



SYMPOSIUM: Does the U.S. need illegal immigrants?

By Tamar Jacoby
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Somewhere between 7 and 8 million of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. are working, doing jobs we need done and contributing to the economy.

With the unemployment rate above 8 percent, couldn't those jobs be filled by U.S. workers? Actually, no: Even the unemployed make choices about which jobs they're willing to take, and not enough of them want to work in the fields or wash dishes or man an assembly line in a meatpacking plant to keep American agriculture, restaurants, hotels, and food processing alive.

There are long-term historical reasons for this. Americans are getting more educated over time. In 1960, half of the native-born men in the labor force were high school dropouts eager to do unskilled, physically demanding work. Today, that number is less than 10 percent. But we still need unskilled workers to keep the economy running. And there is only so much employers can pay unskilled workers before the prices they charge for their products increase so much that no one will buy them.

In fact, most unskilled immigrants support and sustain jobs for more highly skilled U.S. workers. Think about your favorite restaurant. If the owner had to close for lack of busboys or dishwashers, that would put a lot of Americans out of work: the chef, the waiters, and the manager. It would also mean less work for other workers up and downstream in the local economy: farmers, food processors, truckers, insurance agents—the list goes on and on.

Of course, employers should try to hire Americans first, and the law should require that. But there is no question: Whether they're legal or illegal, America needs these immigrant workers—and we will need them even more as the economy recovers and adds more jobs.

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