



Essay: Undocumented Immigrants: Untapped Potential

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UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS: UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

by Cristina Hernández

Undocumented immigrants, who are we, really? The political debate around immigration reform often insists on turning us into figures that must be reduced to zero at any cost. Nevertheless, we are in stores helping with groceries; we are in shops changing oil; we are in schools organizing fundraisers and parent meetings; and we are campaigning for changes in policy that will benefit everyone in areas such as safety, housing, and healthcare. Oftentimes, we are entrusted with the care of the most vulnerable: the children and the elderly. Undocumented immigrants are hard to tell apart within the immigrant population for we are the links that hold our immigrant *familia* and our communities together, as stitches of a colorful quilt. Many families have mixed immigration status within their family, such as children who are citizens with undocumented parents.

Studies estimate that one-in-four Californians are immigrants, and that almost 10% of workers in California are undocumented.¹ In Contra Costa County, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that around 12% of the population of over one million people living in Contra Costa County is foreign born *and* not a U.S. citizen and that 32% of the population speaks a language other than English.² Undocumented immigrants, also known as illegal aliens, are commonly chastised as a heavy burden in our communities. Still many of them hold higher education degrees and possess an entrepreneurial spirit, and all of them have survived the intricate labyrinth of relocation and adaptation by relying on their greatest asset: their resourcefulness.

Challenges of being an undocumented immigrant

In West Contra Costa County, the foreign-born community has increased consistently in recent years. Héctor Jauregui, resident of Richmond for over 20 years and a community leader, has witnessed the transformation. “There have been two major waves of immigrants to the area, first in the mid 90’s and more

recently in 2000 when many immigrants, especially Latinos, found good housing deals here.” According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people of Latin American descent comprised 35.4% of the population in Richmond in 2006.³

“In this area, our immigrant communities are very diverse. Still, we all suffer from the same illness: we ignore our rights or lack the initiative or are afraid to learn them, and we feel powerless as a result. Documented or not, our main obstacle is lack of access to information,” states Héctor.

For Carolina García, youth leader in Richmond and a college student, the challenges of the undocumented youth involve not only lack of access to resources, but also lack of faith in a better future. “For those who have migrated, language is the number one barrier. Once you learn the language, the next question is: what is the motivation to stay in school and get a college degree when it would be very difficult to get a job?” For many others, even the idea of having a career is not part of the conversation. Many immigrant families earn very low incomes and have neither assets nor vehicles for asset creation.

In addition to these economic challenges, the immigrant community in Richmond and other parts of West Contra Costa County has faced police actions that can tear families apart. In January 2007, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Department (ICE) conducted raids in Contra Costa County targeting mainly Latinos in Richmond, sweeping up 119 people, 80% of whom were “encountered in the process,” meaning they had no deportation orders.⁴ As a response to the raids and due to intense organizing by the faith community, the Richmond City Council unanimously approved a resolution protesting the raids,⁵ yet within months of the resolution, the city began the controversial practice of setting up police checkpoints.

“We are the links that hold our immigrant familia and our communities together.”

At the checkpoints, police stop drivers without cause and check their identification, ostensibly as part of an effort to fight crime in the city. However, these checkpoints create a constant level of anxiety and fear among the immigrant community. According to community members, those who don't carry a license get their vehicle impounded for as many as 30 days and receive a fine between \$1000 and \$2500. Police checkpoints are still common practice in various neighborhoods in the city.

Why shall we all care?

Immigrants are agents of change.

Immigrants—documented and undocumented—can be catalysts of positive change in their communities if considered as equal partners and no longer as outsiders. A fair and functional federal immigration policy is needed, but local strategies are equally important in addressing many of the issues immigrants face.

Strategies like funding and promoting entrepreneurship and wealth building and promoting community membership and civic participation can match the industrious spirit of many immigrants and help them become stronger links in the communities they already support. A recent study released by the Women's Initiative for Self-Employment reports that Latina clients participating in a microenterprise program saw their business equity grow over 3000%.⁶

To address the problems of checkpoints disproportionately affecting immigrant and low-income drivers, some cities have stopped impounding cars driven without a license. Recently, courts ruled that impounding cars on the sole charge of driving without a license is unconstitutional, giving local governments reason to change these practices.⁷ Research into

whether checkpoints actually reduce crime rates and where the money from fines levied against undocumented drivers goes would help measure the fairness and effectiveness of the practice.

For the immigrant community, the reality of comprehensive reform may be too distant, but improving their quality of life and developing a stronger voice could be well within reach. West County neighborhoods already benefit and stand to gain even more when we truly embrace the many contributions immigrants make to our communities.



Cristina Hernández is an immigrant and a citizen and is the Cooperative Network Manager for Women's Action for Economic Security (WAGES).

Endnotes

- 1 Public Policy Institute of California, *Immigrants in California*, June 2008.
- 2 U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 2006.
- 3 U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 2006.
- 4 *Contra Costa Times*. (February 7 2007). Richmond council adds voice to immigration debate.
- 5 RESOLUTION NO. XX.07 A Resolution of the Richmond City Council reaffirming its Support for Comprehensive Immigration Reform that is Fair, Just and Humane.
- 6 Women's Initiative for Self-Employment. (2008). *Closing the Wealth Gap through Self-Employment*. San Francisco, CA: Women's Initiative for Self-Employment. Retrieved on November 30th from <http://www.womensinitiative.org/newsroom/publications.htm>.
- 7 California State Senator Gilbert Cedillo. *Rules of the Road; Federal and State Rulings on Vehicle Impounds*. Retrieved December 3, 2008 from http://dist22.casen.govoffice.com/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC={6F62CD2B-EA63-4180-9DB0-CCAAEDA5BF07}.