Undocumented immigrants: A benefit to our economy and food industry

Immigration has been a huge focal point for Americans for quite some time now. It has also been more a larger topic since Donald Trump was elected president. A major issue during his campaign was his promise to build a wall to keep undocumented immigrants from migrating into America. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is often negative and misleading, and most people are not aware of the benefits that immigrants bring to our country. Despite the narrative that undocumented immigrants are a burden on our society and our taxes, there is overwhelming evidence that undocumented immigrants play a substantial role in our food industry and are a vital source for the economy. According the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Harvest requires 1.5-2.2 million workers, half of which are undocumented, and without their labor America would have a food crisis and a substantial rise in produce costs (Philpott). Immigrants also play a vital role in the meat industry, and experts estimate that any mass deportation efforts would result in a 27% drop in production (Philpott). If the food production was to decrease it would cause the prices to increase as well. This shows how important the immigrants are they provide for America in more ways than one.

It is important that we work to change the narrative that undocumented immigrants should be viewed in a negative light and we should focus our attention on ensuring that they have safe working conditions. The majority of jobs that are held by undocumented immigrants
are low-paying and are subject to exploitation. By focusing our attention on campaign promises to build a wall, we are ignoring the fact that undocumented immigrants are beneficial to our country, are a critical part of our economy, and are subject to terrible working conditions as a result of their marginalization. Immigrants make up a substantial portion of low-income jobs, particularly in agriculture, that American workers generally do not want to perform.

A lot of Americans don’t think about where their food comes from and these jobs are often taken for granted. Critics who claim that these jobs are being taken away from Americans are incorrect. Evidence shows that unemployed American workers do not take these jobs and the losses in the agriculture industry have been devastating in states such as Georgia, where anti-immigration laws led to a $103.6 million loss to the economy in 2011 (Philpot). Additionally, undocumented immigrants make up a substantial percentage of the agribusiness industry and without their labor, farms would be incentivized to begin planting crops that are easily harvested through automation and food variety would decrease (Meierotto). Anti-immigrant legislation may limit the amount of undocumented workers, but it does not guarantee that this will lead to more jobs for American citizens.

Currently, there is a labor shortage in the agriculture industry that has led to a rise in automation, indicating that unemployed Americans are not filling these jobs (Jordan). Although the success of President Trump’s campaign indicates that many believe that immigration is harmful to American jobs, there is evidence that America actually needs more labor. Getting rid of undocumented immigrants not only hurts the economy, it would also affect everyday life for American citizens. Immigrants also make up an estimated 10% of the food industry, and experts suggest that a massive deportation of undocumented immigrants would cause a 6% increase in
food costs, as well as food shortages across the country (Ralph). Not only would jobs be lost but food prices would increase and there would be less food production. Rather than focusing on punishing undocumented immigrants there should be a better system because it doesn’t benefit anyone if immigrants aren’t allowed to work.

Immigrants are not only a vital source of labor in agribusiness, they also represent a large portion of other industries vital to our economy, particularly the service industry. Restaurants have some of the highest turnover rates in the country at an estimated 71.5% in 2015, and rely heavily on immigrant labor due to their long tenure as employees and the skills they bring to the industry (Ralph). Restaurants look toward undocumented immigrants to fill these jobs because they are more dependable overall, despite rhetoric that implies that they are lazy or unproductive. On the contrary, American citizens don’t understand that without immigrants the country would face extreme changes in how citizens are used to living. According to AmericanHort, which represents the nursery industry, each job filled by an immigrant sustains 2 to 3 jobs in the surrounding economies (Jordan). Most of the jobs immigrants do are the ones we ignore because we don’t really question where our food comes from, or who is taking care of the kitchen in a back of a restaurant. This shows that people have normalized the process to the extent that they are unaware of how dependent we are on the same group we criminalize. If this problem isn’t solved, it will be detriment to everyone.

A decrease in undocumented labor would also decrease rates of food security and our food options, and would result in a tremendous loss in state and local taxes. According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, undocumented immigrants pay $11.64 billion in state and local taxes and receive no benefits as a result (Ralph). Everyday immigrants are working in
restaurants and farms providing for Americans but we focus our attention on punishing them for not following our rules. As mentioned above, Georgia’s anti-immigrant legislation caused the economy to suffer greatly. Despite President Trump’s claims that undocumented immigrants are violent and a detriment to our society, his own golf club in New Jersey employed undocumented immigrants, showing how embedded they are in our daily life without anyone noticing (Stevens). There is clearly a need for more workers or else companies like those owned by Donald Trump would not be hiring undocumented immigrants.

This is a huge crisis in America that needs to be resolved or else America will be affected by this issue which will only cause harm towards everyone, particularly undocumented immigrants. These immigrants have no access to healthcare, no workers’ protections, and limited resources to help them economically, which is terrible considering how much they do for America. They pay taxes and work just like any average American but they receive nothing in return which is why there should be more sympathy towards them. Undocumented immigrants pay an estimated 8 percent of their income in state and local taxes, compared with the top 1 percent of taxpayers who pay an estimated 5.4 percent (Gie, Gardner, Wiehe). Despite the insistence that undocumented immigrants are a burden, the evidence shows us that they contribute to our society in many ways.

One of the worst consequences of this misdirected anger toward undocumented immigrants is the marginalization they suffer and the exploitation they face at the hands of their employers. According to the National Employment Law Project (NELP), 37 percent of undocumented workers are victims of minimum wage violations, and 84 percent are not paid overtime for working more than 40 hours a week (Costa). The increased attention from the
Trump administration has made things worse, as many workers are refusing to cooperate with investigations by the Department of Labor amid fear of deportation and rising anxiety in immigrant communities (Levin). Notably, the push toward punishing undocumented immigrants and limiting their entry into the country doesn’t involve holding employers accountable for their actions. Rather, the focus is on punishing one of the most vulnerable groups in society for political gain.

It’s important to consider that America has a long history of exploiting migrant labor and criminalizing foreign workers, particularly for political reasons. During the Great Depression, when Americans were living with depressed wages and limited jobs, more than 1.8 million people of Mexican descent were deported to Mexico, even though an estimated 60 percent were citizens (Bernard). Throughout the country, and particularly in cities like Los Angeles which had large populations of Mexican Americans, officers began rounding up people for deportation. The cause of this was the promise from then President Hoover to create “American Jobs for Real Americans”. Similar to President Trump’s pledge to Make America Great Again, Hoover shaped his message around the idea of patriotism and exclusion of Mexican people. Although the onset of World War II brought new jobs and a decline in deportation raids, it is undoubtedly a dark period in American history and caused untold damage to the Mexican American community. These are the consequences when we allow anti-immigrant to flourish and allow undocumented immigrants to act as scapegoats for political actors. More importantly, we allow the continued exploitation of undocumented workers to continue with no repercussions, creating needless suffering for a highly vulnerable population of people.


