

On October 10, 2006, the CSIS Americas Program hosted, “The Immigration Debate: Facts and Analysis.” The panel was comprised of Jeffrey Passel - Senior Research Associate, Pew Hispanic Center; Lindsay Lowell - Director of Policy Studies, Institute of International Migration, Georgetown University; Sidney Weintraub – Chairholder, William E. Simon Chair of Political Economy, CSIS; and Armand Peschard-Sverdrup - Director, Mexico Project, CSIS.

Jeffrey Passel focused on the demographic and migration data. He highlighted the fact that more Mexicans are entering the United States than any other group. Passel pointed out that there are roughly 11.6 million Mexicans in the U.S. This accounts for 10 percent of the entire Mexican population. More than half of these entrants now do so clandestinely. Passel forecasted that by 2050, the Mexican population living in the U.S. would increase to 15 percent.

Lindsay Lowell pointed out that border enforcement was less of a deterrent to entry into the United States. He argued that enforcement became more of a deterrent on the border rather than a cat and mouse game where it was constantly about catching the immigrants. Lowell stated Mexico’s low economic growth and lack of job opportunities is the main cause of emigration. If temporary worker programs are to work, employment must consist of seasonal jobs allowing migrants to come to the U.S. and then return to Mexico. Lowell said that there must be substantial internal enforcement in order to assume that temporary workers return home. He believes that economic development of Mexico is the beginning of any lasting solution to the migration problem.

Sidney Weintraub pointed out the importance of considering each country’s sensitivities and the tensions created when dealing with the immigration issue. The US’s choice to build a wall to somehow limit the number of “border-crossers” will cause great resentment in Mexico. Weintraub said that much of the U.S. immigration debate is centered on code words, including the distinction between amnesty and earned legalization. He said there has to be some way to offer unauthorized workers an opportunity for regularization because a civilized society doesn’t deport 11 million people. He said that a temporary worker program will create two classes of people in the U.S., one with more rights than the other. He proposed aid to develop regional manufacturing centers in rural areas of Mexico to give potential migrants an opportunity to work in their own region.

Armand Peschard-Sverdrup argued the central issue is the dysfunctional relationship between the federal and state/municipal governments. He pointed out that many of the state and county governments in the U.S. are getting unfunded mandates intended to help control the immigration problem. He also said that the current reality is that the U.S., Canada and Mexico are integrating economically. Immigration, in his eyes, needs to be addressed strategically.