

**Arizona Republic**

# **Border security, immigration reform continue to vex U.S.**

**By Dan Nowicki**

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When it comes to grappling with immigration, the United States is hardly alone.

But it is in a league of its own.

With 42 million foreign-born residents, the United States has, by a large margin, more immigrants than any nation on Earth, where more than 200 million people live outside their home country. It also has the world's largest population of illegal immigrants, more than half of them from Mexico.

U.S. lawmakers are struggling with the same challenges that confront their counterparts around the globe: how to deal with the millions of illegal immigrants who already are living and working inside their countries; how to keep undesirable immigrants out; and how to help immigrants integrate into the dominant culture and society.

But because of the sheer number of immigrants in the U.S., the issue has become supersized here.

Congress has tried multiple times in the past decade to enact comprehensive immigration reform, legislation that would balance border security, a guest-worker program and legalization for illegal immigrants. The most recent attempt died in the Senate in 2007 amid a national outcry over what critics called "amnesty." Despite continuing talk, politicians have been reluctant to revisit the issue, instead focusing on border security and enforcement.

Meanwhile, frustration mounts.

With a lack of meaningful action by the federal government, which has been decried by immigration advocates and opponents alike, states have begun trying to fill the void. Arizona, with a large illegal-immigrant population and ground zero for illegal border crossing, has led the way.

The most recent development was Senate Bill 1070, which would have made it a state crime to be in the country illegally. The controversial measure set off a firestorm of controversy. A U.S. judge blocked key parts of the state law, but other states still are hoping to copy it.

Capitol Hill still has not mustered any serious effort to revisit immigration reform in a comprehensive way.

Failure to reach a consensus has changed direction and tone of the debate.

"Years ago, you had President George W. Bush and Mexican President Vicente Fox talking about how to modernize immigration policy between the two countries so that, as they put it in their own words, immigration became safe, legal and orderly," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a national organization that advocates for comprehensive immigration reform. "And now, you have Arizona politicians saying, 'Kick them out and keep them out.' The vision of a 21st-century immigration policy that delivered control and promised humanity has been replaced by hard-edged rhetoric and mean-spirited policies that have strained relations between the two countries."

A unique position

The United States, with an estimated 11.1 million illegal immigrants out of a total of 42 million immigrants, has both the largest immigrant population and the largest illegal-immigrant population of any nation, mostly consisting of Mexicans and other Latin Americans.

The U.S.-Mexican immigration situation is unique in other respects, too. It is the only example of a developing nation sharing a border with an economically advanced nation.

The income inequality is the largest of any two neighbors. The more than 11 million people born in Mexico now living in the U.S. - about 10 percent of the Mexican population - constitute the largest number of people living outside their own country in an adjacent country. More than half of those Mexican-born individuals are in the country illegally.

According to the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center, Mexicans in 2009 made up 60 percent of the total 11.1 million illegal-immigrant population in the United States. That works out to about 6.7 million illegal immigrants. An additional 20 percent, or 2.2 million people, came from other parts of Latin America. South and East Asia contributed 11 percent, or 1.2 million illegal immigrants, the Pew center said.

Myriad approaches

The United States has tried various approaches to deal with illegal immigration, including a controversial 1986 amnesty program and, more recently, a renewed focus on enforcement.

The U.S. labor market has needed Mexican workers on and off since the 19th century. Today, experts point to a well-established integrated border economy that in the past decade contributed an estimated \$638 million in regional commerce every day. Reform advocates say current U.S. immigration policy is outdated and doesn't reflect that reality.

"It's like we have the speed limit set at 25 on a superhighway that connects workers in Mexico to jobs in the United States, and we get mad that people speed," Sharry said.

The U.S.-Mexican relationship has included multiple periods when Mexican labor was welcomed in the U.S., such as the "bracero" worker program, which was instituted during World War II and which fell out of public favor.

During the Great Depression, for example, the United States conducted a mass expulsion of Mexicans and, in many cases, their U.S.-born children, said Carlos Velez-Ibanez, an anthropologist and director of Arizona State University's School of Transborder Studies.

"Every time you have a downturn, historically, in the United States, the first object of attention is: Who? The Mexican-origin population and their children," Velez-Ibanez said. "As a kid (in the 1950s), I used to see the immigration officials raiding Mexican neighborhoods looking for persons who were undocumented or who were braceros who had overstayed their visas."

When the bracero program ended in 1964, policymakers turned their attention to encouraging maquiladoras, the manufacturing plants strategically located on the Mexican side of the border to accommodate returning Mexican labor. The hope was that the displaced Mexican workers would find employment in the plants. But the factories also attracted workers from the Mexican interior who, once living near the border, were attracted to the United States by the promise of higher wages and a higher standard of living.

In the 1970s, "illegal immigration," a term primarily applied to Mexican migrants, started to become a political concern in parts of the country and in the media. The number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. grew from an estimated 540,000 at the end of the 1960s to 1.1 million in 1974 and to 3 million in 1980, according to an August 1987 study based on U.S. Census Bureau research.

By 1986, illegal immigration had increased to the point where U.S. lawmakers decided they needed to do something to discourage the employers who were hiring the undocumented workers.

Congress passed and President Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which would eventually provide amnesty to nearly 3 million illegal immigrants. To be eligible, the immigrants had to prove they had lived continuously in the U.S. since before Jan. 1, 1982, and meet other minor requirements. The law also made it illegal for any employer to knowingly hire or recruit an illegal immigrant, but the employer-sanction provisions of the law were never strongly enforced. Critics complained that the promise of amnesty only gave future immigrants one more incentive to enter illegally.

Illegal-immigration numbers exploded along with the economic booms of the 1990s and 2000s. In 1990, illegal immigrants numbered 3.5 million. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 5.2 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S. as of 2009, or 47 percent of the total 11.1 million, came after 1999.

One expert pointed to a "historic alliance" among President Bill Clinton's administration, corporations hungry for cheap labor, certain labor unions interested in growing membership and the Catholic Church as instrumental in fostering a lenient attitude toward illegal immigration from Mexico. By the end of the 1990s, public opposition to illegal immigration was on the rise, eventually boiling over in Arizona early in the new century.

"Immigration was not a product of natural history, it was the product of corporate greed and basically a conspiracy of many elements of the U.S. population for whom illegal immigration was beneficial," said Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a liberal research group in Washington, D.C. "The creation of rational immigration measures, which would take in people in a harmonic way, didn't have a chance."

Economic pressure

Although illegal immigration has declined recently, most experts expect it to pick up again once the economy rebounds. The political debate has only gotten noisier since the recession hit, with border security a key plank in the 2010 campaign platforms of not only many Republicans but some Democrats.

Some observers say that if there is to be a long-term solution, it will have to take into account the economic pressures related to immigration.

"I don't think there is a way of securing the border, if you go against the laws of supply and demand," said Andrew Selee, director of the nonpartisan Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico

Institute in Washington D.C. "That means at some point we're going to have to increase the number of visas for people to come to work in the United States legally or have some sort of a worker program that allows people to come to the States more in tune with the actual demand."

Even advocates of stricter immigration control agree that a preoccupation with the border won't solve the problem, particularly in the absence of a crackdown on the employers who hire illegal workers, a national requirement that companies use the federal E-Verify program to check a job-seeker's legal status, and a system to monitor visa overstayers. An estimated 40 percent of the illegal immigrants in the country actually entered legally but remained after their visas expired.

"If you don't have interior enforcement, the border isn't going to make that much difference," said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank. "If we don't do that, we could spend 10 times as much on the border and it's not going to matter very much."

U.S. immigration policy

Immigrating legally to the United States is difficult. The government grants "green cards," or permanent-resident status, based largely on family connections and work expertise. Under a preference system, the government each year gives out up to 675,000 immigrant visas, including at least 226,000 for family members and 140,000 linked to workers in the country to fill jobs:

- A U.S. citizen can submit a "petition for alien relative" that would allow an "immediate relative" to live permanently in the country. Immediate family members are a husband or wife, a child or a parent. Others may fall under "special categories" for green cards, such as the widow or widower of a U.S. citizen or the abused spouse or child of a U.S. citizen, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

- A U.S. employer can sponsor a foreign worker for permanent residency but sometimes must demonstrate to the U.S. Labor Department that no Americans wanted or were qualified for the job. There also are special exceptions, such as Iraqi or Afghan translators or Iraqis who helped the U.S. during the war.

- Often the only way to get into the United States is the diversity lottery. Congress created a program to grant 50,000 visas a year to randomly picked applicants from countries with low rates of immigration.