



CHURCH WORLD SERVICE

Clarity in Numbers

Addressing population concerns and restrictionist proposals for immigration reform

Statistics offer some of the most convincing evidence for both sides of the immigration debate.

Unfortunately, statistics are often distorted to fit the biased agenda of restrictionist groups.

This document addresses misconceptions concerning immigrants in the United States, in an effort to return clarity and accuracy to the immigration reform debate.

Assertion #1: The 35.2 million immigrants* living in the United States is a record-breaking high, far surpassing the traditional flows of immigration during the “golden age of immigration” from 1925-1965.^{1,2}

CLARIFICATION: This era is not historically known as a “golden age of immigration,” nor has there ever been a “traditional” rate of immigration – these dates have been cherry-picked to showcase the lowest immigration rates in American history. This was due to the Great Depression, World War II, and the highly restrictive and xenophobic National Origin Quota Acts of the 1920s, which restricted Chinese, Italian, and low-income immigrants and was repealed in 1965. Also, raw figures do not take into account the relative growth of immigration in the context of population growth. Percentages more accurately represent the impact of immigration. In 1910, at the height of the great wave of immigration, immigrants represented 14.7 percent of U.S. residents, making current immigration trends far from unusual.³ The immigrant population now accounts for 12.4 percent of the total U.S. population, compared with other traditional countries of immigration with higher percentages; Canada with 18 percent and Australia with 24 percent of their total populations.⁴

Assertion #2: The growth of immigrant workers has depressed wages and harmed American workers. This reversed the tight labor market, which had converted low income families to middle class status.⁵

CLARIFICATION: The overall economic impact of immigrants on native-born American remains ambiguous, as no consensus has been reached by researchers on the scale or direction of the impact. The economic effects of immigrants, whether positive or negative, should be considered as only one component of the immigration debate. That being said, new research shows that the skill sets of immigrant workers tend to complement, rather than compete with, those of native workers. As native workers are promoted to managerial and supervisory positions and earn higher wages, immigrant workers enter the labor market in lower level positions which fills job vacancies, strengthens the economy, and increases the production and efficiency of American business.⁶

Assertion #3: While the average immigrant today is likely to be poor, uneducated and “ghettoized in ethnic enclaves,” immigrants during the 1925-65 era were educated and quickly earned high incomes.

CLARIFICATION: It has become the trend to romanticize the achievements of European immigrants from the last great wave of immigration, though economic and educational success was not obtained until third- and fourth-generation immigrants. In the early Twentieth Century, European immigrants overall were paid lower wages than native-born Americans and were not accepted by mainstream society. In the 1950’s, second-generation European immigrants still occupied the majority of blue-collar jobs in New York City.⁷ Often

¹ “America’s Immigration Tradition.” *Immigration Changes*. Numbers USA. <<http://numbersusa.com/overpopulation/americasfuture/future4.html>>

² Carmona, Steven A. “Immigrants at Mid-Decade: A snap shot of America’s Foreign Born Population in 2005.” Center for Immigration Studies. December 2005. <<http://www.cis.org/articles/2005/back1405.html#18>>

³ United States. Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2005*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006.

⁴ International Migration Outlook: SOPEMI 2006 Edition. Paris: OECD, Table A.1.4

⁵ “Immigration Reform: Recognizing Reality or Surrendering Principles.” Numbers USA. 19 February 2005. <<http://www.numbersusa.com/interests/CPAC2005speech.html>>

⁶ Peri, Giovanni. “How Immigrants Affect California Employment and Wages.” *California Counts: Population Trends and Profiles*. Public Policy Institute of California. February of 2007.

⁷ Alba, Richard and Nancy Foner. “The Second Generation from the Last Great Wave of Immigration: Setting the Record Straight.” Migration Policy Institute. October 2006.

overlooked, recent immigrants are integrating culturally and economically more so than at any other time in U.S. history. Today, three times as many immigrants are proficient in English compared to the percent of immigrants in 1890. In 1990, 29 percent of U.S. residents who spoke a language other than English at home reported to speak English “very well,” compared 44 percent in 2000.⁸ Conversational English proficiency averages more than 90 percent for foreign-born children who entered the country before they were ten years old.⁹ Also, immigrants who have been in the United States for more than ten years have significantly higher incomes than more recent arrivals. They tend to earn higher average wages than recent immigrants and established undocumented immigrants. This suggests that a path for legalization for immigrants would boost both wages and tax revenue.¹⁰

Assertion #4: As the U.S. population increases, immigrants drain resources and exploit our tax system.

CLARIFICATION: Immigrants contribute to the United States by paying taxes, working hard and enriching the U.S. economy. An increased rate of immigration is needed to guarantee the future welfare of baby boomers, who are beginning to exit the work force and receive their entitlements (social security and Medicare). Due to a steady decline in the native-born tax base, an increase in immigration is necessary to provide these revenues.¹¹ Moreover, high-skilled immigrants are an important asset to growing math- and science-based industries. One in every five doctors in the United States is an immigrant, as are two of every five medical scientists; one of every five computer specialists; and one of every six persons in engineering and science occupations. In the last three decades, the United States has attracted and absorbed more skilled workers than any other industrialized country. High skilled immigrants make the U.S. economy more diverse, productive and innovative.¹²

Assertion #5: Although the United States’ welfare rolls are already swollen, every year we import more people who end up on public assistance: immigrants.¹³

CLARIFICATION: The 1996 welfare reform law limits immigrants’ access to federal public assistance. New restrictions bar nearly all legal immigrants arriving after 1996 from receiving public assistance (Supplementary Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Food Stamps) until they have been in the United States for at least five years. Since 1996, use of public assistance among low-income immigrants has fallen. Use of TANF by immigrants dropped to 4.5 percent in 2004 from 19 percent in 1994. Similarly, use of Food Stamps dropped to 22 percent in 2004 from 35 percent in 1994, and SSI use to 4 percent from 5 percent. While Medicaid use rose among both immigrants and citizens, this was due to an overall decline in health insurance benefits to low-wage workers.¹⁴

Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for any public assistance—except for medical emergencies. However, they contribute to government revenues through income tax, sales tax and social security tax. Many undocumented workers pay taxes using a Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN), which does not require legal status, and there is no reason to believe that undocumented immigrants pay less sales tax than U.S. residents and citizens.¹⁵ Also, undocumented workers provide the Social Security System with approximately \$7 billion each year in unclaimed earnings, which comprised 10 percent of the social security surplus in 2004.¹⁶

**All references to “immigrants” refer to legal immigrants. References to undocumented immigrants have been noted as such.*

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⁸ Crawford, James. “Census 2000: A Guide for the Perplexed.”
<<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jWCRAWFORD/census02.htm#1890>>

⁹ Hakimzadeh, Shirin. “The Pace and Flow of English Language Acquisition Among the U.S. Latino Population.” Pew Hispanic Center.

¹⁰ Fix, Michael. “Immigrants’ Costs and Contributions: The Effects of Reform.” Migration Policy Institute. 26 July 2006

¹¹ Rabin, Jeffrey L. “Immigrant Workers Could be Crucial to Ensuring the Security of Aging Baby Boomers.” *Los Angeles Times*. 27 of February 2007.

¹² Fix, Michael and Neeraj Kaushal. “The Contributions of High Skilled Immigrants.” Migration Policy Institute. July 2006.

¹³ “Immigration and Welfare.” *Immigration and Society*. Federation for American Immigration Reform. October 2002.

<http://www.fairus.org/site/PageServer?pagename=iic_immigrationissuecenters7fd8>

¹⁴ Fix 2006.

¹⁵ Camarota, Steve. The Center for Immigration Studies. As referenced in Lipman, Francine. “The Taxation of Undocumented Immigrants: Separate, Unequal, and Without Representation.” *Harvard Latino Law Review*. 2006. (1-58).

¹⁶ Porter, Eduardo. “Not on the Radar: Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security.” *Generations*. The American Society on Aging. Spring 2005.