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ENTERTAINMENT

\$57 MILLION A YEAR

The cost of illegal immigration

Experts say county strained despite \$700 million influx of goods, services

By BLEYS W. ROSE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Schools bear the bulk of the estimated \$57 million a year spent to provide public services to undocumented immigrants in Sonoma County.

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The price tag is \$47 million for money spent by state government to educate an estimated 6,400 children whose parents are in the country illegally.

Other cost estimates include \$4 million for free hospital care, \$3 million for welfare benefits and \$3 million for keeping illegal residents in jail, according to a Press Democrat analysis.

Financial and social costs of illegal residents, who make up about 5 percent of the county population, are coming under increasing scrutiny as competing versions of immigration law revisions collide in a U.S. Senate and House conference committee.

At the heart of the debate is disagreement over the social cost and economic benefit of illegal immigration, an issue that plays out in the North Coast from vineyards to schools, from restaurant kitchens to hospital emergency rooms.

Opponents of the Senate measure, which would expand guest worker programs and allow an avenue to citizenship for

Published: Sunday, Jun 4, 2006
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\$47 million - The cost of educating about 6,400 kids in Sonoma County's 12 public schools whose parents are undocumented immigrants. One-third of those children are born in this country to parents who are undocumented immigrants. The state allocates \$7,400 per student to local schools. Zoom Photo

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ANALYZING THE NUMBERS

The Press Democrat analyzed the size of the illegal immigrant population in Sonoma County based on numerous interviews with reports from the nonpartisan Hispanic Center, the Sonoma County Economic Development Board, the California Employment Development Department, the California State Department of Education and the U.S. Census Bureau.

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undocumented workers, say the costs are bound to skyrocket.

"If you are allowed to bring any relatives in, who knows how many kids will show up at the school doors or in the emergency room?" said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a research group that seeks tougher limits on immigration.

Undocumented workers provide needed labor, often at low costs, benefiting companies and consumers. In Sonoma County, they produce an estimated \$700 million in goods and services each year, including about \$275 million in local spending.

At the same time, many illegal immigrants send their kids to school and sometimes rely on welfare and food stamps, go to hospitals for medical care and get in trouble with the law.

The total cost estimate of \$57 million represents a broad range of public services funded by taxpayers and medical care paid for by government programs and private hospitals, according to Press Democrat calculations. The total does not include potential secondary impacts, such as the effect on health insurance rates.

In human terms, an example is Antonio, a 31-year-old illegal immigrant from Mexico who works for a local nursery. When he suffered symptoms

of appendicitis four years ago, he was sent home from work, where he had no health insurance. At the emergency

room of a local hospital, he was told to apply for Medi-Cal, the state's health plan for the poor.

Illegal immigrants have limited access to such coverage, but they can qualify for emergency procedures such as an appendectomy or childbirth. The state Medi-Cal reimbursement for an appendectomy is almost \$8,000, according to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital officials.

"I didn't want to ask anything from the government," he said. "But it was a matter of life and death, and I had to do it."

Antonio represents what Sonoma State University economist Steve Cuellar identifies as "the small percentage of illegal immigrants who do impose an economic burden." But, he said, "every single undocumented immigrant is consuming goods and services, which creates economic activities and jobs."

Evaluating immigration costs against benefits is no easy task, Cuellar said, because health care and crime-related costs are local, while payments to Social Security and payroll taxes benefit federal and state governments. Illegal workers in Sonoma County pay about \$30 million in Social Security taxes each year, including the employers' share, The Press Democrat estimates.

Attempts to detail specific costs of providing public services to illegal residents are often frustrated because few agencies -- except the county jail -- ask for verification of citizenship or nationality.

Sonoma County has an estimated 93,000 Latino residents, who make up about 20 percent of the population. While the Census does not provide numbers for illegal residents, a Press Democrat analysis has determined the county has about 21,500 residents who are illegal immigrants. Most are from Latin America, especially Mexico, although a small, undetermined number are from other regions and have overstayed their visits

or their visas.

There are several broad categories of taxpayer-funded services that are affected by undocumented immigrants.

Public schools

The \$47 million education cost is based on an estimate that 6,400 of the county's 72,000 students come from families whose citizenship is in question. About 4,000 of those children are U.S. citizens, born in this country to parents who are here illegally. The cost of educating each student is \$7,400, based on the amount the state allocates to local schools.

There are some additional costs to local schools that are not part of the state funding, but they are not considerable.

"Their presence is not really much of a financial impact except where we focus resources on their acquisition of English," said Carl Wong, county superintendent of schools. "We get a little bit of bilingual money from the feds for this, but this language support is limited. They have to learn English and most do quickly."

Medical care

Providing medical care in local hospitals accounts for the major portion of medical costs for uninsured patients without U.S. citizenship. The total in Sonoma County is about \$4 million annually.

In California, about 10 percent of hospitals' "uncompensated care" is attributed to undocumented patients, according to the California Hospital Association, an industry group that tracks pressures on health facility budgets among its 500 members.

If applied locally, that means in Sonoma County about a tenth of \$40 million of free care given out annually went to patients who don't live here legally.

Last year, Congress allocated money to reimburse hospitals for treating undocumented patients, which will funnel \$72 million annually to California hospitals.

Jan Emerson, vice president of communication for the California Hospital Association, said the funds will make only a small dent in the problem, because the association estimates that state hospitals spend about \$660 million annually on medical care for undocumented patients.

"It is not the biggest issue that we face in comparison with the shortfalls from Medi-Cal and Medicare payments, but it is one of the factors that end up costing patients when they pay higher health care premiums," Emerson said.

Hospitals, especially their emergency rooms, end up as the major source of health care, even for routine medical needs, because federal law prevents health facilities from turning anyone away.

To some extent, community clinics such as Healdsburg's Alliance Medical Center and the Southwest Community Health Center may treat some undocumented adults and children. But tightened federal and state regulations on reimbursement for Medi-Cal services have reduced the clinics' ability to handle patients without proper residency documentation.

Latino community organizers say illegal immigrants are usually less likely to seek public services such as health care than

native-born Americans because of fear of being identified by the government.

Welfare benefits

About \$2.5 million in cash assistance under the CalWorks program annually goes to families that county welfare workers are pretty sure are here illegally because the parents are primarily Spanish speaking and can't produce verifiable national identification. The children are eligible -- but the parents aren't - - under this state and federally funded program that supports roughly 450 individuals a month.

"Obviously, if we did not have noncitizen parents here, then we would not have these costs," said Jo Weber, assistant director of the county Human Services Department. "But we do have them here and if we don't get them the services they need, then they would still have to do something to survive and who knows what that will be?"

Food stamps valued at about \$623,000 annually go to undocumented residents with children. County administrators of the federal program figure that since 14 percent of the CalWorks caseload is likely undocumented, then the same percentage can be applied to the \$4.4 million program here.

Incarceration costs

Illegal immigrants who are arrested in Sonoma County cost taxpayers about \$3 million annually.

At any given time, the number of suspected illegal immigrants housed in Sonoma County's jail ranges from 4 percent to 6 percent of the total population of about 1,100.

On May 18, for example, there were 60 inmates housed at the county's main jail and North County Detention Facility who had immigration holds placed on them by the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency.

While arresting officers on the North Coast do not ask suspects if they are in the country legally, booking officers at the Sonoma County Jail routinely investigate detainees' immigration status, as well as reviewing their criminal history.

At that point, illegal immigrants also come under federal immigration law and face possible deportation proceedings.

Of those 60, three were charged with murder, two with attempted murder, two with assault with a deadly weapon and two with lewd and lascivious acts on a child under the age of 14, according to jail records.

The three most common charges were violation of probation, auto theft and possession of a controlled substance for sale.

The daily cost to house these inmates was \$7,831, officials said.

The actual costs associated with illegal immigrants and crime are likely significantly higher. These costs include the salaries of the officer who made the arrest, the detective who investigated the case and the prosecutor, public defender, judge and bailiff who handled court proceedings.

The county last year received \$605,000 from the federal government to help defray those costs.

National debate

Many undocumented workers believe they are paying their fair share. Angelica, a Santa Rosa housewife and mother of three U.S.-born daughters, came to the United States illegally 14 years ago to be with her husband, who works at a local winery.

Their 13-year-old daughter was recently named Student of the Year at her school, where she maintains a high GPA. Angelica said her daughter, a U.S. citizen because she was born in this country, has every right to receive an education.

"As a citizen, she's not a burden to anyone," said Angelica. "What's more, my husband works hard and pays his taxes. When we go to the store to buy food and other necessities, we also pay taxes. No one gives us anything for free."

Yet the cost measurement for jails, as well as schools, health care and welfare, remains part of the larger national debate over the social cost of illegal immigration.

A study last year by the Federation for American Immigration Reform, an organization that favors stricter limits on immigration, concluded that California's illegal immigrant population cost taxpayers more than \$10.5 billion annually, with 70 percent of that outlay going to educate elementary and high school age children who may be illegal or whose parents might be undocumented.

Even if estimated tax contributions of illegal immigrant workers are subtracted, the study concluded that undocumented residents cost nearly \$9 billion annually. Based on the organization's estimate, this would amount to about \$70 million a year in Sonoma County.

Mehlman, the federation spokesman, said his group's estimates are noteworthy because they put a price tag on the financial costs of providing services to undocumented residents. He said it makes a difference in counties like Sonoma, where \$47 million of its \$532 million state education allocation may go for schooling children who are illegal immigrants or have parents that are in the country illegally.

"Even though they are conservative estimates, they are about 10 percent of your education budget in Sonoma County," Mehlman said. "At a time when your communities are struggling financially, this is a substantial drain on the resources of this county."

The potential impact of the Senate version of immigration reform was addressed at the national level last week by a congressional report that said the plan could cost \$50 billion, including spending for extra welfare, Social Security and public health care, but could bring in an additional \$66 billion in federal payroll and income taxes.

By a 2-1 margin, Americans believe that illegal immigrants should not receive social services provided by state and local governments, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, which tracks public opinion nationwide.

Yet by an equally large margin, most feel the children of illegal immigrants should be permitted to attend public schools.

In summarizing opinion polls, the center said: "Like policy makers, the public is conflicted about what to do with immigrants who are here illegally."

Staff Writers Martin Espinoza, Derek J. Moore, Lori Carter, Mary Fricker and Jeremy Hay, and researcher Vonnie Matthews,

contributed to this report. You can reach Staff Writer Bleys W. Rose at 521-5431 or brose@pressdemocrat.com.

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Monday, Jun 05, 2006 03:06A

Lets start by asking the IRS to stop being hypocritical and disclose all the billions paid with the ITIN program which is the only mechanism that illegal immigrants have to prove they've been paying their taxes hoping to legalize their status someday

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 10:58P

How did we get in this mess? For decades EMPLOYERS have hired laborers without confirming proper visas/citizenship. Why didn't PD write an article outlining all the profit made by employers from utilizing such labor? Or low prices we enjoy? Shame

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 09:49P

Ahem!- but the financial BENEFIT of illegal aliens in Sonoma County was not mentioned, and probably outweighs the costs stressed in this article manyfold. These benefits are impossible to measure precisely but, rest assured, they are real

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 08:53P

Spend whatever it takes to educate these children, it will come back in spades when they are taxpayers. Yes, they are consuming goods and services, we all are, it is great for the economy. Pathetic argument that they are taking jobs or depressing wages

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 05:54P

Dear Editor, It is unfortunate that your article highlighted costs of the immigrant population. Why not stress the bright side...ie, the great economic & social contribution of this group? The article's title and tone are inherently prejudiced.

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 05:43P

On top of all this. They work here, get paid and send half their pay back to Mexico. And what is worse, is our country helps them do this and allows it. That even more of our money being taken away from our country. Our government needs to wake up !!!

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 05:07P

Are you willing to give up your social security, Medi-Cal, and Medi-Care? If you, that being you American-Californian, you will have nothing when you retire. You may just be living in the streets!! Why? A country without borders, is not a country

Sunday, Jun 04, 2006 04:16P

This country, the USA, is a disgrace! It's leader sends