

Traveling Together in Hope

Questions and Answers on Immigration
from the Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin



How many immigrants are in Wisconsin?

A 2010 report by the Immigration Policy Center, “New Americans in the Badger State: The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in Wisconsin,” estimates that immigrants comprised five percent of the state’s workforce in 2008. The national average is 12.5 percent. These numbers do not include the children of immigrants who were born in this country and are therefore U.S. citizens. Nationwide, an estimated four million American children have at least one parent who is not a legal resident.

What draws immigrants to Wisconsin?

Most immigrants come seeking a better life for themselves and their children, either because of poverty, lack of opportunity, violence, or repression in their home countries. Immigrants coming to Wisconsin are attracted by jobs in the agricultural and service sectors (e.g., health care, landscaping, food service, hotel work). It is estimated that more than 40 percent of all workers in Wisconsin’s dairy industry are immigrants. In addition, more than 5,000 migrant workers, plus 1,000 dependents, arrive seasonally to work in our state’s agricultural, canning, and food processing industries.

Are there more immigrants in the U.S. than previously?

Yes and no. Today’s immigration levels are higher than in the decades between 1920 and 1970, but they are very similar to those in the 19th and early 20th centuries – the last period of massive migration into this country.

Do today’s immigrants differ from those of past eras?

Yes, in the sense that they come from different regions. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most immigrants in our state came from Europe (Germany, Poland, and Scandinavia). In 2009, 41 percent of foreign born immigrants in Wisconsin came from Latin America, 31 percent from Asia, 20 percent from Europe, and the rest from other regions.

What is different about today’s immigration process?

Today it is much more difficult for immigrants to come to the U.S. legally. Emigrating to the U.S. during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a fairly simple process. Ships from Europe arrived at Ellis Island laden with immigrants who had to demonstrate good health, sound character, and pay a small fee. Today’s immigration process is far more complicated in terms of both time and expense. For those born in a foreign country, the legal process to become an American citizen is three-fold. First, they must obtain an immigrant visa, which is usually sponsored by either a family member or an employer. Second, they must obtain their Legal Permanent Resident status (a.k.a. a “green card”). Third, they become naturalized citizens. The total time from immigrant to citizen varies from as little as 6 years to decades.

What is wrong with the U.S. immigration system?

Primarily, there is a mismatch between the legal supply and economic demand for immigrant labor. Our immigration system has not kept up with our nation's need for workers in agriculture, construction, and service industries. As a result, there are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants who are living and working in the U.S.

How do the U.S. bishops propose to address this problem of undocumented immigration?

The bishops believe that the federal government must undertake a comprehensive overhaul of our current immigration system. To be truly effective, this reform should include five major elements: 1) an increased number of visas available for family reunification; 2) humane enforcement of immigration laws, including respecting the human and legal rights of undocumented immigrants; 3) a temporary worker program that protects both undocumented immigrants and native-born workers; 4) a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants who have demonstrated good character, paid a fine, and learned English; and 5) greater international efforts designed to address root causes of migration in order to create conditions in which people do not have to leave their homes out of necessity.

Why is achieving comprehensive reform so difficult?

People are divided over which reform component to emphasize. In a recent survey, the Pew Research Center found that 42 percent of Americans support both stronger border security and a path to legalization, 35 percent emphasized only border security, and 21 percent emphasized only a path to legalization. This difference of opinion and our economic crisis makes reaching an agreement very difficult. Moreover, one of the arguments against comprehensive immigration reform is that granting "illegal" immigrants the opportunity to apply for legal status by paying a fine and back taxes amounts to rewarding them for "breaking the law."

By breaking our immigration laws aren't these immigrants criminals?

First it is important to distinguish between serious crimes, defined as felonies, and less serious offenses or misdemeanors. But in this case, entering the United States without inspection or overstaying one's visa is not a crime at all, but rather a civil violation. Crossing the border without inspection becomes a crime only if there is a prior deportation followed by entry without inspection.

But even if unauthorized entry is in most cases not a crime, doesn't failure to enforce this violation undermine the rule of law?

Obedying the law is essential to any civilized society. But we also have to assess if the penalty is proportionate to the offense. Treating those who commit civil violations as though they are criminals is not proportionate. Nor is it proportionate if the punishment separates families and inflicts great hardship on those who are otherwise law-abiding people. Thus the rule of law can be undermined when the penalty is overly harsh. Given the chance, a majority of unauthorized immigrants want to come out of the shadows and legalize their status. They simply have no means to do so under current U.S. immigration policy. This needs to change.

Why are American employers hiring immigrants when there are so many Americans out of work?

Employers tend to hire immigrants when American workers are unavailable for certain jobs, such as agricultural and service sector work, or when American workers lack the education needed to fill highly specialized jobs, such as medicine, computers, and engineering. Unfortunately, another reason for hiring undocumented immigrants is that some unscrupulous employers profit by paying them low wages, providing poor working conditions, and dismissing them at will. Undocumented immigrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation because they fear turning to the authorities to report abuses. Legalizing these immigrant workers would help level the wage differential, stem these abuses, and reduce the number of exploitable workers.

Don't immigrants make a difficult economy even worse for Americans?

Even in difficult economic times, immigrants help the economy to grow because they perform vital jobs, pay taxes, and create new businesses and jobs for natives and immigrants alike. They also stimulate the local economy by purchasing local goods and services.

Public benefits are being cut for American citizens. How can the Church support giving public benefits to immigrants who are not here legally?

While unauthorized immigrants do enroll their children in public schools and do use hospitals and emergency rooms, they are not eligible for federal public benefits: Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), health care (Medicaid and Medicare), and food stamps. In addition, most documented immigrants cannot receive federal benefits for the first five years, even if they are employed and paying taxes.

What about public benefits that go to the children of undocumented immigrants?

It is important to remember that many children of undocumented immigrants were born here and are therefore U.S. citizens. As for undocumented children born abroad, they have the same moral claim to the basic goods of food, shelter, education, and healthcare.

What about the cost to taxpayers of enrolling millions of undocumented students in our public schools?

It is true that the children of immigrants – documented or undocumented – receive a K-12 education and this costs money. This cost is partially offset by the taxes (property, sales, Social Security, etc.) that undocumented immigrants pay. More important, however, is the fact that every community has an interest in developing an educated workforce. Today's immigrant children – some of whom may not yet speak English fluently – are no different from the European children who arrived in the last two centuries. Whatever their initial challenges, immigrant children have helped build this nation into a strong democracy and the world's largest economy. At a time when the birth rate among native-born Americans is below replacement rates, immigrant children are especially important for our future.

Doesn't illegal immigration contribute to increased crime?

No. In fact, the exact opposite is true. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, in the period between 1994 and 2005 when the population of unauthorized immigrants doubled to an estimated 12 million, the violent crime rate in the U.S. declined by 34 percent and the property crime rate fell by 26

percent, reaching their lowest levels since 1973. Undocumented immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala have lower incarceration rates than U.S. citizens.

What can Catholics do to help solve the current immigration crisis?

First, we urge Wisconsin Catholics to **pray** and reflect deeply on this issue. We recommend that you consult the resources listed below for additional information.

Second, Catholics can **persuade** lawmakers and citizens that immigrants are an asset rather than a drain on our state, even in difficult economic times. At a time when the birth rate of Americans is declining and many of our native-born young people are leaving the state, immigrants are critical to our future prosperity.

Third, Catholics can **advocate** for immigration reform by resisting proposals that unfairly discriminate against undocumented immigrants and by persuading federal leaders to adopt a workable and comprehensive overhaul of our immigration system.

Fourth, Catholics can **welcome and assist** immigrants, especially those who are members of our parishes. Like our own ancestors, they need advocates to defend them and give them a voice when they are unjustly attacked. They need tutors to help them learn or improve their English. They need mentors to help them integrate into American society.

Resources

- **Justice for Immigrants**, www.justiceforimmigrants.org
JFI is a campaign of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to educate Catholics about Church teaching on immigration and to support comprehensive immigration reform.
- **Pew Hispanic Center**, <http://pewhispanic.org>
PHC is a project of the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank" in Washington, D.C., which provides information on the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping America and the world.
- **Immigration Policy Center**, <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org>
IPC is the research and policy arm of the American Immigration Council, which supports immigrant integration.
- **A Brief History of Immigration in Wisconsin**
http://www.apl.wisc.edu/publications/APL_Rural_Immigration_Summit.pdf