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## Illegal Immigrants See Opportunity in New Rule

By ADESHINA EMMANUEL

WASHINGTON — The work permits that young illegal immigrants can begin applying for next week under a [new government](#) policy will let American employers tap a generation of educated workers who have been confined until now to the shadowy corners of the economy, experts on [immigration](#) policy say.

One of those could be Juan Escalante, a 23-year-old Venezuelan who has been in the country illegally since age 11 and is among those enthusiastic about the new opportunity. Not long ago, Mr. Escalante said, he feared that he might spend the rest of his life working as an assistant manager in an ice cream shop despite earning a bachelor's degree in political science and international affairs at Florida State University.

Getting a work permit “would be amazing,” he said, allowing him to look for work on Capitol Hill “to see how policy is driven” and to save enough money to help him pursue a master's degree in public policy.

With the Obama administration about to put its new program in place, the [Migration Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan group here in Washington, says that 140,000 illegal immigrants in this country are enrolled in college. An additional 80,000 already have college degrees — about 48 percent from two-year programs, 43 percent from four-year programs and 8 percent from graduate school.

Steven Raphael, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, said many of the young people eligible for the program, which will start accepting applications on Wednesday, were now limited to jobs that do not require proof of citizenship or a work permit. They often have service jobs that pay cash, either in wages or tips, working as restaurant staff members, landscapers, home cleaners, baby sitters or dog walkers. Others start their own businesses off the books.

Roberto G. Gonzales, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, said the policy could provide some relief for a small number of the estimated 11.5 million illegal immigrants in the United States, and help solve a problem of “wasted talent.”

In a decade of doing research about illegal immigrants, Professor Gonzales said he had come face to face with college-educated young people limited to low-skilled jobs. Many had training to work in fields like mechanical engineering, health care, education and law. The new policy could allow them to apply for jobs closer to their career aspirations, he said, as well as motivate high school dropouts to “rejoin the mainstream.”

Still, like many other people who advocate for a broader change in immigration policy, he said the policy announced by [President Obama](#) in June fell short of the ideal. Professor Gonzales likened it to “a kind of second-class citizenship” and a “legal limbo where status can change overnight with a change of administration, or with expiration of deferment or work permit.”

Opponents of the policy argue that it is ill-timed, given a dismal job market that is especially grim for Americans under 30 who do not have college degrees. Talk of harvesting “wasted talent” is “just sugar to make the poison go down,” said William Gheen, president of [Americans for Legal Immigration](#), a political action committee. Mr. Obama is harming American workers by “placing more illegal immigrants up against them as competitors,” he said.

Those criticisms do not diminish the excitement of young people like Claudia Jimenez, of Florida, who finished high school last year. Asked what she has been doing since, Ms. Jimenez, a 19-year-old native of Venezuela who has been in this country since 2001, laughed uneasily and said she had not been doing anything.

“Now I have something,” said Ms. Jimenez, who sees a work permit and employment as the first steps toward enrolling in college. “I can actually do something with my life. Before it was like my life was on pause.”

The Migration Policy Institute says that about 800,000 illegal immigrants are enrolled in American schools from kindergarten through the 12th grade, and 500,000 of them are under the age of 15. About 350,000 young illegal immigrants 16 and older have no high school diploma or equivalent credential and are not enrolled to get either.

Clarissa Martinez of the National Council of La Raza, a civil rights organization, said: “Many people might have thought, ‘What’s the point; I can be deported any time. I’ll find a job in the meantime.’ It’s a net positive because the high likelihood was that they would have continued to live in and be part of the community anyway.”

Having a work permit could also help unauthorized immigrants whose dreams of college are thwarted because they cannot afford to pay tuition with the low-income jobs that they can get

now. And if they do manage to get into college, they cannot do work-study jobs, paid internships or clinical training programs built into degree programs. They are typically not eligible for in-state tuition at state universities. Laws also block them from federal grants and loans for college.

The personal dream of Maria Marroquin, a 25-year-old from Peru who has been in this country illegally since age 13, is to enroll in law school and become an immigration lawyer — a goal that had seemed impossible given the cost of tuition. This fall she will start her senior year at Dominican University, in Chicago’s northwest suburbs. So far, she has paid for her education by working baby-sitting and domestic jobs. She also has received aid that Dominican University sets aside for illegal immigrants — a rarity in higher education.

“If I do get a work permit it will definitely help me because I’d be able to work and either save money to go to law school or work while I go to school,” said Ms. Marroquin, who volunteers for [Dream Activist](#), a youth advocacy organization. “It might not help me pay for all of it, but it will definitely help me pay for some.”

Work permits will also serve as proof of legal residence, allowing young immigrants to get driver’s licenses — an immediate benefit because they can look for jobs in places where public transportation is not available. They can also get [Social Security](#) numbers. When Mr. Obama first announced the new policy, owners of small businesses praised the change, saying it would make it easier for them to comply with laws requiring them to check the legal status of employees.

Angy Rivera, a 21-year-old illegal immigrant from Colombia who has been here since she was 3, is waiting to see the program in action before deciding what to do. “I kind of feel like I’m in a zombie mode,” she said. Ms. Rivera, who lives in Queens and is a part-time student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said she was initially indifferent about Mr. Obama’s policy. But when Ms. Rivera, who writes an advice blog for young immigrants, spoke with other young people, she began to change her mind.

“Those who have been close to giving up, who have worked for nothing or been mistreated in their jobs, those who stopped believing in the American government’s promise of equality for all, may start to see some ray of sunshine,” she said.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/10/us/illegal-immigrants-see-opportunity-in-work-permit-rule.html?\\_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/10/us/illegal-immigrants-see-opportunity-in-work-permit-rule.html?_r=1&emc=tnt&tntemail0=y)