Opinion
Guest Voices



Agriculture workers adjust a trellis to support bitter melon, Sept. 5, 2023, in Homestead, Florida. While President Trump singled out agricultural and hospitality workers as possibly exempt from deportation, writes J. Kevin Appleby, "the reality is that there are 8.5 million undocumented workers who work in industries and essential occupations vital to the U.S. economy." (AP photo/Marta Lavandier)



by J. Kevin Appleby

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 9, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Trump administration's mass deportation campaign is well underway, as the number of immigrants detained has risen 50% since January 2025, while the estimated number of deportees is expected to exceed 400,000 by the end of President Trump's first year in office. The administration will be receiving $170 billion from H.R. 1 (the so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill") over the next few years to continue this inhumane campaign.

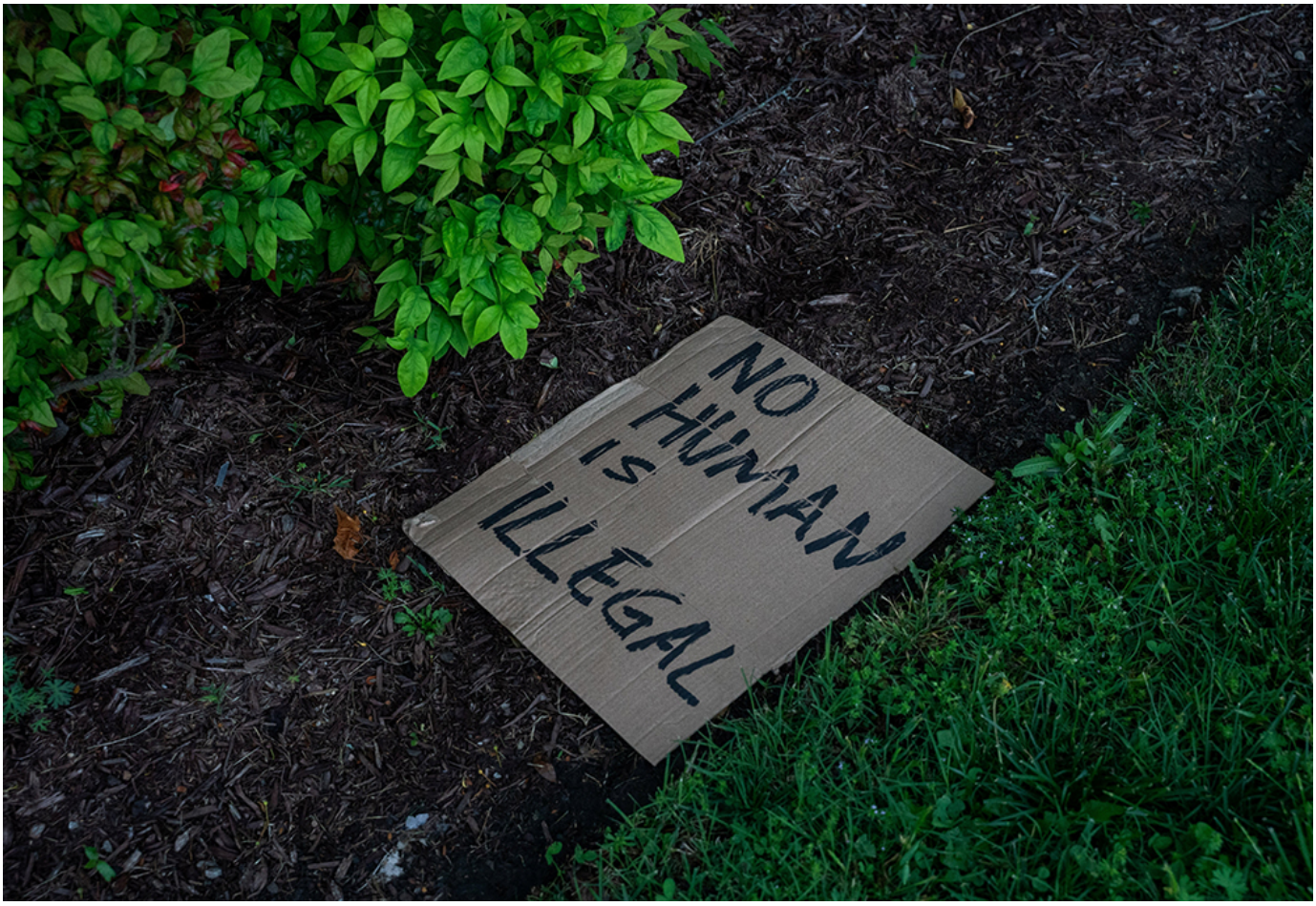
Despite claims from the Department of Homeland Security that criminal aliens are being targeted, more than 65% of those detained as of June 14 had no criminal convictions, according to the Cato Institute. Moreover, the administration has repealed temporary protected status, or TPS, and humanitarian parole from over 1 million persons, many of whom, although having received legal status, are now subject to deportation.

ICE has begun to target worksites, from Home Depot locations in Southern California to a meatpacking plant in Nebraska. Employers have pleaded with the White House to hold their industries harmless, arguing that they need immigrant workers (re: undocumented workers) to keep their businesses afloat. As a result, President Donald Trump has hinted at exempting the agricultural and hospitality/hotel sectors from enforcement, but reversed course after receiving pushback from some in his political base.

While Trump singled out agricultural and hospitality workers as possibly exempt from deportation, the reality is that there are 8.5 million undocumented workers who work in industries and essential occupations vital to the U.S. economy.

A recent report by the Center for Migration Studies of New York identified many of these occupations, including electrical engineers, industrial engineers, electricians, software developers, home health and personal care aides, medical and data scientists, cooks and taxi drivers.

And, as mentioned in the report, undocumented workers pay an estimated $96.7 billion in federal, state and local taxes to the government per year. Social Security payments totaling nearly $26 billion in 2022 were paid into the system by undocumented workers — payments, at least under current law, that these workers will not benefit from when they retire. They also paid $6.4 billion into the Medicare system in 2022.



A sign lies on the ground after a bus with detained people left the Department of Homeland Security field office in Nashville where multiple immigrant rights groups gathered to protest what they believe to be a multi-agency operation to detain-noncitizens overnight in Nashville, Tenn., May 4, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Seth Herald)

Of course, the economic repercussions of a mass deportation campaign pales in comparison to its social effects — namely the human and community effects of family separation. The administration has articulated a policy that gives undocumented parents a Solomon's choice: either leave your U.S. citizen children

behind or take them to a country they do not know.

Bishop Mark Seitz, Catholic bishop of El Paso, Texas, and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, recently highlighted the cruelty of this policy: "How cruel for our country to impose this on a family and put this burden on children. … What we're ultimately going to do is generate a class of wounded, alienated young Americans, and we are going to break up healthy families. There is nothing Christian or Catholic about that."

Instead of recognizing the importance of undocumented workers and providing them legal status, the administration is seeking to deport them, regardless of how it may impact the nation's economy, much less human dignity and family unity. The mass deportation campaign comes at a time in which many important industries face labor shortages over the next decade.

According to a recent study by the Bipartisan Policy Center, both the health care and food processing industries, areas already dependent on immigrant labor, will require about 25 million workers each over the next decade. The report calls for an increase in legal immigration levels in order to meet this demand.

It is somewhat heartening to hear the administration acknowledge, at least in a small way, the value of these workers. However, Trump is not talking about providing them legal status, but simply leaving them alone and allowing them to continue to work in substandard conditions at low wages.

Advertisement

This view unveils the moral injustice of the U.S. immigration system. While immigration opponents, including the current administration, consistently scapegoat undocumented immigrants for our social ills, the nation relies on their hard labor, not compensated at market value, to keep the economy going and prices low. Cheap labor translates to cheaper prices for basic staples, such as eggs, vegetables and meat.

Rather than relying on this unjust immigration system, the nation must provide legal status, and a chance to earn citizenship, to these workers in order to ensure that they are not exploited in the workplace and forced to live in the shadows. This would not only benefit undocumented workers and their families by protecting them from

deportation, but also help them increase their earnings and their contributions to the U.S. economy.

One bipartisan bill in Congress, the Dignity Act (H.R. 4393), would provide legal status to undocumented workers in many industries. While some of its enforcement provisions are problematic, it provides a blueprint for reforming the broken U.S. immigration system. Although the bill does not provide a path to citizenship for immigrants, it is worthy of qualified support, as it would at least provide legal protection to immigrant workers who then could pursue other available avenues to attain citizenship.

Mass deportation, in which a government attempts to remove as many immigrants as possible, regardless of any criminal history and often without due process, is not in the nation's best interest, either economically or socially. Hopefully our elected officials will understand the folly of this flawed policy on both a human and economic level before it is too late. Sooner rather than later, Congress must stop using immigration as a political weapon and repair a system that is unworthy of our nation of immigrants.

The writer is Senior Fellow for Policy for the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS). The views of the author are not necessarily the views of CMS.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.