

Immigrants and the Labor Market

What are “the jobs Americans won’t do”?

BY ESTHER CERVANTES

Congress and the streets are abuzz with talk of immigration policy reform. Militias patrol the Mexican border under the aegis of national security, and the House decides that helping the undocumented should be a felony. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands march for amnesty, and contractors tell newspapers that the undocumented are essential to their business. The president proposes a guest worker program, which Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) counter with a ver-

sion of their own. The labor movement is divided on the issue of guest workers: SEIU backs the idea, while the AFL-CIO does not. It’s clear that the economy is the elephant in the corner, and it’s time to take a good look at the familiar assertion: *Undocumented workers do the jobs that Americans won’t do.*

It’s a statement that raises many questions, such as: *What are those jobs?*

Among non-citizens, Latin Americans differ the most from U.S. citizens in their occupations. They have higher concen-

trations in production, construction and extraction, building and grounds maintenance, food preparation and serving, and farming, fishing, and forestry. African non-citizens concentrate in healthcare support and technical occupations, personal care and service, and transportation. This has consequences for wages. In the employed civilian workforce, nearly two thirds of Latin American non-citizens—both documented and undocumented—find themselves in the occupational categories that are in the bottom half, ranked by pay. Compare that to 41.5% of Latinos who were born as U.S. citizens and 35.7% of U.S.-born whites.

The situation is even worse for undocumented workers; the Urban Institute estimates that two thirds earn less than twice the minimum wage, compared to one third of all workers. As a measure of just how low twice the minimum wage is, consider that if one member in a family of three earns twice the minimum wage at a full-time year-round job, the family still qualifies for many government programs for the poor, such as WIC and food stamps.

This gives us an answer to the question, *Why won’t Americans do those jobs?* It’s because the jobs don’t pay well enough to live on, at least not if you mean to live and raise a family in the United States. But most undocumented workers, especially the Latin Americans who make up about 75% of the undocumented population, don’t intend to have an ordinary family life here. The Urban Institute estimates that 59% of the adult undocumented population are men, yielding a male:female ratio that would be considered a crisis in any permanent society.

The population pyramids show not only the gender imbalance among non-citizen Latin Americans but also that most of them are of working age, represented by the darker bars. (The population pyramid for the undocumented Latin American population would look much the same as the top right graph, since the Urban Institute’s estimates imply that about 90% of non-citizen Latin Americans are undocumented.) The bottom left graph shows the population pyramid for all Latinos (most

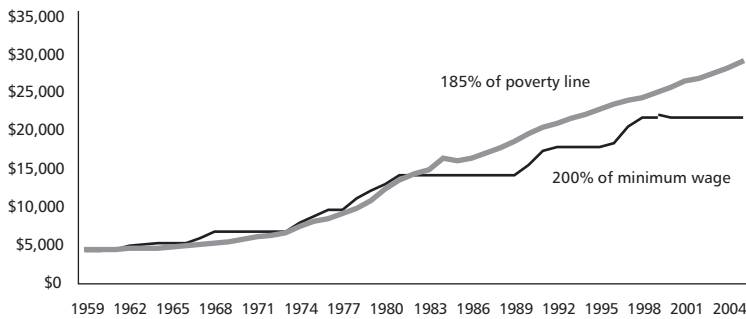
OCCUPATION BY CITIZENSHIP STATUS & RACE

	Born Citizen			Non-Citizen		
	White	Black	Latino	Europe	Africa	Latin America
Mgt, Bus, Fin	15.1	9.5	9.9	15.5	10.3	4.2
Professional	8.4	4.5	5.7	13.2	9.2	2.6
Health Prac & Tech	5.0	3.7	3.2	3.7	7.1	0.7
Edu, Training, Library	7.0	5.9	5.8	7.6	5.2	1.7
Install, Maint, Repair	3.7	2.5	3.4	2.0	2.3	3.4
Const & Extraction	5.6	3.7	5.8	6.5	1.4	16.9
Community & Soc Svc	1.5	2.8	1.9	1.0	2.8	0.4
Protective Svcs	2.0	3.4	2.9	0.6	2.6	0.5
Offc & Admin	15.9	18.3	19.7	11.7	12.1	7.2
Production	6.4	8.9	6.7	7.6	6.0	15.8
Transportation	3.2	4.2	3.1	2.4	6.2	3.1
Healthcare Support	1.9	4.5	2.9	2.2	7.9	1.4
Sales	12.5	10.1	13.2	10.8	12.6	7.5
Bldg & Grounds Maint	3.0	6.5	4.5	5.0	3.9	14.8
Personal Care & Svc	3.1	4.4	3.8	3.9	5.9	3.2
Farm, Fish, Forest	0.7	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.1	5.2
Food Prep & Serving	4.9	6.5	6.6	6.0	4.5	11.4

Source: Author’s calculations using 2004 American Community Survey Population Records (Census Bureau) and November 2004 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Note: Occupations ranked by descending median hourly wage. “Mgt, Bus, Fin” aggregates major Standard Occupational Classifications, (SOCs, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics) 11 and 13; “Professional” aggregates 15, 17, 19, 23, and 27; all others are major SOCs.

200% OF MINIMUM WAGE VS. 185% OF POVERTY LINE



Source: Tom Gabe, Specialist in Social Legislation, Domestic Social Policy Division, Congressional Research Service, "Memo to Honorable Jim McDermott on Historical Relationship Between the Minimum Wage and Poverty, 1959 to 2005," July 5, 2005, and author's calculations.

of whom are citizens) in the United States, regardless of citizenship status. Perhaps a quarter of the children age 15 and under represented there are U.S. citizens with undocumented parents. The bottom right graph shows that a far greater proportion of non-citizen Latin American men are of working age than are their white, U.S.-born counterparts. According to the Urban Institute, undocumented Latin American men have a labor force participation rate of 96%, while according to the Bu-

reau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the rate among white men is 76%.

Since it appears that most undocumented workers have one foot out the door, another good question presents itself: *What can the jobs that Americans won't do buy in undocumented workers' home countries?*

According to Habitat for Humanity, it's a lot easier to build a "simple, decent" house on twice the U.S. minimum wage if the house is in Poland, Mexico,

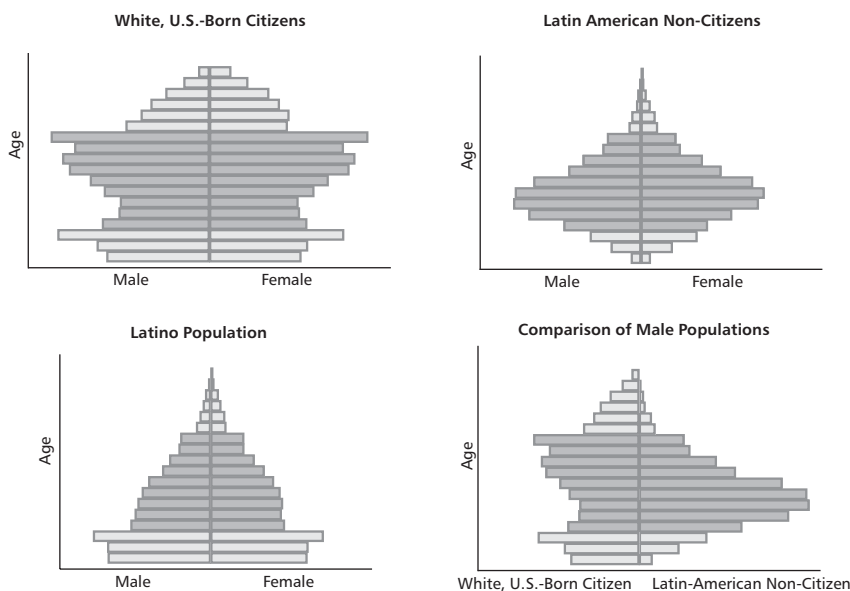
the Philippines, or Nigeria than in the United States.

And even near-poverty wages in the United States make home ownership more attainable than the \$2 or less per day on which 26.3% of Mexicans, 46.4% of Philipinos, and 90.8% of Nigerians live.

Undocumented workers take jobs at the low end of the U.S. wage scale, sometimes falling beneath the official minimum entirely. U.S. citizens won't do these jobs because they don't pay well enough to support a family in the United States. However, the extreme poverty of the undocumented population's home countries lends these low-paying jobs in the United States a certain appeal. Meanwhile, black and Latino U.S. citizens also cluster, though not as tightly, in low-wage occupations, bear more unemployment than whites, and suffer poverty without the undocumented worker's light at the end of the tunnel. How might we make this situation tenable?

Some critics of the various immigration reform proposals complain that policing employers to crack down on undocumented hires would be impractical and expensive. There is, however, an easier, *continued on page 29*

POPULATION PYRAMIDS



Source: Author's calculations using 2004 ACS Population Records.

COST OF HOUSING

	Cost of House	Pct of 2x FT Annual Min Wage
United States	\$50,000	233.4%
Poland	\$30,500	142.4%
Nigeria	\$7,500	35.0%
Mexico	\$6,481	30.3%
Philippines	\$2,290	10.7%

Source: Habitat for Humanity Annual Report FY2004, Worldwide Ministry; Congressional Research Service Memo to Honorable Jim McDermott on Historical Relationship Between the Minimum Wage and Poverty, 1959 to 2005; and author's calculations.

Note: These are the costs of sponsoring a Habitat house in these countries; actual building costs vary. Mexico, the Philippines, and Nigeria are the countries in their regions that send the most people to the United States. Poland holds that rank among Eastern European countries, though it is fourth in Europe as a whole.

ECONOMY IN NUMBERS

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less expensive, and time-tested alternative: unionization.

In this, so far it's the AFL-CIO that's leading the way. SEIU accepted guest worker proposals with the idea that regulating the flow of temporary workers would at least give immigrants the protection of health and safety laws and the right to switch jobs. But AFL-CIO President John Sweeney implied that this doesn't go far enough. "Guest worker programs are a bad idea and harm all workers," he wrote, by encouraging employers to turn good jobs into temporary ones and removing none of the current incentives to exploit foreigners willing to accept low wages and bad conditions. Now the AFL-CIO needs to take a cue from the IWW: "the working class knows no borders or races, but exists wherever workers are exploited for the benefit of capital." Whether as undocumented or guest workers, the poor of other countries will continue to pose problems for workers in more prosperous countries, unless they organize together to solve the problems of poverty, inequality, and exploitation—problems that know no borders. ■

SOURCES Associated Press, "La reforma migratoria debe tomar en cuenta la economía," *El Planeta*, April 6-12, 2006; Auster, Elizabeth, "Guest worker proposals divide America's unions," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 6, 2006; Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey Population Records, factfinder.census.gov/home/en/acs_pums_2004.html; Bureau of Labor Statistics November 2004 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm; Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, "Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures," Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program, January 12, 2004, www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=1000587; Tom Gabe, Specialist in Social Legislation, Domestic Social Policy Division, Congressional Research Service, "Memo to Honorable Jim McDermott on Historical Relationship Between the Minimum Wage and Poverty, 1959 to 2005," July 5, 2005, www.chn.org/pdf/crsminimumwage.pdf; Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Situation," Table A-2, April 7, 2006, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.toc.htm>; Habitat for Humanity, "Worldwide Ministry," Annual Report FY2004, www.habitat.org/giving/report/2004/; United Nations Development Program, "Indicator 3: Human and income poverty: developing countries; population living below \$2 a day (%)," Human Development Indicators, 2003, hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/indicators.cfm; Schoeff, Mark Jr., "Bill Likely to Put Pressure on Firms to Verify Worker Status," *Workforce Management*, April 11, 2006, www.workforce.com/section/00/article/24/33/08.html; Industrial Workers of the World, "May 1st—Defend the Rights of Immigrant Workers," April 10, 2006, www.iww.org/en/node/2340.

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