

Is Immigration an American Strength? Voices of Representatives of Immigrant Societies, Local Governments, and Non-Profit Organizations.

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“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

From Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus,” engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty

Immigration benefits our communities

The United States is a culturally rich nation, shaped by its history and tradition of immigration, which enriches our culture with new faces, languages, traditions, expertise, food, and ways of life. Immigrants and refugees arrive for many reasons, and with them, they bring new ideas and perspectives that increase our productivity and enhance our understanding of the world.

Immigration revitalizes our communities. In our congregations, membership growth among the U.S. population is stagnant. Immigrants enrich our congregations with different perspectives and ideas regarding worship. Helping immigrants and refugees integrate into U.S. society also provides a way for people of faith to follow the commandments of welcoming the stranger, loving one another, and providing for those less fortunate. Immigration allows rich opportunities for children to learn about different countries and cultures, which improves their understanding of the world around them and expands their opportunities for connecting with others.

Immigration benefits the U.S. economy

Immigration is also economically beneficial to the United States. There are historical precedents of encouraging immigrant labor to the United States, such as the seasonal guest worker programs in the mid-20th century. From the late 1940s through the 1970s, the U.S. government encouraged Puerto Ricans to migrate to the United States for seasonal agricultural work.¹ The same can be said for the Chinese during railroad construction and the Irish during industrialization. For many of these individuals and families, migration for economic improvement remains a primary method of survival. Since immigrants also purchase goods and services and pay taxes, they contribute to an increase in revenue and overall economic growth. If we foster equitable working conditions and enact sound immigration policies, immigrants will increasingly benefit our economy

While the demands for labor and refuge have invited these immigrants to the United States, many of them have unfortunately received an unfriendly welcome from the very immigrants who came before them. Immigrants are often blamed for low wages; even though we know lower wages are due mostly to competition in the international market.² Increased immigration actually tends to give low- to middle-class workers a boost as they become supervisors of migrant workers. As the U.S. birthrate declines, the

¹ Pérez, Ricardo, “Unbound Households: Trajectories of Labor, Migration, and Transnational Livelihoods in (and from) Southern Puerto Rico” in Trager, Lillian (ed.), *Migration and Economy: Global and Local Dynamics*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, pp. 62.

² Abraham, Spencer and Lee H. Hamilton, Report of the Independent Task Force on Immigration and America’s Future, *Immigration and America’s Future: A New Chapter*, Migration Policy Institute, September 2006, pp. 11.

population grows older, baby-boomers exit the workforce, and U.S. citizens become more educated, there is an increasing need for low-skilled labor. Many immigrants help fill these gaps when they arrive, and as they continue life in the United States, move up toward more skilled professions. In addition to low-skilled labor, many immigrants meet the heavy demand for high-skilled labor in U.S. business. In order solve labor shortages and compete internationally, many economists hold that immigration will need to increase substantially.³

Detrimental restrictions on immigration

Despite the cultural and economic benefits, we in the United States do not always welcome the stranger as we should. Legal restrictions have made it more difficult for immigrants and refugees to come to the United States and to integrate into society. Highly restrictive immigration caps are harmful both to immigrants and to the U.S. economy. Such caps allow no more than seven percent of annual worldwide visas to originate from one country. This can create long delays for immigrants. For example, a U.S. citizen sponsoring an unmarried child from Mexico may face a delay of up to 14 years. Siblings of U.S. citizens from the Philippines may have to wait up to 23 years. This also means that employers may wait up to seven years for needed labor while potential employees are prohibited from entry, which wastes valuable productive years. Skilled workers and professionals who have jobs may have to wait five years for a visa Only 5,000 visas are available worldwide each year for low-skilled workers, yet each year an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 undocumented workers enter and are absorbed into the US labor force. This fact highlights the unmet demand for migrant labor, and the need for our immigration system to be reformed so that workers who seek to contribute to our country can enter legally rather than having to resort to illegal entry and thus be subject to worker exploitation.

The problems of category caps and limited work visas are exacerbated by a long and complicated process, hefty fees, and bureaucratic delays. Many applications must pass through three agencies: Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Labor, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the Department of State. Each agency has its own applications, processing requirements, information tracking systems, fees, and backlogs.⁴ The inefficiencies of these systems encourage undocumented immigration for thousands of families, workers and employers who cannot afford the wait times and economic costs of the current legal process.

Restrictions on entry have recently increased. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 allowed immigration inspectors at U.S. airports and borders to order the immediate deportation of anyone who arrives in the United States without proper documents. Under this law, asylum seekers fleeing persecution are not supposed to be deported. However, many asylum seekers arrive without documentation because it cannot be obtained during the flight for their lives. These vulnerable asylum seekers are frequently detained, often for long periods of time, and some have been deported against international law.

The asylum system, like the overall immigration system, is also wrought with inefficiency. It is a long and complicated process, and success for the applicant may depend more on a particular judge than on the solidity of a case. For example, a recent study released by the Transitional Records Access Clearinghouse

³ Castles, Stephen and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 3rd ed., New York, The Guilford Press, 2003, pp. 282.

⁴ Abraham, Spencer and Lee H. Hamilton, Report of the Independent Task Force on Immigration and America's Future, *Immigration and America's Future: A New Chapter*, Migration Policy Institute, September 2006, pp. 22.

at Syracuse University showed that between 2001 and 2006, two judges in a New York courthouse granted more than 90 percent of asylum applications while another judge denied more than 90 percent.⁵

Provisions in the 2001 Patriot Act and the 2005 Real ID Act prevent the admission of many refugees as well. According to these provisions, any refugee or asylum seeker who provided “material support,” such as money, shelter, food, or clothing to any “terrorist” organization is barred from refuge. However, this bar still holds when aid was given under duress - at gunpoint or as an appeasement made to save the life of one’s child. These bills also broadly defined a “terrorist” as anyone who has taken up arms against his own government has barred pro-democracy freedom fighters. These have included the Karen National Union in Burma, Cubans who fought with U.S. troops in the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Hmong in Laos, and even the Montagnards in Vietnam who fought with U.S. forces during the Vietnam conflict. In the past year, waivers have permitted the resettlement of some refugees, particularly the Burmese, but not all refugee groups have received waivers any many still await relief.⁶

Inhumane treatment of immigrants

The treatment of refugees and immigrants in the United States is often inhumane, falling short of international standards. Asylum seekers are frequently placed in detention – the only instance currently in the U.S. in which persons are imprisoned prior to being charged with a crime. Husbands are separated from wives, and children from parents. Asylum seekers, who have already faced traumatizing events, tend to suffer from high levels of depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome that worsen the longer they remain in detention. There are no limits to the length of detention. Asylum seekers are detained at ports of entry for not having valid documents upon fleeing from an oppressive regime. Sometimes those with proper documents in hand are also detained if they intend to seek protection immediately.⁷ As many as 33,000 foreign-born persons were held in immigration detention on any given day in 2007 including 3,000 asylum seekers and 7,000 children – more than 300,000 altogether.⁸

Detention facilities are inadequate in maintaining basic standards of human rights. The 2005 U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report concluded that detention facilities are, in virtually all respects, prisons. In addition to being denied basic civil liberties, those in detention often do not receive basic and necessary social services. From 2004 to mid-2007, 81 foreign nationals died in detention, and while many of them suffered from health problems, at least seven were suicides. The ACLU has also reported “severe and widespread problems with access to chronic and emergency medical care.”⁹ Furthermore, the conditions in detention facilities are not held to specific standards, and most lack adequate medical care, nutrition guidelines, legal access, religious services, and education for detained children.

Remittances: a tie to development work

As this is a conference on development, it is also important to address the effects of immigration on development. Remittances are of particular interest. The effects of remittances in international

⁵ USCRI World Refugee Survey 2008, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2177>

⁶ USCRI World Refugee Survey 2008, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2177>

⁷ Physicians for Human Rights and the Bellevue/NYU Center for Survivors of Torture, *From Persecution to Prison: The Health Consequences of Detention for Asylum Seekers*, 2002, pp. 55-86.

⁸ USCRI World Refugee Survey 2008, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=2177>

⁹ Ibid.

development have not been widely studied, but they should be. They add upwards of billions of dollars to developing countries each year, and remittance payments often exceed official development assistance. In 2006, immigrants in the United States sent approximately \$300 billion to their families in developing countries.¹⁰ This is about three times as much as the United States provided in official development assistance and aid payments for that year.¹¹ While much of remittance money is used for immediate needs, a significant portion is invested. Remittances often end up in the hands of poor people instead of corrupt government bureaucrats.¹² Thus, poor people gain power over resources and can use this money to improve their economic and social conditions without the “fixed costs” of startup, hiring, publicity, fundraising, etc. necessitated by more official means of development. Empowering the poor to make their own decisions concerning resource management is a primary goal of development, and if migration helps the poor achieve this goal, we should encourage it – not only for the good of the developing world, but for the increased efficiency of U.S. development policies.

Rather than spending lots of time and money trying to prevent migrants from entering the United States and trying to find and deport them, the focus should shift toward extending protections to immigrants and refugees. Immigrants have to deal with adjustment to a new culture, and they may be separated from family and friends for years or even decades. Immigrants are underpaid, overworked, and treated poorly. They may be forced to live in miserable conditions, completely cut off from social services available to citizens. Despite these drawbacks, millions of people choose to immigrate to the United States. For many people, the real or perceived advantages clearly outweigh the possible risks. And when immigrants arrive, they bring with them their unique skills and knowledge, new ways of thinking, and a desire to work hard and provide a better life for their children. The benefits immigrants provide should be met with the services they need to become full members of our communities and continue to contribute their new homes. Immigrants and refugees, as well as native workers, need to be guaranteed fair treatment and wages. Immigrants and refugees need access to health care and other social services, such as English-language classes. Immigrants and refugees should not be treated like criminals, languishing in prison without access to trial or representation.

Barriers to integration

In addition to obstacles that often prevent immigrants and refugees from coming to the United States or living freely once they arrive, it is also frequently difficult for immigrants to integrate into society. Language barriers make it difficult for newcomers to find work and to become acquainted with others. English classes around the United States have waiting lists as long as three years due to under funding and a lack of emphasis both on the local and national level. Traditionally, integration has happened at a local level, aided by employers, schools, churches, and other community groups. However, in recent years states have begun to pass laws that hinder these efforts. For example, in Arizona and Colorado, state benefits including non-emergency health care are denied to undocumented residents.¹³ The denial of basic social services to immigrants and refugees makes integration very challenging, not only on face value, but also because such policies promote disunity, discrimination, and other community tensions.

¹⁰ “Sending Money Home: Worldwide Remittance Flows to Developing and Transition Countries” IFAD report based on research by Dr. Manuel Orozco, Inter-American Dialogue, December 2007, www.ifad.org/events/remittances/maps/brochure.pdf

¹¹ The World Bank, World Development Indicators Database, April 2008, http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports/ViewSharedReport?REPORT_ID=9147&REQUEST_TYPE=VIEWADVANCED&WSP=N&HF=N/CPProfile.asp

¹² Eversole, Robyn, ‘Direct to the Poor’ Revisited: Migrant Remittances and Development Assistance” in Trager, Lillian (ed.), *Migration and Economy: Global and Local Dynamics*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, pp. 295-96.

¹³ “The Wrong Side of History” *The Economist*, July 13, 2006.

Another barrier to integration is fear on the community level. Undocumented immigrants are often afraid to even leave their homes due to local police acting as immigration officials, which makes people afraid to report crime and thus decreases community safety. Similarly, even lawful permanent residents can be subject to detention and deportation. Violations that qualify as misdemeanors for U.S. citizens, such as the possession of marijuana or the purchase of stolen jewelry, are considered aggravated felonies and thus deportable offenses for legal immigrants. Children brought here when they were infants face a particularly steep obstacle in integration. Due to Congress's failure to pass immigration reform legislation allowing these children to earn their legal status and thus be able to attend college and pursue their dreams, these children are faced with the choice between remaining with their families here in the United States to pursue under-the-counter work, or traveling to a country that is no more home to them than a memory. These legal issues prove problematic for the much needed emphasis on immigrant integration.

Not only are these issues confusing for newcomers, but native-born citizens also might be unfamiliar with laws concerning immigrants and refugees. For example, due to the complications of various immigration visas, employers may not be aware that refugees are legally permitted to work in the United States. In 1986, Congress passed legislation making it illegal for employers to hire immigrants who are not authorized to work. Not only is this detrimental to undocumented immigrants, but also to documented immigrants, refugees and employers. Employers may choose to avoid hiring anyone who is not a U.S. citizen, rather than risk breaking the law, thus encouraging the use of racial profiling.¹⁴ Racial profiling, in turn, can lead to unemployment, during which learning English may not be a priority as one seeks to feed one's family.

In order to help immigrants and refugees integrate into society, communities need to provide access to social services. English-language acquisition is particularly important. Without English, newcomers are unable to effectively communicate with most U.S. citizens, which makes it difficult to perform even simple tasks such as buying groceries, finding jobs, or taking classes to learn new skills. While English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are available in many locations around the country, they are in short supply. Funding for adult education programs has decreased in recent years, and the U.S. Department of Education estimated that nearly a third of adult education classes had waitlists in 2001-2002.¹⁵ Often these waitlists can be as long as three years.

Many immigrants desire to naturalize but lack the access to do so. The U.S. immigration system should empower them to achieve their goal of becoming U.S. citizens by providing financial support to state and local governments and community organizations that offer language and civics education, outreach, and naturalization application assistance. Citizenship should be made more affordable by reducing naturalization fees and making fee waivers more easily accessible. Moreover, processing of application backlogs and security checks should be streamlined to reduce waiting times. These initiatives would help integrate motivated immigrants into society, educate them about democratic principles, and engage them in the civic process.

¹⁴ Abraham, Spencer and Lee H. Hamilton, Report of the Independent Task Force on Immigration and America's Future, *Immigration and America's Future: A New Chapter*, Migration Policy Institute, September 2006, pp. 20.

¹⁵ Pope, Justin, "Want to Learn English? Get in Line" The Associated Press: April 22, 2006, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/22/national/main1534730.shtml>

The need for political leadership

Many politicians have heard from a very loud minority that we should decrease immigration to the United States. Most of these sentiments are motivated by an “us” vs. “them” mentality of those who fear people who are in some way different than them. While it is unfortunate that many in the U.S. forget that they or their ancestors were immigrants, the stakes are higher than just a few people denying the needed benefits of immigration. Congress has failed to pass immigration reform, and it now seems as though Congress wants to sidestep the issue of immigration altogether. It has become clear that Congress does not understand the economic and social impacts that decreasing immigration would have on our country, nor the benefits and true necessity of increasing immigration to the United States. Refusing to reform our broken immigration system to allow more immigrants to enter would have many negative repercussions on our country; continuing a broken system will also have negative effects. We need humane, equitable reform that solves our economic and social needs by increasing immigration and welcoming immigrants once they arrive. It is our collective duty to educate Congress and those around us about the need for increased immigration and humane, equitable immigration policies. Congress needs to take leadership on this issue and enact legislation that decreases visa application backlogs, authorizes an increased number of visas, prioritizes family unity, ensures the rights of all workers, and provides a pathway to earned legal status and eventual citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

Our government and communities need to recognize the valuable contributions of immigrants and refugees, and the humanitarian imperative to welcome the stranger. Only then can the United States fully realize its potential as a nation of immigrants. Immigration reform must make the United States a strength for immigrants, as immigration undoubtedly brings economic, social, cultural, and spiritual strength to America.