

Miami Herald

Illegal immigration declines dramatically in South Carolina

By James Rosen
February 1, 2011

As South Carolina considers enacting its own version of Arizona's tough immigration law, the number of illegal immigrants in the state has dropped significantly in recent years.

While the national total has dropped only slightly since 2007 — from 12 million to 11.2 million, or 6.7 percent — South Carolina's share of illegal immigrants has declined by 21.4 percent — from 70,000 to 55,000 — in the same period.

Jeff Passell, a demographer with the Pew Research Center who wrote the Washington group's report released Tuesday, said economic woes in South Carolina and beyond have slowed the influx of undocumented workers from Mexico and other countries.

"Certainly when the economy is bad, the attraction for new unauthorized immigrants just isn't there," Passell told McClatchy. "In places where the economy is bad, what we've seen historically is that the flow of new unauthorized immigrants drops dramatically."

Myriam Torres, the director of the Consortium for Latino Immigration Studies at the University of South Carolina, said the state's crackdown on undocumented workers has dissuaded foreigners from coming. Torres said South Carolina doesn't really need an Arizona-style law giving police the power to detain anyone they suspect is an illegal immigrant.

"That has people — not only undocumented, but documented immigrants as well — kind of scared because of the possibility of ethnic profiling," she said.

Illegal immigration has been a political flashpoint in South Carolina for several years.

Former Gov. Mark Sanford signed a bill in June 2008 that increased fines on businesses that hire undocumented workers, with the law phased in over 2009 and 2010.

Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham and Jim DeMint clashed in 2007 during a prolonged Senate battle over immigration.

Graham has since toughened his stance on immigration, backing a constitutional amendment that would deny American citizenship to illegal immigrants' children born in the U.S.

Graham and DeMint in December joined other GOP senators in defeating a bill that would have granted legal residency, with a path toward citizenship, to children of illegal immigrants.

But the number of undocumented workers in South Carolina is much less as a share of its overall population — 1.2 percent of its 4.63 million residents — than the national share of 3.6 percent.

Torres said the relatively small number of illegal immigrants in South Carolina raises questions about whether the cash-strapped state government is using its limited resources wisely in cracking down on undocumented workers.

"I do believe there is an unnecessary reaction, especially in terms of the amount of money it takes to implement these laws," Torres said. "There have to be officers to identify someone who may be an undocumented worker, while these same officers can be going after real criminals committing violent crimes."