

## Immigration Stereotypes

A cliché in Mexican soap operas is the mean-spirited wealthy matron who unjustly fires “Lupita,” a household servant with a heart of gold for some imaginary infraction. Lacking work, Lupita is forced to return in disgrace to her small pueblo. The matron is portrayed as an insensitive villain and her treatment of her household workers exemplifies her selfishness (and often her racism, since servants are usually portrayed as darker-skinned “indias”).

Now a little reflection reveals that those among us who are agitating for the expulsion of undocumented Hispanic immigrant workers and their families are running pretty close to the stereotypical villain of the soap opera. The poor migrants have been working for us, both personally and for the businesses we patronize, under terrible conditions, without legal protections, fearful of firing without recourse to unemployment insurance, unprotected by workers’ compensation insurance against on the job injury, and paying into social security without the possibility of future benefits. We even won’t let them apply for drivers’ licenses without which they cannot register the cars they need to get to their jobs with us. Our police lie in wait for them, seizing their cars because they lack that registration, fine them \$1000+ to get it back—only to have the cat-mouse game begin all over. (Yes, right here in Santa Barbara.)

This underclass of exploited workers came here at the (implicit) invitation of our local businesses—including us, as private employers. They do the jobs no one else wants, are labeled “illegals,” while their employers remain respected pillars of the community.

Back in the 1960s, it was often claimed that various counties in the American South chartered buses to send poor African-Americans to Northern states to receive welfare benefits. And now the same kind of inflammatory rhetoric has resurfaced—“Mexico is *dumping its problems* on us.” “Migrants are coming here to receive welfare.” They are like “termites invading our country looking for a free lunch.” “They are committing robbery on an international scale.” These are the sort of charges being made by the News-Press’s very own Randy Alcorn. Mr. Alcorn, are the women cleaning your house stealing from you? Are the women who work for \$7 an hour cleaning motels, or the gardeners and construction workers who earn \$10 an hour without benefits, here for welfare? Are they really like termites? Are you, like the villain of a Mexican soap opera, going to accuse them of theft and send them back to their pueblos?

Other myths abound. Immigrants are portrayed as “disease-carriers” despite the fact that almost all are strong healthy young adults, the most enterprising from their country, willing to face the ordeal of a trek through the desert and hard work without health insurance once here. Immigrants are portrayed as “prolific breeders” although the fertility rate is below that of the parents of the baby boomers and not especially high for young married people. Immigrants are accused for costing tens of thousands of dollars each although the National Academy of Sciences Study found a net lifetime contribution of \$80,000.

Evaluating the economics of immigration and the balance of benefits and costs is a complex task that requires dispassionate analysis. Reviving an unfortunate historical tradition of ethnic stereotyping and racial hatred is not only immoral, it is also counterproductive to an intelligent debate over immigration policy. And common humanity should open our hearts to the reality of our own responsibility for immigration, to the need for compassionate and just treatment of the millions who were invited here by us and who have established roots among us as friends, neighbors, and coworkers.