

“Temporary” Alien Workers in the United States

Designing Policy from Fact
and Opinion

**Sidney Weintraub
Stanley R. Ross**



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About the Book and Authors

"Temporary" Alien Workers in the United States: Designing Policy from Fact and Opinion

Sidney Weintraub and Stanley R. Ross

The most controversial and significant aspect of U.S. immigration policy concerns those persons who enter the country illegally in order to seek employment. It is known that a significant proportion of the "temporary" immigrants remain--authorities estimate that between three and six million undocumented aliens live permanently in the U.S., a figure that grows by the hundreds of thousands each year--but other aspects of the issue are less clear. There is no consensus about how the importation of foreign workers affects the U.S. labor market, nor about the desirability of some system to identify temporary workers living legally in the U.S. Neither is there agreement about the effect of curtailing the flow of workers from Mexico on that country's internal political structure.

This book brings together current knowledge about temporary workers in the U.S. and examines the various issues that are likely to shape future policy. The authors place particular emphasis on recent proposals made by the Reagan administration and on other recommendations now under consideration by Congress. The book is not political in the sense of being for or against any particular program; rather, it seeks to clarify the many issues by setting forth what is known and by critically analyzing the options.

Sidney Weintraub is Dean Rusk Professor of Public Policy in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin. Prior to coming to the LBJ School in 1976 he had a distinguished career with the U.S. Department of State. *Stanley R. Ross*, professor of history at the University of Texas, has written extensively on Latin America and on U.S.-Mexico relations.



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To Gladys,
who graciously ceded her time
so that this study could be prepared;
To Gerry,
who gave her time and energy
to an open-heart by-pass surgery patient;
To Diane,
who met unreasonable typing deadlines.



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Preface

Our purpose in preparing this study is to have an impact on the immigration legislation now under consideration in the U.S. Congress. We approached this objective mainly by addressing the central issues which must be included in any legislation on foreign temporary workers. Our examination deals primarily with the theory and practice of using foreign temporary workers and its impact on the labor market in the United States, the foreign policy implications of a legal U.S. guest worker program, and the issue of amnesty for persons who have resided illegally in the United States for a protracted period. We also have addressed the specific provisions of the legislation now pending before the Congress, but have tried to place these in the context of the underlying theory and practice.

The format of this study is to examine first what is known about the use of foreign temporary workers. It is designed to dispel illusions and counteract unsubstantiated assertions made by advocates of one position or another. We then analyze what is ambiguous from the theory and past experience in order to set forth the basis for opposing positions and the value judgments that enter into them. Legislation, in our view, should build on the known and be fashioned from debate on the ambiguous.

We find much of value in the legislation submitted by the Reagan administration. We also find much that is unwise, including proposals that ignore what has been learned from experience and research. Good policy can not emerge from deliberate or unintended disregard of what is known, and yet much of the proposed policy does precisely that.

We wish to thank Diane Treviño for her work in getting the manuscript into final form. Kathy Lewis prepared the index under a tight deadline.

*Sidney Weintraub
Stanley R. Ross
Austin, Texas
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Introduction

There are few subjects more controversial than immigration policy. At the same time, there are few issues more poignant in human terms. Immigration (or emigration) policy directly affects the lives of people and their families. The movement of human beings can have a profound impact on the economies of the sending and receiving countries, on the social structures in those nations, and ultimately on political systems.

Immigration policy can bring out the most generous human attributes when those who came first open their arms graciously to those who come later. This act of grace can be a matter of life and death, as it was for many boat people from Vietnam seeking a haven. Immigration policy also can bring out the most heartless of national behavior, when refugees or escapees are sent to almost certain death on the high seas in unsafe boats or are imprisoned in detention centers until they can be deported to whence they came, or be sent anywhere else. Just not here. Many countries are immune to merciful manifestations, as recent and past boatlifts have made amply clear. Greek tragedies of the type that befell the boat people from southeast Asia were played out earlier during the Nazi period. Heartlessness, however, is no less heart rending for being repetitive. No country is completely open to all comers. Sovereignty embodies the right to declare a total or partial pox on aliens. Brave speeches about one world do not apply to foreigners, unless they remain foreigners.

This book deals with only one aspect of immigration policy, that which concerns illegal immigration and the contracting of foreigners for what is intended to be temporary work. This form of migration involves more people today than all other forms combined.¹ On any given day, there are between 14 and 20 million people living in countries not their own, many without legal papers and others under some form of contract.² For each of these, there are more persons back home who depend on income from this work. National policies towards foreign workers thus directly affect hundreds of millions of people. In addition, there are indirect social and economic effects on national workers and their families, some benefiting from the presence of foreign workers while others lose. Again, the lives of additional millions of people are affected by what is labeled "immigration policy."