

Immigrant facts vs. myths

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To hear some folks describe it — including some folks who have daily access to a radio microphone — California is under attack by

crazed, rapacious and thieving hordes that are pouring across the southern border, bent on occupying the state.

These illegal immigrants — or “aliens” or “invaders,” in the vernacular of those who complain incessantly about them — are described as consuming vast sums of welfare and health-care funds, committing countless crimes, clogging the prisons and in other ways ruining what would otherwise be an idyllic paradise. And during an election year, of course, the anti-immigrant rhetoric escalates to an even higher level.

There's no question that illegal immigration is a serious political question. But crossing the border illegally isn't a serious felony that places life or property in danger. Indeed, weather, terrain and real criminals make illicit border-crossing very dangerous, and except in egregious cases, the federal government doesn't prosecute most illegal immigrants it catches; it merely sends them back.

The hysteria over illegal immigration is having one beneficial impact. It has generated some reputable studies that paint a far more benign picture of the societal impact than the talking heads would have us believe.

Last year, for instance, the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy issued an analysis of employment data undercutting assertions that illegal immigrants were taking jobs away from Californians — an assertion, ironically, that contradicts the other demonizing claim that immigrants are lazy consumers of public services financed by hardworking taxpayers.

The CCSCE study determined that of the estimated 3 million illegal immigrants in California, about 1.8 million are employed, a rate of employment substantially larger than the population as a whole, incidentally. It points out

that only about 800,000 Californians are listed as unemployed, “so even if every unemployed worker were ready and willing to fill a job left by an unauthorized immigrant ... there would be a large shortfall in California.” Eliminating illegal immigrant workers, in short, would be a serious blow to the California economy, leaving at least 1 million jobs vacant.

The Public Policy Institute of California, meanwhile, has generated an even more detailed study of crime and immigrants that obliterates the claim that they are posing a big danger to the law-abiding public.

The PPIC found that immigrants, including illegal immigrants, are “far less likely than the average U.S. native to commit crime in California.” Among the PPIC's points:

■ People born outside the United States are 35 percent of the state's adult population, but only about 17 percent of the state's prison population.

■ U.S.-born men are incarcerated at rates up to 3.3 times higher than those born outside the country, and the rate is 10 times higher among men 18-40

years old.

■ Noncitizen males in the 18-40 age bracket from Mexico, most of whom are illegal immigrants, are more than eight times less likely to be behind bars than U.S.-born men in the same age bracket.

“The findings are striking,” the PPIC said, “because immigrants in California are more likely to be young and male and to have low levels of education — all characteristics associated with higher rates of crime and incarceration.”

Finally, the PPIC study found that cities with higher shares of recent immigrants have lower property- and violent-crime rates than cities with low immigrant populations.

Those who are coming to California illegally are, overwhelmingly, coming to work and better themselves and their families. We should make public policy based on their emerging factual portrait, not the horrible fantasies being peddled by self-serving, self-appointed patriots.

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