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New York
has 650,000
undocumented
immigrants...

They Should

All Be Legal

BY TAMAR JACOBY

As New York's estimated 650,000 illegal immigrants know, the chief problem with living in the shadows is the uncertainty that comes with it. It's not like being a fugitive on the run.

You can usually manage to hold down a job, either with false papers or in the underground economy. Many of your friends and neighbors also are undocumented. You learn to survive — it can even come to feel "normal."

But try to get a driver's license or enroll your kid in college or bargain with your boss or even just take a vacation in your home country — all things that most of the rest of us take for granted — and you will suddenly be reminded: Though Americans are happy to look the other way while you work hard to help grow our economy, we also are determined to punish you for entering the country illegally. And though U.S. authorities aren't constantly on your trail, even a small slip on your part — running a red light or showing that fake Social Security card to the wrong person — can bring the law crashing down on your head.

Sens. John McCain and Edward Kennedy will introduce legislation this month that grapples with the dilemmas posed by these undocumented New Yorkers and 10 million other illegal immigrants living and working in the United States. Of course, as the bill will recognize, these foreigners have broken the law, and few Americans want to reward them or grant them an advantage over other immigrants waiting patiently in line for visas back in their home countries.

But it hardly makes sense to deport 11 million people. Just imagine the dragnets and roundups and forced family break-ups. It would also devastate the economy, both locally and nationwide. As poll after poll shows, what Americans want is control: a secure, orderly, legal immigration system. But we can't build that new, sound structure on a rotten foundation — so we've got to do something about the illegal immigrants already here.

That's why, in keeping with President Bush's immigration plan, McCain and Kennedy are expected to offer undocumented New Yorkers a chance to earn their way in, out of the shadows — by coming forward to register with authorities, then paying a fine and working while they wait their turn for green cards.

Some Americans won't like the idea — and understandably so. But the irony is that ultimately they, too, would benefit. We depend on these workers. They grow our food and build our homes, bus our tables and take care of our children. What we need — what's missing now — is a system that allows them to come into the country legally and live here with dignity, then choose whether to return home or stay and become Americans.

The McCain-Kennedy legislation will provide for this, building that new, sound structure we need for the future: a guest worker program ample enough to meet

our ongoing demand for foreign labor. There is effectively no avenue for non-farm workers — even those who have a job lined up in America — to enter the United States. No wonder, if they do have family here — and no possibility of family visa — they come illegally. The new legislation would remedy that by providing adequate legal channels backed by tougher enforcement. The goal is not more immigrants, but just a way for those now coming illegally to enter in a legal fashion — after a background check and with proper papers.

The two parts of the package go together — indeed neither would work without the other. One piece is transitional: a way to eliminate the existing black market. The other builds upon it, ensuring no unauthorized flow in the future.

The dividend for us: not just an end to the illegality that makes a mockery of the law, but also enhanced security, both at the border and in immigrant communities. Instead of a system we all know is a joke — unrealistic limits we can't hope to make stick — let's try something honestly enforced like we mean it.

In the end, all Americans would gain from the reform — native-born Americans as well as immigrants.

We all have an interest in an airtight system that meets our labor needs and lives up to our values — our glorious traditions as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws.

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