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Illegal immigrants: Here to stay

By Lee Hockstader

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Two new studies on illegal immigration are out this week, looking both at demographic trends and at the enforcement efforts, mostly by local governments, to contain the problem. Here's the headline: Illegal immigrants are here to stay, no matter how much pressure, legislation, ethnic profiling and furious rhetoric are directed against them.

In the gusher of new data, one thing that struck me was how deeply entrenched undocumented migrants are, not just in communities across the land but in the American economy. Dislodging them in any meaningful way isn't just nativist fantasy; it's economic folly.

Consider this: Three big states -- California, Texas and New Jersey -- on their own account for about 25 percent of U.S. GDP. In those states, unauthorized immigrants account for, on average, about 9 percent of the work force, according to a report released Tuesday by the Pew Hispanic Center. (It's actually closer to 10 percent in California and a little below 9 percent in New Jersey.)

Removing almost a tenth of the labor force in those states, as the pro-deportation crowd favors, would deal a staggering blow to a quarter of the American economy, robbing it of the low-skilled workers that underpin agriculture, food processing, hospitality and construction industries, among others. And don't count on millions of unemployed American-born workers, who tend to be relatively well educated and skilled, rushing to fill the places of deported illegal immigrants who sweated through jobs in meat-packing plants, construction sites and picking lettuce.

Overall, the Pew study found, the number of illegal immigrants has leveled off, at 11.2 million after two years of decline linked largely to the recession. About 8 million undocumented workers were in the country in 2010, a number virtually unchanged from 2009; they represent 5.2 percent of the overall labor force.

Maybe even more striking is the ongoing surge of so-called anchor babies -- children born in the U.S. to illegal immigrants, who tend to be younger and have more children than the population overall. While illegal immigrants represent just under 4 percent of the U.S. population, about 8 percent of all newborns has at least one unauthorized parent, Pew reported. In the 12 months ending in March 2010, about 350,000 babies were born in this country to illegal immigrants --

about the same number as in the previous year. (Another 17 percent of all American babies were born to legal immigrants, meaning that a quarter of all U.S. children have foreign-born parents.) And of all 5.5 million kids born to illegal immigrant parents, more than 80 percent were born in this country and are therefore citizens.

Those numbers will undoubtedly cause even more gnashing of teeth from the nativist crowd, and calls to reinvent the 14th Amendment, which has been interpreted as conferring automatic citizenship on children born within our borders.

The other study, by the Migration Policy Institute, offers fewer big surprises. It features the unshocking information that crackdowns by local authorities in a number of jurisdictions led illegal immigrants to, well, go next door to jurisdictions that took a more tolerant stance.

Two of the localities highlighted by the report are Prince William County, in Virginia, and Frederick County, in Maryland. In both places, immigrant-bashing rhetoric and policies led to sharp (in Prince William) or very sharp (in Frederick) declines in the unauthorized population. But in national or even regional terms, the effect was negligible since most who left those counties appeared not to have gone very far.

The MPI study focuses on the federal government's 287(g) program, which authorizes state and local law enforcement officers to screen and hold people for immigration status and violations, and trigger deportation proceedings against them. Unsurprisingly, the application of that program has been highly inconsistent. Some local police departments use it against any illegal immigrant they can get their hands on, and others target those who commit serious crimes, in line with the feds' stated policy.

Still, as the report acknowledges, only about 10 percent of deportations are initiated by state and local officials. So while they have been instrumental in generating a hostile atmosphere for unauthorized immigrants in some places, they're having little impact on the overall demographic trends that the Pew report highlights.