



# Tough Questions on Immigration

## What don't the bishops understand about "illegal"?

The U.S. bishops and the teachings of the Catholic Church have consistently respected the right of sovereign governments to control its borders—it functions as one of the principles in their pastoral letter [Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope](#). However, the Church, along with other members of our democratic society, has the right to work to change laws which are believed to violate basic human dignity, imbued by the Creator. In the case of immigration, the [U.S. bishops](#) believe that the broken U.S. immigration system separates families, denies due process and contributes to the exploitation of migrant workers in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

## Why do immigrants come here illegally?

One of the primary reasons certain immigrants do not come to the United States through lawful mechanisms is because of the many systemic barriers that prevent them from coming through a legal process. They come illegally because there are insufficient visas under the current system to come legally. Immigrants come illegally because there is an enormous backlog that prevents them from reunifying with family members currently living in the United States in a timely fashion. Some family members might have to wait for more than a [decade](#) before their visa is processed and for family reunification can occur.<sup>2</sup> Some immigrants arrive at our borders as they are fleeing persecution and seeking protection and cannot safely live in their home countries. Most recently we have seen this in the case of the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Our system contains a limited number of permanent visas for low-wage laborers to come to the United States, but the demand for

their work within the US is much higher, and as many as 300,000 undocumented people each year are absorbed into the U.S. workforce.

## Do immigrants increase the crime rate?

One of the dominant myths that distorts any debate on immigration is the idea that immigrants are criminals and commit crimes at higher rates than native born citizens. This is a false assumption. Recently [published research](#)<sup>3</sup> has shown that immigrant communities do not increase the crime rate and that immigrants actually commit fewer crimes than native born Americans. Although the number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States tripled from 3.5 million to 11 million between 1990 and 2013, the corresponding violent crime rate declined by 48%. This was matched by a 41% reduction in property crime over the same period. Further, immigrants are less likely to be in prison and less likely to engage in criminal behavior. For example, while only about 1.6% of immigrant males between the age of 17-39 are incarcerated, 3.3% of native born men are in prison.

## Do immigrants pay taxes?

Unauthorized immigrants [pay a wide range of taxes](#),<sup>4</sup> including sales taxes where applicable. They also pay property taxes, directly if they own their homes and indirectly if they rent. Between one half and three quarters of undocumented immigrants pay state and federal taxes. In fact, estimates state that unauthorized migrants pay an estimated \$11.64 billion every year in state and local taxes.

1 Archbishop Gomez Testimony On E-Verify, February 10, 2011, <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/congressional-testimony/archbishopgomeztestimonyone-verify.cfm>  
2 U.S. Department of State, Visa Bulletin for November 2016, <https://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/law-and-policy/bulletin/2017/visa-bulletin-for-november-2016.html>

3 American Immigration Council, "The Criminalization of Immigration in the United States," July 13, 2015, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/criminalization-immigration-united-states>

4 New American Economy, "Undocumented Immigrants Pay Billions in State and Local Taxes and Would Pay Substantially More Under Comprehensive Immigration Reform," February 15, 2016, <http://www.renewoureconomy.org/news/undocumented-immigrants-pay-billions-in-state-and-local-taxes-and-would-pay-substantially-more-under-comprehensive-immigration-reform/>