

Illegal immigrants touch every part of North Carolina

By Elise Phillips

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Almost half a million strong and still growing, the number of illegal immigrants in North Carolina make the state the eighth largest one in the country with the most illegal aliens. And the economic and social impact that they have on North Carolina is even more remarkable.

North Carolina has only 3 percent of the country's total illegal immigrants, but they touch every part of the state—school systems, health care systems, job growth—and leaders in the eastern part of the state have taken polar opposite stances about how these illegals affect legal citizens' daily lives.

The Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C. estimated in a 2006 report that the healthy job market in the U.S. drives large numbers of Hispanics to the country. The job area that benefits most is the construction industry, employing about 40 percent of newly-immigrated illegals in the country. According to a 2006 article by Raleigh's *News & Observer*, businesses are the biggest beneficiaries of illegal immigrants and "are the reason unauthorized foreigners are here in the first place."

Several construction companies in the eastern part of the state had no comment for this story.

UNC-Chapel Hill researchers told the *News & Observer* in the same article that Hispanics in the state have led to the creation of approximately 90,000 jobs and \$9 million in revenue. Businesses eagerly hire these illegals for a number of reasons. The most obvious one? Cheap labor.

Jeff Popke, associate professor in the Department of Geography at East Carolina University, says that most immigrants here illegally end up working in low-paying jobs.

"Many immigrants do end up in relatively low-wage sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, construction, agro-processing and the service sector," he said. "At the same time, maquiladora factories have proliferated, so that American companies (and our standard of living) can benefit from cheap Mexican labor."

Maquiladora factories are those (mostly along the U.S.-Mexican border) that are U.S.-owned, but employ Mexicans cheaply to resell goods (like clothing) in the U.S.

The construction and hospitality industries also help illegal immigrants to assimilate themselves into American life more easily because little communication is required for the jobs, which is a plus for those illegals who don't speak English.

“In these two areas, there is little barrier of communication because simple words or phrases help them get the job,” said David Rivera, assistant professor for ECU’s Department of Hospitality Management.

Popke says that there are a variety of explanations why North Carolina has become a haven for illegal immigrants.

“They are coming to North Carolina and many other Southern states for a number of reasons. There is a long history of migrant labor in certain industries (such as tobacco). We have a relatively strong economy, there are jobs available [and] compared to traditional destination states in the Southwest, North Carolina has a lower cost of living and less of an 'anti-immigrant' climate,” he said.

At the same time, with the growing numbers of mostly Hispanic illegal immigrants in the state some feel that these immigrants do not boost the economy. Sue Myrick, a representative of North Carolina’s ninth district, said in a 2006 report that the U.S. government should send illegal immigrants back to their home country.

“Call me old-fashioned, but...I believe in our laws. I believe we should seal off our borders and enforce our immigration laws. Our economy would not be damaged by sending illegal aliens home,” she said. “Illegal aliens are here illegally, and we must recommit ourselves to enforcing our laws and securing our borders.”

Laws in North Carolina are clear, but many businesses hiring illegals “bend the rules” or choose to ignore the laws altogether.

Section 274A of the Immigration and Nationality Act forbids businesses from knowingly hiring illegal immigrants, but according to a 2006 article by the *News & Observer*, not a single business in NC has been fined since 1999 for hiring illegal immigrants. The current fine for businesses that knowingly hire illegals is \$250 per immigrant.

Wanda Yuhas, executive director for the Job Development Commission in Pitt County, says that all companies in North Carolina are supposed to verify I-9 (to verify citizenship status) forms for each of their employees, but that doesn’t always happen.

“As we approach our growing, and in turn, harvest seasons, more migrant labor will surely be in evidence,” she said.

Besides businesses, illegal immigrants shape North Carolina school systems. According to figures by the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise in a 2006 by the *News & Observer*, the state spends approximately \$210 million yearly to support programs in the school system that benefit children who are here illegally or children of parents who are illegal immigrants. And Pitt County’s Yuhas says that’s where things get tricky.

“I have heard in some of the meetings that I attend that one-third of our [Pitt County’s] kindergarten population is Hispanic or Latino. What percentage of that enrollment is

legal or illegal?” she asked. “As a parent, I’d risk a lot in order to get my children into U.S. schools and health systems and out of the poverty of the Mexican countryside.”

According to the same *News & Observer* article, Hispanics accounted for 57 percent of the enrollment growth in North Carolina’s public schools from 2000 to 2005. In Pitt County alone, Hispanics rank No. 3 in enrollment among public school students, next only to black and white students, according to the Pitt County public school system’s Web site.

“Our responsibility is to serve all students as best we can with ESL (English as a Second Language) services. When students come from another country, it takes some time for them to get adjusted in school and feel comfortable with their peers because the language limits the conversation,” said Sylvia Mizzelle, director of federal programs for Pitt County schools. “We probably do have undocumented students, but by law we cannot ask for that information.”

Schools and businesses are not the only sectors that are affected by illegal immigrants. Health care systems also bear the brunt of the influx of illegal immigrants in North Carolina, although it is hard to estimate the costs of their care. The main reason: hospitals are not required to ask about citizenship status when patients come in for care.

“Hospitals are not the place to figure out citizenship issues. We are required as health care professionals to give the highest quality of care to our patients, not figure out whether they are legal citizens or not,” said Tamara Williams, director of diversity and language services for Pitt County’s University Health Systems. “I think the responsibility of hospitals and health care systems is to give quality care to patients, regardless of their citizenship status.”

However, according to a 2004 report by the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at UNC-Chapel Hill, the estimated cost for Hispanic patients (illegal or legal) is approximately \$299 million per year in the state. According to a 2006 article by the *News & Observer*, illegal immigrants likely make up one-third of the 1.3 million uninsured North Carolinians.

Federal law states that illegal immigrants can receive Medicaid, the national medical fund for low-income Americans, if their condition is severe enough, accounting for \$52.8 million spent in 2005. However, this figure makes up less than 1 percent of the fund’s annual budget. For illegals who give birth in hospitals in North Carolina, Medicaid pays approximately \$7,000 for normal births and \$18,000 for complicated Caesarean section births for each patient, one insurer told the *News & Observer* in 2006.

“Half the babies born here at Duplin General Hospital are Latino,” said Laura Maready, director of marketing at the Kenansville, N.C.-based hospital.

According to Maready, from October 2006 to September 2007, 394 of the 776 total births were Hispanic children.

“As you can see, that’s a pretty large number,” Maready said.

While illegal immigrants abound in North Carolina, the fact is that several of the state’s systems are affected by their presence. Some North Carolinians don’t mind the growing numbers of illegal immigrants, but some want them out of the state.

“I believe that some parts of North Carolina are understanding the Latino culture and by doing that, it gives Latinos more of an opportunity,” Rivera, assistant professor for ECU’s Department of Hospitality Management, said.

However, Rep. Myrick has said that while there is no way to push illegals out now, it should be a priority of the U.S. government in the future.

“I know there is no practical means to send 12 million illegal aliens home,” she said in 2006. “We don’t have the tools, resources or manpower. That is why at some point in the future we will have to discuss...giv[ing] illegals incentives to go back to their country and apply to come here legally.”

Jon Connor and Chris Patterson contributed to the reporting of this story.