

The other half of the immigration equation

The large number of Americans relocating south of the border is a quiet but healthy trend.

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PANAMA CITY - For all the heated debate over this summer's failed immigration reform bill, little attention has been paid to the other side of the equation: the flow of Americans out of the United States. Emigration doesn't stoke passions as illegal immigration does, but its scale and impact are significant.

As the US Census Bureau has discovered, attempting to count Americans residing outside the US is prohibitively expensive, assuming they could even be found scattered across the far corners of the globe. That led my global marketing firm, New Global Initiatives, to survey Americans to find out how many are planning to relocate outside the country. If we can't measure the past flow of emigrants, we can try to measure the current and future flow.

The survey results showed that some 1.6 million households, representing nearly 3.5 million people, have actually decided to relocate. Close to 2 million households claim to be seriously interested and likely to relocate. And while the media often discuss retirees as the major source of relocators, we found that Americans in their 30s and 40s are the most likely to relocate – and by a very wide margin.

Where they're interested in going is also significant. More than 40 percent of respondents have chosen Mexico, Central America, or Panama as their destination or are seriously considering the region. In numbers, they may not compare to the millions flowing in the other direction, but one American household moving to Mexico or Panama can have as great an economic impact as dozens of poor Latino immigrants to the US.

The influx of illegal immigrants from south of the border will continue until the economies of their homelands begin providing sufficient job opportunities. US emigrants help to create those jobs. They are America's most effective foreign aid program, but without the bureaucracy and waste. They share more than money. They share themselves. Taken together, they are helping to alleviate the root causes of illegal immigration.

Thus the flow of immigrants in both direction can be positive.

Immigrant labor is critical in helping America compete effectively with low-cost foreign competition. Perhaps it was best summed up by a comedian in Mexico City who quipped that the US was going to drive all the Mexicans out, then build a wall to keep them out. But, he asked, who was going to build the wall?

Illegal immigration is a real problem and must be dealt with, but the value America gains from immigrant labor cannot be ignored.

In like manner, Americans bring their sorely needed money and wealth of professional expertise to the homelands of America's immigrants. That steady emigration from the US is thoroughly ignored, however, because relevant statistics are nearly impossible to find.

Under contract to my firm over the last two years, Zogby International has completed seven opinion surveys of a total of more than 115,000 adult Americans. Each survey began with a

question regarding their interest in relocating outside the US. Respondents who were relocating due to their employment were not included, only voluntary relocators and they had to be relocating for two or more years.

We provided three different positive responses, along with the standard negative response. We asked people if they had made the decision to relocate, if they were "seriously" interested in relocating, and likely to relocate, and finally if they were "somewhat" interested and might relocate.

In addition to 1.6 million households that said they had decided to relocate, some 7 million households are at a tentative stage of considering relocation. Finally, 3 million households which do not plan to relocate now are seriously considering purchasing a vacation home or other property outside the US. These may be vacation homes now, but they can easily become full-time residences in the future.

All told, fully 21 percent of respondents placed themselves in one of the categories above. That's a lot of Americans.

For 40 years, I have worked all over the world for both public and private organizations. And I have stood in more immigration lines than I ever imagined. Today, those lines are much longer.

I am watching the birth of a true global community. It comes not by the design of altruists or politicians, but by the free choice of millions of individuals. This may seem to be a silent migration, but actions do speak louder than words and I hear them in those immigration lines.

How sweet the sound.