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Immigration Policy and Human Resource
Development

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CAHRS Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies

Research Highlight

Immigration Policy and Human Resource Development

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As the 20th Century closes, the United States is in the midst of the numerically largest immigration inflow in its history. As of 1997, the foreign-born population totaled 25.8 million persons (or 9.7 percent of the population). As shown in Table 1, only 32 years earlier, the foreign-born population totaled only 8.6 million persons (or 4.4 percent of the population). Prior to 1965, immigration had been of declining significance to the growth of the U.S. population and labor force for 50 years. The revival of the phenomenon of mass immigration from out of the nation's past was an accidental by-product of the Immigration Act of 1965. The goal was to purge the system of its overtly discriminatory features, not to increase the scale of immigration. It ended up doing both.

Immigration is an instrument of policy making that functions solely at the discretion of the U.S. Congress. No foreign-born person has the right legally to enter, to work, or to seek refuge in the country without the explicit permission of the federal government. With this authority comes the implied duty to design and enforce an immigration policy that conforms to the best interests of the United States. For as Napoleon once said, "policy is destiny."

Population projections made by both the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Research Council in 1995 show that, if existing immigration policies remain in place, immigration will account for two-thirds of the anticipated population growth of between 124 and 131 million people that will occur by 2050. Immigration, which is currently accounting for about 40 percent of annual population growth, is in the process of becoming

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the dominant influence on the nation's human resource development. Two national commissions established by Congress since 1965 have strongly criticized prevailing immigration policy and offered significant recommendations for changes. Independent research findings have confirmed that extant immigration policy is not serving the national interest. Public opinion polls consistently indicate that most Americans want extensive reforms. But because immigration policy has been captured by a powerful coalition of special interest groups who have selfish private agendas, reform efforts have languished. As a consequence, immigration policy has been allowed to function without accountability for its economic consequences.

Because the foreign-born population is composed of more men than

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Year	Foreign Born Population (Millions)	Percentage of U.S. Population that is Foreign Born
1965	8.6	4.4
1970	9.6	4.7
1980	14.0	6.2
1990	19.8	7.9
1997	25.8	9.7

TABLE 1 Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

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women and it is younger than the native-born population, the impact of immigration on the U.S. labor force is greater than is revealed by population statistics. In 1997, foreign-born workers accounted for 11.5 percent of the labor force (or almost one of every eight U.S. workers). Even this high percentage must be viewed as a minimal figure because of the undercount of illegal immigrants. The most significant labor market characteristic of the foreign-born labor work force, however, is not its size but its composition. It is disproportionately dominated by workers with little human capital. The 1990 Census revealed that 25 percent of foreign-born adults had less than a ninth-grade education (compared with only 10 percent of native-born adults). Moreover, 42 percent of the foreign-born adult population did not have the equivalent of a high school diploma (compared to 23 percent of the native-born adults). Not only do low-skilled immigrants compete with each other for whatever opportunities exist at the bottom of the nation's job hierarchy, but they also compete with the sizable number of low-skilled native-born workers.

In 1997, 25 percent of the foreign-born labor force were employed in the occupations of laborers, farm workers, and operatives while an additional 20 percent were employed in low-skilled personal service occupations. The unemployment rate of foreign-born workers in 1997 was 7.4 percent, whereas the national rate was 4.9 percent. The unemployment rate for foreign-born workers with less than a high school education was 9.8 percent and it was 14.5 percent for such native-born workers. Consequently, immigration's greatest impact is upon the least skilled segment of the labor force that is already having the greatest difficulty finding employment.

Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that immigration is a significant contributor to a host of societal ills — such as, the incidence of poverty, widening income disparity, school dropout rates, child healthcare inadequacies, crime rates, school desegregation, and adult illiteracy to mention only a few. It's not surprising that immigration has become a significant fiscal burden in those states and urban areas where it has occurred. Increasingly, these states and localities have sought to have the federal government assume more of these costs so that all Americans are being asked to bear the burdens.

The difference between mass immigration at the beginning of the 21st Century and its resumption at its ending is the nature of the labor market. In earlier times, the U.S. was experiencing rapid growth in the blue-collar occupations in the expanding goods-producing industries. The need was primarily for manual work. Skills,

education, and the ability to speak English were unimportant. Today, blue-collar employment in goods-producing industries has fallen dramatically. The greatest needs are for workers who possess knowledge, skills, education, and the ability to speak English. The demand for labor has changed over time, but the characteristics of the supply of immigrants has not.

To be sure, not all immigrants today lack human capital. Indeed, there are many immigrants with skills and high levels of education (albeit considerably fewer than those lacking such attributes). Indeed, there is evidence that the scale of their presence has been enough to tamper-down the pressure for higher wages in certain skilled occupations that would otherwise have occurred. For skilled native born job seekers, of course, this result is not considered a "benefit." It is also misuse of public policy because it discourages native-born workers from preparing for such vocations. In the process, it raises concerns that the alleged shortage of such native-born skilled workers is a self-fulfilling prophecy. But many employers consider access to skilled foreign-born workers a "benefit," and some consider it a necessity. The irony is that many employers have had to resort to the use of temporary foreign workers on restricted visas (e.g., H-1B workers) because the extant legal immigration system is skewed largely to favor the admission of those with family connections to U.S. citizens and permanent resident aliens. Thus, the entry of many skilled foreign workers takes place despite existing immigration policy, not because of it.

Immigration reform is not going to go away. The issue will continue to fester until reforms are initiated and enforcement becomes rigorous. Eventually as its costs continue to exceed its benefits and as immigration continues to re-shape the nation's destiny, this rogue element of public policy will be reined-in. ■

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structures and disability management programs in the American workplace today.

Further information about this survey and information about on-line resources on the ADA and HR practice can be found at:

http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/projects/ADA_Projects/IEP/ ■

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