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Undocumented workers impact housing and wages

Gen RE

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Arguments over immigration can be smart or misguided, but they are always complicated. Let's start with an annoying one. Donald Trump's ramp-up of immigration arrests has hit the construction industry, much of whose labor force is undocumented.



Employers of such workers are blaming the raids for the rising cost of housing, a hot topic at the moment. But then you hear of a builder in Jacksonville, Florida, complaining that because of the supposed labor shortage, framers who used to be paid $20 an hour may now cost $40 an hour or more.

A framer cuts the wood and erects the skeleton of the house. It is brutal work, hoisting 50-pound beams while balancing on open framing high above the ground. Framers work in bitter cold and torrid heat. They get rained on.

It would seem fair to pay these guys $40 an hour. On a 100-degree day, I passed Spanish-speaking workers putting in long hours on a high-rise construction project. One took off his T-shirt and wrung out the sweat while laughing. It was a union job, so he was almost certainly documented.

And I thought, yes, America needs immigrants like him and furthermore is lucky to get them. Millions of migrants without papers have been working in this country for years without running afoul of other laws. They shouldn't be rounded up. They should be made legal.

So, what am I saying about current immigration policy? I'm no fan of Trump, but he does get credit for making clear that the border is closed to unauthorized entries. An undocumented workforce hurts the

wages and benefits of legal workers. It should not be used as a way to cut costs for others.
Teachers' unions would have a nervous breakdown if schools could start hiring Australians without papers as a money-saving measure. Somehow, we've looked the other way when the illegal workforce is concentrated on hard manual labor. Americans buying homes thanks to their market-rate pay should be paying their construction
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workers market rates.
The reasons so many Americans can't afford a house, or think they can't, are varied. And not every economist agrees that there even is a serious "housing shortage."
The White House's 2026 Economic Report of the President cited a shortage of 10 million homes. Estimates from mainstream economists range from 5 million to almost no shortfall at all.
A county-level analysis places the shortage at about 4.5 million homes in California and virtually none in North Dakota and West Virginia. Home prices are a function of supply and demand. There's fierce demand in select areas, especially on the coasts, where land for building is hemmed in by oceans.
Some on both the left and the right blame these areas' zoning laws for the difficulty of building houses. But these places are already densely populated. Ditch all their zoning rules, and you ruin the quality of life that made them desirable in the first place.
High interest rates also make buying a home with a mortgage more expensive.
America needs more immigrants, both with fancy tech degrees and willing muscle. Americans have a right to decide how many may come and what skills they bring.