

# Chicago Council Survey

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CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

## Chicago Council Midwest Immigration Survey: Knowledge of Recent Immigration Trends Is Key to Support for Reforms

By Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura

*An August 2012 Chicago Council Survey of midwestern views on immigration highlights the critical need for more public education on immigration trends to address information gaps. While the midwestern public is somewhat divided on specific reforms, those who have accurate information about shifting immigration flows and changing labor needs express majority support for key immigration policy proposals. A substantial public education initiative would serve well those trying to promote reform.*

### The Need for an Education Campaign on Benefits of Immigration

As part of an *Independent Task Force on Immigration and Midwest Competitiveness*, two public opinion surveys were fielded in mid-2012 that posed questions about immigration and immigration policy. The first survey, fielded May 25 to June 8, 2012, was part of a series of national surveys that The Chicago Council has undertaken since 1974. The second was a Midwest-specific survey on immigration fielded August 16 to 27, 2012. Taken together, the results offer new insight into how to advance an immigration reform agenda.

The results show that Americans today are considerably less threatened by immigration than they have been in the past two decades. Despite this trend, the Midwest survey finds that midwesterners remain divided about how to effect immigration reform. They are split over whether to pursue a comprehensive immigration reform package – one that would secure the border, create a way for needed workers to enter the country legally, and provide a solution for the millions of illegal workers already living in the U.S without legal status – or whether to pursue an incremental approach, addressing these problems step by step (38% comprehensive versus 41% incremental). In addition, midwesterners are unaware of some key facts about immigration, particularly that:

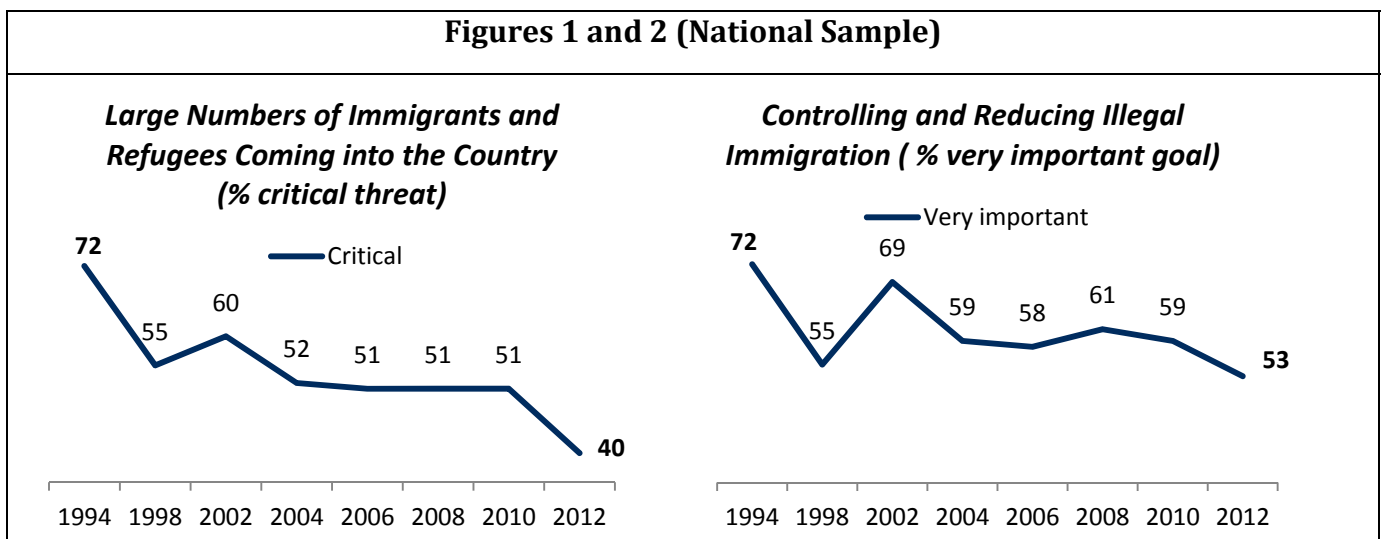
- unauthorized immigration has decreased over the past few years;
- most immigrants living in the Midwest are here legally; and
- midwestern employers often have trouble finding enough qualified U.S. citizens to fill open jobs, particularly agricultural and seasonal work.

The Midwest poll further reveals that when midwesterners have the correct information, they express more openness to increasing immigration. For example, those who understand that

Unauthorized immigration has declined and are more likely to support increases in immigration. Furthermore, those who believe that businesses need to attract more immigrants to fill job openings are more open to supporting immigration reform.

### Nationwide, Fewer Than Ever See Immigrants as a Critical Threat

For the first time in *Chicago Council Survey* history, only a minority (40%) of Americans consider immigration a critical threat to the United States. Public perceptions of immigration as a critical threat declined a staggering 32 points over the course of eighteen years. In addition to this, fewer now (53%) than recorded at any time since 1994 say that “controlling and reducing illegal immigration” is a very important goal for the United States—a 19 point drop since 1994 (Figures 1 and 2).



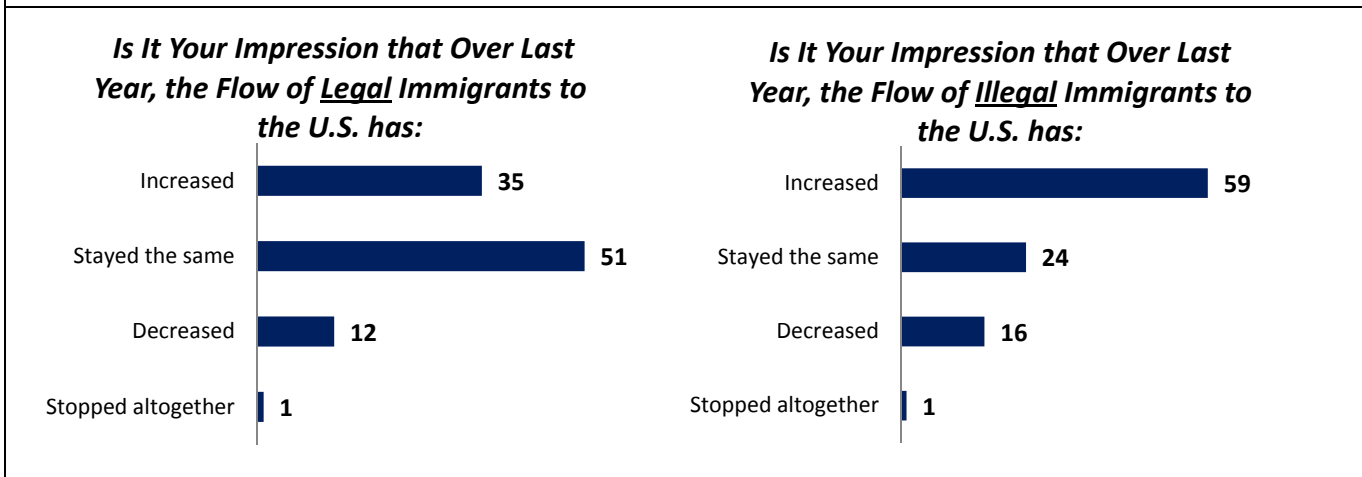
### Most Midwesterners Are Unaware That Unauthorized Immigration Has Declined

Recent reports have highlighted that net inflows of unauthorized immigration nationwide has flattened in the past few years, meaning that more Mexican immigrants (the largest portion of Midwest immigrants) are leaving the United States for Mexico than the other way around.<sup>1</sup> Few midwesterners are aware of this recent shift, according to The Chicago Council midwestern survey. A majority (59%) says it is their impression that illegal immigration has increased over the past year (see Figures 3 and 4).

<sup>1</sup> According to the Pew Hispanic Center, the net standstill in Mexican-U.S. migration flows is the result of two opposing trend lines that have converged in recent years. Between 2005 and 2010 a total of 1.4 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States, a dramatic drop from the 3 million who had done so between 1995 to 2000. At the same time, the number of Mexicans who moved from the United States to Mexico between 2005 and 2010 rose to 1.4 million, about twice as many as had done so in the previous five-year period. The trend lines within this latest five-year period suggest that return flow to Mexico probably exceeded the inflow from Mexico during the past year or two. See Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera article at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/net-migration-from-mexico-falls-to-zero-and-perhaps-less/>.

In contrast to unauthorized immigration flows, official statistics have shown that legal immigration has increased modestly in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Midwestern opinion is closer to the mark on legal immigration, with half (51%) saying it is their impression that legal immigration has stayed the same, and one in three (35%) believing it has increased.

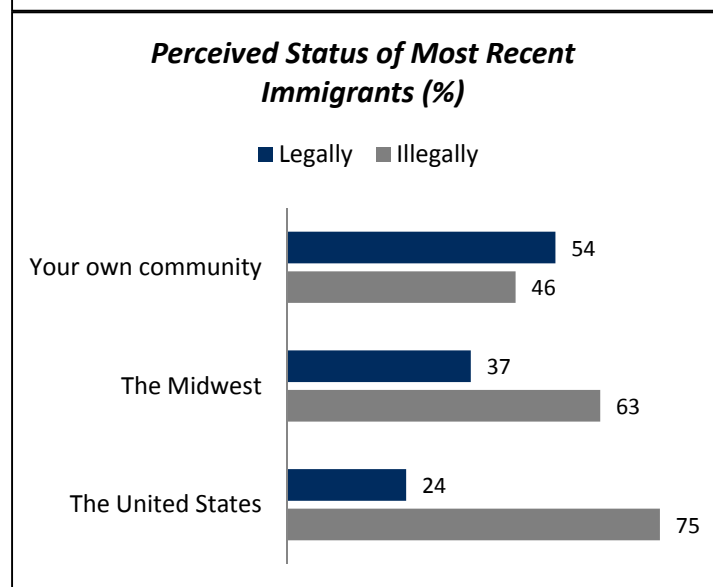
**Figures 3 and 4 (Midwest Sample)**



### Majorities Think Most Immigrants in Midwest Are Here Illegally

Midwesterners are also under the impression that most recent immigrants to the United States, including the Midwest, are here illegally, even though a small majority says most recent immigrants in their own communities are here legally (Figure 5). In reality, there are more legal permanent residents in the United States than there are undocumented immigrants. Additionally, millions of immigrants come to the United States every year on a variety of visas.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 5 (Midwest Sample)**



<sup>2</sup> 2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security. September 2012. [http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2011/ois\\_yb\\_2011.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2011/ois_yb_2011.pdf).

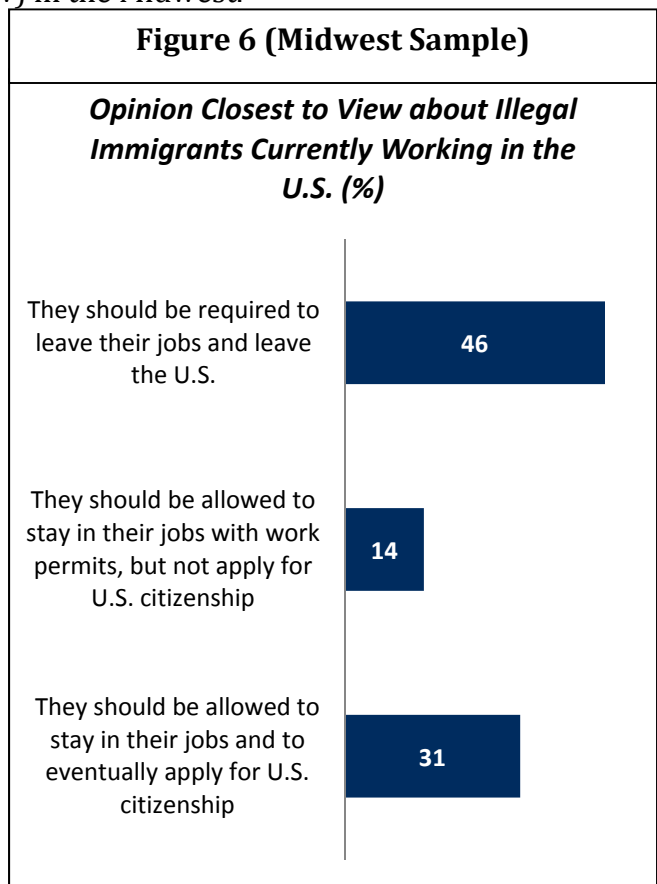
<sup>3</sup> For estimates on the unauthorized immigrant population, see “Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010” by Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn of the Pew Hispanic Center. For population estimates of legal permanent residents, see “Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population in 2010” by Nancy Rytina, Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security.

## Need for Immigrant Labor Unrecognized

Employers in high tech industries, health care, and agriculture often face difficulties finding both high- and low-skill workers for open positions.<sup>4</sup> This is especially pressing for agriculture in the United States. The American Farm Bureau Federation projects \$5 billion to \$9 billion in annual produce-industry losses because of the labor shortages. But midwesterners do not sense there is a job candidate deficit at either level. About two in three midwesterners think there is a sufficient number of U.S. citizens to fill both high-skill fields such as technology, science, and engineering (67% sufficient, 33% too few) and low-skill fields such as seasonal work, farming, food processing, and home health care (63% sufficient, 37% too few) in the Midwest.

Given these impressions, it is perhaps not surprising that a majority opposes (54% oppose to 44% support) a proposal to increase the number of highly skilled foreign worker visas to attract foreign workers with advanced degrees in math, science, and engineering. A slightly narrower majority opposes a proposal to increase the number of foreign workers with low skills to fill jobs in seasonal work, farming, food processing, and home health care (52% oppose to 47% support).

Opinion about whether unauthorized immigrants currently working in the United States should be able to keep their jobs is divided. Nearly half (46%) say that unauthorized immigrants currently working in the United States should be required to leave their jobs and leave the United States (Figure 6). But about as many say they should be allowed to stay (45%), either with work permits (14%) or with a path to citizenship (31%).

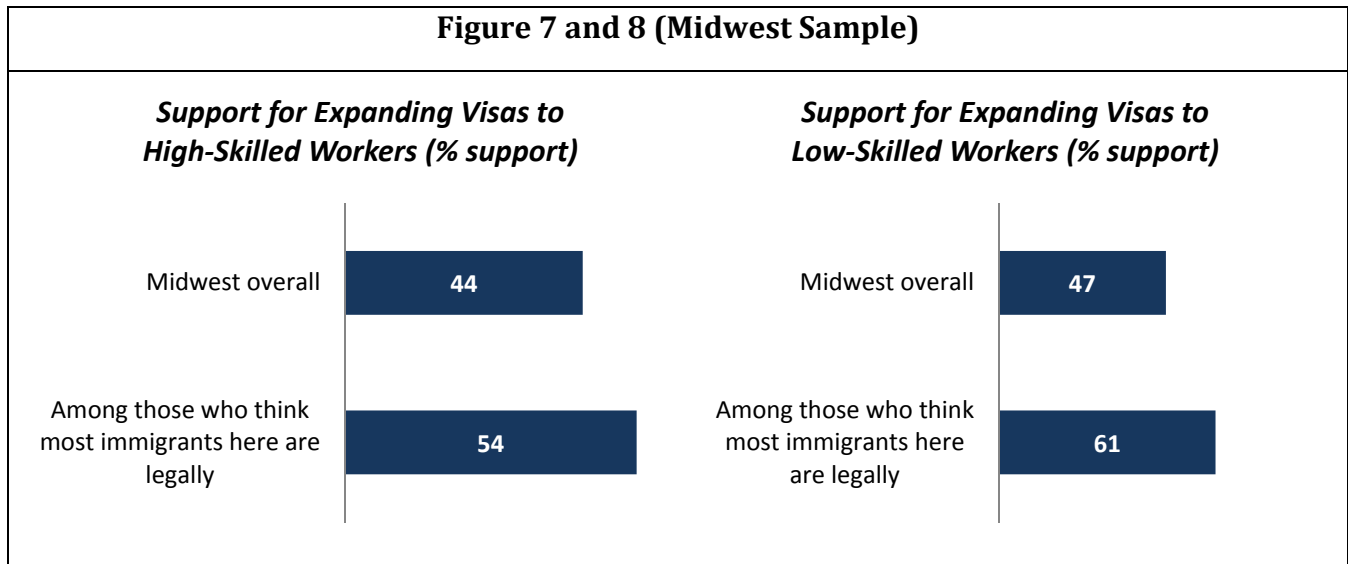


<sup>4</sup> While there is some controversy over business needs for immigrant workers to fill high-skilled positions, projections from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce predict that 63 percent of all jobs will require at least some postsecondary education by 2018. Employers will need 22 million new workers with postsecondary degrees, and the report shows that the United States will fall short by three million workers without a dramatic change in course. This translates into a deficit of 300,000 college graduates every year between now and 2018. See <http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/hw.pressrelease.pdf>.

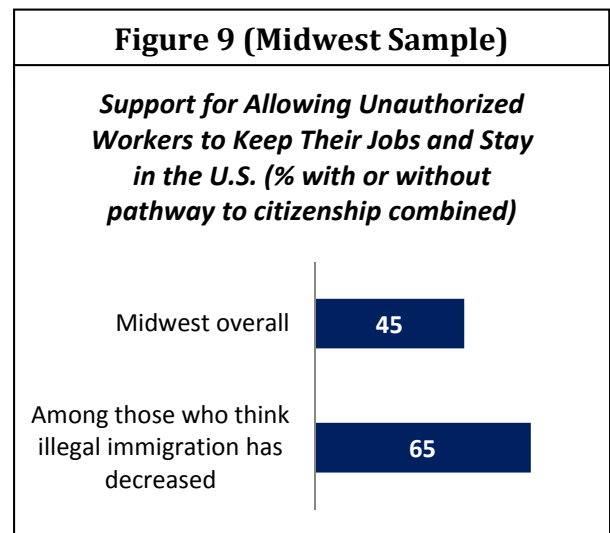
## The Importance of Accurate Information to Support for Reform

Overall opinion is somewhat divided on expanding foreign worker visas and on how to deal with unauthorized immigrants currently working in the United States. But support for both reforms rises to majority levels among those who understand that most immigrants are in the United States legally, are aware that illegal immigration has declined, and believe midwestern businesses do not have enough job applicants with U.S. citizenship.

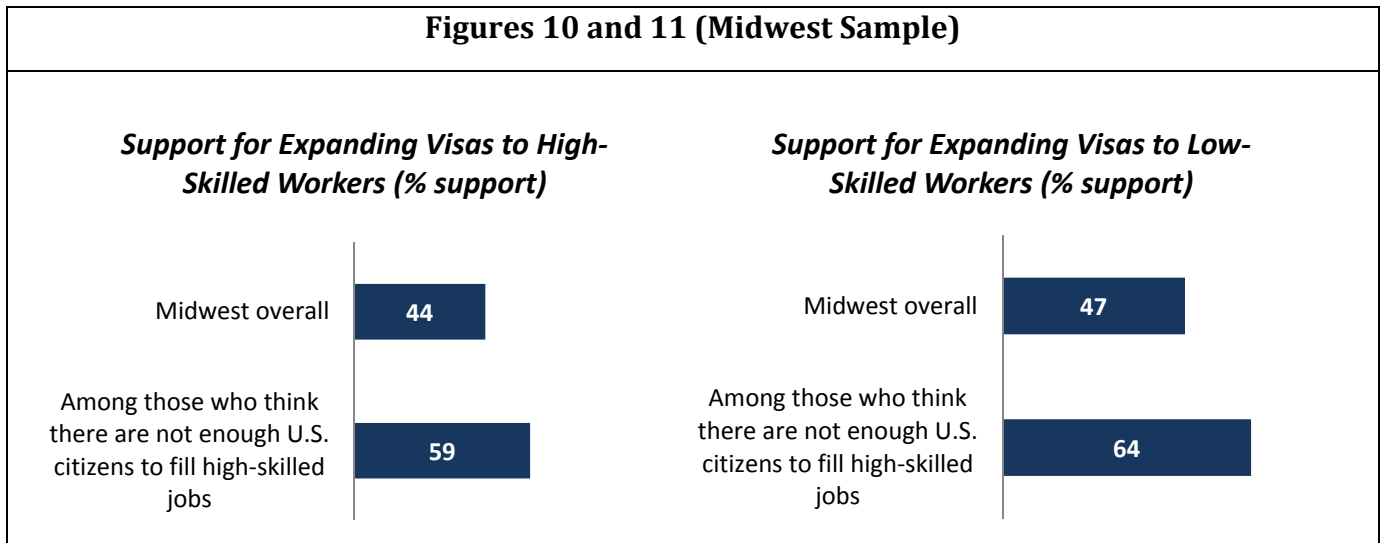
For example, six in ten midwesterners *who correctly think that most immigrants in the Midwest are here legally* favor increasing the number of visas for both high-skilled (54%) and low-skilled (61%) work, compared to less than half overall (Figures 7 and 8). A similar proportion among those who think most immigrants in the Midwest are here legally prefer to allow unauthorized workers to keep their jobs (60%, with or without a pathway to citizenship).



The same pattern is evident when other facts are known. Analysis shows that those midwesterners *who are aware that illegal immigration has decreased over the past few years* are much more likely (65%) than the Midwest average (45%) to express willingness to allow unauthorized workers to keep their jobs, either with job permits or with a pathway to citizenship (Figure 9). They are also more inclined to support expanding visas for both high-skilled (66%, compared to 44% of Midwest overall) and low-skilled jobs (62%, compared to 47% of Midwest overall).



Awareness of midwestern businesses' difficulties in finding enough U.S. citizens to fill open jobs is another key factor influencing views. A least six in ten *among those who say that there is a shortage of U.S. citizens for both high- and low-skilled jobs* support proposals to increase the number of visas granted to foreign workers (59% for high-skilled, 64% for low-skilled workers), higher than for the Midwest public overall (Figures 10 and 11).



However, only those who think that there are too few *low-skilled* job applicants for Midwest business hires are more likely than the overall Midwest public to favor allowing unauthorized immigrants currently working in the United States to stay in their jobs (57% with job permits or a pathway to citizenship, compared to 46% overall). Those who say there are too few *high-skilled* job seekers still do not favor unauthorized immigrants keeping their jobs (49%, compared to 46% overall).

### Conclusion

Currently, midwesterners lack awareness of important immigration trends. A majority of people in the Midwest inaccurately perceive that most immigrants in the Midwest are here illegally and that the number of illegal immigrants coming into the country has increased rather than decreased over the past year. In addition, people in the Midwest do not believe that Midwest employers have a shortage of U.S. citizens to fill high- and low-skilled jobs and require immigrant workers to fill this need.

Even with the level of awareness they have now, 45 percent of the public in the Midwest supports reforms to keep unauthorized immigrant workers in the United States. With a focused robust public education campaign, that support could grow to majority levels for positive rather than punitive reforms.

## **A Note on Methods**

This report is based on the results of two surveys commissioned by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, both conducted by GfK Custom Research. The first, a national survey, was conducted between May 25 and June 8, 2012, among a nationally representative sample of 1,877 adults. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 3$  percentage points. The second Midwest survey was conducted between August 16 and August 27, 2012, among a representative sample of 1,062 adults living in the twelve-state Midwest. The margin of error for this survey is  $\pm 4$  percentage points.

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