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January 4, 2006

The cost of illegal migrants

Influx of unauthorized immigrants contributes to existing problems

By Brady McCombs
Greeley correspondent
 January 2, 2006

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To explore the dilemma surrounding immigrants in Colorado, newspapers from Colorado Mountain News Media and the Greeley Tribune created a series of stories that will run each Monday eight weeks. This is the third in the series, which was planned and coordinated by the Vail Daily.

Correspondents reported from the resort areas of Vail, Aspen and Breckenridge, to the bedroom communities of the Roaring Fork Valley and the agricultural city of Greeley. Another writer spent time in northern Mexico, visiting the towns from which many of Colorado's immigrants originate.

A child arrives to kindergarten who doesn't understand or speak English.

An uninsured pregnant woman arrives at the hospital in labor.

A man without a driver's license gets pulled over for a DUI and spends the night in jail.

The estimated 200,000-250,000 illegal immigrants living in Colorado put an extra strain on schools and the health-care and criminal justice systems, officials say.

But these same officials add that illegal immigrants aren't the cause or catalyst of all the woes of schools, hospitals and jails.

Most Spanish-speaking children enrolled in schools are actually U.S. citizens. Plenty of native U.S. citizens arrive uninsured at the hospital in labor. No study shows that illegal immigrants commit any more crimes than U.S. citizens.

If the U.S. Immigrant Custom and Enforcement agency were able to send home all illegal immigrants - as some policy-makers have proposed - school principals and teachers, doctors and nurses, and law enforcement agents would feel some relief.

How much relief depends on who you talk to. School officials say they would receive minimal immediate relief because they estimate that most Spanish-speaking students are actually U.S. citizens. Whether some, or many, came here with illegal immigrant parents is irrelevant now. Future teachers and educators

Illegal immigrants from Brazil sit together after being detained near Harlingen, Texas, on April 12. (Eric Gay/AP)



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might benefit from tighter borders, but current ones have to deal with the problems in front of them.

Physicians and hospitals would gladly take the relief but would still be facing a national problem of uninsured patients. Social services workers say illegal immigrants don't strain their services much because they can't qualify or use false documents.

Criminal justice officials are more up front in their desire to rid themselves of the illegal immigrants who fill their jails and courts. Even though illegal immigrants represent between 10-20 percent of the case loads, officials say they would be able to focus on cases involving native U.S. offenders.

Among experts and officials, a general consensus exists that illegal immigrants overextend resources in the school, health care and criminal justice systems. Yet, figures on the exact fiscal impact remain elusive.

From square one

Greeley-Evans School District 6 currently finds itself under the watchful eye of state and federal officials who are threatening to revoke the district's accreditation - akin to being grounded - because of low test scores.

One factor in that complicated equation is the number of children who speak English as a second language.

The number of Spanish-speaking students coming to the district continues to rise, said Anne Ramirez, the district's English language acquisition coordinator. Since 2000, the number of English language learners has doubled in the school district to about 4,100. Of those students, 9 percent were born outside the United States.

Educators struggle to teach those students fast enough to score well on standardized tests.

"We have to teach these kids from square one," said Juan Verdugo, principal of East Memorial Elementary School in Greeley. "So, that already pushes us back."

Dr. Mark Wallace, a former school board president in Greeley, said children of illegal immigrants bring two challenges to the classroom. First, they're English language learners. Second, they often come from low-income, migratory families.

Verdugo said many of those parents are incapable of supporting their children in their studies.

"They can't take homework home and get help from parents because they don't have the education in either language," he said.

District 6 in Greeley spends \$2.7 million - less than 1 percent of its total budget - on programs to reach illegal immigrants: second-language programs and migrant education programs.

But Wallace said children of illegal immigrants represent only a small percentage of these children who come to school with little or no English. Even though some argue that these children became U.S. citizens because their parents entered illegally, District 6 officials don't blame illegal immigrants for the low test scores.

"I do not want to see kindergartners made an enemy of this district," Wallace said at a recent school board meeting. "If most have been born in the United States and came into the school system not speaking English, then it is not the kindergartner's fault."

Penny Gonzales-Soto, an immigration attorney with Catholic Charities Northern, said school districts need to be careful not to assume every Spanish-speaking child is an illegal immigrant.

"Because a child speaks only Spanish when they enter kindergarten or first grade doesn't mean they're not a U.S. citizen," Gonzales-Soto said. "It just means their parents don't speak English, and that's the

language they learned at home."

Verdugo said he believes the school district has a responsibility to provide education to children whose parents help fuel the economy.

"Public education has a duty to educate all our kids," Verdugo said. "If we don't educate all the kids that come into this nation, this country will go down quickly."

Half lack health insurance

It's difficult to pinpoint the fiscal impact illegal immigrants have on health care because most hospitals, community care centers, and doctor's offices don't track the documentation of their patients.

Wallace, the school board president who doubles as president of the Northern Colorado Health Alliance, said illegal immigrants form a subset of the nationwide problem of uninsured patients. Any uninsured patient - regardless of immigration status - presents a challenge to health care professionals and puts a drain on the system, he said.

"It's not in any way, in my opinion, the cause of the problem," Wallace said.

Bill Horner, administrator of North Colorado Medical Center in Greeley, said illegal immigrants account for a small portion of the uninsured patients who strain the hospital's resources.

Hospital administrators don't track how many illegal immigrants use the emergency room, but he said looking at how many adults failed to report Social Security numbers can offer a ballpark guess. Of the 44,000 adults who visited the ER in 2004, 1,400 - or 3 percent - did not report Social Security numbers.

Wallace and Horner's estimation that illegal immigrants form a small subset of a larger problem would make sense considering that illegal immigrants make up only 4-5 percent Colorado's population and 3 percent of the nation's population.

But studies show that within in the illegal immigrant population, people are less likely to have health insurance and more likely to have larger families than native U.S. citizens.

According to a Pew Hispanic Center study, 59 percent of illegal immigrant adults and 53 percent of illegal immigrant children do not have health insurance. That compares to 25 percent of "native" U.S. citizen children and 14 percent of native U.S. citizen adults lacking health insurance.

Many illegal immigrants work in low-paying jobs that either don't offer health insurance or offer it with premiums they can't afford, Gonzales-Soto said.

High fertility rates play a significant role in the equation as well. Illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. more than 10 years average 2.65 children per family, compared with 1.96 for native U.S. citizens. Mexican immigrants in the U.S. average 3.3 children per family, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Of the 6.3 million illegal immigrant families in the U.S., an estimated 31 percent have at least one U.S. citizen child. Current law grants citizenship to any child born in the U.S., regardless of the parents' status.

The case of the uninsured, pregnant illegal immigrant puts doctors in a tough situation. In Colorado, a pregnant illegal immigrant doesn't qualify for prenatal care from Medicaid. She does, however, qualify for Medicaid when in labor because it falls under emergency care. Then, when the baby is born, the child automatically becomes a U.S. citizen, eligible for services available to any U.S. citizen.

A physician who chooses to help the pregnant woman won't get reimbursed from Medicaid. If a doctor refuses treatment, Medicaid or another doctor could face greater costs down the line if the baby is born with problems related to a lack of prenatal care.

"Most of us will provide care and see what she can pay," Wallace said.

Mike Bloom, president of Greeley's Sunrise Community Health Center, knows all about uninsured patients. The center serves 25,000 uninsured residents in northern Weld County.

The center doesn't track numbers of who's documented but estimated that somewhere between 15 and 25 percent of its patients are illegal immigrants. But even if they didn't have to serve this population, the center would still have 10,000 eligible patients it couldn't serve.

"We would be full and still wouldn't be meeting the need," Bloom said.

Judy Griego, director of Weld County Social Services, said federal law prohibits her office from delivering most of its services - food stamps, Medicaid, child care - to undocumented immigrants. Social Services can provide emergency Medicaid, child support and child protection.

"We see a very minimal impact because of our responsibility as a governmental agency is to only serve U.S. citizens or legal residents," Griego said. "The impact is connecting families who do not have proper documents to agencies that can provide them services."

Social Services also has its own fraud investigation unit that reviews all Social Security and identification cards for validity. Griego called it nearly impossible to get through the system with false documentation.

The wrong direction

Weld County Sheriff John Cooke and Weld District Attorney Ken Buck said illegal immigrants cause a significant drain on criminal justice resources in Weld County.

Cooke estimated the county spends about \$1.5 million a year on foreign-born inmates, who account for between 15-20 percent of the inmates in the jail system. Not all foreign-born, however, are illegal immigrants.

For instance, on Oct. 27, ICE identified 43 of the 85 foreign-born in jail Thursday as illegal immigrants who had committed serious enough crimes to be held in the jail. Weld County sheriff's deputies send information on all foreign-born criminals to ICE officials, who then flag the most serious cases for possible deportation.

The rest - DUI, shoplifting, habitual traffic offenses - move through the system as if they were U.S. citizens.

"A guy can go out here and drive drunk and kill somebody and most likely not get deported," Cooke said. "Most aren't afraid of the system because they know nothing's going to happen to them."

Buck said the county spends another \$1 million annually on transporting inmates to other county jails.

"If you figure 10-15 percent of the occupants are illegal, that would drop us to being barely overcrowded," Buck said.

The Greeley police gang unit estimates that 10 percent of gang members are foreign-born. Of those, about 8-10 individuals, or 2 percent, fit the profile to be deported, said Greeley Police Capt. Jack Statler.

Even though it's a small percentage, Buck has been lobbying for a placement of an ICE office in Greeley that would work with the gang unit to deport known illegal immigrant gang members and other criminals.

Buck said worries that, without immigration reform, Weld County will become a community of haves and have-nots. He believes law-abiding illegal immigrants will grow tired of their lack of rights and representation and tension will erupt.

"I think we are headed in the wrong direction, and things are getting worse," Buck said.

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