



Highlights of [GAO-06-1055](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The opportunity for employment is an important magnet attracting immigrants, including unauthorized immigrants, to countries. The policies and practices used by other countries to manage foreign workers, including actions to limit illegal immigration and to reduce the employment of unauthorized foreign workers, have been shaped by country-specific economic, demographic, and political factors. Immigration reform is a matter of continuing debate in the United States. This report examines selected countries' (1) programs for admitting foreign workers; (2) efforts to limit the employment of unauthorized foreign workers; and (3) programs for providing unauthorized immigrants with an opportunity to obtain legal status, referred to as regularization. To address these objectives, we examined reports from foreign countries, intergovernmental organizations, and research organizations. We also interviewed government officials and experts from 8 countries—Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom—and surveyed 6 other countries. We selected these countries based on their net immigration rate, population size, membership in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or World Bank classification as high income, range of immigration policies, and geographic location.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1055.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Richard M. Stana, 202-512-8777, stanar@gao.gov.

FOREIGN WORKERS

Information on Selected Countries' Experiences

What GAO Found

The countries GAO studied have programs for admitting foreign workers, most of which are focused on recruiting high-skilled or seasonal foreign workers. To recruit foreign workers, some countries use bilateral agreements with other countries. For example, Canada uses bilateral agreements with Mexico and several Caribbean nations to recruit seasonal agricultural workers. Some countries manage foreign worker admissions by various means, such as quotas or points-based systems. However, officials stated that it is difficult to implement a system that responds to changing labor market needs and does not create incentives for employers to hire unauthorized foreign workers. Some countries regulate foreign worker admissions by specifying requirements for participation in a foreign worker program, such as work permit fees. Moreover, foreign worker programs differ in their requirements for workers to return home. Some temporary programs require workers to return upon expiration of work permits, while others allow foreign workers to renew their permits and apply for permanent resident status.

The countries GAO studied use a variety of efforts in enforcing laws designed to limit the employment of unauthorized foreign workers. In some of these countries, employers are required to report workers' information to government agencies or to verify workers' authorization status. Among these countries, the employment of unauthorized foreign workers is largely considered one of several illegal labor practices, including failure to pay taxes or social insurance contributions, and government agencies generally focus their enforcement efforts and investigate employers to detect all such practices. Government officials and experts have noted that conducting frequent employer investigations and publicizing those investigations helps deter employers' hiring of unauthorized foreign workers. Countries can penalize unscrupulous employers for employing unauthorized foreign workers, including imposing monetary fines on employers. However, countries have faced difficulties, such as the prevalence of document fraud, in penalizing employers.

Some countries have implemented large-scale regularization programs that allow unauthorized immigrants to apply for legal status on either a temporary or a permanent basis. Countries have implemented regularization programs for different reasons, such as to help reduce the size of the underground economy or to facilitate immigrant integration, and governments believe they derive some benefits from implementing these programs, such as increased collection of tax and social insurance contributions. Under these programs, countries require illegal immigrants to meet specified eligibility requirements, such as residency and work requirements, before applying for or receiving legal status. Employers and unauthorized foreign workers have incentives to participate in regularization programs but may not want to because, for example, some employers can save money by employing unauthorized foreign workers from whom they do not pay taxes or social insurance contributions. However, countries have faced difficulties in implementing these programs, such as in ensuring timely review of applications. Moreover, some experts have reported that regularization programs may attract further illegal immigration, while others have concluded that programs' effect on illegal immigration is unclear.