



Department of Social Development and World Peace
Office of Domestic Social Development

Background on Immigration Reform
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Issue

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, there are currently 11-12 million undocumented persons residing in the United States. Each year, another 300,000 to 500,000 undocumented persons arrive in the United States by either crossing the U.S.-Mexico border or by staying in the country beyond the expiration of their visa. The large majority of the undocumented population works in vital industries important to the U.S. economy, including agriculture, construction, and service industries. Because of their undocumented status, these workers often experience exploitation in the workplace and other forms of discrimination. Because of a lack of available employment and family-based visas in the U.S. immigration system, many are forced to cross the border with unscrupulous smugglers in dangerous conditions. Since 1993, more than 2800 migrants have perished in the deserts of the American Southwest.

Background

Since 1993, the U.S. government has spent approximately \$25 billion on border enforcement initiatives and has tripled the number of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border. During the same period, the number of undocumented persons in the country has almost doubled and the rate of migrant deaths in the desert has nearly tripled. Clearly, a more comprehensive approach to the immigration crisis in our nation is needed.

In May of last year, President George W. Bush announced his support for comprehensive immigration reform. During the 109th Congress, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, an enforcement-only bill which included many overly broad and punitive provisions targeted toward both legal and illegal immigrants. The U.S. Senate passed S. 2611, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006, which included many elements supported by the U.S. bishops. USCCB opposed H.R. 4437 and called S. 2611 a “step in the right direction.” Both bills died upon adjournment of the 109th Congress.

It is expected that the U.S. Senate will begin debating new legislation sometime in March and that the House of Representatives will consider legislation sometime in the summer months.

USCCB Position

In January, 2003, the U.S. Catholic bishops outlined principles for comprehensive immigration reform in their pastoral statement, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. They stated that any just immigration reform proposal should address the root causes of migration, such as global poverty, and should include the following elements:

- 1). a broad-based legalization of the undocumented;
- 2). a future worker program with appropriate protections for both U.S. and foreign workers

- 3). changes to the family-based immigration system to reduce waiting times for family reunification
- 4). restoration of due process for immigrants

Earned Legalization: An earned legalization program with a path to citizenship would require undocumented workers to work for several years, take English courses, and pay a fine in order to participate in the program. Such a program would help stabilize the workforce, promote family unity, and bring a large population “out of the shadows,” as members of their communities.

Future Worker Program: A worker program to permit foreign-born workers to enter the country safely and legally would help reduce illegal immigration and the loss of life in the American desert. Any program should include workplace protections, living wage levels, safeguards against the displacement of U.S. workers, and family unity.

Family-based immigration reform: It currently takes years for family members to be reunited through the family-based legal immigration system. This leads to family breakdown and, in some cases, illegal immigration. Changes in the family-based immigration should be made to increase the number of family visas available and reduce family reunification waiting times.

Restoration of due process rights: Due process rights taken away by the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) should be restored, particularly the elimination of 3 and 10 year bars and the use of judicial discretion in deportation proceedings.

Addressing Root Causes: Congress should examine the root causes of migration, such as wage inequities and the lack of job opportunities in sending countries, and seek long-term solutions in areas of development, debt, and trade. The antidote to the problem of illegal immigration is sustainable economic development in sending countries. In an ideal world, migration should be driven by choice, not necessity.

Enforcement: By replacing illegal migration with legal migration, law enforcement will be better able to focus upon those who truly threaten public safety: drug and human traffickers, smugglers, and would-be terrorists. Any enforcement measures must be targeted, proportional, and humane.

What You Can Do

- Contact your Senators and Representatives and ask them to support a comprehensive immigration reform bill consistent with the principles outlined by the U.S. bishops.
- Look for more information on the *Justice for Immigrants* website, www.justiceforimmigrants.org.

For More Information: Kevin Appleby 202-541-3260 or kappleby@uscgb.org