

The Oregonian

Immigration: Dollars and sense

In Oregon and across the nation, illegal immigration is a hot election-year issue. A new analysis reveals facts behind the costs -- and benefits -- of these workers.

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Silvio was 14 when he crossed the Mexican-U.S. border. He caught a plane the next day to join his father in Portland.

He didn't go to school. Instead, he worked back-to-back shifts, 6 a.m. to midnight, at a recycling company, loading paper and driving tractors for \$6 an hour.

Nobody cared about documents. They only cared how hard he worked.

He took English classes at Portland Community College and at 16, enrolled in a Portland high school. Today, the 20-year-old attends PCC, helping to pay for his education by pulling two 15-hour night shifts at a supermarket.

"I am willing to work and be a success in life," he says. "I'm not a criminal, and I pay taxes.

Silvio, who agreed to be interviewed on condition his full name not be reported, is one of Oregon's estimated 175,000 undocumented immigrants -- among more than 11 million in the United States who stand at the center of a storm of political debate, massive protests and calls for legislative reform.

One of many contentious questions is what these workers and their families contribute to Oregon's economy compared with what they cost in taxpayer-funded services, such as public schools and health care.

The answer doesn't come easily, given a population that mostly flies under government radar. A review by The Oregonian, which included examining state spending and independent studies, suggests illegal immigrants might consume tens of millions of dollars in state services. The Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., estimates that almost 7 percent of Oregon's work force is "unauthorized" -- higher than the national average of 5 percent -- and is clustered in the agriculture, cleaning, hospitality and construction industries.

By law, all employees must fill out an Employment Eligibility Verification form, called an I-9, and provide documents, such as a Social Security card or permanent resident green card, authorizing them to work. Employers are not required to verify the validity of documents.

But Oregon employers cannot estimate how many of their workers are here illegally.

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," says Ken Bailey, a state agriculture board member and vice president of Orchard View Farms in The Dalles. "The employer is under no obligation and has no right to examine any documents that look valid."

Bailey estimates about 75 percent to 80 percent of his seasonal work force is Latino. Losing these workers in Oregon would result in a potential revenue loss of \$1.5 billion each year, based on calculations that labor-intensive crops, such as berries, pears and Christmas trees, provide 43 percent of the state's \$4.1 billion annual production.

Any legislative changes by Congress must be workable for employers at harvest time, says Don Schellenberg, a farmer and lobbyist for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

"You got 50 to 100 people showing up in the morning," he says. "How am I going to check all those before I send them to work?"

Elio, a shop worker who entered the United States illegally when he was 17, says it troubles him to lie to his employer about his status. Elio agreed to tell his story if his full name was not reported.

"I'm an honest person," he says. "But because I don't have papers, I have to use a fake Social Security card."

Shortly after Elio arrived from Mexico, his father applied to make his son a legal resident. Fourteen years later, they are still waiting. Elio is 31, the father of two children. His brother has served two tours in Iraq with the Army.

A swelling population

California, Texas, New York and Florida are the top four states with the highest concentrations of undocumented immigrants. Oregon -- which saw a 59 percent increase between 2000 and 2004 -- is one of 15 states with rapidly growing numbers of such immigrants.

The promise of jobs draws workers northward. They follow a trail that begins in Southern California citrus groves, winds through the fruit orchards and vegetable fields of the San Joaquin Valley and ends with berries in Oregon. Once here, they often find jobs at nurseries or Christmas tree farms.

In the past 15 years, a combination of factors has resulted in more undocumented workers coming to -- and staying in -- Oregon.

In the mid-1990s, the federal government tightened border patrols, making it difficult to return to Mexico. A healthy state economy brought opportunities outside of field work, scattering the population into urban as well as rural areas.

"If you're the first non-English speaker in a workplace, it's hard," says D. Michael Dale, a lawyer with the Northwest Workers' Justice Project in Portland. "If you're the 10th, it's not so hard."

Costs and benefits

A line of people waits longer than an hour one morning in Eugene to receive "matricula consular" identification cards issued to Mexican nationals. One woman, holding her 1-month-old baby, says the card will allow her to get an Oregon driver's license.

Representatives of a half-dozen state agencies stand nearby to offer information about child care, wage and labor arbitration, filing taxes and avoiding consumer fraud. State officials say these "Carousels of Information" events, sponsored by the Mexican consulate, are a good way to reach the growing Spanish-speaking population.

Such events also attract controversy.

Protesters also show up, claiming illegal immigrants are improperly benefiting from millions of dollars of taxpayer-funded services that are reserved for citizens or legal residents.

Oregon officials say it's impossible to calculate how much these workers and their families cost the state last year. Known costs include more than \$15 million in prison expenses, more than \$2 million in social services. But the big-ticket items -- public schools and emergency medical bills -- are not tracked by the state.

The Federation for American Immigration Reform, which wants tighter restrictions, estimated that educating undocumented children in Oregon in 2004 cost \$167 million. The state Department of Human Services has budgeted \$35 million for its emergency medical program in 2005-07. But officials can't say how many of the 17,768 people who received emergency care last year were undocumented immigrants.

These workers and their families are not eligible to receive food stamps, most welfare assistance or most health care services.

Most benefits available to undocumented immigrants are required by state and federal law, says Clyde Saike, DHS deputy director. And most deal with situations in which the public could be put at risk -- such as a mental health crisis -- if care were not provided, he says.

Still, immigration opponents suggest that undocumented workers contribute to the agency's growing social services caseload and its projected \$140 million budget gap.

Nationally, they cite a report by the Center for Immigration Studies that says in 2002, households headed by "illegal aliens" paid \$16 billion in federal taxes and ate up \$26 billion in services such as Medicaid and uninsured health care, food assistance programs and the federal prison system. The center favors restricting immigration.

A new study by the Oregon Center for Public Policy, which researches tax and budget issues and advocates for the working poor, estimates that Oregon's undocumented workers pay \$66 million to \$77 million a year in state income, property and excise taxes, such as fuel and cigarette taxes. The study assumes only half of the undocumented workers paid taxes.

Paul Warner, head of the Legislative Revenue Office, said the estimates "appear to be fairly conservative."

The center also estimates that Oregon's undocumented workers pay \$58 million to \$67 million in federal Social Security taxes and another \$13 million to \$16 million annually in Medicare taxes -- money they can't reclaim because they are here illegally.

Reform in Congress

Last week, a split Senate Judiciary Committee voted to legalize undocumented workers and to grant them citizenship, provided they hold jobs, learn English and pay back taxes.

It's uncertain whether such a sweeping program will clear the Republican-controlled Congress. If it does, workers such as Silvio could benefit.

The first time the North Portland resident crossed from Mexico into Arizona, the border patrol tossed him right back. He got in the next day. He left his mother and sisters behind in the state of Yucatan.

Silvio, who graduated from high school last year, wanted to attend Western Oregon University and learn to teach. But because he came to the United States illegally, he could not apply for federal financial aid, so he gave up enrolling in a four-year university.

Still, he is determined to stay, convinced this is where he can best contribute.

"If they catch me tomorrow and take me to Mexico, next week I'll come back."

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The Oregonian

They work rain or shine, hot or cold

Immigration - After 16 years in Oregon, a 72-year-old man says he might return to Mexico

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Don Severo, a sinewy 72-year-old, testifies to his life as a farmworker in tight, blue-ink handwriting that covers nearly three notebook pages.

It was easy, he says, to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in 1990 through Tijuana. Severo, who agreed to be interviewed if his full name wasn't used, passed into San Diego and got a ride to Los Angeles, where he caught a bus to Oregon.

He found a job on a Christmas tree farm near Woodburn. His employer paid him \$8 an hour cash and didn't ask for papers. Severo sent his wife \$200 a month.

He returned to Mexico to see his family in 1997 but found it wasn't so easy to come back. He paid a man \$1,000 to help him cross at Nogales, Ariz. Then he joined a group of men, women and children who spent the night walking through the desert.

"A van was waiting for us," he says in Spanish. "They took us to a house. Then the next day, they took us to Oregon."

Again, Severo found steady work in the Willamette Valley, where he picked caneberreries, weeded strawberries and turned the soil in the rain.

"Immigrants suffer a lot in work," he writes in his notebook. "If it rains a lot, we work, soaked, all day long. If it's really cold, we work. We work without a place to warm ourselves. And if it's very hot, we work."

Shortly after returning to Oregon, Severo paid \$30 for a forged Social Security card. He gets a paycheck now, and his employer withholds taxes that Severo can never claim.

His wife eventually joined him. This spring, they are working side by side in a shed, cutting, washing and wrapping tulips. She's 67 and "gets really tired," Severo says.

The family has no health insurance and is not eligible for state-federal Medicaid. When his wife had "heart issues" a few years ago, the hospital bill totaled \$1,212, which the couple are paying off \$50 a month.

He often rides home in water-soaked clothes after tending tulips all day.

"I think I'm winding down," Severo says. "This might be my last year. I might go back."

-- Michelle Cole

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Trying to label the debate

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What's in a term? A lot if you're talking about the more than 11 million people who are in the United States without permission from the federal government.

Jim Ludwick of Oregonians for Immigration Reform hates the term "undocumented" and says it's the height of political correctness.

"An 'alien' is not a pejorative term. It is a descriptive term, and illegal means illegal," Ludwick says.

But immigrant rights advocates argue that the phrase "illegal alien" is dehumanizing and paints the person as a criminal, when, in fact, it's a violation of civil immigration law -- not criminal law -- to live or work in this country without proper papers.

Romeo Sosa, an organizer with Voz, a Portland group that advocates on behalf of day laborers, says people come here because they lack opportunities at home.

"There's nothing illegal to look for work," he says. "There's nothing illegal to feed your family."

-- Janie Har

The Oregonian

IMPRINT ON OREGON

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Undocumented immigrants are putting their stamp on the state.

Population

Mexicans make up 80 percent of undocumented immigrants in Oregon, compared with 57 percent nationally, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, considered the authoritative source on immigrant demographics by the U.S. Census Bureau as well as organizations on all sides of the issue. Others come from Central America, South and East Asia, South America, Europe, Canada.

In 2002, about 10 percent of all Oregon births were to undocumented mothers, according to the Center for Immigration Studies, which supports less immigration.

An estimated 20,000 of the 175,000 undocumented in Oregon are children. About 40,000 to 50,000 Oregon children -- born here and therefore U.S. citizens -- have parents who may not be legal residents.

Education

The Federation for American Immigration Reform estimated that educating undocumented children in Oregon in 2004 cost \$167 million. But the state Department of Education cannot confirm that number. Officials say they do not know how many undocumented children attend public schools, and it's unconstitutional to deny any child access.

Undocumented immigrants must pay out-of-state tuition at Oregon's seven public universities. They cannot receive federal financial aid.

Corrections and enforcement

As of Feb. 1, 766 inmates with federal immigration detainers were in Oregon prisons and awaiting deportation. Not all necessarily crossed illegally, but they committed a crime here, prompting the detainer. Cost to the state: nearly \$19 million for fiscal year 2005; the federal government reimbursed \$3.4 million.

Through January of this fiscal year, the Seattle office of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which oversees Oregon, Washington and Alaska, deported about 1,430 individuals, roughly a one-third increase from last year. Oregon accounts for less than half of these deportations, and 68 percent of deportees are returned to Mexico. Not all necessarily entered illegally; they might have overstayed their visas or committed a crime.

The investigations section of Immigration and Customs Enforcement does not focus on tracking down random illegal immigrants, preferring instead to root out large-scale operations, such as human smuggling, money laundering and fake documentation rings. **Social and other services**

Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for:

Food stamps

Oregon Health Plan, except for emergency assistance, including childbirth.

Welfare cash assistance, except for domestic violence victims. The state estimates 90 to 100 cases in 2005 involving undocumented families; estimated cost, \$62,000.

Day-care subsidies. In 2005, subsidies were given to as many as 500 undocumented families in which both parents worked; estimated cost, \$2.3 million. The benefit ended April 1. No proof of immigration status is required for:

Mental health crisis intervention and commitment. No estimates.

Court-ordered DUII treatment, drug and alcohol counseling. No estimates.

Child protective services when abuse or neglect reported. About 50 undocumented families a year; no cost estimate.

Nutrition education and coupons for pregnant women and children. No estimates.

Oregon driver's license with proof of an Oregon address, name and age. Federal Real ID Act, which goes into effect in 2008, will require proof of legal residency to use the license as identification.

The right to vote, with a driver's license submitted at registration.

Worker's compensation for injured workers. An employer-paid state fund picks up the tab when an employer fails to provide insurance, as mandated by law. No estimates. **Documentation**

In the past five years, the Mexican consulate in Portland has issued about 100,000 "matricula consular" ID cards, allowing a Mexican national to enter Mexico. Critics say undocumented workers use the IDs to get driver's licenses and open bank accounts. The consulate says they are a cheaper alternative to passports and legal residents carry them, too.

It's difficult for someone who enters the country illegally to become a legal resident. Applicants, often sponsored by a citizen spouse or employer, must leave the country to get a green card and also receive a waiver on a rule that bans anyone who has lived in the United States without permission from coming back to the country for three to 10 years.