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Honduras: The Debate between the United States Immigration Crackdowns

Sarah De Souza

For many years we have encountered a high influx of immigrants in the United States (US). It is roughly estimated by Jeffrey Passel, a researcher for the Pew Hispanic Center, a non-profit organization, that in 2006 there were about 11.5 to 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the US. Some argue that the numbers now range from 12 million to 20 million. According to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE), in 2006 there was approximately one million Hondurans living in the United States and 70% of those one million Hondurans were “illegals.” Immigration is not new to this country, but resistance swells, taking new forms as the years pass. So then, why do people come to the US? And are illegal immigrants a threat to the US? These two questions will outline the composition of this paper.

To begin, there are many reasons why people come to the US. Those that come legally may not like to “settle down in one place for any length of time. . .” and those that enter the US illegally feel as if they do not have a choice (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). When asked, people agree that, “All immigration is an economic matter, [illegals migrate to the US] to improve their economic status” (Streitz, 2009). Although some people understand one of the reasons why people migrate, they are not aware of the other reasons.

US Intervention in Honduras and its Converse Effects on Immigration and Economic Stability

Many illegal immigrants such as the Hondurans are displaced from their homes, “by violence, or by economic, social, or political pressures” (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). These pressures cause forced displacement, which pushes people to leave their communities and travel across the borders into other countries such as the US. Honduras, for example, has experienced a great deal of these difficulties and one of the reasons why it still remains politically and economically unstable is due to US interventions, as well as a natural disaster that occurred in 1998.

Since the 1980s, Honduras has been a battlefield for internal fights and US interventions. The US presently “maintains a troop presence of about 550 military personnel known as Joint Task Force Bravo at Soto Cano Air Base” (Sullivan, 2005). This military force was trained and financed in the 1980s by the US in order to fight the war on Nicaragua’s revolutionary Sandinista government. The secretly financed contra war brought economic burdens and military risks to Honduras. With the presence of US troops, the Honduran government was obligated to feed the soldiers and provide gasoline for them to maneuver around the borders (Acker, 1988). Increasing US interventions led private investors to move their money elsewhere, intensifying Honduras economic instability. The US backed wars in Central America caused many fatalities and it bears a large share of responsibility for most of the economic catastrophes that have ignited mass migration to the US (Guskin and Wilson, 2007).

Besides the economic instability created by the US contras, Honduras also suffered great devastations during a hurricane in 1998. Hurricane Mitch ripped through Honduras as a category five and created damages of up to three billion dollars. It destroyed 60% of the country’s entire infrastructure, and 70% of its agricultural industries (Arias, 2008). The hurricane also destroyed about 100,000 homes, leaving many families homeless. (Supplement 45, 1998). Considering Honduras is a major agriculture exporter, it depends on its natural resources for all of its income. Since Honduras’ “economy revolves almost exclusively around agricultural products . . .,” the agricultural industries were destroyed, therefore leaving thousands of household providers unemployed (Rosenberg and Shepard, 1986). An estimation of about 18,000 people were unemployed and they only had one place to turn to, their good old American Uncle Sam. This catastrophe on top of the previous economic and political instabilities sparked another migration to the land of opportunities, the US.

Due to all of the hardships that undocumented Hondurans have gone through, they have a right to stay in the US. Their country has been a product of violence, economic instability, and disaster. After Hurricane Mitch hit, the United States recognized that Honduras was incapable of coping with the irreparable losses so the US provided temporary protected status (TPS) to the undocumented Hondurans (Sullivan, 2005). This protection allowed the Hondurans to work and send money back to their families in the form of remittances. These remittances make up more than a quarter of Honduras’ gross domestic product (Johnson, 2007). If a federal effort to crack down on Hondurans continues it will force the Honduran government to

reintegrate all of these people, which would cause the collapse of their entire country. Although other countries suffer as well, Honduras does not have the capability to provide for the needs of these people returning home; they are still rebuilding their infrastructure and economy. The US funded contras and Hurricane Mitch contributed to the collapse of the economy and the illegal migration of many Hondurans to the United States.

Immigration exports have led to questions about whether we should continue to allow illegal immigrants to stay in the US. Opponents to immigration have pressured politicians to crack down on illegal immigrants, stating that they are to blame for the problems in the US. Accusations attacking illegal immigrants have caused enormous debates between the Latin American political interest groups and legislative officials. According to a report from MSNBC, “Deportation’s of Hondurans are expected to reach 40,000 this year if the current pace holds; a sharp increase since 2005” (Johnson, 2007). Massive deportation has been a result of the opposition, which has angered the Honduran government. Many US citizens have been manipulated by the media to think that illegal immigrants are destroying the economy. It is very important that US citizens understand that illegal immigrants are not a massive threat as the media portrays them to be. Critics argue that immigrants have taken US jobs, lived off of welfare services at the cost of taxpayers, drained the economy, and committed more crimes than non-immigrants, yet there is substantial evidence that contradicts these arguments.

Challenging Common Arguments against Immigration

First, illegal immigrants do not take US jobs. Paul Streitz, an advocate for stricter immigration rules, quotes that, “Of course [illegal immigrants take US jobs]. . . Proven beyond a doubt by all sorts of statistical evidence, or just try to find a white person working in a fast food restaurant in Danbury. . . these illegal’s took jobs that belonged to American workers” (Streitz, 2009). Illegal immigrants have not taken US jobs; they work hard at jobs that no Americans want to do. A great number of immigrants like Hondurans work in the agriculture industries. James S. Holt, an economist for a management labor law firm stated that agricultural jobs “entail physical labor under adverse environmental conditions of heat, cold, sun, rain, etc.” These are jobs that Americans do not want. “It is work which many Americans would be physically incapable of doing on a sustained basis, and that most of the rest would prefer not to do if there are better alternatives available” (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). These types of jobs and other low paying jobs like car washing, dish washing, and lawn mowing, are not the type of jobs US workers are doing to have. To blame illegal immigrants for many people’s unemployment status would be unreasonable, considering that the jobs they take are not ones that US citizens enjoy and are low paying due to the fact that there is no state regulating the wages for illegal immigrants. In addition, the presence of illegals should not be feared by US workers. A study in 1994 by the conservative Alexis de Tocqueville Institution concluded that, “Evidence suggests that immigrants create at least as many jobs as they take” (Guskin and Wilson 2007). For instance, when providing for their families, they buy goods and services creating more jobs. Twelve years later the Liberal Pew Hispanic Center studied the employment trend in the 1990s and early 2000s and confirmed the same conclusion. Most illegal immigrants that come to the US are looking for a means to tend to their children, but this has created a misunderstanding that they use the welfare system on taxpayer’s expense to care for their children.

Second, the argument that illegal immigrants milk the US welfare system without contributing to the system is erroneous. Paul Streitz states, “It is not so much direct welfare, they are not eligible for that. It is the medical expenses and then the education expenses of the anchor baby children” (Streitz, 2009). Regardless of whether or not opponents accept it, these are American children because they were born on American soil. Therefore, they are entitled to their education and medical care. On the other hand, illegal immigrants pay taxes and they are entitled to some form of social services. “About 75% of this country’s \$7.2 million out-of-status workers are employed in the formal economy, which is they are working on the books” (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). Undocumented immigrants pay payroll taxes through either an invalid Social Security number or a Tax Identification number (Prante, 2006). In addition, those that claim they do not pay taxes fail to realize they still pay local sales taxes like everyone else, and contribute to property taxes when buying or renting a place to live. Therefore, illegal immigrants in general are taxpayers and they are entitled to receive welfare if they need it. Those that do not pay taxes are not considered a burden because of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law, which “barred states from giving any federal welfare benefits to immigrants who lack status” (Guskin and Wilson, 2007).

Third, some opponents of immigration may argue that illegal immigrants create an economic burden by draining the economy. Illegal immigrants do not drain the economy; they help the economy grow as they prevent businesses that rely on

cheap labor from being forced to close or go abroad. They also contribute to the economy just as much as they benefit from it. According to a 1997 study by the National Research Council, immigrant women through the production of goods and services added a “modest but significant \$1.1 billion to \$9.5 billion to the nation’s \$7 trillion economy” (Nazario, 2006). Although many immigrants send money back to their relatives, they also pay fees in order to send that money out of the country. In 2002, it was estimated that a total of 28 billion was sent to Latin American countries. US politicians and corporations agree that these payments are not big enough to impact the total US economy (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). Illegal immigrants including Hondurans all together paid about four billion US dollars in fees for sending remittances back to their countries (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). Even though it seems they are taking money out of the US economy, illegal immigrants also return a substantial amount. In addition, illegal immigrants boost the economy through the taxes that get deducted from their paychecks and “those that do not file their taxes only accounts for \$2.7 billion annually,” which is nothing compared to loss in federal revenues through obscured corporate tax evasions (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). Nonetheless, economist Andrew Sum from Northeastern University who focuses on the negative side of immigration admitted, “That the U.S. economy is larger and growing faster, due to the supply of illegal immigrants.” He also said that there would be, “A decline in labor force of three to four percent if it were not for the immigrants” (Isidore 2006). He continues arguing that we would not have grown so much in the 1990s if it were not for the immigrants. In turn, the presence of illegal immigrants has been a benefit for the economy as a whole.

Finally, anti-immigration pressures have manipulated US citizens into thinking that illegal immigrants commit more crimes than non-immigrants. In 2000, a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center showed that 73% of US citizens believed that immigrants were causally related to more crimes. The great distance between fact and perception, reality and scenario, is a result of the impact of media coverage. The media has tried to convince the US public that illegal immigrants are criminals. Although they present many statistics, the facts do not support the fear. The 2007 Immigration Policy Center (IPC) study found that: At the same time that immigration, due to especially undocumented immigrants, reached high numbers, crimes rates had declined, even in cities with a greater number of illegals (Barry, 2008). In addition, John Hagan of the University of Toronto and Alberto Palloni of the University of Wisconsin found “that immigrants are disproportionately represented among prison inmates because of biases in processes that lead from pre-trial detention to sentencing” (Horowitz 2001). Crime data does not tell us who commits crimes, but rather it just tells us who gets caught. Unfortunately for illegal immigrants they are more likely than white US citizens to get caught because they are more likely to be watched, stopped, questioned, caught, and arrested (Guskin and Wilson, 2007). As for the ones that do not get caught, they probably commit the same amount of crimes as the illegal immigrants. In general undocumented immigrants are more law-abiding than US citizens. They fear the consequences and they depend on their stay in the US to support their families back home.

Conclusion

Any calculations of the benefits and the burdens of immigration depends on who you are. Some illegal immigrants come to the US because they are displaced from their homes. They have been forced to leave due to political instabilities and violence, which the US bears a large part of the responsibility. In reviewing the 1980s in Latin America, Honduras has been greatly affected by the US turmoil and intervention. This is one of the main reasons why Hondurans have migrated to the US. Although critics argue that illegal immigrants are a threat to this nation and the economy, we have examined that illegal immigrants are entitled to the benefits through the taxes they pay. In order to manage the mass migrations to the US, people should support illegal immigrants in trying to build a better future in their own countries. They should oppose war and political violence. If people really want less immigration they should turn to address the root causes of immigration, instead of attacking the individuals.

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