

Contra Costa Times

Study: Amnesty would help fix state's financial woes

By Stephen Wall

January 12, 2010

For the second time in as many weeks, researchers at a major university have concluded that legalizing undocumented immigrants would provide a powerful jolt to the economy.

California, home to about one-quarter of the country's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, stands to gain about \$16 billion over time from an amnesty program, according to a study released Tuesday.

Amnesty would help fix Sacramento's budget crisis by increasing the state and local tax base by about \$350 million in the short run, said USC economist Manuel Pastor, co-author of the report.

The report follows UCLA professor Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda's study released last week that showed comprehensive immigration reform injecting \$1.5 trillion into the U.S. economy over the next decade.

"The economy is sometimes used as an excuse to not think about comprehensive immigration reform," said Pastor, co-director of the USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, which put out the report.

"We think in fact this is a time for us to be thinking in the long run and short run about how comprehensive immigration reform can work for California in particular," he said.

The report looks specifically at Latino illegal immigrant adults, who make up the vast majority of the state's undocumented population.

If they had legal status, Latino workers would make more money and increase spending, investment and contributions to the state, local and national economy,

Pastor said. They would bolster the Social Security and Medicare systems and earn higher wages as a result of increased education and English skills, he said.

"It seems to me that regardless of how people feel about so-called unauthorized workers, California stands to benefit significantly in terms of revenue and other kinds of income they bring into our state," said Elsa Valdez, a sociology professor at Cal State San Bernardino.

Critics of illegal immigration dismissed the report as another attempt to sell amnesty to skeptical Americans who rejected legalization when it was last tried three years ago during better economic times.

"Basic common sense tells the American public that when you have double-digit unemployment and massive budget deficits, granting amnesty to millions of illegal aliens is not a good idea," said Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington D.C. group that favors severely restricting immigration levels.

Other illegal immigration opponents disputed the report's findings.

"Amnesty means the guillotine for the American people, American workers and American families," said Raymond Herrera, founder and president of We The People California's Crusader, a Claremont-based group fighting to stop illegal immigration. "It's the American worker that should be paying those taxes and holding those jobs."

Jose Calderon, a professor of sociology and Chicano studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, said that undocumented workers in certain industries do bring downward pressure on wages.

"But it is not the immigrant that it is to blame," Calderon said. "The way to eliminate this downward pressure is by giving undocumented workers labor protection. As you reduce the exploitation of wages and improve the working conditions, more equality will be created between immigrant workers and resident workers."

Adrian Pantoja, an associate professor of political studies at Pitzer College, said a \$16 billion boost is small considering the California economy is nearly \$2 trillion.

Pantoja said the larger economic benefits of legalization are based on the assumption that undocumented immigrants will become more educated and earn higher degrees.

"If that's what's going to happen, then the economic benefits are going to be significant," he said. "But we don't know. The big question we're grappling with in the field of Latino studies is whether Latinos will be moving into the middle class or will they become part of the underclass. We don't have a good answer for that."