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## LEGALIZATION AND THE COMMON GOOD

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### **Legalization and the Common Good**

Much of the debate surrounding comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) focuses on how to deal with the nearly eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the United States today. One of the central features of CIR, supported by both the Catholic bishops of the United States and the Justice for Immigrants Campaign, is the development of a legalization program for undocumented immigrants, a proposal that we are convinced would both contribute to and protect the common good. It would do so in the following ways:

- Legalization would keep families together and improve the well-being of U.S.-citizen children. Legalization would help stabilize immigrant families and would protect U.S.-citizen children in “mixed” status families. A 2009 study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 47 percent of unauthorized immigrant households were couples with children. 3.1 million U.S.- citizen children live with one or more undocumented parents. Undocumented immigrants are more likely than either U.S. born residents or legal immigrants to live in a household with children, a growing share of whom—73 percent—are U.S. born citizens.<sup>1</sup>
- Legalization would recognize and maintain the economic contributions of the undocumented. Undocumented workers are an integral part of many industries across the country, including agriculture, service, construction, meatpacking, and poultry processing. For example, undocumented workers make up more than 13 percent of the labor force in agriculture, and 25 percent of the labor force in farming. Of the roughly 8.3 million undocumented workers in the U.S. labor force, the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that more than 1 million are in manufacturing, 1.7 million in construction, 1.4 million in the leisure and hospitality industries, and over 300,000 in agriculture.<sup>2</sup> In addition, undocumented workers contribute billions to the tax and Social Security systems, paying \$520 billion into the Social Security system since 1975.<sup>3</sup>
- Legalization would improve wages and working conditions for all workers. By legalizing the labor force in a way which allows immigrants to become permanent residents, wages and working conditions would improve for all workers. According to a North American Integration and Development Center study, a new legalization program would increase the wages of immigrant workers by 15 percent, similar to the effect after passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.<sup>4</sup> Legalization also would allow workers to organize and assert their rights, leading to better working conditions and wages for all workers.
- Legalization would help create new job opportunities for Americans. Increased legal and illegal immigration in the past fifteen years has not increased the



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number of people living in poverty in the United States. In fact, the number of people living in poverty decreased during this period as U.S. economic growth expanded, and native-born Americans attained higher levels of education and new job skills. Legalization combined with a new worker program would likely continue this trend, creating additional middle-class job opportunities for native-born workers.<sup>5</sup>

- Legalization would help bring U.S. immigration policy in line with U.S. economic policy. The United States, Mexico, and Central America are more integrated than ever. U.S. immigration policy has yet to adjust to the fact that U.S. economic policies such as NAFTA have facilitated rapid interdependence between Mexico and the United States. As economic policies are integrated, so, too, must bilateral migration policies. We live in a globalized region and world, and the movement of labor must be regularized to protect basic rights.
- Legalization would make us more secure. By legalizing the 11 million undocumented and requiring that they register with the U.S. government, law enforcement will be able to focus on others who are in the United States to harm us, not those who are here to work and contribute to their communities. Despite the dire warnings of opponents of legalization for undocumented workers, evidence suggests that legalization would yield benefits at many levels by preserving family unity, securing the economic contributions of migrants, and raising the wages and working conditions of all workers. It would also ensure the participation of all undocumented workers because of the opportunity for permanent residency and eventual citizenship.

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1 Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States, Pew Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009.

2 A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States, Pew Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009.

3 Testimony of Patrick P. O’Carroll, Jr., Inspector General of the Social Security Administration, before the U.S. Senate, Committee on Finance, regarding “Administrative Challenges Facing the Social Security Administration,” March 14, 2006.

4 Raul Hinojosa Ojeda, Comprehensive Migration Policy Reform in North America: The Key to Sustainable and Equitable Economic Integration. Los Angeles, California: North American Integration and Development Center, School of Policy and Social Research, UCLA, August, 2000.

5 Daniel T. Griswold, “As Immigrants Move In, Americans Move Up,” The CATO Institute, July 21, 2009.