

An Immigration Policy that Works for All Americans

By Silva Mathema

Like all Americans, immigrants to the United States are driven by the belief that if they work hard, they will be able to own a home, save for retirement, and send their children to college—in other words, build secure, middle-class lives for themselves and their families.¹ Immigrants make contributions to the economy and are taxpayers. Yet they face unique barriers to reaching the middle class themselves.

Immigrants play an essential role in lifting up the American middle class. Immigrant workers increase production and create opportunities for expanding local businesses, supporting the incomes and jobs of local workers across the country. A recent study found that by increasing the demand for local services, each immigrant creates 1.2 jobs for their local economy—most of which go to native-born workers.² Immigrants also directly create jobs as entrepreneurs: They accounted for nearly 30 percent of all new entrepreneurs in 2014 and were twice as likely as native-born Americans to start new businesses or become self-employed.³

Contrary to hyperbolic rhetoric that is all too common in discussions surrounding immigration, immigrant labor also helps to strengthen the middle class. Many American women, especially those with high skills, are able to work and contribute more to the economy in part because they can obtain the affordable child care and household services

frequently provided by immigrant labor.⁴ Numerous studies have found that immigrants generally complement—rather than compete with—native-born Americans. Even lesser-skilled immigrants in the workforce tend to cause native-born workers to specialize in more complex jobs.⁵

But immigrants face unique barriers as they work to build middle-class lives. In particular, the country's 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants—many of whom have lived in the United States for a decade or more—are largely relegated to the economic sidelines.⁶ Many low-wage immigrants—particularly those who are unauthorized—face dangerous working conditions, frequent workplace violations, and wage theft.⁷ In the United States, unscrupulous employers are held responsible for their actions through formal complaints by employees. The inability or unwillingness of unauthorized workers to file complaints or seek redress as a result of their precarious legal status perpetuates unfair and potentially unsafe working conditions for large swaths of workers, including native-born Americans.⁸

Pass comprehensive immigration reform

To bring all unauthorized immigrants off of the economic sidelines and supercharge their economic and fiscal contributions to the United States and its middle class, Congress must step up and pass com-

prehensive immigration reform. Passing reform that provides a pathway to legal status and citizenship has the potential to add nearly \$1.2 trillion in cumulative GDP over the course of a decade, while also increasing the incomes of all workers by \$625 billion and generating 145,000 jobs annually—ultimately increasing prosperity for all Americans.⁹

Unfreeze and fully implement DAPA and expanded DACA

Separately, the administration should continue to pursue administrative reforms within the bounds of existing law to improve the nation's immigration system and benefit all Americans. One such reform is the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents initiative, or DAPA, and

the expansion of the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA.¹⁰ If implemented, DAPA and expanded DACA would allow eligible unauthorized immigrants to register with the government, pass background checks, and apply for a temporary reprieve from deportation and work authorization. The implementation of these initiatives remains blocked due to ongoing litigation.¹¹

If the courts permit the implementation of these initiatives, the United States, as well as individual states, would reap significant economic benefits. Temporary work authorization would increase recipients' wages, which would in turn add billions of dollars to the U.S. GDP, put upward pressure on wages, and increase state and local tax revenues.¹²

Endnotes

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- 8 Kugler and Oakford, "Comprehensive Immigration Reform Will Benefit American Workers."
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