homeownership nationally was approximately 69% in 2006, it was 60% for Asians and 50% for Latinos—each group with large immigrant populations and therefore greater impediments to obtaining bank loans.<sup>40</sup> Although homeownership is largely correlated with legal status in the U.S., undocumented immigrants are also buying into the “American Dream” of homeownership in some of the most expensive housing markets in the country.<sup>41</sup>

**MYTH: Immigrants bring crime to our cities and towns.**

**FACT: Immigrants are actually far less likely to commit crimes than their native-born counterparts. Even as the undocumented population has increased in the United States, crime rates have decreased significantly.**

According to a 2000 report prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice, immigrants maintain low crime rates even when faced with adverse social conditions such as low income and low levels of education.<sup>42</sup>

Although incarceration rates are highest among young low-income men and many immigrants arriving in the U.S. are young men with low levels of education, incarceration rates among young men are invariably lower for immigrants than for their native-born counterparts. This is true across every ethnic group but the differences are especially noticeable among Mexicans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans, who constitute the majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Even in cities with the largest immigrant populations, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami, violent and non-violent crime rates have continued to decline.<sup>43</sup>

Even after taking into account higher deportation rates since the mid 1990's, and reviewing the 1980 and 1990 censuses, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) ascertained that, "18-40 year-old male immigrants have lower institutionalization rates than the native born each year...and by 2000, immigrants have institutionalization rates that are one-fifth those of the native born."<sup>44</sup> In fact, according to the NBAR study, the newly arrived immigrants are particularly unlikely to be involved in crime.

Cities like Hazleton, Pennsylvania have tried to blame a new wave of immigrants for a supposed rise in crime. Yet, Hazleton's own crime statistics taken from the Pennsylvania State Police show that overall crime in the city has decreased and is now less than half of the national average.<sup>45</sup>

**MYTH: Most immigrants are undocumented and have crossed the border illegally.**

**FACT: Two thirds of immigrants are here lawfully—either as naturalized citizens or in some other lawful status. Moreover, almost half of all undocumented immigrants entered the United States legally.**

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, one third of all immigrants are undocumented, one third have some form of legal status and one third are naturalized citizens. This applies to immigrants from Latin America as well as others.<sup>46</sup>

Almost half of all undocumented immigrants entered the United States on visas that allowed them to reside here temporarily—either as tourists, students, or temporary workers. This means they were subject to inspection by immigration officials before entering the country,<sup>47</sup> and became undocumented only when their visas expired and they didn't leave the country

**MYTH: Weak border enforcement has led to high rates of undocumented immigration. We should increase enforcement and build a wall around our border.**

**FACT: Increased border security and the construction of border fences have done little to curb the flow of immigrants across the United States border. Instead, these policies have only succeeded in pushing border crossers into dangerous and less-patrolled regions, and increased the undocumented population by creating an incentive for immigrants not to leave.**

Building a wall along the entire 2000-mile southern U.S. border would be prohibitively expensive. According to a study by the Cato Institute, rather than acting as a deterrent to those attempting to cross the border, increased enforcement has only succeeded in pushing immigration flows into more remote, less patrolled regions, resulting in a tripling of the death rate at the border and decreased apprehensions, and creating a dramatic increase in taxpayer money spent on making arrests along the border (from \$300 per arrest in 1992 to \$1,200 per arrest in 2002).<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, increased border enforcement has actually increased the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. at any one time. The increased risk and cost to immigrants of crossing the border has resulted in fewer undocumented immigrants returning to their home countries for periods of time as part of the decades-long circular migration patterns that characterize undocumented immigration from Mexico up until the 1990s. Instead, immigrants stay in the United States for longer periods of time, often choosing to immigrate their families to avoid longer periods of separation.<sup>49</sup>

The Secure Fence Act of 2006 directed the Department of Homeland Security to construct 850 miles of additional border fencing. According to a report by Congressional Research Services, the San Diego fence, combined with increased border patrol agents in the area, succeeded in decreasing border crossing in that region, but at the same time there is considerable evidence that the flow of illegal immigration has shifted to the more remote areas of the Arizona desert, decreasing the number of apprehensions and increasing the cost.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Council of Economic Advisers, "Immigration's Economic Impact," Washington, D.C. June 20, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Rand Corporation. "Rand Study Shows Relatively Little Public Money Spent Providing Health Care to Undocumented Immigrants," November 2006.

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<sup>4</sup> Center for Studying Health System Change. "What Accounts for Differences in the Use of Hospital Emergency Departments Across U.S. Communities?" Prepared by Peter Cunningham, *Health Affairs*, July 18, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Agriculture. "Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: Fiscal Year 2003," Prepared by Karen Cunnygham (Mathematica Policy Research Inc.), November 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Council of Economic Advisers, "Immigration's Economic Impact," Washington, D.C. June 20, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Arizona: [http://udallcenter.arizona.edu/programs/immigration/publications/impact\\_judy.pdf](http://udallcenter.arizona.edu/programs/immigration/publications/impact_judy.pdf)  
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North Carolina: [http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/assets/documents/2006\\_KenanInstituteHispanicStudy.pdf](http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/assets/documents/2006_KenanInstituteHispanicStudy.pdf)

South Carolina: <http://www.sph.sc.edu/cli/documents/CMAReport0809.pdf>

Texas: [http://www.aifl.org/ipc/spotlight/spotlight\\_122206.pdf](http://www.aifl.org/ipc/spotlight/spotlight_122206.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Center for Urban Economic Development, University of Illinois at Chicago. "Chicago's Undocumented Immigrants: An Analysis of Wages, Working Conditions, and Economic Contributions," Chirag Mehta, Nik Theodore, Iliana Mora & Jennifer Wade, February 2002.

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<sup>9</sup> Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy. The University of Arizona. "The Economic Impacts of Immigrants in Arizona," Judith Gans. July 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the Comptroller, Texas. "Undocumented Immigrants in Texas: A Financial Analysis of the Impact to the State Budget and Economy." Special Report. Carole Keeton Strayhorn. December 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Council of Economic Advisers. Executive Office of the President. "Immigration's Economic Impact," Washington, D.C. June 20, 2007. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/cea\\_immigration\\_062007.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/cea_immigration_062007.html)

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