

Restaurant Owners Grapple With Hiring Undocumented Immigrants

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The Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids at chicken processing plants last week reignited an old debate - who will do these jobs if not undocumented workers? In Mississippi, the workers dismembered poultry for \$11 to \$12 an hour - brutal, dangerous work. Across the country, immigrants often do manual, low-paying jobs, and employers say they have no choice but to rely on them.

NPR's John Burnett spent time with one restaurant owner who is wrestling with this very issue.

JOHN BURNETT, BYLINE: It was mid-afternoon at a small, popular restaurant in a city somewhere in Missouri. The lunch rush was over, and only a few diners remain. The cook was cleaning up.

(SOUNDBITE OF COOK CLEANING)

BURNETT: The proprietor, Lynn, asked that we not use her full name, the restaurant's name, the kind of cuisine or the city to avoid arousing the attention of federal immigration agents. At least four of her six employees, in government parlance, gained entry to the United States without the requisite inspection. They're undocumented.

The kitchen manager, Jaime, has been using a fake Social Security number since he came to the U.S. from Mexico 21 years ago. He paid an underground seller \$60 for it and didn't ask any questions.

JAIME: Well, we had to pay to get a social. We know there is illegal, but if we don't have that, we're not going to have jobs. We're not going to have nothing else. So we had to do that to work.

BURNETT: Lynn and I sat at the serving counter. Jaime was standing in the kitchen wearing a black chef's uniform and a ball cap. Jaime said every immigrant he knows is constantly fearful of ICE, and we had our conversation before the Mississippi chicken plant raids.

JAIME: We just need to - careful about everything. If we do something not correctly, we're going to have troubles.

BURNETT: Lynn said she's plugged into the restaurant community in her Midwestern city, and she states flatly - all of them hire undocumented workers.

LYNN: You cannot hire an American here that will show up to work. They will not be committed to their job. In America, restaurant work is not a serious profession.

BURNETT: The administration says they're deporting undocumented citizens like Jaime because he's taking jobs from Americans.

LYNN: That is the biggest joke. I know, I hear it all the time. And I couldn't hire someone. We put ads on Craigslist, Facebook, in the window, in the newspaper. The people that come in and apply to take our jobs will show up for one shift. They will not be clean. They will not probably be sober. They will ask for their money at the end of the shift, and then they will not come back for the second shift.

BURNETT: In contrast, Lynn describes her employees, all of whom came from central Mexico, as loyal, dependable and incredibly hardworking. She says she pays her dishwashers \$11.50 an hour, \$16 for cooks. That's more than minimum wage, but they get no insurance, vacations or sick pay.

The Pew Research Center says there are 7 1/2 million unauthorized workers in the United States. They're concentrated in agriculture, construction and the hospitality industry. But would they choose another line of work if they were here legally?

If you had a green card, would you still be here working for \$16 an hour?

JAIME: Obviously. I like to cook, and then I like to work.

BURNETT: Even if your boss wasn't standing here, would you work here if you were a lawful permanent resident?

JAIME: I would like to do something else like - I don't know, something different.

BURNETT: Jaime didn't say what work he might choose if he had papers. Truth is, there's no path to citizenship for him. I turned back to Lynn, who was nursing a glass of Pinot Grigio after another long day overseeing the restaurant.

What would happen if ICE deported all the undocumented workers in this city tomorrow?

LYNN: We'd close. I mean, I couldn't - I'd just sell everything for whatever amount of money we could get for it, and we would close because there's not enough talent of people who really do know how to cook.

BURNETT: According to the Pew Center, 10% of restaurant workers are unauthorized. That's 1.1 million employees. Lynn and thousands of other restaurant owners across the country say they cannot find enough suitable workers in the legal

labor pool, especially for their kitchens. But administration hardliners say the law is the law.

MARK KRIKORIAN: Whether you're talking about a chicken plant with 200 plus illegal workers or a little restaurant that has half a dozen illegal workers, the issue is the same.

BURNETT: Mark Krikorian is executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C. think tank that favors lower immigration. He says there are U.S. citizens who will do these unattractive jobs, and he cheers on Trump's ICE raids.

KRIKORIAN: And if that means a little restaurant somewhere ends up closing, that's unfortunate. I wish that on no one. But restaurants close every day. And if the labor market is tighter, what that means is restaurants that do come up with a way of recruiting and retaining legal workers will have a competitive advantage.

BURNETT: I called Lynn back this week and asked for her thoughts about the big ICE raids in Mississippi. She said her restaurant is too little for ICE to target, but that doesn't mean she's not affected. She said now she's afraid the cost of chicken is about to go up. John Burnett, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF JOSE GONZALEZ SONG, "HINTS")