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<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/business/economy/competing-views-on-how-to-regulate-illegal-migration.html?_r=2>

**“It is time to move past the failed policies and fossilized positions of the previous generation.”**

I write to correct several statements by David Bacon and Phil Martin regarding Eduardo Porter’s discussion of a proposed United States-Mexico labor migration agreement by the “Shared Border, Shared Future” working group.

Bracero visas obviously substituted for illegal migration. Immediately after the United States vastly raised the number of visas to an adequate 400,000 in 1954, illegal migration collapsed to near zero for the duration of the program. This outcome required both the adequate legal pathway and stronger enforcement, as Kelly Lytle Hernandez documents in her groundbreaking book, “Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol.”

Substantial illegal migration occurred exclusively in the early years of the program, when the number of visas — around 100,000 a year — was insufficient. But the end of this legal channel in 1965 was followed by unprecedented illegal migration in the 1970s and ’80s.

Mr. Bacon and Professor Martin misrepresent [the labor-market effects](http://www.jstor.org/stable/42860675?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) of excluding bracero workers. They are right that farm wages rose in the states that excluded braceros in the late 1960s. They do not mention that farm wages rose by the same amount, in the same years, in states that did not exclude any braceros (because they never had any). Farmers’ response to bracero exclusion was to quickly adopt labor-saving technologies — particularly in cotton, tomatoes and sugar beets — in perfect accordance with “economic principles.” That actually harmed United States farm workers by eliminating many of their own jobs.

Mr. Bacon mentions the unacceptable abuses of workers under the existing seasonal work visa. That is why this new proposal departs sharply from that tainted model. The proposal prevents workers from being tied to a single employer, and it eliminates unscrupulous recruiters the only way it can be done: bilaterally. He also mentions that many braceros’ wages were stolen. No one knows that better than this group, which includes Alejandro Poiré, a former director of the Mexican government’s program to restitute those losses. Thus the group insists on a 21st century system to transfer any withheld wages from the United States government securely and directly to individual workers.

Professor Martin suggests that the Mexican migration of the 1970s to 1990s was somehow created by the bracero agreements in the 1950s. But Mexican migration networks are far older; the Mexican-born fraction of the labor force in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico was [higher in 1920 than 1990](http://www.nber.org/chapters/c0098.pdf).

The policy decision of 1965 was to outlaw those longstanding, generational traditions of temporary mobility across the border. The dark consequence of that decision is today’s giant black market in labor that has immeasurably harmed United States and Mexican workers. It is time to move past the failed policies and fossilized positions of the previous generation, and the “Shared Border, Shared Future” report offers a specific vision of how to do that.

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