Erin Goheen and Andres Gamboa are both students at the University of Arizona, and they both grew up in the state. But when it comes to the topic of immigration, they don't have much in common.

Goheen, a 20-year-old senior from Phoenix, blames illegal immigrants for Arizona's crime problem, which has gotten so bad, she says, that she's afraid to be out on city streets after dark. That's why she supports Arizona's tough new immigration law, which gives local police broad power to arrest anyone they think may be in the country illegally, and makes it a crime for all noncitizens not to carry immigration papers.

"I am more than thrilled about this law," she says. "I've read it more than 20 times. I have it printed out and take it with me almost everywhere."

But to Gamboa, an 18-year-old freshman from Tucson whose parents are Mexican immigrants, the new law is simply a threat. Born in California, Gamboa is a U.S. citizen, and he says his parents are here legally. But that hasn't prevented scary run-ins with authorities, who he says recently tried to search his family's home in the middle of the night for no good reason. He fears the new law will only make things worse for Hispanics in Arizona.

"It's a law based on racism," he says. "I know a lot of people who are afraid of going out in the street. They just take their children to school and go right home. They feel like their safety is threatened."

Goheen and Gamboa represent the sharp divide not only between Arizonans, but also among Americans in general on the subject of immigration. Arizona's tough new immigration law has reignited the national debate and put a spotlight on Washington's failure to tackle this issue at the federal level, leaving a vacuum some states and cities are trying to fill.

An estimated 12 million illegal immigrants live in the United States, with about 7 million from Mexico. While there are illegal immigrants in every state, they are concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Arizona.

Path to Legalization? Nearly everyone agrees that America's immigration system is broken; what they don't agree on is how to fix it.

Broadly speaking, conservatives favor tightening border security, with some talking about deporting illegal immigrants. Liberals have generally been pushing for a path toward legalization for those here illegally, providing they pay fines, learn English, and wait their turn to be considered. This is the approach favored by President Barack Obama, who voiced strong opposition to Arizona's approach.

'Most Explosive Issue' But many voters see immigrants as threats to their jobs and wage levels—especially at a time when the unemployment rate is around 10 percent—as well as a drain on services like schools, police, and health care.

While the debate over immigration is especially heated right now, immigration has been a hot topic in the U.S. from the nation's beginnings.

In 1776, most Americans were immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants, from the British Isles. The majority were white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who came in search of economic opportunity or to escape religious or political persecution. But the population also included large numbers of Dutch, Spanish, and Germans, in addition to American Indians and blacks, who were brought from Africa as slaves beginning in 1619.
Today, the U.S. is in the midst of its fourth great wave of immigration, following those in the 1850s, the 1880s, and the early 1900s. The current wave could turn out to be the biggest: The Pew Research Center projects that foreign-born Americans will exceed 15 percent of the population by 2025, breaking a century-old record of 14.8 percent in 1890.

'Mixed' Families The debate over immigration today is largely about illegal immigration. But illegal immigration is often more complicated than it seems. For example, there are now thousands of "mixed" families in the U.S. in which the parents are in the U.S. illegally, but their children, born in the United States, are citizens.

There's also the question of how to treat the estimated 1 million young people who were brought to the U.S. illegally as infants or children by their parents. Though they were raised in the U.S. and feel as American as anyone who was born here, they are technically here illegally and therefore can't get Social Security numbers or federal financial aid for college, and they have trouble getting jobs.

Earlier this year, young immigrants in several cities held "coming out parties" where they publicly announced that they are illegal. In addition to raising awareness of their situation, the gatherings were designed to push for passage of legislation pending in Congress known as the Dream Act, which would provide a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. when they were under 16 and graduate from American high schools.

There are also thousands of people serving in the U.S. military who have spouses or close relatives who are illegal. Many say they're afraid their families will be deported while they're away fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Will Congress Act? In 2007, Congress came close to passing comprehensive immigration reform. But despite the support of President Bush and a bipartisan coalition in Congress, the legislation failed—largely over a provision laying out a path to citizenship for those here illegally.

That's again part of the reforms supported by President Obama. Under the legislation currently being considered, illegal immigrants who want to remain in the U.S. would have to admit they broke the law, pay whatever back taxes they owe, and pass a criminal background check to qualify for legal residency.

Whatever the outcome, the debate is likely to be heated, as it has been for the last 250 years. "There's an old immigrant saying that sums it up: America beckons, but Americans repel," says Alan Kraut, who teaches immigration history at American University in Washington. "This is nothing new." (The New York Times Upfront, Vol. 143, September 6, 2010)

1. How many illegal immigrants are in the United States? How many of these are from Mexico?

2. Why do some voters see immigrants as ‘threats’?

3. The article refers to ‘mixed families.’ What are these?

4. What would the Dream Act legislation do?

5. What are two things the immigration reform supported by President Obama would do?

6. What is your opinion of illegal immigration? Explain your answer in 2-3 sentences.