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Senate Bill Would Add 20 Million Legal Immigrants, Report Says

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The nation's population of legal immigrants would increase by nearly 20 million over the next decade if the recently passed Senate immigration bill becomes law, and taxpayers would spend more than \$50 billion to operate a new guest-worker program and pay for extra welfare, Social Security and public health-care costs, according to a Congressional Budget Office report.

But the cost of absorbing the newcomers would be offset by a boost of \$66 billion in federal revenue from income taxes and payroll taxes generated by the temporary guest-worker program, along with fees that immigrants must pay to participate, the report said.

By 2016, about 8 million immigrants would enter the United States as temporary guest workers, and 11 million immigrants who now live in the country illegally would become permanent legal residents under provisions of the bill.

The report, the first definitive look at the impact of the Senate bill, was commissioned by the Senate Finance Committee and was submitted on May 16, nine days before the measure was passed. The study has been embraced by the Bush administration and the bill's supporters, but opponents said crucial omissions greatly lowered its population and cost estimates.

Critics said the report does not take into account the 950,000 newcomers who enter the country legally under current immigration law, bringing the 10-year total of new immigrants to about 30 million. Some say that number will double by 2026.

The report also does not consider the possibility of future mass illegal border crossings that might occur in spite of technological enhancement and increased personnel along the Southern border, according to critics.

An explosion of immigrants is one reason that House Republicans say they are strongly opposed to the Senate bill, and have vowed to fight it when members of the two chambers meet for negotiations in a congressional conference. Supporters of the Senate's approach, which is backed by President Bush, say they will stand firm.

"We can build miles of fences, but the fact remains that immigrants will still come because employers need workers and immigrants want jobs," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), who fought for a guest-worker program. "It's far better for American jobs and wages to have a practical, common-sense policy of legal immigration, than to continue leaving millions of immigrants underground and underpaid."

Will Adams, a spokesman for Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), who opposes granting residency to illegal immigrants, called legal immigration "the soft underbelly of the Senate bill." It is overlooked in the debate, he said, "but when it's exposed, the public is outraged."

Robert E. Rector, a senior research fellow in domestic policy studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the bill "is horrendous." Assisting tens of millions of low-income workers with less than a high school education would lead to costs in welfare, health care, housing and other areas that far exceed the half-billion dollars the government already pays each year, he said.

"Once [illegal immigrants] become legal, they are going to receive welfare that's vastly disproportionate to the taxes that they're going to pay," Rector said. High school dropouts, immigrants or not, earn about \$22,000 yearly and pay far fewer taxes than middle-class Americans. "There's no way they can contribute to the cost of educating their children. The cost they impose on government . . . far exceeds anything they bring in in terms of tax revenue."

The budget office report, compiled with help from the Joint Committee on Taxation, disputed that account, as did others who took issue with Rector's belief that the Senate bill would increase the immigrant population by 60 million.

Earlier, Rector predicted an even higher number: 100 million. He updated the figure after an amendment to the bill capped the yearly number of guest workers at 200,000 per year.

Alan Reynolds, a senior fellow for the libertarian Cato Institute, said Rector's estimates "are preposterous." He accused Rector of compounding numbers to reach an alarming total and not taking into account that most immigrants who would become legal citizens already live in the country.

"They're basically saying, 'Gee, if we keep illegals illegal, then we would have fewer legal residents,'" Reynolds said.

A report released yesterday by the **National Foundation for American Policy** also said Rector "overstated the numbers." Stuart Anderson, executive director of the foundation, said most "new entrants" who would become legal residents currently live in the United States. In 20 years, the net total of new entrants would be about 47 million.

Rector is supported by other groups, including the Center for Immigration Studies and NumbersUSA, two opponents of increased immigration. He said his concern about the number of immigrants is outweighed by the cost.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, 750,000 immigrants would be eligible to receive food stamps, and 1.3 million would be eligible for some form of Medicaid, in addition to other benefits.

The cost of providing food stamps, Medicare, Medicaid and visa fees for guest workers would total \$5 billion between 2009 and 2016. An additional \$6.5 billion would be needed for new residents who unite with families. Providing services to illegal immigrants who become permanent legal residents would cost \$10 billion more.