

# Illegal Immigration: Is There Reason to Worry?

*Public resentment grows despite expert opinion.*

by Richard S. Au

**T**HE RECENT AND MUCH PUBLICIZED attempts by Chinese and Haitian refugees to enter illegally into the United States have increased public resentment toward US immigrants- both legal and illegal. The problem of illegal immigration is not a new one, but it seems to have reached a new peak since the 1980s when record numbers of foreigners, mostly Mexican, slipped secretly into US territory seeking a better life. This renewed feeling of hostility towards immigrants can partially be explained by the economic slowdown that has occurred since the end of the 1980s. American workers, worried about the future of their jobs, look for someone to blame. Unfortunately the target of these frustrations has historically been the immigrant population, especially those who entered the country illegally. The United States admits the largest number of legal immigrants of any country in the world. Indeed, at 700,000 immigrants each year, the US admits more immigrants than the rest of the world combined (Griffen, 363). During the 1980s, a record nine million people immigrated to the US (Fierman, 76). As a result, many Americans feel that there are already too many people immigrating into the US. The large number of illegal immigrants entering each year only exacerbates existing tensions. But are the resentful American workers justified in their beliefs that illegal immigrants take away valuable jobs? Do they really drain the social resources that so many Americans depend upon? Most experts agree that illegal immigrants do not pose a significant threat to the economic vitality of the United States. They argue that most of the resentment originates from myths about illegal immigrants that simply do not stand up to scientific analysis. In fact, the existence of some illegal immigrants could actually help the economy to expand.

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The history of the United States is a tale of immigrants who traveled great distances to seek a better life. During the 19th century, trying to escape the revolutions and social upheavals in Europe, a large number of people left for America. The number of immigrants rose from 0.1 million in the 1820s to 5.2 million in the 1880s (Griffen, 370). The vast majority of these immigrants came from Ireland, Germany, and Italy. Congress passed in 1875 the first exclusionary act that prevented prostitutes and convicts from immigrating. In

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response to fears that immigrants were taking American jobs, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed prohibiting Chinese workers from immigrating to the US. In 1891, the Bureau of Immigration, the precursor of today's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), was created to deal with the rising number of immigrants.

Economic depression during the 1920s and 1930s and fears of too much diversity again prompted Congress to enact measures limiting the number of immigrants each year. The result was the creation of the much-criticized quota system that limited the number of new immigrants each year according to the share of the US population that the immigrant represented. This pro-European quota system favored skilled workers and immigrants whose families were already US citizens. In 1921, the maximum number of people allowed to legally immigrate comprised 3% of the number of people of that ethnic group that were living in the US at the time of

the 1910 census. This policy effectively served to exclude nationalities that traditionally comprised a minority of the population, including Asians and Eastern Europeans.

Due to labor shortages because of the Second World War in the first half of the 1940s, the United States loosened its policy to allow greater numbers of Chinese and Mexican to immigrate. In 1942, the US government initiated the Bracero program that invited some Mexicans to be "guest workers". This policy was aimed at reducing the agricultural shortages of some western states. The Chinese Exclusionary Laws were repealed mainly because China entered the war against Japan as a US ally.

In 1952, Congress passed the comprehensive Immigration and Nationality Act. The purpose of this act was to standardize a national policy of immigration to replace the haphazard policies of the past. Under this new law the national quota system was retained and the prohibitions against Asian immigration were dropped; however, the quotas for Asians remained relatively small. A system of preferences was established in which applicants were given immigration visas according to the type of work they performed and the shortage of supply in that profession in the United States. During the 1950s, the US government also initiated its first operation aimed at identifying and deporting a large number of illegal immigrants that lived along the southwestern state. "Operation Wetback" involved the relocation of 500 INS agents from the US-Canadian border to the US-Mexican border to bolster the 250 INS officers already positioned there. These federal agents combed through factories and local businesses rounding up Mexicans who did not have proper identification and sent them back to Mexico. Altogether, more than 1 million people were deported.

The Immigration Act of 1966 altered the focus of US policy by issuing a greater number of visas to family members than to skilled workers. This act retained a numerical ceiling for immigrants "but it abandoned the strong preferential treatment accorded to European countries by abandoning variable country-specific quotas and substituting uniform quotas of 20,000 visas per country for the eastern hemisphere (Rolph, 7). The removal of quotas and a pro-European bias in immigration policy resulted in dramatic increases in the number of Asian and Latin American

immigrants. Between 1951 and 1960, Asians accounted for 5% of the total number of immigrants entering the US. Between 1961 and 1980, the corresponding figure for Asians was 25% (US Department of Justice). Moreover, the act permitted the immediate family members of US citizens to enter without numerical ceilings.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw a rise in the number of illegal immigrants that lived in the United States. The Bracero program was partially responsible for this increase. Under this program, over 1,000,000 Mexican workers were given legal working permits to make up for the labor shortfall during World War II. However, after the war ended, the US government discovered that it could not keep track of all the workers, many of whom decided to remain illegally in the country after their work permits expired. The relative ease of slipping into the United States coupled with the desperate economic conditions in Mexico and the strong demand for unskilled labor in the southwestern states were the other principle reasons for the increase in illegal immigration.

As the demographic composition of immigrants entering the United States changed from a majority of Europeans to a majority of Asians and Latin Americans, so too did the demographic composition of refugees and asylum seekers. Elizabeth Rolph writes:

growing concern over the increasing numbers of refugees and asylees, illegal immigration, and the changes in the characteristics of those entering under the provisions of INA prompted both the President and Congress to authorize a number of studies and to appoint a high-level commission to review immigration policy in its entirety.

The results of these and other studies were the Refugee Act of 1980, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, and the Immigration Act of 1990.

The Refugee Act of 1980 was created to establish a national policy for dealing with refugees. The US government wanted to regain some control over the number and types of refugees admitted that it had lost during the 1970s because of the increase in refugees and the lack of a comprehensive refugee policy. This act standardized the definitions of refugees and asylees and set specific

limits to the number of applicants that could be admitted each year.

The principle purpose of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was to limit the growing numbers of illegal immigrants entering the US each year. To accomplish this objective, the IRCA adopted two different policies. First, the IRCA legalized all the illegal immigrants who had entered the US prior to 1982. It also permitted seasonal agricultural workers, called Special Agricultural Workers (SAWs), to obtain temporary work permits with the opportunity to apply for permanent visas after two years. Since 1987, the Immigration Reform and Control Act has allowed more than 3.1 million illegal aliens to obtain legal status (Griffen, 371). The purpose behind this policy was to allow the illegal aliens currently residing in the country to obtain citizen status while reducing the demand for illegal workers

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through the creation of SAWs. The second policy adopted by Washington to deal with the influx of illegal immigrants was to increase monitoring of the US-Mexican border while cracking down on businesses that hired illegal workers. Employers found guilty of hiring illegal aliens were fined \$2,000 per worker and could be jailed for repeat offenses.

On paper the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 looked it might be the answer to the illegal immigration problem, but in practice, the IRCA did not fulfill its objectives. Its failure can partially be explained by the lack of enforcement by federal officials. Although many businesses were raided for illegal workers, the lax standards outlined in the IRCA for identifying illegal immigrants resulted in few deportations and fewer arrests. The desire to increase the number of INS agents monitoring the border did not materialize due to financial constraints.

The Immigration Act of 1990 was passed by Congress in a new

attempt to deal with the inequities of existing US immigration policy. It increased the total number of visas issued per year by over 50% to 700,000. This act continued to admit an unlimited number of immediate family members of US citizens. The reason behind increasing the total number of legal immigrants was to achieve a more equitable ethnic distribution without reducing the current number of immigrants from more popular nations. While this act dramatically increased the number of legal immigrants, it failed to solve the problem of illegal immigration. In 1992, the US government announced a new plan to supplement the border patrol with additional agents and more equipment, such as lights and fences. But this plan has not prevented thousands of illegal aliens from crossing into the US each year.

#### ARE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS A BURDEN ON SOCIETY?

The public has, historically, perceived that illegal immigrants take away American jobs. In recent times, resentment against illegal immigrants living in California has created a new fear that illegal aliens act as an economic and social weight that strain government resources. The plight of Chinese immigrants that tried to land in Manhattan on the Golden Venture has also heightened fears that illegal Asian immigrants, in addition to Latin American aliens, are overwhelming US borders and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Are these beliefs supportable by scientific analysis or are they simply misperceptions fueled by ignorance? Most experts believe that the claims that illegal aliens strain public services are exaggerated. They argue that since illegal immigrants are not eligible for federal welfare and other social services, they do not drain the government's resources. Moreover, since these aliens fear deportation by US officials, they seldom file for income tax refunds. As Rodman Griffen states, "illegals come to the United States to work, not to go on welfare" (Griffen, 365). Douglas Massey, a sociologist from the University of Chicago, points out that many illegal immigrants who are unable to find jobs in the US return to their country of origin (Rohter). In fact, some studies have shown that nine out of ten illegal immigrants return to their home country (Griffen, 374).

In addition, the claim that immigrants, both legal and illegal, drain

social services is also questionable. George Borjas, an economics professor at the University of California at San Diego, calculated that the nation's 20 million immigrants receive \$1.1 billion more in welfare payments than they pay through income <taxes(Fierman, 77). However, they also contribute more than \$5.1 billion into the US economy by spending money on food, clothes, and other items. Jeffrey S. Passel, head of the immigrant research project at the Urban Institute, stated that "places that got immigrants during the 1980s generally did better in terms of wage growth than places that didn't(Rohter)."

Experts also agree that public fears about immigrants stealing American jobs are largely untrue. For evidence, they point to studies which indicate that "immigrants are more likely than the rest of the population to be self-employed and start their own businesses" (Rohter). A study performed by the Urban Institute indicates that immigrants create more jobs than Native Americans. The Urban Institute found that "for every 100-person increase in the population of adult immigrants, the number of new jobs rose by 46. By contrast, for every 100 new native-born Americans, the number of jobs rose by just 25(Fierman, 77)." Some experts also believe that aliens generally compete with other aliens for jobs(Fierman, 77). Most immigration experts even hold that illegal immigrants create more jobs than they take away citing the continued US presence of certain industries, such as textiles, that would have moved off-shore without the existence of the cheap labor provided by the illegal population.

Yet at the same time, illegal aliens are causing economic problems that must be absorbed by the local municipalities. A disturbing trend among the immigrants has been the rising birth rate. While adult aliens are not entitled to receive social benefits from the government, their children who are born in the United States are. These costs accrue from various services including hospital and educational costs. Since illegals often congregate in large municipalities, these local governments feel a disproportionate amount of pressure relative to other regions in the United States. The municipalities with the largest populations of illegals are Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston, Washington, and Miami. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1992 that welfare payments to children of illegal immigrants cost

\$250 million every year.

The recent attempts by Chinese workers and Haitian refugees to slip into the US by boat have spawned widespread fears that Asian and Latin Americans are overrunning US borders in large numbers. In fact, the statistics do not support these misconceptions. Mexicans and Central Americans as a whole comprise the largest ethnic group of illegal aliens. Latin Americans are the second largest followed by the Europeans. Asian illegal aliens actually comprise the smallest ethnic group in the United States.

#### US IMMIGRATION POLICY FOR THE 1990s

With the realization that large numbers of illegal immigrants cause short-run problems, especially in large metropolitan areas, what can be done to rectify the situation? The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimate that 3.2 million illegal immigrants currently reside in the US with an additional 300,000, crossing over every year a majority of whom are Mexicans(Sontag). Even though past US policies aimed at enforcement of borders have proven inadequate, President Clinton has pledged to dedicate additional resources to stem the flow of illegal immigration. The President's plan includes altering US refugee and asylum laws, stiffening the penalties for harboring illegal immigrants, and increasing the number of INS agents at the US-Mexican border. While these policies might help alleviate the situation in the short run, it seems to make the mistake of addressing the short-term effects of illegal immigrants without trying to eliminate the source of the problem. An increasing number of people argue that the only way to limit illegal immigration is to promote the growth of the Mexican economy. These people argue that eliminating the financial incentive to flee to the North will get to the root of the problem and solve many

of Washington's immigration problems. Proponents of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, hope that it will improve Mexico's economy while strengthening our own economic position. Rodman Griffen underscores the importance of improving the economic situation in Mexico when he writes, "whatever the time frame, as long as Mexico is poor and the United States has jobs, people will come, legally if they can and illegally if they must"(Griffen, 379).

Illegal immigrants have historically been the target of much resentment by the US public. They have certainly caused economic and social problems, especially in the larger metropolitan areas in which they reside, but the major beliefs that the public holds against them are largely unjustified. Most experts agree that illegal immigrants give to a country as much or more than they take out. As Patrick Young, the director of the Central American Refugee Center in Hempstead, Long Island has stated, "only about 1.25% of the US population is undocumented, and if all the problems of your country are attributable to this minuscule population, then your system's really in trouble"(Sontag).

It is also evident that policies aimed strictly toward border enforcement and eviction of illegal aliens do not suffice because they do not attack the origin of the problem. A logical way to decrease the number of undocumented workers sneaking into the United States every year is to help Mexico improve its economic situation. NAFTA, which just passed Congress, might be the solution to this long-term problem. A policy that focuses on both the causes and effects of illegal immigration is the most sensible approach to pursue.

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