

Immigration: Why it Matters and What Needs to Change?

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Abstract

Around 60% of migrants make it across the U.S-Mexico border each year. On the other hand, only 3% of Mexican applicants, who apply for a green card, are granted residency. Many Mexicans who desire to come to the United States are faced with this dilemma of choosing the illegal route or the legal process. The path to the United States for immigrants is neither an easy nor a cheap one for both types of migrants. Naturalization is a process that many do not have the opportunity to complete as limitations such as costs, quotas, and time requirements leave only a select few immigrants the chance to gain a green card. The price tag for freedom is a hefty one as immigrants are forced through many complications that are too risky to justify acting on the desire that America exports to immigrants. The research shows with the use of analyzed statistics and cost found in the immigration process that the legal process must be improved; therefore, the United States must reduce barriers for immigrants and create a more simple process for granting visas. The United States should make reforms to the legal process in order to make it more efficient and less costly to migrants. This will encourage more immigrants to go through the legal process rather than the illegal way. By taking part of the budget for border protection and investing in increased quotas and lower fees, more immigrants would be inclined to get a green card, which would lessen the issue of border control. An immigration tariff can be the solution to many immigration problems instead of the current system in place. Reform to the legal process would not only benefit the immigrants but also the United States, as more legal immigrants would boost the economy by building businesses, creating more jobs for Americans and balance out the aging population thus strengthen social security.

Keywords: Immigration, Political Science, and U.S.-Mexico Border

1. Introduction

Many Mexicans who desire to come to America are faced with the decision of being part of the 60% of the population of migrants who make it across the U.S-Mexico border or part of the lucky 3% of the Mexican population to obtain a green card each year. Many hopeful immigrants simply do not have the option to get a green card, as many do not have the necessary relationships, money or time to apply for legal entry. The time commitment for a green card can require "years or decades of waiting for a visa".¹ The path to the United States for immigrants is neither an easy nor a cheap one for both types of migrants.

The negative connotation of immigrants that America has is evident, as it is clear that America is not a "golden door" for all. The Statue of Liberty is engraved with a poem by Emma Lazarus that states, "Give me your tired, your poor, /your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, /the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. /Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, /I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" The poem rings with little truth, as the poem never mentions the complicated legal process that any person seeking this so called "freedom" must endure. Naturalization is a process that many do not have the opportunity to complete because of limitations such as costs, quotas, and time requirements that leave only a select few of immigrants the chance to obtain a green card. Most

Mexican immigrants who desire to come to America do so "to work and send money home and return to their families".² This makes those who seek immigration to the US for economic reasons less likely to be given a green card or citizenship because America favors more educated or skilled immigrants.³

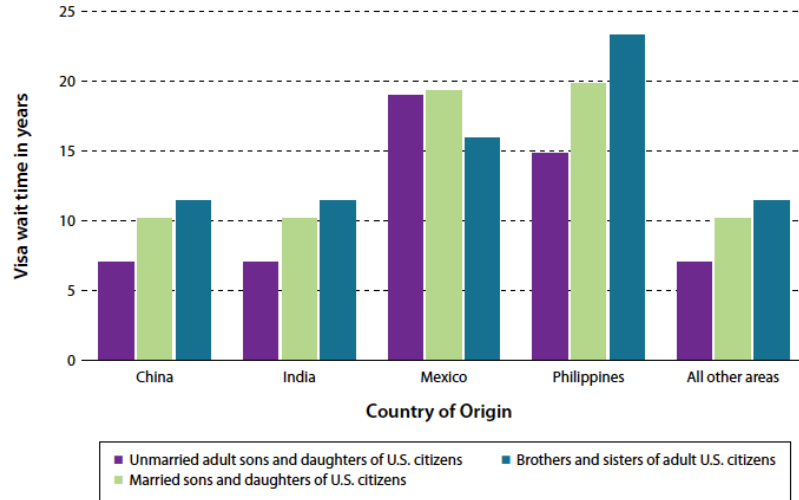
The challenges and narrow scope of legal immigration force an estimated 780,000 immigrants to enter the United States illegally from July 1, 2013 to May 1, 2015.⁴ Illegal immigration faces its fair share of complications, such as the rising level of deaths of immigrants trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. There is a price to pay to smugglers, corrupt Mexican police, and immigration officials for a chance to make it over the border. Mexican immigrants make up the highest group of immigrants; therefore, it makes sense to compare the possible cost of an immigrant coming to America from Mexico legally and illegally.⁵ The cost analysis of both illegal and legal examples of immigration will help enlighten people to the truth of the cost that immigrants face in order to come to the United States.

2. Legal Process

The price tag for freedom is a hefty one as illegal and legal immigrants are forced through many complications and costs that are too much of a risk to justify acting on the desire that America exports to immigrants. A possible solution for the complicated process is focusing on easing the legal process, thus encouraging more immigrants to come legally compared to illegally. Making reforms to the legal process in order to make it more efficient and less costly to migrants will motivate more immigrants to go through the legal process rather than the illegal way. "Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003, funding for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency that manages the nation's borders, has risen from \$6.6 billion to \$12.4 billion in fiscal 2014—in real terms, a 91 percent increase." By taking part of the budget for border protection and investing in increased quotas and lower fees, more immigrants would be inclined to get a green card, which would lessen the issue of border control. The solution to both legal and illegal immigration is to fix the broken legal process. Reform to the legal process would not only benefit the immigrants but also the United States. More legal immigrants would boost the economy, as it will help build businesses, which creates more jobs for Americans and balance out the aging population thus strengthening social security.

The perplexing process of naturalization is costly and exclusive. Nine out of ten immigrants, who have not naturalized, say they would if they had the chance.⁶ Of the 4.4 million people waiting for green cards, there are 1.3 million from Mexico, according to a U.S. State Department report. However, the total number may be much higher, according to immigration experts. The waiting list is a huge obstacle as the United States only lets in about 226,000 immigrants per year to receive green cards via family-based petition. "At that rate, it would take 19 years to clear the existing backlog of immigrants waiting for green cards, according to an analysis by Claire Bergeron, a research assistant at the Migration Policy Institute".⁷ The *U.S. Immigration System: Potential Benefits of Reform* shows the backlog for immigrants being limited by quota, an evident flaw of the immigration system:⁸

FIGURE 3.
 Visa Wait Times for Family Members of U.S. Citizens, in Years



Source: State Department (2012).

Figure 1. Graphical Illustration of the Wait Times in Year for a Visa by Country of Origin

The process of coming to the United States is a complicated ordeal that can be broken up into two parts. One part is obtaining a green card to gain permanent residency. The final step of this process is naturalization. There are three methods for obtaining an immigrant visa: “ through a family relationship with a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident, through employment, and through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program. ⁹ Therefore, it is necessary to have luck or connections to even want to have a chance of coming to the United States the legal way. These basic requirements limit most hopeful immigrants, leaving no other option but to cross the border illegally. The privilege to apply legally is not for all, and for most, having the privilege to apply does not guarantee a green card. Celina Alvarez, an immigrant who moved the United States 18 years ago from Jalisco, Mexico, spent in total \$18000 in application and attorney fees to get her green card. Even with her employer having sponsored her, the process was still outrageously expensive and complicated. After five years with a green card, an immigrant can continue on to the next process of naturalization. The naturalization application cost \$680 but applicants also have to spend thousands more on trips to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Office and on lawyers.¹⁰ “The general point is, and my interesting perspective is: the legal process is a brutal process – it’s extraordinarily lengthy, rigorous, cumbersome and expensive – and crossing the border, ironically, is so much easier” says Nick Adams, the author of *The American Boomerang: How the World’s Greatest Turnaround Nation Will Do It Again*.¹¹ His statement suggests that illegal immigrants have actually chosen the easier road to come to America. The convoluted and expensive legal process turns many immigrants toward the illegal route.

3. Illegal Immigration

The gritty path to the U.S.-Mexico border is a journey that many take as 1,400 more arrive every day over the border. ¹² Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s 2014 fiscal year, conducted that 213,719 migrants were apprehended while attempting to illegally enter the United States. ¹³ The trip is a big gamble that can cost a huge sum of money and maybe even a migrant life. Most migrants must find smugglers known as Coyotes. Migrants can pay around \$4000 to \$10000 each to be smuggled across thousands of miles.¹⁴ The journey that migrants face is dangerous as most smugglers hold power over the migrants. “Many migrants are abused or die on the way to their destination, and many are abandoned en route without resources. Refugees and asylum seekers, as well as vulnerable migrants such as unaccompanied minors and pregnant women, can be among those who pay a high price for smuggling services with no guarantee for their safety or the success of the venture”.¹⁵ The cost is not the only risk migrants take, as the biggest cost of the journey can be their life. Bruce Anderson, the chief forensic anthropologist at the medical examiner’s office says, “Less people are coming across, but a greater fraction of them are dying”. ¹⁶ According to the U.S. Border Patrol

statistics, there were 477 accounted deaths of crossing migrants in 2012 and 445 in 2013.¹⁷ Migrants face multiple risks such as kidnappings by gangs. According to the Mexican National Human Rights Commission, “as many as 20,000 migrants are kidnapped every year in situations like this. The abductions can be lucrative: they earn criminal gangs an estimated \$50 million each year”.¹⁸ Illegal immigration in the U.S. can be the only option for many migrants, as desperation and hunger make them unable to wait in line for the legal process and many others simply do not have the option to obtain legal residency in the United States. The path to cross the border is a risky one that can allow many immigrants the opportunities that America provides.

Breaking down the cost and timeline of coming to America will help people better understand how complicated the process is. Let's take two hypothetical scenarios, both from Mexico. One migrant comes to America the legal way and the other by illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The first immigrant, Immigrant A, must meet the requirement to apply for a green card. Most applicants in Mexico obtain their visa through family relationships.¹⁹ Therefore, in this scenario immigrant A will be able to apply for a green card because their family has legal permanent residency in the United States. Immigrant A must pay \$420 for the initial filing of the I-130 form. After the I-130 form has been approved, immigrant A, before the consulate interview, must pay \$325 for an immigrant visa fee that must be paid to the U.S. Department of State. The Immigration and Nationality Act requires that all immigrant visa applicants must undergo a medical exam before receiving a visa. Immigrant A must present their visa interview appointment letter in order to have the medical exam, which will cost around \$2865.20 peso or \$170.61 USD. Immigrant A must pay \$120 for Form I-864 Affidavit of support fee to have proof of family connection's legal status. Another fee that needs to be paid is \$185 for the USCIS immigrant fee. All the fees listed above does not include the legal fees for an immigration attorney, which cost between \$2000 and \$5000 in total. An immigration attorney is necessary in order to ensure the best possible outcome. Immigrant A must ensure they have their required documents, which have to be translated into English, which will cost around \$60. Another document that is needed is a police certificate from where the applicant has lived. This document cost around \$40. Immigrant A must have a Mexican passport, which cost \$135 plus a delivery service fee. All the costs involved so far are in order to obtain a green card.²⁰ The completion of all this paperwork does not ensure that immigrant A gets a green card. Only 3% of Mexicans who applied receive a green card.²¹ So far, immigrant A must pay around \$6440 for the application to obtain permanent residency in the U.S., but the likely hood of the immigrant paying only the minimum is unlikely as the price usually is substantially more for most incoming immigrants as there are many numerous other hidden costs along the way. The cost of time will be the biggest price as Immigrant A will have wait in line for a green card; “processing delays and the family employment-based immigration quotas legislated by Congress result in significant wait times — and much frustration — for potential immigrants and U. S. employers,” sometimes taking as long as 20 years.”²² The wait and the price of the legal process are too much for most immigrants to go through. The cost is a lot for an immigrant that seeks economic asylum, as they desire the work in the United States.

Immigrant B will not be able to go through the legal way to the U.S. because they do not meet the requirements to apply and/or they cannot suffer through the legal process. Immigrant B is lucky enough to already reside in Mexico, therefore, taking out a lot of extra cost and struggle that comes with coming to Mexico from another country. Immigrant B must pay a smuggler to get them across the border. Data from the Mexican Migration Project says an average Coyote's fees are about \$3000-\$4000.²³ Immigrant B must pay \$150 for a ride from the Rio Grande to a stash house. A stash house cost \$20 per day. Immigrant B also wants to go find work, therefore, they decide to pay \$200 for the ride north of Border Patrol's Highway checkpoint to Houston. Immigrant B's total cost of crossing the border cost around \$4400 but this does not include the price of personal necessities during the journey. Immigrant B's journey is a gamble as they risk deportation and health risk as many migrants fight to survive the journey. The process is still costly and a lot more risky than the legal process but the illegal route can be faster and is open to anyone willing to take the risk.

Each immigrant who hopes to come to the United States has a choice to go through the legal path or the illegal journey over the border. Immigrants must decide between the lesser of two evils, as both processes are costly in more than one way. The challenges that are faced to come to America for both legal and illegal immigrants are not ideal, as it limits many people the chance of experiencing the opportunity that America promises. The few immigrants who have the chance to go through the process legally face challenges such as wait times that can last a decade and prices that many cannot hope to afford.

4. Why it Matters

“Immigration is an emotional issue filled with a lot of misinformation,” is a quote by the Head of Homeland Security during the 12th Annual Immigration Law and Policy Conference.²⁴ The constant negative image of immigration is mostly driven from ignorance, as immigration is not a hinder on the United States but a great benefit. Immigrants are

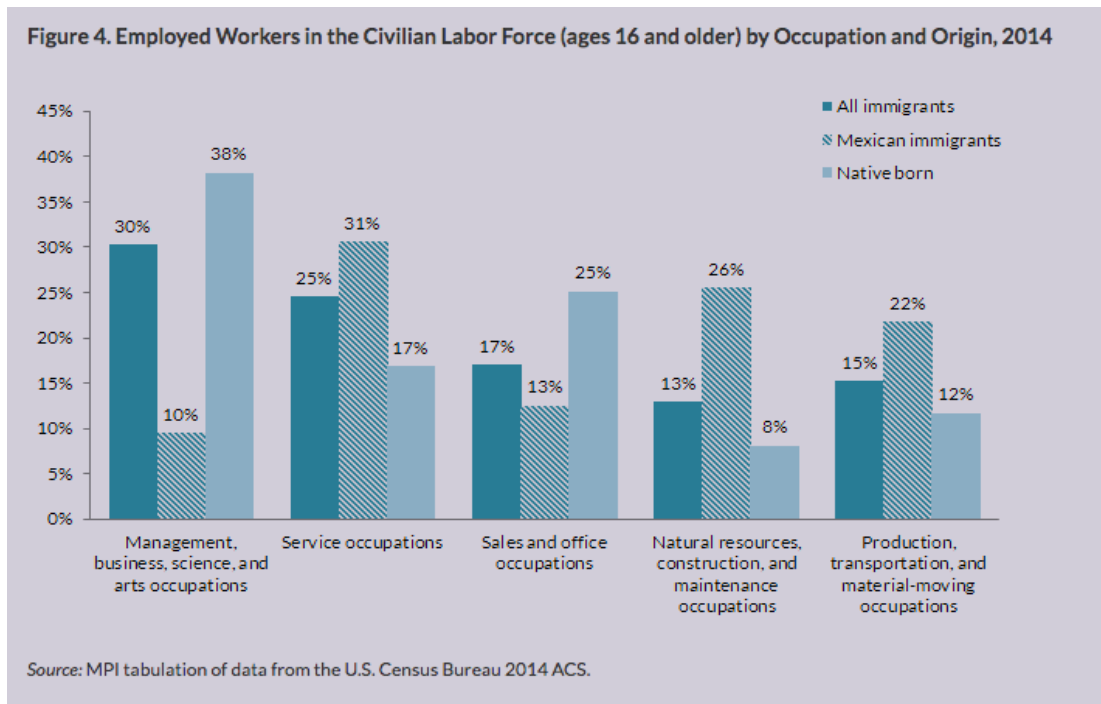


Figure 2. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force by Occupation and Origin

more entrepreneur as more than 40% of the Fortune 500 companies in 2010 were founded by an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. It is common an immigrant to start up a new business.²⁵ With the creation of new businesses comes the creation of new jobs, therefore, helping boost the economy.

Immigrants do not steal the American people jobs' but actually, fill in the necessary gaps in the labor force. 16% of U.S. Labor-force is made up of Migrants in several occupations that are in short supply with native workers. 60% of the working immigrant work construction-related occupation and the majority of farm workers and butchers. Mexican immigrants “At the other end of the education spectrum, over one-third of medical, physical, and mathematical scientists; doctors; and economists are also foreign born;” important occupations that should never be limited from the best of the best. These jobs are in high need and there are immigrants willing to supply at the current wages.²⁶ The data by the Migration Policy Institute shows the comparison of native-born verse foreign-born verse Mexican immigrants workers in different occupations;²⁷

The graph depicts the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. labor force by highlighting what field immigrants are heavily involved in. The information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau shows that Mexican immigrants are more prominent in low skills jobs compared to other immigrants. The United States needs to address the lack of both low and high skills workers with the encouragement of more immigration for these skills.

The founder of Apple, Steve Jobs mention the lack of engineers in the American workforce, "Apple employed 700,000 line workers in Chinese factories because there were 30,000 engineers on-site. "You can't find that many in America to hire... If you could educate these engineers, we could move more manufacturing plants here," America can no longer provide the necessary labor to most of it growing corporation thus forcing many companies to build factories overseas. An immigration reform that encourages and promotes high-skill and low-skill workers would help solve two issues one issue being the economic crisis of many migrants and the second issue being the lack of certain skilled workers that America faces. Immigrants can help boost the economy by working in the United States;

Arlene Holen of the Technology Policy Institute, using methodology from the Congressional Budget Office, has estimated that in the absence of constraints on green card and H-1B visas over the period 2003–07, an additional 182,000 foreign graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields would have remained in the United States. Their earnings and contribution to GDP would have been \$14 billion in 2008, and they would have paid \$2.7 billion to \$3.6 billion in taxes.²⁸

The money lost because of the burden put on immigrants caused a burden to the United States economy. With the United States debt at over 18 trillion, the money and taxes that could have been received from these stem-working immigrants would have contributed to helping the economy.

In the next 20 years, 76 million baby boomers will leave the workforce and enter into retirement. The aging baby boomer generation will cause a surge in ranks of entitlement beneficiaries, therefore causing the working-age adults to not keep pace in supporting these 76 million beneficiaries. “The Ratio in the Social Security Program” shows that in order to keep the Social Security Trust Fund stable more working-age adults must be added to the population to upkeep a good ratio of worker per beneficiary:²⁹

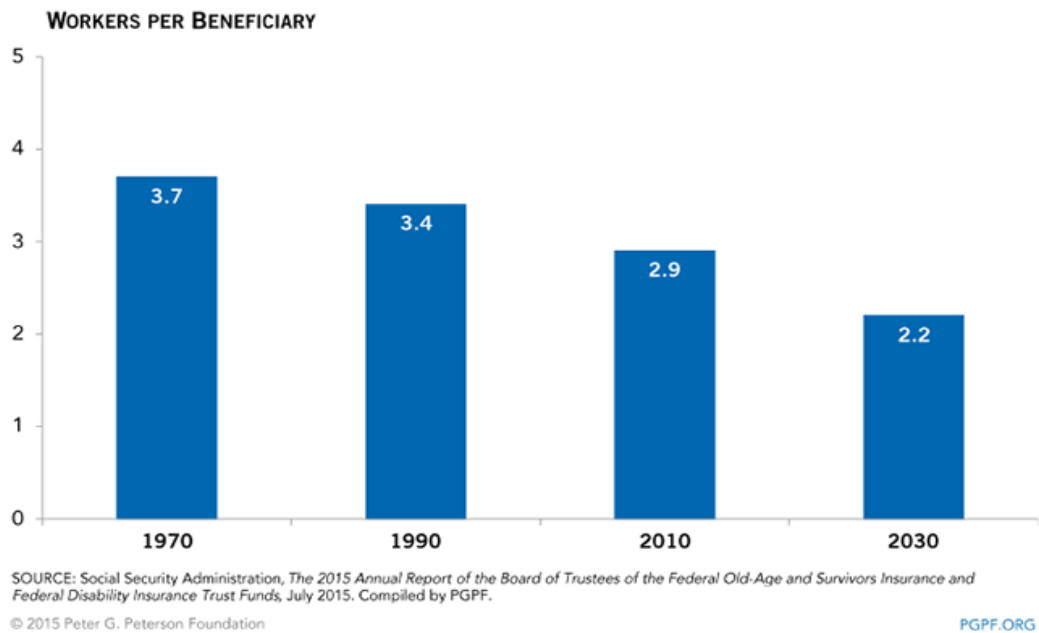


Figure 3. Graphical Illustration of Workers per Beneficiary in the Social Security System by Year

Immigration is necessary in order to keep the Social Security System afloat as a “net of \$611 billion will be added to the Social Security system over the next 75 years because of immigrants, according to the National Foundation for American Policy [...] Stuart Anderson of the National Foundation for American Policy finds that cutting off immigration to the country would increase the size of the Social Security deficit by 31 percent over 50 years.” Increasing immigration will actually lessen the load of the native working population as “Security trustees project that an increase in immigration of 100,000 persons a year would improve the long-term actuarial balance of the Social Security’s trust fund by about 3.5% of the projected 75-year deficit. The National Council on Aging also notes the demographic makeup of immigrant families and the positive role it plays in strengthening Social Security”.³⁰

The United States needs to completely reform the immigration system. Immigration reform is long overdue as the last time the U.S passed a comprehensive immigration reform was when President Ronald Reagan in 1986 signed a bill legalizing the status of 3 million people. The constant attempt for true immigration reform has failed to make any difference in the broken system. In an interview with Hannah Evans, who is policy assistant for Domestic issues with the Quakers, she addresses the issue with the political concern of immigration; “We spend so much money on militarizing the border but we are not addressing the real root cause. It is not just because people crossing the border but because they do not have any legal means to come to the US”.³¹ The United States should focus on increasing the quotas in order to streamline the flow of immigrants currently in the backlog. As quotas level rises, more immigrant

workers would be able to enter the U.S. workforce legally thus helping strengthen the social security system and the economy; “a policy of gradually bumping up quotas from the current level of about 800,000 per year to a range of 1-1.5 million would ensure that we have a steady stream of young workers to keep our economy prosperous when the baby boomers begin to retire”.³² The immigration system needs to be changed to help provide a solution to keep up with the demands that America produce as a land of opportunity.

5. Conclusion

Coming to America legally sounds ideal on paper but with the constraints put on the process can cause many immigrants to come illegally. Even though the time frame of illegal immigration may not be as long as the legal process, it does still have the risk of failure that can lead immigrants back to their home country, or worse, to their grave. The journey to the United States via the border is a costly one as prices are high for safety and success. The calculated cost of a Mexican immigrant coming to the United States legally and illegally shows how both processes have their obstacles that are unnecessary and time-consuming.

Another solution that overcomes the issue of quotas is to remove them and instead have an immigration tariff. Immigration tariff takes out the bureaucratic mess of the immigration system in exchange for a one-price deal. Immigrants already pay thousands in hopes to get through the lengthy process for a green card so why not have a flat rate that actually guarantees one. The current system in place cannot keep up with the desire of incoming immigrants, as “Quotas do not adjust to meet the rising demand.” The current system in place for legal immigration “is a complex bureaucracy that sets quotas, fees, and arbitrary restrictions that prevent most immigrants from attempting legal immigration. Wait times for green cards are sometimes longer than a century. Replacing that system with a tariff would provide a legal avenue to immigrate, deregulate much of the labor market, and end most of the immigration black market. The question is not whether immigrants should pay to immigrate, but whom they should pay to immigrate.”³³

This helps two problems that the US has; reducing the backlog of incoming immigrants and reducing the national debt. Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker praises the idea of setting a price for immigration. He believes that this system would help stop the argument against immigration as it “would lead to a greater willingness to accept immigrants [...] No longer could people say they're not paying their way. They would be paying their way, not only in income taxes but in the entrance fee, so to speak.”³⁴ The only restriction that the government would put on any hopeful immigrant is the restriction of “criminals, suspected terrorists, or carry contagious diseases”. The opportunity that the United States has is worth the cost of a less complex immigration system. Immigration tariff will not be something that only wealthy immigrants can afford because it would be like an investment where money can come from the lending institution, family members, charitable organization or even their future employer, in a way that the current system of quotas cannot. American employers will benefit from hiring the labor they need while immigrants would benefit with the opportunity to work legally without the worries of deportation in the United States. The desire for better life in the US would make it worth the cost as the “difference in wages between similar worker abroad and in the U.S. is so great and the increase in wages so immediate that many foreigners would pay for the opportunity to legally work in the U.S.”³⁵

Quotas and unnecessary restrictions should not limit immigration but immigration should be encouraged as it serves a crucial benefit to the United States economy. Improving the legal immigration process will improve the social security system, the job market and the economy as a whole. For a country that is made up of citizens whose descendants were immigrants, its’ government seem quick to stop and limit immigration for others. America should go back to representing the ideal of opportunity for all and not make it nearly impossible for immigrants to come to America. The Statue of Liberty stands strong today, as the Mother of Exiles but the idea it represents, as a symbol of immigration and opportunity, no longer corresponds to the ideals of the United States' government.

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