

MANAGING GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

The Impacts of Immigration in U.S. Cities and Towns

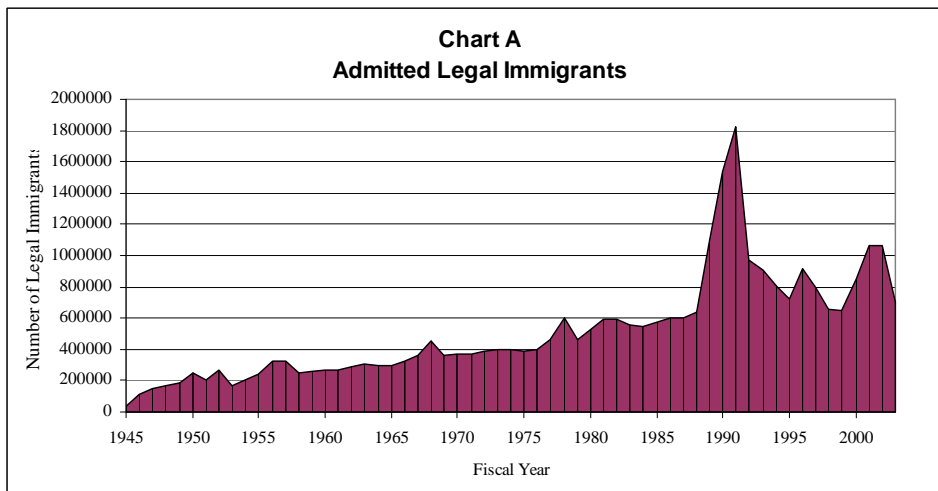
The U.S. is currently experiencing the greatest wave of both legal and illegal immigration in its history, and the destinations of immigrants are becoming increasingly diverse and nationwide. While immigration policy is formulated and enforced on the federal level, its effects are realized on the local level.

Q: Who is able to enter the U.S. legally?

The largest numbers of legal immigrants entering the U.S. fall into four main categories: (1) immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, which encompass only parents, spouses, and unmarried children under the age of 21, (2) family-sponsored preferences, including all other familial relations such as married children and siblings, (3) employment-based preferences, which may include individuals such as exceptional academicians, multinational executives, highly-skilled workers or those employed in an area identified as experiencing slow growth, and (4) refugees. Immigrants of immediate relatives have no numerical cap, and as a result, immediate relatives have been the single largest category of immigrants since 1986, excluding those immigrants who were granted amnesty under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986.

Q: How large is the current legal immigration wave?

Compared to the historical patterns, immigration is occurring in record numbers, as depicted in the chart below.



The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 granted amnesty to three million undocumented aliens who arrived in the U.S. before a cut-off date of January 1, 1982. The practical effects of this law were realized in the early 1990s.

The most recent decline in legal immigration (a decline of 34% from 2002 to 2003) is a result of more stringent security checks affecting application processing. In addition, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has experienced an application backlog. In 2003, the backlog was on the scale of 1,200 applications.

Q: Where are legal immigrants coming from?

The source countries for legal immigrants have shifted from developed to primarily developing countries. The primary regions of origins for legal immigrants for 2000-2003 were Mexico and Asia. In 2003, 35 percent and 36 percent of all legal immigrants were admitted from these regions, respectively. In 2003, the leading countries of origin were Mexico (115,864), India (50,372), the Philippines (45,397), China (40,659), and El Salvador (28,296). Combined, these countries accounted for 40% of legal immigrants.

Q: What are the primary destinations of legal immigrants?

The primary destinations for immigrants, consistent since 1971, are California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. In 2003, these six states accounted for 63% of all legal immigrants. The pattern of immigration reflects chain migration – a situation where recent immigrants enter the U.S. already having a target destination, often influenced by the presence of family members.

There is also a trend of increased immigration to suburbs instead of central cities. According to a study by the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy at the Brookings Institute (Feb 2004), more immigrants lived in suburbs than central cities by 2000, and the growth rates of immigrants in suburbs surpassed those in central cities. Suburban regions in states such as Colorado, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina are becoming major destinations for immigrants because they represent the centers for job creation.

Q: What is known about illegal immigration?

A January 2000 Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) report estimated that roughly 7.0 million illegal aliens currently resided in the U.S., 69% of whom are from Mexico. The INS reports a steady and continuing increase in illegal immigrants. The Center for Immigration Studies, a non-profit research organization, estimates that in March 2004 there were upwards of 9 million illegal aliens in the U.S.

Q: Are illegal immigrants aggregated in border states?

No. Traditionally viewed as a problem for border states, illegal immigration is becoming a national issue geographically. Out of the top ten states with the highest illegal immigration population, only four (California, New York, Texas and Arizona) share an international border. The ten states with the highest illegal immigration population are: California (2,209,000), Texas (1,041,000), New York (498,000), Illinois (432,000), Florida (337,000), Arizona (283,000), Georgia (228,000), New Jersey (21,000), North Carolina (206,000), and Colorado (144,000).

Q: What is the skill level of recent immigrants, both legal and illegal?

With a shift of immigrant origins from developed to developing nations and a large influx of illegal immigrants, the average skill levels of incoming immigrants has declined. Gordon Hanson, Professor of Economics at the University of California San Diego, argues that “in contrast to their predecessors, many of today’s immigrants enter with skill levels far below those of the typical U.S. worker.” This trend implies that immigrants are more likely to be employed in low-skill, low-wage jobs.

Q: Are there proposals to address immigration reform?

There are a number of immigration reform proposals.

- Some proposals treat immigration purely as a law enforcement issue. Under such proposals, state and local law enforcement personnel would be mandated to participate in the enforcement of immigration laws while in the course of their local public safety duties. The NLC Policy and Advocacy Committees on Public Safety and on Human Development oppose such a mandate.
- Creation of a temporary guest workers program, matching foreign workers with willing U.S. employers when no natives can be found to fill the jobs, is another plan which has been put forward. Such guest worker proposals generally do not offer a blanket amnesty to undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. Other guest worker proposals allow for undocumented workers who have paid a fee and met other requirements to gain legal status and eventually citizenship after six years.

Q: How is the current immigration trend affecting localities?

- Social Impacts. Immigration introduces a natural social tension in communities through cultural and linguistic differences. For example, Danbury, Conn., has a large influx of Brazilian and Ecuadorian immigrants that have been attracted to the combination of cheap housing and service jobs in the region. The local schools serve children speaking more than forty languages. Existing residents have complained about the large gatherings by Ecuadorans at volleyball courts built in neighborhoods which attract crowds late into the evening. Municipal governments are compelled to deal with the issues of public safety, social harmony, employment, and education.
- Economic Impacts. The economic effect of immigration results in an overall societal benefit by preventing a stagnant economy and increasing the labor pool. Immigration economist and Harvard University Professor George Borjas points out that enlarging the labor force allows for a more efficient utilization of U.S. resources, technology, and capital. However, the benefits of immigration are not evenly distributed. Specific groups who are economically hurt by immigration are low-wage workers and teenagers; individuals who are more likely to compete with immigrants for jobs.

Q: What are some law enforcement implications of the current immigration trends?

There are three main law enforcement implications to the present immigration wave.

- Day Laborers. In response to the unorganized gathering of day laborers, many local governments have begun to create day laborer centers. In 2000, a National Day Laborer Organizing Network (www.ndlon.org) was founded for the express purpose of encouraging the creation of day laborer centers around the U.S.
- Consular Identity Cards. Some foreign countries, most notably Mexico, have a practice of issuing consular identity cards to its citizens. Some local governments are recognizing these Mexican-issued consular identity cards, known as a Matricula, as a valid form of identification. While intended to be issued to legal immigrants, these identity cards are subject to counterfeiting and are then used to obtain valid identification (such as a driver's license) in the U.S. Local police often accept these cards as valid ID, thus protecting illegal aliens from background checks and fingerprinting for minor infractions.
- Homeland Security. The influx of illegal immigrants has resulted in direct impacts for border states, which experience environmental damage and political tension as citizen groups attempt to patrol the borders in efforts to call federal attention to the need for more border patrols. In addition, as the events of 9/11 reflect, the porous nature of the U.S. borders is part of a larger security issue with implications for all local governments.

Federal law enforcement agencies are seeking to co-opt local governments into policing illegal immigrants. In fact, two states, Alabama and Florida, have entered into Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with the federal government, which create a law enforcement role for state and local police on the issue of federal immigration policy.

The NLC Policy and Advocacy Committees on Public Safety and on Human Development do not support or encourage the negotiation of MOUs. State and local enforcement of federal immigration policy causes a myriad of problems, in breaking the relationship of trust between local government officials and the community, in draining local resources to carry out federal responsibility, and in confusing the priorities of local law enforcement by emphasizing federal needs over local ones.

Q: What are cities doing in response to immigration challenges?

Two case studies illustrate specific ways localities have responded to immigration issues.

Chandler, Ariz. The Arizona Valley, containing communities such as Chandler, is facing a day laborer problem. Unemployed immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, line the streets and neighborhoods, waiting for contractors to come hire them on a day-by-day basis. These gatherings often disturb and unsettle existing residents and also block traffic flow. As a result, cities, such as Chandler, have supported the creation of day laborer centers.

While some day laborer centers are partially or fully publicly funded, Chandler supported the creation of a privately-run day laborer center in May 2003.

The success of this day laborer center has been mixed. While the center has not been successful in preventing day laborer gatherings along streets, the approximately 25 to 30 men who do utilize the day laborer center are all able to get jobs. Chandler does not inquire about the immigration status of those who use the center noting that immigration is a federal policy that requires federal enforcement.

Clearwater, Fla. The 2000 Census found Hispanics and Latinos account for nine percent of the Clearwater population of 109,000, and the figure is up three percent in just the last ten years. Responding to the surging minority population, the police department and the Tampa Bay YMCA founded Operacion Apoyo Hispano. The program serves the Hispanic community, addressing concerns from crime to social and economic opportunity and connecting bilingual police officers and citizens. Looking for a one-stop center for Hispanics, the police department of Clearwater opened a Hispanic Outreach Center in 2002. The Center provides bilingual childcare, education services, and language classes.

For its proactive efforts in reaching out to the immigrant community to establish bonds of trust and methods of communication, the city of Clearwater and City Manager William B. Horne received the 2003 ICMA Public Safety Program Excellence Award.

Q. What questions should be addressed to municipal staff on this topic?

- Does your community have a plan to help assimilate new immigrants?
- How many municipal staff members, especially first-responders, have foreign language skills?
- Which civic organizations in the community are providing assistance to immigrants?

This paper was prepared by the International Programs staff at the National League of Cities. For more information on related topics contact James Brooks at (202) 626-3163, by E-mail at brooks@nlc.org or visit the International Programs pages of the NLC website at www.nlc.org.