

## **The part of "ILLEGAL" we don't get**

It is a widely held misconception that immigration law violations are criminal in nature. In fact, all most immigrants without legal status are guilty of is a civil violation. We do not label people as "illegal" when they break speed limits, go through a red light, or drive while intoxicated- even though such conduct is arguably more dangerous than immigrants overstaying visas. Immigrants find themselves out of legal status for a variety of reasons, among them the byzantine nature of our immigration laws, the inefficiency of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, and unrealistically low visa quotas for Mexico, our NAFTA partner.

The term "illegal" dehumanizes immigrants. Simplifying this very complex issue in terms of legal vs. illegal immigration may serve the purpose of making our current enforcement crackdown more palatable to the public, but it will not solve the problem of illegal immigration.

What part of illegal don't we get? The part that dishonors the American existential sense of responsibility for our own problems, and looks for scapegoats. The part that disregards the hypocrisy of a system that lures low-skilled immigrants with plentiful jobs, but closes the front door to them, makes them jump over the backyard fence, and hides them in the basement. If we, as a society, have allowed this situation to get out of control, it is our collective responsibility to restore fairness and justice without which there cannot be respect for the rule of law, as American history has abundantly shown.

A large number of unauthorized immigrants are embedded into our social fabric, contributing to the economic and cultural renewal of our communities. Most live in mixed status families. They are the parents, children, husbands, wives, and siblings of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. They are "our" people. Let us stop dehumanizing immigrants with labels like "illegal alien," and direct our efforts to integrating them legally in our society, for our sake, as much as theirs.



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