

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
and
Institute for Policy Studies



The Immigration Debate

By David Stoll

Immigration into the U.S. is an issue that makes for strange bedfellows. Supporters of current immigration levels include corporate interests that profit from cheap foreign labor, ethnic lobbies seeking to increase their political base, and religious activists, humanitarians, and civil libertarians who focus on human rights and other ethical concerns. Opponents include nativists who view non-European immigrants as a threat to American culture, environmentalists who dread immigration-fueled population growth, and labor advocates who fear that immigration is taking jobs from U.S. citizens and depressing U.S. wages. On the right of the political spectrum, free marketers square off against cultural conservatives. On the left, civil rights and ethnic advocacy groups oppose environmentalists and job protectionists.

Key Points

- In the immigration debate, free marketers square off against cultural conservatives on the right side of the political spectrum; while on the left, civil rights and ethnic advocacy groups oppose environmentalists and job protectionists.
- Until 1994 the debate over immigration focused on what the INS calls illegal aliens, particularly those slipping across the Mexican border, even though a larger number of undocumented residents arrived legally and overstayed their visas.
- Immigrants, documented and undocumented, are also the targets of populist backlashes like California's Proposition 187, which bars undocumented immigrants from basic social services.

Current policy is a reaction to the Immigration Act of 1924, which reduced the number of immigration visas and allocated them on the basis of national origin. Since the quotas for each nationality were based on its proportion of the U.S. population, the system favored northern Europeans and discriminated against Asians. In the 1960s national quotas were finally abolished on equity grounds. Equal opportunity and family reunification became top priorities, opening the door to much larger flows from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia.

Refugees became a large immigrant category with mass arrivals from Cuba in the early 1960s and early 1980s, and from Southeast Asia in the 1970s after the collapse of U.S.-supported governments. Refugees fleeing communist-run countries were granted automatic acceptance until steadily rising flows from Vietnam and Cuba forced a halt to this practice.

To reduce economic incentives for illegal immigration, in 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) to punish employers who hire

undocumented immigrants. In addition to authorizing employer sanctions, IRCA also granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants who had been residing continuously in the U.S. for several years. Immigrant rights groups decried discrimination against undocumented workers, while anti-immigrant groups complained that employer sanctions would be unenforceable and that new arrivals could easily receive amnesty by forging documents.

In 1996 the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) authorized 911,000 legal immigrants, including 595,000 for family reunification, 118,000 for their job skills, and 198,000 for humanitarian reasons and diversity. This represents a rise of almost 30% from the 1995 figure of 716,000. When illegal immigrants receiving amnesty are included, the 1996 total is around one million. In recent years, the largest group of legal immigrants have come from Asia (37%), followed by Mexico/the Caribbean/Central America (32%), and Europe (18%). About 150,000 people apply for political asylum annually, and the backlog of applications for political asylum stands at about 450,000.

Until 1994 the debate over immigration focused on what the INS calls illegal aliens, particularly those slipping across the Mexican border, even though a larger number of undocumented residents arrived legally and overstayed their visas. In response to rising political pressures, the INS launched high-profile campaigns such as Operation Blockade in El Paso and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego. Blocking the most-frequent entry points, however, shifted immigration flows into isolated deserts and mountains where more border-crossers fall victim to robbers, rapists, and extreme weather conditions.

Immigrants, documented and undocumented, are also the targets of populist backlashes like California's Proposition 187, which bars undocumented immigrants from basic social services. Courts have barred implementation of Proposition 187, but other legislation at the federal and state levels is cutting off both legal and illegal immigrants from public welfare benefits. There are also proposals to end the traditional practice of granting automatic citizenship to anyone born in the U. S., regardless of the legal status of the parents.

Immigration policy has to address a range of economic, humanitarian, and ethical issues. Central to the raging immigration debate are differing evaluations of the rights of immigrants—to be with their families, to find haven from political persecution, to seek a better standard of living, etc.—and the rights of native-born citizens (and their government) to determine who lives, works, and benefits from public services in their country.

Among the factors affecting these different assessments are a rising sense of economic and social insecurity in many U.S. communities, dependence of many economic sectors on immigrant labor (from childcare to agribusiness), an increasingly interconnected global economy characterized by the relatively free flow of capital and trade, and rising crime and drug trafficking in border states.

Current immigration policy is failing on numerous accounts. Stricter border controls have proved unable to stem illegal immigration flows, leading instead to rising human rights abuses and victimization of border-crossers. Immigration clearly contributes to a downward pressure on wage levels and to decreased job availability in certain economic sectors. Many refugees fleeing repressive governments and violent political situations find themselves rejected by Washington.

Economists tend to agree that immigration is a net benefit to the U.S. economy. Immigrants fill jobs that U.S. citizens often reject, help the U.S. economy maintain competitiveness in the global economy, and stimulate job creation in depressed neighborhoods. But net benefits for the economy can conceal serious losses for vulnerable sectors of the U.S. population. It is no secret that many employers—ranging from suburbanites to small contractors to major corporations—would rather hire foreigners who often work harder for less pay than U.S. citizens.

As such, immigration has long been a contentious labor issue. The infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was, among other things, a reaction to the importation of indentured laborers, who were paid far less than other workers. The immigration debates of the late 19th and early 20th centuries anticipated contemporary alliances between self-interested capitalists and open-door idealists on the one side, and nativists and protectionists on the other. One consequence of the Great Wave from 1880 to 1924 (with immigration averaging more than a half million annually) was that northern manufacturers relied on imported southern and eastern Europeans rather than hiring southern blacks.

Long employed in the agricultural sector, immigrants since the 1970s have become a major presence in other industries that have reorganized to take advantage of

cheap labor and undermine union wage scales. A prominent example is the meatpacking industry, which has replaced U.S. workers with Mexicans and Southeast Asians at far lower pay. The chronic oversupply of labor from south of the border has kept farm wages low and obstructed successful labor organizing. The low-wage economy of border towns like El Paso is also partially explained by heavy immigration flows. El Paso, which has grown rapidly in macro terms, is for the most part a low-wage, labor-intensive treadmill with high unemployment, earnings a third lower than the national average, and twice the national poverty rate. Low-skill workers, particularly recent immigrants and blacks, are among the most common casualties of this process. But they are not the only ones. The 1990 expansion slots for high-skill immigrants have contributed to rising levels of unemployment in the U.S. for engineers, computer programmers, and Ph.Ds in technical fields.

Immigration also has implications for U.S. population growth, environmental protection, and the demand for new infrastructure. In the 1970s the U.S. population was approaching stability at less than 250 million around the year 2030. Currently, immigration (including new arrivals and their children) accounts for an increase of about 1.5 million more people a year, which represents more than half of total U.S. population growth. At current levels of immigration, the U.S. population will approach 400 million by the year 2050. If immigration is reduced to half the current level, the U.S. population would still approach 350 million by that year. Given the voracity with which U.S. residents consume a disproportionate share of the world's resources, the accelerated growth of this population is far more troubling than that of third world residents, who consume so much less.

Immigration's fiscal costs and contributions are hotly debated. Rice University economist Donald Huddle argues that, in 1994, legal and illegal immigration drained \$51 billion more in social welfare and job displacement costs than immigrants paid in taxes. But according to the Urban Institute, immigrants contribute \$25-30 billion more in taxes than they receive in services. Clearly immigrants are stressing the social infrastructure in some states. But cutting them off from hospital care, schooling, and assistance creates conditions of destitution that are even more costly to address—apart from the ethical issues such action poses.

Key Problems

- Stricter border controls have proved unable to stem illegal immigration flows, leading instead to rising human rights abuses and victimization of border-crossers.
- Immigration clearly contributes to a downward pressure on wage levels and to decreased job availability in certain economic sectors.
- Many refugees fleeing repressive governments and violent political situations find themselves rejected by Washington.

IPS/IRC Conference on Immigration Policy

Given the highly controversial character of the immigration issue, the IPS and the IRC are planning a conference on immigration policy for late 1997. We would also like to hear your opinions about the policy recommendations offered in this *Foreign Policy In Focus*. Write directly to the IPS or the IRC, and share your thoughts with our In Focus discussion group (see <http://www.zianet.com/infocus> for instructions on how to subscribe to and address this group).

The implications of the trends regarding immigrant rights are troubling. The lure of jobs, higher wages, and better living standards is drawing immigrants into situations where U.S. citizens increasingly perceive the protection of immigrant rights as undermining their own. This means that politicians can attract votes by promising to fortify the Mexican border, even if such measures only exact a higher price from border-crossers without significantly altering the flow.

The quandaries of policing borders have generated support for a national worker identity card. Including a photograph and perhaps a fingerprint, the national identity card would be much harder to falsify than current forms of documentation. If issued to legal residents, authorized temporary workers, and U.S. citizens, the card would enable enforcement of sanctions against employers who hire illegal immigrants. It would remove the main incentive for illegal immigration by rendering anyone who didn't have a card unemployable.

Opposing the identity card is a broad alliance of liberals and conservatives, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to the National Rifle Association, backed by employers who do not wish to see enforceable sanctions.

The jobs/benefits debate has highlighted the fact that the number of legal immigrants is three times the number of undocumented immigrants and that legal immigrants have a correspondingly greater impact—hence the proposals in the 1996 Congress to slash legal immigration to as low as 235,000 a year. This figure would approach the level favored by those arguing for replacement level immigration (the same number as those leaving the U.S.). Proposals to reduce quotas were defeated in 1996, but legislation was approved to bolster the

strength of the U.S. Border Patrol, expedite deportation proceedings, stiffen the penalties for document fraud, and hold sponsors financially responsible for immigrants who become public charges.

Immigrant labor is, of course, not the main reason for deteriorating wage levels, job opportunities, and labor conditions for U.S. workers. For example, corporations

pit workers against each other by threatening to move production to lower-wage locations if their employees make demands. But if current immigration levels are indeed contributing to the transformation of the U.S. into a low-wage economy, then a new immigration policy is in order.

If the labor argument outlined in this policy brief withstands scrutiny, then first on the list of reforms should be the current definition of family unification—a policy that leads to chain immigration and should be restricted to spouses and children. Following closely should be a drastic reduction in job skills-based immigration, most of which simply provides an opportunity for businesses to pay foreigners less than what they would have to pay current residents.

With respect to humanitarian admissions, national preferences should be eliminated to admit everyone who can demonstrate that they are victims of individualized persecution. To address illegal immigration, labor advocates and policymakers should give serious consideration to the national worker identification card. Backed by rigorous enforcement of labor laws, such cards would deflate the political pressure for militarizing the Mexican border. Such protections of the U.S. job market should, however, be accompanied by a foreign policy that contributes to broad-based development in low-income countries.

A new immigration policy should do the following:

- Stress ethical and humanitarian objectives by giving priority to refugees fleeing from persecution.
- Streamline and restructure provisional work programs that open the U.S. to temporary workers who take jobs that U.S. residents don't want, while guaranteeing the basic rights of these workers to organize and receive worker benefits such as unemployment compensation.
- Protect the most vulnerable economic sectors from an influx of low-wage competition.
- Lower legal immigration flows to sustainable levels.
- Protect the basic human rights of all U.S. residents, legal or not.

David Stoll is the author of Is Latin America Turning Protestant? and Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala. An anthropologist, he is also interested in the labor implications of immigration.

Key Recommendations

- First on the list of reform should be the current definition of family unification—a policy that leads to chain immigration and should be restricted to spouses and children—followed closely by a drastic reduction in job skills-based immigration.
- In humanitarian admissions, national preferences should be eliminated to admit everyone who can demonstrate that they are victims of individual persecution.
- Labor advocates and policymakers should give serious consideration to the national worker identification card. Backed by rigorous enforcement of labor laws, such cards would deflate the political pressure for militarizing the Mexican border.

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

Editors
Martha Honey (IPS)
Tom Barry (IRC)

Production
Grant Moser

Communications Director
Erik Leaver (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506
Phone: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor	IPS Editor
Phone: (505) 388-0208	Phone: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
Fax: (505) 388-0619	Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org	Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org
Website: http://www.zianet.com/infocus	

sources for more information

Organizations

Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law

256 S Occidental Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90057
Voice: (213) 388-8693
Fax: (213) 386-9484

Center for Immigration Studies

1815 H Street NW, Suite 1010
Washington, DC 20006.
(Publishers of *Immigration Review*)

National Immigrant Law Center

1102 South Crenshaw Blvd., Suite 101
Los Angeles, CA 90019
Voice: (213) 938-6452
Fax: (213) 964-7940

National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

310 8th Street, Suite 307
Oakland, CA 94607
Voice: (510) 465-1984
Fax: (510) 465-1885
Email: nnirr@igc.apc.org

U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform

2430 E Street
South Building
Washington, DC 20037
Voice: (202) 776-8400
Fax: (202) 776-8635

Publications:

Roy Beck, *The Case Against Immigration* (New York: Norton, 1996)

Leon Bouvier and Scipio Garling, *A Tale of Ten Cities: Immigration's Effect on the Family Environment in American Cities* (Washington, DC: Federation for American Immigration Reform, 1995).

Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, *Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight* (Urban Institute).

John Isbister, *The Immigration Debate: Remaking America* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996)

David A. Jaeger, "Skill Differences and the Effect of Immigrants on the Wages of Natives," Working Paper 273 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor: March 1996).

Julian Simon, *Immigration: The Demographic and Economic Facts* (Washington, DC: The Cato Institute and the National Immigration Forum, 1995).

World Wide Web

List of Internet Immigration Organizations

<ftp://heather.cs.ucdavis.edu/pub/immigration/index.html>

American Civil Liberties Union

<http://www.aclu.org/issues/immigrant/hmir.html>

American Immigration Lawyers Association

<http://aila.org/home.htm>

Federation for American Immigration Reform

<http://www.fairus.org/>

Urban Institute

<http://www.urban.org/hotopics.htm#immigration>

U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform

<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/uscir/>

U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service

<http://www.usdoj.gov/ins/textonly/index.html>

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Phone: (505) 842-8288 ♦ Fax: (505) 246-1601 ♦ Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org