

Many will not self-deport

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Attrition through enforcement is the underlying strategy of Arizona's immigration law SB 1070. Supporters say it forces undocumented immigrants to make the "rational" decision to self-deport. In theory, they will do this when faced with an increased risk of being caught and officially deported, and a decreased chance of finding work.

This logic, however, doesn't hold. Why? Because undocumented immigrants have a lot to lose, and just walking away goes against human nature.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more than one-third of undocumented immigrants own a home. This number rises to 45 percent among those who have been here more than 10 years. An estimated 37 percent of undocumented immigrants have U.S.-citizen children.

Undocumented immigrants have ties to jobs, schools, churches, family, friends and co-workers. Studies have found that when undocumented immigrants lose their jobs because of worksite enforcement, they often take lower-paying, cash-only jobs to scrape by. That's because self-deporting means giving up everything -- and don't forget, some of them paid a high price to smugglers and risked their lives to get here in the first place.

There is logic to the argument that migrants leave when jobs disappear. A March report from the Department of Homeland Security estimated the number of undocumented immigrants living in Arizona at 360,000 in 2011, down from 560,000 in 2008. Arizona now ranks ninth among the 10 states that have the highest undocumented population, down from fifth a year earlier.

Experts say increased border enforcement and tough state laws played a role, and the numbers back them up. Arizona saw a sharper reduction in illegal immigrants than other states that did not aggressively pursue tough new immigration laws.

But the primary reason for the exodus was the economy -- particularly lost jobs in construction and hospitality industries.

After years of economic malaise, there continues to be a demand for migrant labor, and it is likely to increase with economic recovery. Meeting that demand with legal workers through enhanced guest-worker programs makes more sense than going after the undocumented families who stuck it out through the recession. They have long been part of our communities and should be offered a path to legalization. This is preferable to driving them further underground.

In a new report, "The Myth of Self-Deportation," political scientist Alexandra Filindra says the pattern predicted by attrition-through-enforcement does not fit with what psychologists know about human behavior. It ignores that people tend to increase the level of risk they are willing to accept in an effort to hang on to what they have.

She writes: "The deeper the ties to the United States . . . the greater the risk an immigrant is willing to assume in order to stay." The report was released by the Immigration Policy Center, the research arm of the American Immigration Council, a non-profit that advocates for "humane immigration policies that reflect American values."

Attrition through enforcement won't achieve its goals unless we ratchet up law enforcement to a level few Americans would tolerate. Civil liberties would be left in the dust. Is this the kind of country you want to live in?

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Published on Immigration Policy Center (<http://immigrationpolicy.org>)

The nation needs a solution that will secure the border and offer undocumented immigrants a way to earn legal status.

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