

# Report says immigrants' taxes pay for education

**By Diana Heil**

The New Mexican

The amount of local taxes illegal immigrants pay into the system each year more than covers New Mexico's costs for educating their children, concludes a report on immigrants' impact on the state's economy issued Thursday by New Mexico Voices for Children.

According to the report: "All of their efforts make life easier and richer for the rest of us. But to assume that they get a free ride in New Mexico is a mistake: They pay for the services they receive, and then some."

But when drawing that conclusion, one big factor was not closely examined in the report:

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health care.

"You look at emergency-room care, and that's a huge hit," said Patricio Larragoite, director of the New Mexico Health Policy Commission. "All of the local governments share in that burden."

But he, like those at New Mexico Voices for Children, said the cost of educating immigrants is easier to pin down than health care.

"I'd like to look more into it," said Gerry Bradley, author of the report and an economist with New Mexico Voices for Children.

By federal law, hospitals cannot turn away pregnant women about to give birth or patients who need emergency care, including surgery, regardless of the patient's legal status.

When illegal immigrants need elective surgeries, they often pay out of pocket, according to the study. Little financial assistance is available, and public insurance, such as Medicaid and Medicare, isn't an option, the study says. And for illegal workers, private health insurance is hard to come by.

The cost of unpaid hospital bills is staggering — though undocumented immigrants are only part of that picture in New Mexico, the study says.

Last year, University Hospital in Albuquerque wrote off \$131 million in uncompensated care, though it's hard to know how much of that cost is attributable to illegal immigrants, hospital spokesman Sam Giammo said.

A chunk of it was offset by Bernalillo County's mill levy. But that left about \$50 million, and University Hospital begged successfully for the state Legislature to help foot the bill.

"It kills La Familia and (St. Vincent Regional Medical Center)," said Steve Shepherd, Santa Fe County's Community Health Division director.

Plus there are hidden costs.

Sometimes illegal immigrants go to the emergency room when they don't have an emergency situation because they know they won't be turned away, Shepherd said. It clogs up the ER, and St. Vincent doesn't get reimbursed because the level of care is

## BY THE NUMBERS

◆ Cost to educate **9,200** undocumented immigrants in New Mexico in 2003-04: **\$67 million** from state and local sources (plus **\$14 million** from federal sources)

◆ Estimated sales and property taxes paid by undocumented immigrants in New Mexico in 2004: **\$69 million**

Source: Pew Hispanic Center and New Mexico Voices for Children

considered inappropriate. "It really hurts everybody else in the community," he said.

A few years ago, Santa Fe County tried to start a discussion about whether the hospitals should get reimbursed from the indigent fund for serving illegal immigrants.

Shepherd, who was flooded with telephone calls, said there was such an outcry that the conversation was dropped. "There's a division within town," he said.

Some Santa Feans think immigrants who live and pay taxes here should be eligible for some benefits. But others, mostly longtime Hispanic residents, vehemently disagree, he said.

Officially, county indigent funds are reserved for poor people with Social Security numbers.

However, undocumented immigrants with fake identifications are sure to tap into some of this money, to which they contribute as taxpayers.

"To be honest with you, we don't run checks on numbers through Social Security," Shepherd said. "We're pretty sure people scam us once in a while."

Bradley said the main point of the report was to draw attention to the fact there are a lot of unavoidable taxes for illegal immigrants. What's more, money is deducted from their paychecks for Social Security and Medicare — federal programs that benefit American citizens only.

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