

Reuters

Over a million immigrants land U.S. jobs in 2008-10

By Ed Stoddard

January 20, 2011

Over the past two years, as U.S. unemployment remained near double-digit levels and the economy shed jobs in the wake of the financial crisis, over a million foreign-born arrivals to America found work, many illegally.

Those are among the findings of a review of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census Bureau data conducted exclusively for Reuters by researchers at the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.

Often young and unskilled or semi-skilled, immigrants have taken jobs Americans could do in areas like construction, willing to work for less wages. Others land jobs that unemployed Americans turn up their noses at or lack the skills to do.

With a national unemployment rate of 9.4 percent, domestic job creation is at the top of President Barack Obama's agenda and such findings could add to calls to tighten up on illegal immigration. But much of it is Hispanic and the growing Latino vote is a key base for Obama's Democratic Party.

Many of the new arrivals, according to employers, brought with them skills required of the building trade and found work in sectors such as construction, where jobless rates are high.

"Employers have chosen to use new immigrants over native-born workers and have continued to displace large numbers of blue-collar workers and young adults without college degrees," said Andrew Sum, the director of the Center for Labor Market Studies.

"One of the advantages of hiring, particularly young, undocumented immigrants, is the fact that employers do not have to pay health benefits or basic payroll taxes," said Sum.

From 2008 to 2010, 1.1 million new migrants who have entered America since 2008 landed jobs, even as U.S. household employment declined by 6.26 million over that same period.

But in a sign of the times, the pace of job growth for new arrivals has also slowed, to an average of 550,000 a year from 2008 to 2010 from over 750,000 a year from 2000 to 2008.

Sum said it was fair to estimate that around 35 percent of these workers were undocumented or illegal.

Many immigrants acquired jobs in traditional low-wage work associated with foreign, undocumented and especially Mexican labor: hotels and food services, retail trade, sanitation, cleaning and construction.

There are a number of programs by which the United States lets foreign workers into the country to fill gaps in its domestic labor market but employer groups complain little is done in this area for legal, unskilled workers.

"There is basically no unskilled immigration that is legal. There are basically no provisions in the law for unskilled immigrants," said Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business.

Farm workers in particular argue that Americans would not do the tough field work that is rife with undocumented workers, titling one recent union campaign "Take Our Jobs". The slogan meant that if Americans wanted their jobs, then take them. But it is likely they don't.

Immigrant hiring also comes despite stepped-up workplace enforcement against companies that hire illegal immigrants and the rapid expansion of the online E-verify system used by employers to check immigration status.