

Apr 8, 2010 By Daniel J.B. Mitchell

## Work Americans won't do



*Daniel J.B. Mitchell is professor emeritus of the Anderson School of Management and the School of Public Affairs.*

---

How often have you heard the phrase — always in connection with debate about immigration — “work Americans won’t do”? A quick Google search counted about 230,000 references to that phrase. But the recent coal mining disaster in West Virginia should make you skeptical about that phrase. Take a quick look at any of the news photos of miners that have accompanied that disaster. Who do you see doing a job that is both physically demanding and dangerous? Americans.

Of course, the Americans doing that work are being paid substantially above the minimum wage. And that is the key. Whether someone will do a particular job is inevitably tied to pay and what alternatives are available. The lower the pay, the fewer folks there will be who want to do a given job. That is Economics 1.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers in mining-related occupations in West Virginia averaged around \$20 per hour, benefits not included, in 2008, the latest year for which data were available. The average wage in that state, even including highly paid managers and professional workers, was about \$16. So if you pay enough, someone will do work that is unpleasant, demanding and risky.

Immigration — especially in California — has long been a contentious issue. It was a leading concern back in the gubernatorial election of 1994 when Proposition 187 — an abortive attempt to bar illegal immigrants from public services — was on the ballot. And it has surfaced again in the 2010 Republican gubernatorial primary. However, despite the currently high unemployment rate in California, a recent Public Policy Institute of California poll suggests a majority of California voters now believe that, on net, immigration benefits the state. An even larger fraction of voters think that some version of amnesty for illegal immigrant workers should be adopted.

There is no doubt that immigration has complicated effects on California’s labor market and on state and local budgets. As in other areas of public policy, there are costs and benefits of immigration that can be estimated and debated. But can we all agree to look at the news photos from West Virginia and then drop the phrase “work Americans won’t do” when we discuss immigration?

Note:

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics pay data can be found at:  
[http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes\\_wv.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes_wv.htm)

The Public Policy Institute of California poll data can be found at:  
[http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S\\_310MBS.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_310MBS.pdf)