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Guest Columnist

Immigration reform and economic recovery

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The American economy is experiencing severe inflation, high levels of inequality, supply chain breakdowns and labor shortages. The stock market has plummeted. Leading economists forecast a recession soon.

The U.S. is also facing "demographic stagnation." The Census Bureau's 2020 count revealed that the United States has moved from a fast-growing country of young people to a slow-growing older nation. Experts expect this stagnation will reduce productivity and national prosperity.

Immigration reform is central to America addressing these challenges. Unfortunately, the debates on immigration are too often driven by feelings rather than facts. Many "feel" that immigrants are taking jobs that would otherwise go to other Americans and create a permanent underclass that is prone to drugs and crime. Donald Trump stated his "feelings" about immigrants in launching his presidential campaign, claiming that immigrants from Mexico "have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems. ... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." (And witness how some on the right are blaming the horrific deaths of more than 50 migrants in a semi-trailer near San Antonio, Texas, on President Joe Biden's border policies.)

Fortunately, we now have "facts" to better understand the impact of immigration on the American economy and culture. Economic historians Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, with new access to digitized records, and the ability to analyze new data on platforms such as Ancestry, present factual insights into some of the age-old debates surrounding immigration. In their new book "Streets of Gold," Abramitzky and Boustan analyze previously unexplored data sources that span nearly a century and a half of American history, starting around 1880. These scholars scrutinize the records of millions of immigrants and their children and compile "the first set of truly big data about immigration."

Consider the following conclusions on immigration from their impressive "big data" methodology:

• **Immigrant success is not at the expense of U.S.-born workers.** The data show that immigrants do not "steal the last slice from a fixed pie." Instead, immigrant labor helps the economy to grow by filling positions that have few available U.S.-born workers — "either very highly educated positions in tech and science, or work that requires very little education, such as picking crops by hand, washing dishes, landscaping and taking care of the elderly."

• **Immigrants are not likely to commit crimes.** Politicians consistently focus on immigrants who are involved in burglaries, assaults and organized crime. Yet, the data reveals that in recent times, "immigrants are less likely than the U.S.-born to be arrested and incarcerated for all manner of offense." For example, in Texas researchers with access to data from the Department of Homeland Security found that "undocumented immigrants were half as likely as the U.S.-born to be arrested for violent crimes."

• **Immigrants have a positive impact on the economy overall.** Abramitzky and Boustan carefully document how immigrants "contribute to the economy as consumers and as taxpayers, and ... help support an aging population as baby boomers retire." Immigration is essential for filling key jobs in health care, tech, nursing homes, construction, farming and manufacturing. America has an essential need for immigrants to fill these critical jobs. Immigrants thus play a key role in contributing to population growth in the midst our "demographic stagnation."

This year is the 10th anniversary of the Obama administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). This program provided working papers for children brought illegally to the U.S. before they were 16, have a clean record and have lived in the country at least five years. This group represents approximately 1.5 million children of foreign-born parents. Unfortunately, Congress has still not passed the "Dream Act" legislation, which would allow these young immigrants to apply for permanent legal status. According to the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, DACA (Dreamers) jobs and incomes contributed nearly $42 billion to U.S. gross domestic product each year and added $3.4 billion to the federal balance sheet.

As a first step in immigration reform, the barriers that these undocumented children face should be removed. The "Dream Act" legislation can provide these children with the same opportunities that immigrants throughout American history have received. This legislation will benefit not only these young people but all Americans by helping to grow our economy out of the current economic disorder.

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