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Report defends costs of immigrant education

By [Megan Arredondo](#)
Tribune Reporter
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Angelica Regino's father came to the United States when she was 2 years old.

When she was 10, the rest of her family followed, illegally entering the country.

"I was able to go to school. I went to college, got a degree. Now, I'm a U.S. citizen," Regino said.

"If I had stayed in Mexico, I probably could've only gone through the sixth grade.

"We didn't come expecting an education for free; we know there's a struggle to pay for education, health care and other necessities."

Regino, 33, is now program manager for the Community Health Partnership, a group that works to improve public health conditions in southeast Albuquerque.

She spoke at a news conference Thursday about the effect of people like her parents, illegal immigrants who use available resources as well as contribute to the economy.

New Mexico Voices for Children, a children's advocacy group, unveiled its report outlining immigrants' contributions to state and local taxes.

The report concluded that, in New Mexico, the money the government pays for undocumented immigrant children's education is outweighed by the amount of money those families pay in taxes.

Gerry Bradley, research director for New Mexico Voices for Children, did the study over the past three months.

Bradley said he used estimates from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Pew Hispanic Center to evaluate how much undocumented immigrants in New Mexico pay in taxes.

Because the numbers are based on estimates, Bradley said he had no way of giving a margin of error.

According to Bradley's assessment:

The INS estimates 40,000 undocumented immigrants in New Mexico, or 2 percent of the population. The Pew Hispanic Center's estimate is slightly higher, at 55,000.

ON THE NET

A copy of the New Mexico Voices for Children report, "Undocumented Immigrants in New Mexico: State Tax Contributions and Fiscal Concerns," is posted at www.nmvoices.org.

The INS estimates 17,500 undocumented families in New Mexico, while Pew estimates 24,000 families.

The average income for an undocumented family is \$25,850, the assessment said. Based on the average income, families would pay \$2,230 in sales taxes, \$254 in property taxes and \$422 in income tax.

Under the INS estimate, the total amount of sales and property taxes paid by undocumented families in New Mexico would be \$50.37 million. The number is \$69.26 million, going by the Pew population estimates.

The combined per-pupil cost of kindergarten-through 12th grade education to state and local governments is \$7,331 annually.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates one-sixth of the state's undocumented immigrants are school-aged children.

Assuming all these children are enrolled in school, the total cost to state and local government would be \$49.12 million when using the INS estimate of 40,000 undocumented immigrants and \$67.45 million using the Pew estimate of 55,000.

Using the above calculations, undocumented families are paying between \$1.25 million and \$1.81 million more annually in taxes than state and local government are paying to educate their children.

Rachel LaZar, director of El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos, an immigrant rights group based in Albuquerque, said the report helps dispel myths about the immigrant population.

"The prevailing myth is that immigrants drain the system, which is absolutely false," LaZar said.

The immigrant population contributes to the economy by paying taxes and consumerism, she said.

"They contribute through the work force, but they also help grow the economy through (opening) small businesses, which are the cornerstone of the local economy," she said.

The new study does not take in account other public services tapped by undocumented immigrant families, such as health care, but Bradley said he plans to expand his study.

"There's an enormous area here for research and trying to understand the impact on the community" of undocumented families, he said.

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