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Editorial

Immigration Benefits

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SHOULD IMMIGRATION BE factored into the highly charged debate about the solvency of Social Security? A new study posing that question produced intriguing answers - especially at a time when President Bush and Congress are wrestling with both topics.

Immigrants expected to enter the United States over the next 75 years will significantly enrich Social Security's coffers, contributing \$611 billion to the benefit fund, according to an analysis by the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a public-policy organization.

The study also found that increasing annual legal immigration levels - now approximately 800,000 per year - by one-third during that same period would increase Social Security revenues enough to shrink its projected deficit by 10 percent. Conversely, reducing immigration by one-third would worsen the expected shortfall by 10 percent.

Most legal immigrants come to this country at a young age and typically pay into the Social Security system for 40 years before claiming benefits. Illegal immigrants, who generally arrive in their early 20s, also pay into the system through payroll deductions but are not eligible to collect benefits.

Thus, a steady inflow of legal immigrants, and the temporary guest worker plan proposed by President Bush, would strengthen the nation's retirement safety net.

Two Republicans, Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas and Rep. Chris Cannon of Utah, have urged colleagues in both parties to consider the study's findings. Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan has long championed expanding immigration policies, and he reiterated those sentiments last week before a House committee.

Opponents of expanded immigration say the social costs, particularly those of illegal immigration, far outweigh the long-term benefits. But that contention requires careful examination.

Between 6 million and 8 million undocumented immigrants are believed to be living here. Legal immigrants who have gone through the stricter vetting process since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks pose fewer national security risks, get better-paying jobs, are less vulnerable to exploitation and are less likely to be dependent on government assistance than those who arrive illegally.

Lawmakers should use the study to consider raising immigration quotas as well as giving undocumented workers the opportunity to legalize their immigration status.

We believe the numbers speak for themselves. This country needs immigrants just as much as immigrants need this country. Their potential to help ease the Social Security squeeze is another powerful argument that the White House and Congress should factor into the debate.