

EconoFact Chats: Unauthorized Immigration and Immigration Enforcement in the U.S.

Tara Watson, Williams College

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Michael Klein:

Hello, everyone. Welcome to EconoFact Chats. I'm Michael Klein, founder and executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan, web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate and economic and social policies, drawing on the contributions from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org. The American narrative celebrates the idea of immigrants arriving to build a better life in the land of abundance, yet Americans have always struggled with immigration, particularly as it intersects with race, poverty, and economic opportunity.

Michael Klein:

These sentences begin the forthcoming book, *Unauthorized: The Human and Economic Costs of Immigration Enforcement in America* by Professor Tara Watson of Williams College and her coauthor and the writer, Kalee Thompson. In their book, Tara and Kalee survey research and immigration, research that Tara has contributed to, and then they also tell the stories of six immigrant families. I'm very pleased to welcome Tara to EconoFact Chats. Along with her scholarly research and the memos that she has contributed to EconoFact, Tara also served as deputy assistant secretary for microeconomic analysis at the US Treasury from 2015 through 2016. Tara, good to have you on EconoFact Chats.

Tara Watson:

Thank you.

Michael Klein:

Tara, let's begin with some basics. What do we know about undocumented immigration in the United States? Something that's challenging to analyze, well because the people we're trying to learn about are undocumented.

Tara Watson:

Well, the latest estimates which are not precise, but are pretty good are based on 2017 data, and they suggest about 10.5 million people living in the US are here without authorization. This number grew from about 3.5 million in 1990 to a peak of 12.2 million in 2007, but it's been gradually declining since The Great Recession.

Michael Klein:

Where are these immigrants coming from now, and is that different from what we've seen in the past?

Tara Watson:

Yeah, it is actually. Unauthorized migration used to be dominated by people from Mexico, but that's no longer the case. In the past decade, there've been a lot more immigrants coming from Central America, especially the golden triangle countries, which are Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and there are a lot more undocumented immigrants, Asia and Africa as well compared to the past. Nowadays, less than half of the undocumented population was born in Mexico.

Michael Klein:

How do these undocumented immigrants get to the United States?

Tara Watson:

Well, one important source that most people don't realize is that many undocumented individuals come by overstaying their visas. Usually about 1% or even less than 1% of visitors to the country who come on visas don't leave before their visa expires, and even though it's such a small percentage, it ends up being a lot of people because we have so many people coming through the US in a given year. Last year, about 500,000 people were supposed to leave according to their visa, but did not. Nowadays, it's actually more than half, perhaps 60% of undocumented immigrants did not cross the border surreptitiously, but actually came on a visa.

Michael Klein:

Is this like the six immigrant families that you profiled? Did that happen with any of them?

Tara Watson:

Only one of the families that we profiled in the book arrived in this way. Two young adults that we talked to from South Korea came as children when their father was on a student visa, and they didn't even realize they were undocumented until well into their teenage years when they were trying to start their professional lives.

Michael Klein:

Of course, the media and many politicians focus on people crossing over the US-Mexican border. Is that another source of unauthorized immigration?

Tara Watson:

Yeah, so it definitely is, and until recently it was the most common way that undocumented immigrants came to the US, but there's been really remarkable ramp up in border enforcement in the 1990s and 2000s. While before that, it was fairly easy to just walk across the border without getting caught or to risk getting caught, but with very minor penalties, maybe a slap on the wrist. Nowadays, it's much harder to do.

Michael Klein:

For the families that you profiled in your book, did any of them cross the US-Mexican border?

Tara Watson:

Yeah, so most of them did. One that we talked to came as a very small child from Mexico, and her mother would take the entire family across the border every time she had a child to have the baby in Mexico, and then they would all trek back across the desert. That was back in the 1980s. Most of the other families we talked to came more recently across the border and generally use paid guides, which are called coyotes to help them cross the border and charge a few thousand dollars for that.

Michael Klein:

Given the numbers, is it relatively easy to cross the border, and has it been so for some time?

Tara Watson:

Well, it's definitely gotten a lot harder. There's been rarely remarkable ramp up in border enforcement since around 2000. Even before Trump, there were about 700 miles of walls and fencing along the southern border. There's surveillance, drones. It's almost a militarized border in places, and one way economists can see that is that the cost of a coyote, this guide service has gone way up because it's a higher risk proposition now to cross the border. It's also more dangerous. You see people perishing in the desert every year, usually a few hundred, and the other thing that's changed is on the legal consequences of trying to cross the border.

Tara Watson:

As I mentioned before, it used to be that you would just get a slap on the wrist, but nowadays, if you get caught, it becomes a permanent deportation on your record, and that affects your likelihood of being able to migrate legally to the US in the future.

Michael Klein:

Tara, is border enforcement central to controlling illegal immigration?

Tara Watson:

Well, I think most experts would agree that border control has deterred some migration. It's become more expensive and dangerous to cross the border, and people who are on the margin of making that decision sometimes are dissuaded from doing it. The evidence also suggests that people who have family in the US has particularly children in the US or who are fleeing violent or unsafe situations are less likely to be deterred by strong border control.

Michael Klein:

Go ahead.

Tara Watson:

Oh, well, I was just going to mention that it used to be the case because of the more relaxed atmosphere at the border that people would go back and forth a lot, and that's really not true anymore. It is uncommon for people even to want to go back to visit their family. One woman, we talked to actually left her son as a toddler in Guatemala in 2004, and she hasn't been able to see him in person since. They Skype, but she hasn't actually physically seen him. Nowadays, it's actually the case that most undocumented immigrants living in the US have lived here a long time. The statistics from pure research, just two thirds of unauthorized immigrants have been here more than a decade, and they're often the parents to US citizen children.

Tara Watson:

In a sense, the lives of undocumented immigrants are really in the US, and they live here.

Michael Klein:

Their children would be like many cases, the DACA recipients, right?

Tara Watson:

Well, so children that are born here would not be DACA recipients. They would be citizens themselves. Children that come as children from another country are often eligible for the DACA program, which is

deferred action for childhood arrivals, which is a immigration relief program targeted at those who came as children.

Michael Klein:

Tara, a focus of your book, Unauthorized is not in fact border crossings, but what you and Kalee called interior enforcement. Can you describe what that means?

Tara Watson:

Yeah. Interior enforcement is enforcement that happens not at the border, but in the interior of the US. It's typically organized through the immigration and customs enforcement or ICE, part of Department of Homeland and Security. It includes anything that is a community arrest that could sometimes be targeted arrests, where ICE might learn that someone is living in the community with a criminal history that is an undocumented immigrant might specifically target that person, but it also includes things like work site rates, where employers are suspected to be hiring undocumented immigrants, or even just a routine traffic stop can involve ICE. If a local police officer suspects that someone is an immigrant, they may get ICE involved.

Tara Watson:

There's also this secure communities program, which essentially is that when someone is booked into jail or comes across law enforcement, their fingerprints are sent to the Department of Homeland and Security. If there's evidence that they might be an undocumented immigrants, ICE might be able to take control of the case.

Michael Klein:

Did that happen to any of the families that you profile in your book, this interior enforcement?

Tara Watson:

Yeah, so we interviewed quite a few families where they had had some interior enforcement event. One was targeted at their workplace, or just upon leaving their workplace because of a previous criminal record, but three of them were actually just caught up in routine traffic stops that they happened to get pulled over for one case of broken taillight or some other minor infraction, and that was enough to push them into the system. It's a situation that creates a lot of fear among people living here without authorization because it's not much predictability.

Michael Klein:

Unlike border enforcement, interior enforcement is targeting people who have been in the US and as you say, a lot of them have been here for quite a long time.

Tara Watson:

That's right.

Michael Klein:

Is there evidence on the deterrent effects of interior enforcement? I guess the idea is that if you do this in the interior to keep fewer unauthorized people from coming into the United States, but is there any evidence that that in fact works that way?

Tara Watson:

It's actually really not something we know very much about. I've done some research myself on an earlier program, which was called 287(g) and it allowed for cooperation between local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland and Security. In that case, I didn't see evidence that people left the US or that they changed their migration patterns at all in response to that program being in particular areas, but some other studies have found that aggressive laws do affect where migrants choose to live. For example, Arizona, which is known for being a particularly aggressive state when it comes immigration enforcement, when they ramped up their laws, it looked like some immigrants were choosing to live in other states or perhaps even not come to the US at all.

Michael Klein:

Right, but it could be that they're just in other states. For the US as a whole, it might not have had that big an effect.

Tara Watson:

Right. It's just really hard to get a good handle on that question given the evidence we have.

Michael Klein:

Can you infer anything from the information and statistics and analysis of the border literature and the effects of that on what might happen with interior enforcement?

Tara Watson:

Well, I think that the biggest lesson that we might be able to take away is that it's likely that people who are somewhat indifferent between living in the US and living in their home country might be more deterred than people who have a really strong incentive to come to the US. Again, those would be people with close relatives in the US or people who are fleeing, like many of those currently leaving Central America are fleeing violent and unsafe situations, and are not particularly worried about the level of enforcement in the US.

Michael Klein:

Along with the possible to turn effects of enforcement, there's some concerns about spillover effects as well, right? We've heard about law enforcement being concerned that because of this interior enforcement, that people are not cooperating with their local law enforcement people, or they're not coming forward, let's say witness a crime. Is there evidence about that?

Tara Watson:

There is some good evidence that that is the case actually. There's a paper showing that in Dallas, Texas when Obama temporarily ended secure communities, the program I discussed before that reporting of crimes by the Latino population in Dallas went up, and it was not the actual crime rate that appeared to be going up, but rather the reporting and willingness to talk to police. I do think that the evidence seems strong that people avoid government institutions when enforcement is at high levels.

Tara Watson:

I also have evidence from my own work showing that in the case of public benefit programs, so specifically I look at the Medicaid program and show that citizen children of immigrants who are eligible for Medicaid are less likely to be enrolled by their parents when there's higher enforcement, presumably because those parents fear interacting with the government bureaucracy.

Michael Klein:

You mentioned children, but there's also concerned that the spillover effects can extend to other legal immigrants as well. For example, you have an EconoFact memo about the public charge rule, and can you briefly describe what this rule is and the effects that it may have had?

Tara Watson:

Yeah, sure. Public charge is a long standing doctrine of immigration policy that discourages the US from admitting people who are likely to become wards of the state or dependent on the state, and it's something that recently the Trump administration has signaled. They want to enforce more seriously and particularly, they have stated that using benefits like Medicaid and the SNAP food assistance program, which historically were not considered to be relevant for the public charge are now relevant. This actually shouldn't affect most immigrants already living here. Undocumented immigrants in particular are not eligible for these programs now.

Tara Watson:

Really, it shouldn't matter either way, and legal immigrants have already been admitted and this new rule should not directly affect them. However, a lot of policymakers and advocates are concerned that legal immigrants have been shying away from using these programs for which they're eligible because of this fear and confusion around this new rule.

Michael Klein:

I want to go back to a point you just made that may have slipped by people. They're just very important point that undocumented immigrants are not eligible for government benefits like Medicaid and SNAP. SNAP used to be called food stamps. In fact, your EconoFact memo on this point is one of our most widely read pieces.

Tara Watson:

Yeah, it's a common misperception that people think undocumented immigrants are using a high degree of government benefits, and they're simply ineligible, and it's not the case. I think some of the confusion comes from the fact that they often have citizen children who are eligible for programs and do sometimes use them. That creates maybe a misperception, but it is definitely the case that undocumented immigrants are not eligible for most government programs.

Michael Klein:

Which you point out in your EconoFact memo, which just goes to prove that more people should be reading EconoFact.

Tara Watson:

Absolutely.

Michael Klein:

During the pandemic now, there's this additional concern that immigrant communities are not seeking healthcare because of concerns about interior enforcement, and this of course has implications for the spread of disease, not only in those communities, but to other communities as well, and this has both health and economic consequences. You have another EconoFact memo with Chloe East and Hillary Coins on this topic.

Tara Watson:

Yes, we recently put out on an EconoFact showing that non-citizens are less likely to use public benefits than other low income individuals and for the reasons we just talked about, that's because in many cases, they are not eligible. We also show in that EconoFact that noncitizens have had more employment loss associated with the COVID crisis. We think that the situation is that non-citizens, and this is true for undocumented immigrants in particular as well, are facing really bad employment situation, but do not have access to the safety net that they need to stabilize their income streams during that situation. As you said, it seems likely that the current immigration policy climate is discouraging immigrants from seeking out healthcare in this time, which is obviously very unfortunate.

Michael Klein:

Finally, Tara, as I mentioned at the outset of this EconoFact Chats, your book features stories of six immigrant families. Can you tell us something about what struck you the most with these narratives?

Tara Watson:

Yeah. Well, one thing that came across through these stories is how arbitrary and capricious the current enforcement system is. Something as trivial as a broken tail light would be enough to completely upend the life of an immigrant who has lived here for a really long time and in part, that's because there really isn't strong legislation on immigration. A lot of it is in the hands at the executive branch, and actually, a lot of it is in the hands of the individual officer making a decision on the ground. There's just a tremendous amount of capriciousness. Another thing we learned I would say is that immigration enforcement really doesn't discourage people from working in the US.

Tara Watson:

Ostensibly, that's one of the goals of aggressive enforcement, but people without authorization have very high labor force participation rates. They're very committed to working here. They came to the US in most cases for better opportunities economically and of course, businesses rely on this labor as well. What we came away suspecting is a bit cynical, but we believe that a lot of the immigration policy efforts or the enforcement efforts in particular are centred around creating the appearance of an aggressive posture and creating a climate of fear, but not actually reducing the number of undocumented immigrants very much. That satisfies both business interests, but also satisfies the interest in presenting an appearance of being tough on immigration.

Michael Klein:

I guess it's a little bit like paraphrasing the famous line in the movie Casablanca when Captain Renault says, "I'm shocked, shocked to find that politics is going on here."

Tara Watson:

Yeah, something like that.

Michael Klein:

Something like that. All right. Well, Tara, thank you very much for your insights on this really important and controversial issue. I appreciate you joining us in EconoFact Chats.

Tara Watson:

You're welcome.