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Researchers disagree on illegal immigrant cost-benefit analysis

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Reasonable people can disagree on many things. But when it comes to the costs or benefits of illegal immigration it seems there is little consensus among analysts on just about anything.

One immigration researcher recently told a congressional committee that legalizing millions of illegal immigrants would cost taxpayers nationwide more than \$50 billion a year. Others say legalizing them would increase revenues resulting in a net gain of \$12 billion over 10 years.

The reason for such wide disparities can be attributed, in part, to uncertainties in basic data, such as how many illegal immigrants are in the country, researchers say. But the difference is also driven by ideological differences.

Some researchers, who favor comprehensive immigration reform, say immigration will not harm the economy.

"There are numerous potential threats to future U.S. economic strength and fiscal health, but immigration is not one of them," said Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego. Cornelius favors citizenship for illegal residents, guest worker programs and more cooperation with Mexico.

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, Robert Rector, a senior analyst with the conservative Heritage Foundation, said illegal immigrants have a detrimental effect on the country, including declining wages, increasing dependence on welfare and rising crime.

"In the long run, (legalizing millions of illegal immigrants) would prove the largest expansion of government welfare in 30 years," Rector said. "The overall potential costs of the amnesty ... are likely to reach \$50 billion per year."

Recent hearings on immigration organized by the Republican leaders in Congress around the country have raised a torrent of debate on the costs associated with illegal immigration. San Diego County was the sight of three hearings. Another is scheduled Monday at 11 a.m. at the county administration building downtown.

Immigrant rights groups have criticized the hearings, arguing that most of the invited speakers are biased against illegal immigrants. But anti-illegal immigration activists have lauded the panels, saying that they present important information about the issue.

Much of the debate revolves around two widely differing proposals in Congress to overhaul the nation's immigration laws. A House-backed bill would intensify enforcement efforts and make it a felony to live and work in the country illegally. A Senate measure would combine enforcement with a guest-worker program and increased access to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Rector told a committee that met in San Diego earlier this month that the Senate bill would legalize 9 million to 10 million illegal immigrants living in the country. Once they become citizens, they would be eligible to bring family members such as parents to the country legally, resulting in some 30 million new legal immigrants.

In an analysis of the Senate bill, Rector estimated that legalizing illegal immigrants would lead to

more than 100 million new immigrants over the next 20 years.

Other groups, such as the American Immigration Law Foundation, a research and policy organization based in Washington, D.C., say that figure is vastly inflated and unrealistic.

"Some critics of (the Senate bill) have claimed that the bill would unleash a veritable flood of anywhere from 66 million to 217 million new immigrants into the United States over the next 20 years," according to an American Immigration Law Foundation analysis.

"The absurdity of these projections is evident in the fact that the estimate of 217 million is 70 million more than the combined populations of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama."

There are also differing views about the cost legalizing illegal immigrants would impose on the country.

At the hearing in San Diego, U.S. Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., said each illegal immigrant costs taxpayers about \$2,700 a year, for a total of about \$10 billion a year, which includes education, law enforcement and other expenses. He said legalizing illegal immigrants would likely nearly triple the figure to about \$29 billion a year.

Those estimates come from the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based immigration think tank that advocates for more restrictive immigration measures.

"While amnestied immigrants might be less likely to work off the books, it is absolutely essential that we recognize and carefully consider the fact that if legalized, they will also be eligible for many local, state and federal welfare programs for which they are currently ineligible," Sensenbrenner said.

However, researchers at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a policy and research organization based in Washington, D.C., say that legalizing illegal immigrants would significantly increase the number of people filing federal tax returns. The Senate bill also requires that to qualify for citizenship, illegal immigrants would have to pay back taxes.

Overall, researcher Aviva Aron-Dine said legalizing illegal immigrants would increase tax revenues by \$66 billion, while increasing welfare costs by \$54 billion. The net result is a benefit of \$12 billion over 10 years.

Immigrant rights advocates have repeatedly criticized the immigration hearings, saying the Republican-led panels are not interested in hearing dissenting voices who favor citizenship and guest worker programs.

"Undocumented immigrants are an integral part of our economy," said Melissa Daar, a field director for People for the American Way, a liberal advocacy organization. "House Republicans are trying to portray immigration as a one-way situation where only immigrants benefit."

At the San Diego hearing earlier this month, most of the questions were directed at speakers who favor stricter immigration measures. After the two-hour hearing, Cornelius was visibly frustrated by the discussion.

Asked what he thought of the hearing, he answered: "I couldn't tell you what I think on the record."

Monday's Government Reform Committee hearing at the county administration building will focus once more on the cost of illegal immigration to local, county and state governments. Only invited speakers will be allowed to speak.

The list of speakers includes: Miguel Unzueta, a special agent with the U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement in San Diego; Bill Kolender, San Diego County Sheriff; Bill Horn, chairman of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors; Steven Escoboza, president of the Hospital Association of San Diego and Imperial Counties; state Sen. Denise Moreno Ducheny, D-San Diego; and Dr. Bronwen Anders, professor of pediatrics at UC San Diego.

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