



Higher Education of Undocumented Immigrants: The Student Adjustment Act **Part 3 of 4 By Lillian Kim^δ**

The Moral Objection

Now we turn to the other major objection to the SAA: the moral side of the debate. Critics argue that allowing illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition prices would send the message that the U.S. rewards law-breakers, rather than condones them. Laws that exist specifically to prohibit illegal entry into the country would be undermined and illegal immigration will increase as a result. While not much evidence exists that proves most undocumented immigration is driven by a desire to obtain a free public education, a case can still be made. Todero states that because migrants are risk averse and because there is a great uncertainty attached to the probability of employment, employment outcomes carry a lot of weight in one's decision to immigrate.¹ Since attending college increases one's chances of landing a job, it can be argued that foreigners would view the implementation of SAA as a factor that would increase their probability of employment, which would thus encourage them to immigrate to the United States.

If the SAA does indeed encourage illegal immigration, a dire economic situation could result. After taking into account projected emigration and death rates of 1.5% and .5%, respectively, the Carrying Capacity Network projects the stock of illegal settlers to increase by an average of 300,000 per year based on 1997 estimates of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (Huddle). Using estimates of illegal alien stocks of 4 to 5.4 million and growth by 300,000 yearly, we find that the net costs of public assistance for illegal immigrants and the U.S. workers they displace will be between \$207 and \$280

^δ Bachelors of Science, expected graduate class of 2004, Wellesley College.

¹ <http://www.nber.org/books/global/chiswick-hatton3-21-02.pdf>

billion in 1994 dollars for the decade 1995-2004 (Huddle). With such a huge number of illegal immigrants in this country already, it seems unlikely that U.S citizens would support a legislation that could potentially worsen the economic situation.

In response to those who contend that allowing illegal aliens to pay in-state tuition rates would encourage more illegal immigration to take place, Romero points out that it is highly unlikely that many, if any, undocumented persons closely scrutinize the immigration code before deciding whether to cross the border. It is more likely that they were aware of their undocumented status, but chose to enter the country anyway. It is also unlikely that illegal immigrants who are already in this country will voluntarily leave the United States or turn themselves into the INS; many of these individuals consider themselves as American rather than foreign (Romero).

The issue of job displacement that illegal immigration usually poses does not appear to be so grave either. Borjas finds that if the immigrant population were to increase by 10 percent, the earnings of white native-born workers are reduced by only 0.2 percent, while the earnings of black native-born workers increase by 0.2 percent.² Furthermore, those who fear that the implementation of the SAA will result in a surplus of low-paying jobs should calm themselves by taking a look at the numbers. The percentage of eligible college-bound undocumented workers is quite small, thereby not depleting the labor pool as greatly as some might suspect. In California, the number of undocumented students in public community colleges totals “far less than one percent...” (Romero). Even with such depletion, there will likely be more adults who will replace the few college-bound

² disclaimer: This type of study is still in its infancy. Many more empirical studies of this type are required before these results can form the basis for informed policymaking. Nevertheless, the few studies that do exist, using different data and methodologies, cannot find any evidence of sizable negative impacts. And this finding, in light of the discussions that dominate the literature, is quite a surprise. (Poza—Borjas)

children of the prior migration wave through both lawful and undocumented entry into the United States (Romero).

In order to consider the implications that the SAA might have on future illegal entry into the country, the situation of how the majority of illegal aliens come to be must first be addressed. There is a common misconception that most immigrants enter the country illegally when in fact the opposite is true. A total of 31 states had fewer than 10,000 undocumented immigrants. To put this figure in perspective, eight of eleven newcomers to the United States each year enter legally. The question that subsequently comes to mind is: how is the net flow of illegal aliens in the order of 200,000 to 300,000 persons per year (Borjas)? Most enter the country legally with tourist or student visas and lose their legal status by remaining beyond the expiration date (Borjas). Also, to dispel further misconception, early 50% of the 300,000 immigrants who settle in the United States illegally each year do not sneak across the U.S.-Mexico border (Barbour).

Even if the SAA is implemented as a federal law, critics argue that the positive effects felt by society would not be worth the costs. Bratsberg cites Chiswick's findings that the effect of an additional year of education on earnings is lower for foreign-born men than for native-born men (1978). Furthermore, even if illegal immigrants get an opportunity to work in a job that will earn them higher wages, Bucci and Tenorio believe that discrimination in the workplace will prevent them from working to their full potential. To counteract these views, Borjas offers further evidence that denying illegal aliens a fair chance at higher education would be detrimental to society. He finds that if immigrants lack the skills that employers demand and find it difficult to adapt, immigration may

“significantly increase the costs associated with income maintenance programs as well as exacerbate the ethnic wage differentials already in existence in the host country.”

Next Week: Part 4 of 4: Conclusion