

Lessons on Immigration During COVID-19

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July 2020

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdowns, many western governments sought out foreign workers to do essential jobs. In May, Italy granted temporary six-months amnesty to 600,000 undocumented workers to ameliorate shortages of seasonal agriculture workers. Germany airlifted 40,000 foreign farmworkers in April and another 40,000 in May from Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Ukraine to pick fruits and vegetables. Additionally, the German government raised seasonal farmworkers' length of stay from 70 days to 115 days.

Normally, foreign doctors in Germany must prove their credentials by passing medical licensing exams to work as physicians. During the pandemic, this licensing requirement has been waived. Even the regional medical board of Saxony, the center of the nationalist and anti-immigration party Alternative for Germany, has welcomed foreign doctors without a license, including Syrian refugees, to treat COVID-19 patients.

Farm owners in the U.K. have also started chartered flights to bring workers from Poland and Romania to pick the fruits. Yes, the same Romanian and Polish workers that Brexit has pledged to ban from entry into the U.K.¹ It turns out that 98 percent of vegetable and fruit pickers in the U.K. are foreigners, making it hard to do without them. Without these foreigners, fruits and vegetables would rot in the fields.

In the U.S., while President Trump has imposed restrictions on several visa categories, the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services is making sure that essential foreign workers are allowed to enter the country. It relaxed the conditions of H-2A visas for legal, seasonal, agriculture workers, and allowed them to stay longer than the three-year maximum allowable period. All employers with valid temporary labor certifications are allowed to hire foreign workers who are currently in the U.S. on H-2A visas.

In New York, the epicenter of COVID-19 in the U.S. in the initial months of the outbreak, governor Andrew Cuomo issued an executive order to allow "graduates of foreign medical schools having at least one year of graduate medical education to pro-

vide patient care in hospitals" even if they do not have licenses. Abroad, the U.S. consulates continue to process visa applications for health workers, even though the state department has closed consulate offices globally to protect the staff from the contagion.

These examples highlight the key role immigrants play in western countries and provide several important lessons for policy.

One, immigrants are indispensable for critical industries. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines certain jobs in health, infrastructure, manufacturing, services, and food industry services as essential critical infrastructure jobs. Estimates by the Center for Migration Studies show that 69 percent of all immigrants in the labor force and 74 percent of all undocumented workers work in these essential critical infrastructure jobs.² As the economy recovers from COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns, any design to impose additional restrictions on immigration would restrict the supply of workers in these essential industries and delay recovery. Recent measures by President Trump to limit the entry of foreign workers within several non-immigrant categories will create obstacles in the path of economic recovery. The United States should increase, and not lower, avenues for legal entry into the country.

Two, policy analysts need to re-think the contributions of immigrants engaged in low-skilled occupations. The conventional wisdom is that highly skilled immigrants, including scientists, physicians, engineers, and entrepreneurs, bring enormous benefits to the host country, whereas low-skilled immigrants are a fiscal burden, and their entry should be restricted if not banned. This is the basis of merit-based and points-based immigration systems that countries, including Canada and Australia, have adopted. There is an active debate about introducing such a system within the U.S. Temporary shifts in immigration policies in a number of western countries during COVID-19 show that this conventional wisdom has no basis. It has become clear during the lockdowns that low-skilled and even illegal immigrants play a crucial role in host countries. Their contribution should be acknowledged. Governments should integrate, not alienate, immigrants.

Yet, most immigrants, in particular the undocumented, were not eligible for the provisions of the various COVID-19-linked stimulus programs in the United States, including the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. “Immigrants in our communities are having to make a choice between feeding their children and sending money to feed families back home,” said Jairo Guzman, executive director of Mexican Coalition, a New York-based NGO, in a conversation over the phone. Mexican Coalition surveyed 160 Mexicans in NYC when the lockdowns began. Two-thirds of the respondents said that they did not have the money to purchase the basic necessities for themselves or their families for a period of just 14 days. Many said they barely had the income to purchase seven days of food and other household items.

Immigrants played a vital part and continue to work in essential industries during COVID-19. Alas, the federal government let them down by excluding many groups of immigrants from the CARES Act. State governments and civil rights organizations filled the gap.³ Given the current political climate in Washington, advocacy groups are likely to get more success in pushing state and local governments for programs and policies to relieve immigrants of the COVID-19 and lockdown-inflicted economic and health challenges.

Three, an important lesson from the current pandemic is that immigrant health and lives matter. This is true for their own sake as well as for the sake of citizens. Yet the changes to the public charge rule in February 2020 endangered both immigrants and natives by discouraging immigrants from seeking medical advice and care.⁴ Given the current political climate, local and state governments need to step up to provide for the healthcare needs of immigrants who are excluded. Local and state governments need to take a more expansive and humanitarian view of healthcare to protect both lives and livelihoods of immigrants.

Despite the value and importance of immigrant workers, COVID-19 threatens to feed nationalistic and anti-immigrant forces within western societies. In the United States, President Trump’s recent measures to restrict visas have brought many existing channels of immigration that propel vibrancy into the U.S. labor market to a halt. These measures do not protect American workers, but instead, threaten to cripple essential sectors that are highly dependent on immigration and will set back the recovery.

State governments, advocacy groups, corporate America, and civil rights organizations should challenge these measures to build America from the ashes of COVID-19. The pandemic brought lockdowns that sapped America’s economic and social vitality. Infusing and integrating immigrants can restore this vitality. It is the only path to make America great again.

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The Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University is a university-based academic research center that explores the scientific foundations of the interaction between individuals, business, and government.

The Immigration and Economic Recovery Symposium explores what role immigrants play in the economic recovery of the United States post-COVID crisis.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University or the views of Utah State University.

Endnotes

1. Neeraj Kaushal, *Blaming Immigrants: Nationalism and the Economics of Global Movement*, (Columbia University Press, 2019).
2. Donald Kerwin, Mike Nicholson, Daniela Alulema, and Robert Warren, “US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic,” *Center for Migration Studies*, May 1, 2020, <https://cmsny.org/publications/us-essential-workers/>.
3. Whitney L. Duncan and Sarah B. Horton, “Serious Challenges and Potential Solutions For Immigrant Health During COVID-19,” 2020, *Health Affairs Blog*, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200416.887086/full>.
4. Kathleen R. Page, Maya Venkataramani, Chris Beyrer, and Sarah Polk, “Undocumented U.S. Immigrants and COVID-19,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 2020, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2005953>.