

Our Teenagers Suffer from Illegal Immigration

By JOHN VINSON

The teenage son of one of my friends earned money mowing lawns for people in the neighborhood. One day one of the people he worked for told him she wouldn't need his services anymore. When he asked why, she said that she had found a Mexican man who would do the job for less pay.

My friend was upset about his son losing work to an adult competitor, one who most likely was in this country illegally and was further breaking the law by working here. Yes, this foreigner was willing to work for less than an American, a situation some free enterprisers hail as an economic benefit, which trumps illegality. But the cheap labor isn't quite so cheap when you factor in the tab for public benefits that illegal aliens legally and illegally obtain. On that basis, it's free enterprise for the U.S. employer and socialism for the non-employed U.S. taxpayer.

Getting back to my friend's son, one can honestly say in this instance that he was a victim (though admittedly in a small way) of our government's refusal to enforce immigration laws effectively. Unfortunately, he is one of many such victims, and their numbers and the extent of their victimization is growing.

Times aren't easy now for American teenagers in the job market. Today only 25 percent of 16 to 19 year-olds are employed, the lowest level since 1948, when record keeping of teen employment began.¹ The decline has accelerated sharply in recent years. In 2000, the teen employment rate was 45 percent.² Andrew Sum, an economist at Northeastern University, is a leading authority on teenage employment. Two years ago he remarked, "I've been working on youth issues now for 40 years, and never has anything been this bad."³

One significant reason, says Sum, is that American teenagers — like my friend's son — are having to compete with illegal aliens.⁴ These foreigners are now taking

many of the jobs our youngsters used to do. And this is a serious problem which our society should not ignore.

Why is teenage employment so important? The biggest reason, Sum observes, is its great influence on how one fares as an adult. Research shows that teens who work are less likely to get involved in anti-social behavior and are less likely to drop out of school. These advantages and the work habits acquired on a job give those who worked as teens a considerable advantage over other adults who didn't work in their teens.

Another key consideration is that teen unemployment is a greater problem for teens in low-income families than for those whose families are better off. Specifically, a teenager in a family making less than \$20,000 a year has only a 20 percent chance of getting work compared with a 38 percent chance for a teen in a family making between \$75,000 and \$100,000.⁵ Wealthier families generally have more connections and contacts for securing employment. And teens in wealthier families often have more role models to follow for obtaining and keeping employment. Thus, in the present economy, the youngsters who need jobs the most are less likely to get them.

Particularly hard hit among the poor are black American youths. A study done in 2009 found that only 20 percent of poor black teens between 16 and 19 had jobs, compared with 36 percent of poor whites.⁶ One reason is that a high percentage of black teens are in cities with large foreign-born populations. In the spring of 2012, the Obama Administration announced plans to help lower-income youth find jobs. Not mentioned was the possibility of deporting illegal aliens to open up jobs for citizens. To the contrary, in June the administration announced a de facto amnesty which would issue more than a million work permits to illegal aliens.

Sometimes we hear the claim that American youngsters simply don't want work because they are lazy. One reply is that of Neil Sullivan, executive director of the Boston Private Industry Council, an organization that seeks to increase employment opportunities

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in the Boston area: “We often ask, ‘What’s wrong with this generation? They don’t have any work ethic?’ but a deeper analysis shows they haven’t had the same employment opportunities their parents and older siblings once had.” Thus they don’t have a chance to develop “the habits of paid work.”⁷



In cases where laziness of American kids is a problem, we still should hesitate and reflect before accepting illegal immigration as a solution. The source of the problem is a moral failing on the part of adults as well as youngsters. It is the reprehensible attitude that certain

types of work are low and dirty, and only low and dirty people—such as illegal immigrants—should perform them.

Such thinking, often encouraged by adults, is a great disservice to our youth by inflating their egos and giving them a false sense of entitlement. (I understand this mentality because I had it myself as teenager. My parents helped cure me by forcing me to work summer jobs under the hot Georgia sun.) Kids today would be fortunate to have a similar influence from parents and other adults. Unfortunately, the easy availability of illegal alien labor does a great deal to undercut the moral resolve necessary to sustain that attitude. In short, it works to corrupt the character of both the adults and the youngsters.

Another moral liability is the attitude that unchecked illegal immigration engenders toward people in neighboring countries—the homelands of many illegal aliens. As neighbors we should strive for mutual respect, but this erodes when they flagrantly break our laws, and we think that the only thing they’re good for is doing work that we and our children are supposedly too good to do. In this situation, as in so many others, strong fences do indeed make good neighbors.

With respect to what Americans owe one another, no obligation is more profound and fundamental than the duty of older generations to assist the hopes and prospects of our young people. Not standing up for our youth, so that foreigners and native vested interests may benefit, is gross dereliction of that duty. ■

Endnotes

1. NBC News, Allison Linn, 5/3/12
2. Christian Science Monitor, 6/2/05
3. LiveScience.com, Stephanie Pappas, 8/22/10
4. Ibid.
5. Spotlightonpoverty.org, John Drew, Action for Boston Community Development, 8/1/12
6. epi.org, Algernon Austin. 5/11/11
7. knowledge@Wharton, 3/7/07