

Editorial: Abhorring a vacuum

The absence of comprehensive immigration reform from Congress is resulting in a crackdown — a repudiation of who we are as a nation.



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It seems only yesterday that thousands of immigrants and their advocates first took to the streets of Milwaukee and elsewhere to protest mean-spirited legislation that would make unlawful presence in this country a felony.

Two years ago, Congress sensibly beat back the effort to criminalize illegal immigration borne of economic necessity — necessity for both the immigrants and this country. But since that legislation by Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) failed, local authorities have been trying to achieve the same thing through a back door.

A recent New York Times article described how authorities throughout the country are using existing laws to round up illegal immigrants, with deportation as the end game. This is a nuclear, enforcement-only approach that disintegrates families and local economies.

Workplace raids occurred last month in Postville, Iowa, at Agriprocessors Inc., the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse. They resulted in 260 illegal immigrants sentenced to five months in prison on charges related to federal identity theft laws.

In Florida's Santa Rosa County, the sheriff had businesses searched for illegal immigrants, making arrests on charges of violating state identity theft laws.

One consequence of this is precisely what immigration foes want: more apprehensions, more deportations and a pall of fear cast over the immigrant community and those who would join them. Other consequences, however, include a repudiation of who we are as a nation of immigrants and swimming against a global tide that makes labor as fluid as goods.

These raids, in tandem with local law enforcement efforts, result in children — often U.S. citizens — left parentless or facing the prospect themselves of what is tantamount to deportation. But another result is boarded-up stores, as already-struggling communities realize that these workers are also consumers.

So to catch a relative few of the 12 million estimated illegal immigrants in this country, the country is expending immense resources while the nation's economy — even in its anemic state — has need of many more workers than our antiquated immigration system will allow in.

This is lunacy and yet another reason for Congress to get to work soon on the kind of comprehensive immigration reform that tells the world that this nation has rediscovered its head, and its heart, when it comes to newcomers.