

What happens when immigrants go away

OUR OPINION: LOCAL LAWS ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL REMEDY

Opinion
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Riverside, a small New Jersey town, got more than it bargained for after passing a get-tough immigration law last year. Proponents of the law blamed newcomers from Latin America for crowding, scarce parking, increased crime and strained public services. Although it never was enforced, the law worked anyway.

Influx of strangers

Hundreds, if not thousands, of Brazilians and other immigrants fled. Now the town has other woes: a deserted downtown, economic malaise and lingering resentment. Two weeks ago, Riverside repealed the law in the face of mounting legal bills and lawsuits likely to be lost.

Riverside's dynamics were predictable. Wary of strangers who spoke a different language and brought different customs, many residents rebelled. They feared the sudden influx of strangers: Why can't they speak English? They are taking our jobs.

Ironically, Riverside had experienced many immigrant waves before. Portuguese settled there in the 1960s and built businesses. This made the town attractive to Brazilians, who began arriving in 2000. How many of the new arrivals had legal status is unknown. But they revived the local economy.

Then came the new law. It mandated fines, jail time and possible loss of business licenses for anyone who knowingly rented housing or employed an undocumented immigrant. Soon after the law passed, many newcomers left. Along with them went the prosperity that their work and earnings pumped into the town.

Sad to say, Riverside's experience is quintessentially American. It reflects the love-hate relationship with immigrants that has existed since before our nation's founding. In the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin railed against German immigrants and their presumed threat to the English language. But our language and system of government survived the Germans, along with succeeding waves of Irish, Chinese, Italian, Polish, Mexican and Cuban immigrants. And the United States thrived.

Sensible solutions

Those groups arriving during eras of highest immigration were key to building U.S. industrial and economic power. The current wave, marked by immigrants from the Southern hemisphere, is no different.

Amid this wave, Riverside blamed undocumented immigrants for its woes, as did many of the 30 towns nationwide that enacted similar laws. Congress shares much of the blame for this. For years, the immigration system hasn't worked in the nation's best interest. Lawmakers with sensible solutions have been outflanked by a resilient minority. Municipalities would be better off lobbying Congress. Self-defeating local laws are no substitute for comprehensive immigration reform.