

Immigrants' Impacts on U.S. Society*



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Legal immigration averaged over 900,000 per year in the early 1990s. The United States absorbs the equivalent of 1 of every 100 people added to the world's population each year. The number of illegal immigrants is, of course, unknown, but most estimates range from 1.1 million to 2.9 million per year. Most of these unauthorized persons leave the United States (either through apprehension or voluntary departure), but an estimated 300,000 remain as permanent settlers.

This influx of immigrants since the mid-1980s has helped increase the share of foreign-born persons in the population. By 1995, 23 million foreign-born persons lived in the United States. Almost one in five (5.3 million) had arrived within the past five years. The growing diversity of America's population is increasing the complexity of how we function in the workplace and in the marketplace.

EFFECTS ON SCHOOLS

Young people with limited English-language skills have created pressing problems for many school systems throughout the country.

In New York City, for example, students come from at least 188 countries and speak as many as 100 different languages. In California, New Mexico, Texas, New York, and Arizona, at least one-fifth of the school-age population speaks a language other than English at home. Approximately 2.6 million students in kindergarten through high school were identified as having limited English proficiency (LEP) in 1992-1993. This represents nearly 6 percent of all K-12 students in the United States.

Not only are bilingual teachers needed, but many school districts are finding that they must hire additional counselors to work with immigrant children and their families to help them adjust to their new social and educational environment. In fiscal year 1995, Congress initially appropriated \$195 million for bilingual programs, but later cut this sum to \$156 million.

EFFECTS ON THE LABOR MARKET

Studies present very mixed results. Findings often depend on which groups of immigrants, occupations, or geographic locations are being studied and on the prevailing market conditions (such as unemployment rates, inflation, or the general business climate) at the time of the study. Case studies of specific communities and occupations often find that immigrant workers depress wages, worsen working conditions, and displace some groups of U.S.-born workers. Econometric studies that look at larger labor market effects, such as a rise in unemployment rates or a drop in wages, generally find no significant adverse effects from immigration. These conflicting findings leave the debate on the effects of immigration wide open for a variety of interpretations and policy initiatives, and for further study.

Because highly skilled jobs often are clustered in high-immigration areas, highly educated whites are less affected by the presence of new immigrants. Indeed, highly educated whites continue to move into the high-immigration states. What seems to be emerging is a widening difference between states and localities based on job skills and economic competitiveness.

EDUCATION AND EARNINGS

In general, immigrants tend to have completed fewer years of education than native-born

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Americans, thereby putting them at a disadvantage for more skilled jobs.

A new pattern is emerging among the most recent wave of immigrants, however. While many are less educated than native-born Americans, just as many are more highly educated. The longer the immigrants are in the country, the more likely they will adapt to labor market conditions and close the income gap with U.S.-born Americans.


**Excerpted from Carol J. De Vita's report, "The United States at Mid-Decade" (Population Bulletin, Vol. 50, No. 4, 1996).*

EFFECTS ON THE ECONOMY

Like native-born Americans, the vast majority of foreign-born Americans pay taxes, send their children to public schools, and use hospitals and other public services. Because recent immigrants may have special needs, such as help with language skills, getting a work permit, or filing tax returns, some analysts argue that the influx of immigrants has created added financial stress on government budgets, particularly at the state and local levels.

There have been numerous attempts to estimate the costs and benefits of immigration to various levels of government. Invariably, the results prove highly controversial and are challenged on conceptual, methodological, and philosophical grounds. One aspect is clear, however: the bulk of taxes paid by immigrants, and all Americans, goes to the federal government, while the cost of providing services to immigrants is typically borne by states and localities. The federal government reimburses states for some of these costs, but many high-immigration states feel they are not adequately compensated for the full cost of immigrants.

Welfare use by the foreign born raises even more contentious issues. A popular assumption is that many immigrants are drawn to the United States because they hope to receive public assistance. The reality is that most immigrants are ineligible for most forms of welfare and public assistance until they have resided (legally) in the country for five years. Refugees are the exception. Because refugees may be fleeing persecution and often arrive in the United States without much prior preparation for the journey, they are automatically granted access to certain welfare services upon arrival.

Use of public assistance and welfare diminishes as foreign-born residents become more established in the United States. Several welfare reform proposals before Congress would deny public assistance to anyone who is not a U.S. citizen. The number of immigrants applying for citizenship almost doubled between 1991 and 1993, and may double again, topping 1 million by the end of fiscal year 1996. 



| Education and Economic Well-Being of Immigrants and Native-Born Americans: 1994 | | | | | | |
|---|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Characteristic | Native-Born | Foreign-Born (Year Arrived) | | | | |
| | | All | Before 1970 | 1970-1979 | 1980-1989 | 1990-1994 |
| Education* | | | | | | |
| Not high school grad (%) | 17 | 36 | 32 | 38 | 39 | 33 |
| High school grad/some college (%) | 61 | 41 | 48 | 40 | 38 | 34 |
| College grad/advanced degree (%) | 22 | 23 | 20 | 22 | 23 | 33 |
| Economic Well-Being | | | | | | |
| Median income, 1993 | \$15,900 | \$12,200 | \$14,500 | \$15,100 | \$11,600 | \$8,400 |
| Percent in poverty, 1993 | 14.4 | 23.0 | 10.8 | 16.3 | 26.4 | 37.3 |
| Percent receiving public assistance, 1993 | 2.9 | 3.7 | 1.4 | 3.4 | 4.4 | 5.7 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P20-486, table 1.

*Educational attainment for persons age 25 and older.