

Week #5.

Why do immigrants come to the U.S.? Why don't they come legally?

This is the final article in the (Insert Name of Parish/Institution) Circle of Support educational series about immigration issues in the United States. This article attempts to answer the oft-heard questions posed by many: *Why do immigrants come to the U.S.?* and *Why don't they come legally?* The answer is complex, and involves numerous restrictions and regulations that make attaining legal entry and legal status extremely difficult, if not impossible. In addition, we explore the conditions which force these families to flee their home countries and embark on a long and often dangerous journey to our borders. We begin with the concluding words of the *Reflection on Psalm 95* by Bishop Mark J. Seitz, D.D., of El Paso, Texas.

In a day when we prefer to think that prejudice and intolerance are problems of the past, we have found a new acceptable group to treat as less than human, to look down upon and to fear. And, should they speak another language or be brown or black...well, it is that much easier to stigmatize them. Why can't we put ourselves in their shoes? ... Because we have decided they are not our neighbors, we have decided that they are aliens and illegals.

In America today, is there no more Golden Rule? Have we forgotten the lessons of Scripture? Have we forgotten the commandment to love? Have we forgotten God? But here on the border, God knocks. In the struggle for hope and freedom and family, he knocks. In our neighbors here today, he knocks. He knocks. He knocks. He knocks.

The Most Reverend Mark J. Seitz, DD, Bishop of El Paso, Texas
Reflection on Psalm 95, Give Us This Day, November 14, 2020.

Immigration and legal status

Many people ask why all immigrants can't come to the United States legally. If our ancestors did, why can't they? Unfortunately, legal options are largely unavailable to many immigrants wishing to come to our country today. While educated, wealthy white immigrants can usually gain legal status within a few years, most immigrants from the global south — especially those coming from poverty and who lack a higher education — have to wait 20 to 30 years for citizenship. Even then, legal status is not guaranteed.

The legal routes are highly regulated and subject to strict requirements. Most unauthorized immigrants do not have the necessary family or employment connections, and cannot access humanitarian protections, such as refugee or asylum status. Therefore, no matter how long they have been in the U.S., *most* unauthorized immigrants, under current U.S. guidelines, have no path to legal status. Even those who pay taxes, work hard, and contribute to their communities and their church have no options unless Congress creates a path to legal status. When surveyed, nearly all undocumented immigrants would prefer to live and work lawfully in this country.

Why do they come?

Gangs/Violence: (rape, torture, kidnappings, extortion, murder): As a result of severe economic desperation, gangs have formed throughout Latin America. For decades, various U.S. foreign policies and transnational corporations in Latin America have prevented locals from building their own businesses. Many have been forced off their family land and coerced into working for foreign-owned

corporations for very low wages. Many undocumented immigrants have left their country to escape war and persecution, or because their home government offers them no protection.

Drought/Food shortages: Immigrants are also forced to flee due to natural disasters. A six-year drought covering S. Mexico to Panama, forced many small farmers out of business, causing wide-spread food shortages. From 2010 to 2015, there was a 500% increase in people leaving this region due to climate change and the resulting stress on small, subsistence farmers.

Labor opportunities: The U.S has a long history of reliance on foreign-born labor. This remains true to this day. These primarily low-skilled, low-paying jobs are ones most U.S. citizens are not willing to take. Their low wages subsidize the low costs of many of the products and services we use.

What can we do?

As concerned Catholics, called by Christ to “welcome the stranger,” we can support and advocate on behalf of our undocumented brothers and sisters. Please visit the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ *Justice for Immigrants* website for information on how you can advocate.

<https://www.usccb.org/offices/migration-policy/justice-immigrants/>

To learn more, you may also watch educational webinars offered by Strangers No Longer:

<https://strangersnolonger.org/newsletters-videos/>

Sources for this article include the American Immigration Council; The Catalyst Publication; and USCCB.