

2026-2-14

# Is immigration enforcement hurting the economy?

LC

The writers address the question, "Is immigration enforcement hurting the economy?"

The Denver Gazette · 14 Feb 2026 · B5 · Randall Bloomquist is the owner of Bloomquist Media. Steven Camarota is the director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies.

POINT: Randall Bloomquist



America's economic strength rests on its ability to attract talent, reward hard work, and out-innovate global competitors. Today, as the country faces labor shortages and an increasingly competitive world economy, carefully controlled immigration is not just an economic policy choice — it is a strategic necessity.

If the United States wants to maintain its innovation edge, it must continue attracting the world's hardest workers and best minds while building a lawful, modern immigration system.

The Society for Human Resource Management warns that the U.S. economy is on track to face worker shortages in the millions over the next decade. These gaps span industries from trucking and health-care to advanced manufacturing, technology and research. When companies cannot find the workers they need, projects stall, productivity slows and opportunities move elsewhere. Immigration alone will not solve America's workforce problem, but it is an effective tool to deepen the labor pool.

The Congressional Budget Office projected in 2024 that higher immigration would increase the U.S. labor force by 5.2 million people by 2033 and substantially raise economic output, adding trillions of dollars to gross domestic product over the next decade. Such expansion would support stronger growth, higher productivity and more opportunities for workers at every level of the economy.

Research also suggests that well-designed immigration policies can raise wages rather than suppress them. A 2025 analysis from the Penn Wharton Budget Model found that expanding visas for college-educated immigrants could lead to faster economic growth, lower federal debt, and higher wages across income groups. These findings show that innovation-driven immigration can benefit American workers by creating industries and expanding economic output.

Newcomers also drive business formation in the United States. While immigrants make up 14 percent of the population, they own a fifth of U.S. businesses, according to the Small Business Administration. Immigrants and children of immigrants own one-third of American enterprises.

Legal immigration does more than fill and create jobs; it powers innovation. Many of America's most important industries, including artificial intelligence and advanced medical research, depend on highly skilled talent drawn from around the globe. Engineers and researchers from abroad contribute to new

Now

1

technologies, start businesses, and help keep the United States at the forefront of scientific and economic progress. With other countries aggressively competing for top talent, failing to modernize immigration pathways risks ceding America's leadership in emerging technologies and industries. Of course, Americans expect an immigration policy that protects borders and serves the national interest. But throttling immigration cannot address the realities of a changing workforce or the global competition for talent. The smarter approach is to modernize legal pathways that align with economic needs.

One example is the Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act, <sup>Note</sup> which would allow foreign workers to be employed in areas and industries where jobs are hard to fill. The bill, introduced in September 2025, would address labor shortages in industries such as healthcare, hospitality and construction by offering a three-year, renewable non-immigrant visa. The program would initially be capped at 65,000 visas. Policies like this recognize that economic growth and a lawful immigration system are not mutually exclusive goals.

The United States stands at a crossroads. Policymakers can either modernize immigration to reflect workforce realities and global competition or allow outdated systems to slow economic growth and weaken America's innovation advantage.

#### COUNTERPOINT: Steven Camarota

The administration is right to argue that enforcing immigration laws gets criminal aliens out of communities. It is exceedingly unwise for jurisdictions to release undocumented immigrants from their jails as a matter of policy, even after Immigration and Customs Enforcement asks them to hold them. The reasons for enforcing the law go well beyond sending criminal aliens home. When ordinary undocumented immigrants leave, or are deported, the rule of law is restored, less-educated American workers win, as do taxpayers. It also keeps the size of the foreign-born population within reasonable limits, facilitating assimilation.

In its detailed 2017 review of the academic literature, the National Academies of Sciences listed more than a dozen studies showing that immigration reduces wages for some American workers, particularly the least educated and poorest. It is difficult to tease out the specific effects of illegal immigration. However, the Center for Migration Studies and Migration Policy Institute estimate that seven out of 10 undocumented immigrants have no education beyond high school. The documented immigrants and U.S.-born workers facing competition from undocumented immigrants tend to be the least educated and poorest. <sup>Note</sup>

Undocumented immigration has also allowed politicians, businesses and society to ignore the huge decline in work among less-educated U.S.-born men. In 1960, 7 percent of non-institutionalized U.S.-born men ages 20 to 64 without a college degree were not in the labor force, meaning neither working nor looking for work. By 2000, it was 16%, and, in 2025, it was 21%. <sup>Note</sup>

This deterioration is linked to profound social problems, from crime to overdose deaths. Enforcing immigration laws will not only help raise wages and draw some of these men back into the labor force, but it will also help create the incentive to undertake the difficult reforms necessary to address this problem. After all, why should our leaders care about these men if undocumented immigrant workers are available?

Despite what some may assert, keeping wages down at the bottom of the labor force has only a trivial effect on consumer prices. The poorest third of workers account for just 12% of economic output. Using undocumented immigration to hold down wages is neither fair nor wise. *Note*

In addition to the effect on less-educated workers, undocumented immigrants also impose high costs on taxpayers. A recent analysis of government data by my colleague Karen Zeigler and I estimated that more than two-thirds of households headed by undocumented immigrants use one or more welfare programs. Typically, undocumented immigrants receive benefits on behalf of their U.S.-born children who are awarded American citizenship and full welfare eligibility at birth. They can also access some programs directly. *Note*

Undocumented immigrants make extensive use of the welfare system, not because they are lazy — most actually work — but rather because their low average educational levels and resulting lower incomes mean many who are employed are still poor enough for their U.S.-born children or themselves to qualify for means-test programs. It also means their tax contributions tend to be modest, even when paid on the books.

The National Academy of Sciences study was clear that educational attainment is the single best predictor of an immigrant's income, use of public services and tax payments. Given the education level of most undocumented immigrants, they are a large net fiscal drain, even though some do pay taxes.

There are numerical limits and selection criteria for undocumented immigrants, along with resources to enforce this system, for sound reasons that go beyond keeping out violent criminals. These include protecting American workers, avoiding fiscal costs and keeping the overall numbers low enough to facilitate assimilation. Sanctuary jurisdictions undermine all of these goals, to say nothing of the adverse effect on the rule of law.

