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Do illegal aliens pay their fair share?

Orange County records say yes, but some officials fear the price tag of a federal immigration-reform bill

By Randall Hackley
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SANTA ANA — Porfirio Perez figures he has paid \$40,000 in taxes after working in the fields of Orange County for 19 years.

Perez is one of 80,000 to 120,000 illegal aliens in the county who pay taxes, send their children to public schools and sometimes collect welfare illegally.

Some say illegal aliens sap taxpayers' pocketbooks and job prospects, taking more in social services than they pay in taxes. Others say the scales tip the opposite way. In Orange County, the figures support the latter view.

According to county tax, sales, health and education estimates, it cost the county at least \$13 million to care for illegal aliens and their families last year. Meanwhile, illegal aliens living in Orange County paid about \$102 million in taxes to the local economy.

The Simpson-Mazzoli Immigration Reform and Control Bill, which passed the Senate last year and awaits House action this session, would radically alter those scales.

The bill, which attempts to cut the flow of illegals into the country, would make employers liable to fines and imprisonment if they hire undocumented workers. The measure also would offer limited amnesty to aliens who have resided in the United States since 1982, which some say could cause an increase in newly legalized aliens applying for welfare.

Illegal aliens currently are forbidden to use local services "except to drive our roads, drink water from our system," send their children to schools and use hospitals and health clinics for emergency care, said Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

Allegations that undocumented workers cost the public more than they add to the local economy are "hogwash," Kennedy said. The cost-benefit ratio in

taxes paid and services rendered proves undocumented aliens' local worth, he said.

But David North, director of the Center for Labor and Migration Studies in Washington, D.C., predicted in a June report to the Orange County Board of Supervisors that if the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill passes, welfare applications from illegal aliens "will increase sharply when some of this currently excluded community begin to receive benefits."

Within three years, the bill would cost county taxpayers \$8.5 million, North said, compared to \$1.1 million in current annual relief assistance for illegal aliens.

But the Orange County Human Services Agency, which expects 6,000 undocumented workers to apply for welfare if the bill passes, estimates local costs to provide aid for newly legalized aliens will remain at \$1.1 million a year.

The Board of Supervisors' study on the expected effect of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill noted "a very low rate of social services utilization by undocumented immigrants. The percentage of those who secured welfare payments ranged from less than 1 percent to 4 percent."

Every major study on the undocumented worker "that employed scientific methodology (has) reached the conclusion that the undocumented worker was not a drain on the economy," said historian Rodolfo Acuna, professor of Chicano studies at Cal State Northridge.

While the county has not taken an official stance on the bill, immigration legislation that opens relief programs to newly legalized aliens could have "far-reaching consequences on the county of Orange," Supervisor Bruce Nestande said.

Under proposed legislation, newly legalized aliens with a family of four could qualify for up to \$833 a month in county cash programs, said Sylvia Wall, manager for food-stamp and general-relief programs.

At present, undocumented residents in Orange County are ineligible for non-emergency health care, legal aid, welfare, food stamps, unemployment benefits or Social Security, Kennedy said.

Under current House versions of the bill, the federal government would not reimburse the county for welfare costs. "That's what worries us," said Beverly



Todd Buchanan/The Register

Gloria Lopez, director of an Anaheim neighborhood community center, says no legislation can stop illegal aliens from entering the United States.

Hunter-Curtis, county social services director. "The county may in the end get stuck with a big bill."

Schooling for undocumented immigrants' children and care for illegal aliens at UCI Medical Center account for most of taxpayer costs, said Carol Kiser, contract services manager of the Orange County Health Care Agency.

In fiscal year 1983-84, it will cost the county about \$9.4 million to treat low-income patients, most of whom are illegal aliens, Kiser said. That is nearly four times more than 1977, when it cost \$2.7 million to care for illegal aliens, their spouses and children.

But an analysis of figures proves the county "clearly benefits financially from undocumented workers," Kennedy said. Orange County's major industries — farms, nurseries and services — depend on undocumented labor, he said.

The \$102 million paid last year in taxes by 80,000 to 120,000 illegal aliens in Orange County is up 21 percent since 1978, when the county Task Force on Medical Care for Illegal Aliens compiled sales and property tax contributions by undocumented migrants.

That task force report on the economic impact of undocumented immigrants for the county supervisors said 57,172 illegal aliens contributed \$83 million in 1978 in taxes to the local economy, including \$12 million in property taxes from renters who paid a portion of the owners' taxes.

Illegal aliens are "very significant taxpayers," said the Rev. Alan Figueroa Deck, director of the county's Hispanic Ministries for the Roman Catholic Diocese. Working immigrants pay state and federal taxes as if they were citizens, defray property taxes through rent, pay gasoline taxes and sales and excise taxes when they purchase goods, he said.

Proponents of the bill hope the measure will seal the border more effectively against job-seeking illegal aliens, most of whom come from Mexico.

Last year, a record 1.3 million illegal aliens were

captured by immigration agents along the 1,952-mile U.S.-Mexican border. Aliens who trek north in search of better-paying jobs would be stymied by the bill's passage, agents say.

But critics say there is no reason to believe the bill will halt the flow of illegal aliens into Orange County or curb employers' appetite for cheap labor. Most undocumented laborers are paid the minimum wage, \$3.35 an hour, said Jose Vargas, Hispanic liaison officer of the Santa Ana Police Department.

"There will always be people coming from Mexico or Central America," said Gloria Lopez, executive director of Independencia Community Center in the Anaheim neighborhood of Colonia Independencia. "As long as those governments don't provide jobs or a good life for their citizens, I don't believe any legislation will stop them."

Others believe Hispanics may find it tough to get work with employers who won't risk hiring them under threat of the sanctions. "It does raise the specter of discrimination. Employers may discriminate against anyone who looks or sounds foreign," Kennedy said.

Colonia resident Francisco Padilla, who works at an Anaheim gas station, agreed. "In my mind, if the bill passes, I think I'll find it harder to get work because I speak Spanish and people won't believe I'm legally here."

Nativo Lopez, spokesman for Hermandad Mexicana, an Orange County group that helps undocumented aliens with legal problems, said, "I resent that passage of this bill could mean the color of our skins and Spanish surnames could alert employers that they may be in trouble if they hire us."

Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at La Jolla, called employer sanctions "quack" cures. A similar employer-sanction bill, the Dixon-Arnett Act, was passed 13 years ago in California, but no employer ever was convicted, he said. The state Supreme Court declared the act unconstitutional in 1974.

"Virtually all members of Congress ... have chosen to ignore the fact that this approach to immigration control already has been tried," he said. "Is California any less dependent on Mexican labor today than it was in 1971, when the state Legislature passed the Dixon-Arnett Act?"

Local officials say there are at least 36 percent more illegal aliens in Orange County now than 1977, when the Board of Education estimated 57,172 undocumented aliens lived here.

The Simpson-Mazzoli bill also may hurt the county's \$220 million agricultural industry, said Martin Breitmeyer, president of the Orange County Farm Bureau.

"A grower shouldn't have to become a policeman. It can't help but increase the price of produce that the consumer buys. Our (labor and administrative) costs to enforce the law will go up, and either we pass that on to the consumer or we go out of business," said Breitmeyer, a poultry farmer from Orange.

In the end, U.S. Sen. Pete Wilson predicted, the immigration bill is "destined to failure. It is Mexico, not punitive action against farmers and businesses, that is the key to ... bringing a halt to the flow of illegal immigration."



Working in strawberry fields in Orange County is the route many immigrants take to begin new lives in the United States.

STEMMING THE TIDE OF ILLEGAL ALIENS

The Simpson-Mazzoli measure, proposed to curb the flow of illegal aliens into the American workplace, is the first major rewrite of federal immigration laws in 32 years. The bill proposes:

- Fines of up to \$3,000 per alien hired and imprisonment of up to a year for employers who knowingly hire illegal aliens. Employers would be granted a six-month grace period to comply.
- A temporary program to hire 20,000 aliens annually that agribusiness leaders say are needed because not enough Americans will take low-paying jobs. A transition period in the Senate version would allow farmers three years to comply with the act.
- Require forgery-proof national identification cards that an employer would have to see before a worker is hired. Civil rights advocates and U.S. Sen. Alan Cranston have said this would create a potential for a "police state."
- Set a limit on annual national legal immigration, except for political refugees, at 425,000. The legal Mexican quota is 20,000 a year.

- Require a search warrant or owner's permission to enter a grower's property. Search warrants currently are required only to enter businesses.

In the Senate version of the bill, a two-tier system offers permanent residency for 3 million to 6 million illegal aliens the Reagan administration says have lived in the U.S. since Jan. 1, 1977. Those newly legalized aliens would have to wait three years before receiving federal benefits.

The second tier would offer temporary legalization to illegal aliens who arrived here between Jan. 1, 1977, and Jan. 1, 1980, and who have been residents since then. Temporary residents could apply for permanent residency after three years but would receive no federal benefits until they became permanent residents.

Similar provisions with amnesty dates for illegal aliens who have resided in the United States since 1982 are pending House action.