

## Part II: Immigrants Today

Today, immigrants are drawn to a life in the United States in record numbers. The United States continues to lure many with the promise of a better future. More than 12 percent of the U.S. population was born in another country. And yet, as the number of immigrants coming into the United States has increased, so has the scope of the immigration debate. In recent years, Congress has debated about the reform of the immigration laws. Concerns about the economic security of American workers fuels the debate, just as it has throughout our history. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have added another dimension to the questions surrounding immigration.

As the new century begins, immigration policy has come head to head with health care, terrorism, crime, and other important domestic issues. In the foreign policy arena, immigration has left a mark on human rights, international trade, the worldwide refugee crisis, and U.S. relations with Latin America. The question to answer at the end of this reading is: What should U.S. immigration policy be?

Before you consider the future of U.S. immigration policy, you will explore the chief issues that frame the debate. This reading reviews the economic impact of immigration, the role of illegal immigration, refugee policy, and concerns about national security.

### Immigration and the Economy

Economic concerns have long dominated discussions about immigration. For most of the past century, business leaders and big farmers have generally favored open immigration to ensure an adequate supply of workers. In the early 1900s, the steady flow of unskilled immigrants into the labor force helped fuel the boom in manufacturing. Although opportunities for unskilled factory workers have declined since World War II, other businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and agriculture continue to depend on low-wage labor to hold down costs.



Photo by Robert Sumner/Getty Images. Used with permission.

People march in support of immigrant rights on May 1, 2006 in Seattle. Immigrants and their supporters rallied around the nation to show the importance of immigrants to American society.

### *What are the economic arguments in favor of immigration?*

Supporters of open immigration policies note that many high-tech industries have come to rely on newcomers. About 12 percent of immigrants earn graduate degrees, compared to 8 percent of native-born Americans. Immigrants also tend to specialize in engineering, com-

### Legal Immigration to the U.S. in 2006

Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens.....	803,335
Skilled workers, professionals, and unskilled workers .....	159,081
Refugees .....	99,609
Asylees .....	116,845
Total.....	1,266,264

data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

## Immigration and Population Trends

The concentration of immigrants in a handful of states has raised questions about the relationship between immigration policy and population trends. In California, for example, immigrants account for about two-thirds of the state's population growth. As the number of Californians surpasses 33 million, the state's population problems have put new strains on the environment. Population pressures have also intensified competition between farmers and city dwellers for scarce water. Population growth threatens to aggravate environmental problems in other parts of the country as well.

Like other developed nations, the United States has experienced a drop in birth rates for most of this century. If immigration were closed off entirely, the U.S. population would actually begin falling around the year 2020. At current levels of immigration, the population is expected to reach 335 million by the year 2025—an increase of thirty-five million people. Although U.S. population growth rates are far below those of Mexico and other developing countries, they remain among the highest in the developed world.

puter science, chemistry, and other fields that are in high demand. One in four people living in America with a university degree in the sciences was born abroad.

Many economists attribute the success of the U.S. economy to the openness of American society and the influx of skills and labor from overseas. For example, recent immigrants from China and India started 30 percent of the new high-tech companies in Silicon Valley during the 1990s. Many see preserving the vitality that immigrants bring to the country as extremely important.

In the biggest U.S. cities, immigrants have helped revive downtown business districts in the past two decades. Many have opened up small businesses, created new jobs, and strengthened the local tax base. Without the influx of immigrants, the nation's largest cities would have experienced a drop in population since 1980. Between 1990 and 1995, for example, New York and Los Angeles each lost more than one million native-born residents.

### ***What are the economic arguments against immigration?***

Historically, opposition on economic grounds to open immigration laws has come from labor union leaders. They claim that high levels of immigration have taken jobs away from native-born Americans. Immigration critics note that one-third of immigrants lack

a high school diploma, double the rate for native-born Americans. They maintain that the entry of unskilled immigrant workers into the economy holds down wages at the bottom of the employment ladder.

Other critics argue that U.S. immigration policy drains poor countries of their most-educated professionals. Experts estimate that about half of the foreign students who study in American universities do not return to their home countries after graduation. Officials in some poor countries have even made the case that they should be compensated by the United States for highly skilled emigrants who leave their nations.

### ***What burden do immigrants place on social services?***

Measuring the cost of newcomers in terms of education, health care, welfare, and other social services has also become part of the immigration debate. For immigrants coming to the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, the government offered little help, other than to provide free education for their children. Since the 1960s, however, the United States has initiated a wide range of programs to assist the poor.

Although the vast majority of immigrants come to the United States eager to work, studies indicate that they are about one-third more likely to receive public assistance than native-

born citizens. Many of them, especially the growing number of elderly immigrants, often need special help during the first few years after their arrival. This has placed a substantial burden on a few areas. In 2006, for example, six states—California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois—received almost two-thirds of all immigrants.

California alone was the destination of 35 percent of immigrants during the 1980s. According to critics of high immigration, the latest wave of immigrants is taking more resources out of the state than it is putting in. They note that foreign-born Californians make up one-quarter of the state's population and receive about 40 percent of the state's public assistance budget.

Similar expenses have strained other areas of heavy immigration. In New York, the city's public school students speak 145 languages. Nearly one-quarter of the students do not speak English well, and most of them require bilingual classes. Across the country in the state of Washington, roughly one in ten students comes from a home in which English is not the family's native language.

### ***How did welfare reform affect benefits and citizenship?***

When Congress passed a major welfare reform bill in 1996, special attention was paid to benefits for immigrants. Since the law's enactment, legal immigrants have been barred from enrolling in most common welfare programs until they gain citizenship.

Congress hoped that the new law would discourage would-be immigrants from coming to the United States to take advantage of the welfare system. However, the legislation has largely shifted the burden of supporting poor immigrants from Washington to state and local governments.

As governments at all levels spend more on social services for immigrants, the constitutional principles determining citizenship have come up for re-examination. Several bills introduced in Congress in recent years proposed modifying the Fourteenth Amendment by denying automatic citizenship to the U.S.-born children of illegal aliens.

Meanwhile, a recent change in Mexican law has added another dimension to the question of citizenship. In 1998, Mexico began

## **National Security and Visitors to the United States**

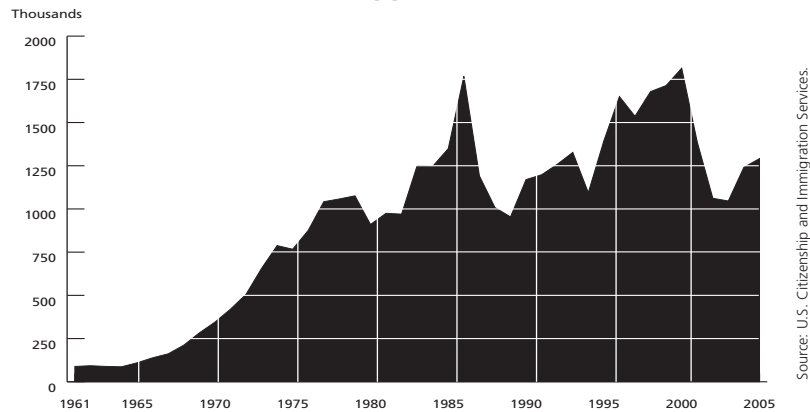
A difficult task facing the government is keeping track of visitors to the United States. All of the nineteen hijackers who commandeered the planes that crashed on September 11 were foreign nationals. Several of them used manipulated passports and fraudulent visas, and were able to persuade border officials to grant them entry into the United States. Most were able to avoid suspicion while in this country, despite violating immigration laws while here.

Two weeks before September 11, the FBI received information connecting two of the hijackers to the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole*. A search for the men began. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was alerted, but the two men could not be found. Because the FBI was not aware of a specific threat, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and other authorities were not notified. Government officials agree that improved communication and coordination between agencies is important in the struggle to prevent terrorism.

Many argue that there is a strong need to reassess America's immigration system. They call on the government to devote more resources to ensuring that the United States scrutinizes more closely those whom it admits to the country, that people abide by the terms of their admission, and that the United States establishes better mechanisms for monitoring those who have been admitted. Much of this involves increasing coordination, resources, and personnel. It will also require investing in technology that enables the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of State to share information more easily.

permitting Americans born in Mexico and their children to claim Mexican citizenship. (Previously, Mexicans who accepted citizenship in another country lost their rights as Mexicans.) With dual nationality, Mexican-Americans would be entitled to own property in Mexico or attend public universities there while continuing to enjoy the rights of American citizenship.

## Aliens Apprehended



## Illegal Immigrants

According to the most recent U.S. government estimates, about 350,000 illegal aliens settled permanently in the United States each year during the 1990s. Today, an estimated nine to eleven million illegal aliens currently reside in the United States. The U.S. government calculates that many of them arrive as tourists, students, or businesspeople, and then stay beyond the limitations of their visas. Some use false documents to slip past immigration officials at airports. Others simply slip across the U.S. borders illegally.

### *How has immigration from south of the border changed?*

Although illegal aliens enter the United States from all parts of the globe, there is a particularly heavy flow across the southern border with Mexico. Until 1968, there were no official limits on immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere. Before 1924, there was not even an attempt to monitor the borders. The subjects of border control and illegal aliens were seldom mentioned. In recent decades all of this has changed as the public spotlight and U.S. government resources have zeroed in mainly on illegal immigrants who enter the country by crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. Increased enforcement around urban areas has forced illegal immigrants to cross in more remote areas and in more hazardous conditions.

Workers from Mexico, in particular, have been a critical part of the labor force in the Southwest for many years. Until recently, they generally worked in agriculture during the growing season and then returned to their homes in Mexico. Today, there is much less seasonal migration between the United States and Mexico. Nevertheless, large farms and low-wage industries in the United States continue to rely on Mexican workers.

### *Has NAFTA affected illegal immigration?*

When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was finalized in 1994, Mexico was already the United States' third leading trading partner. The agreement created a trading bloc of nearly 400 million people by lowering trade barriers among the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Both Mexican and U.S. officials looked forward to the day when poverty would no longer drive Mexicans northward. They believed that increased trade between their two nations could help solve the problem.

Supporters of NAFTA contended that the agreement would produce better-paying jobs in Mexico and reduce the flow of undocumented immigrants. Some experts on illegal immigration went further. They argued that by increasing foreign aid and trade benefits to Mexico and other Latin American countries, and by encouraging low-wage American industries to invest in the region, the United

### Border Control and National Security

The challenge of border control is daunting yet critical. For more than half its nearly two thousand miles, the U.S.-Mexican border is marked by the shallow Rio Grande. In the empty deserts to the west, it consists of three strands of barbed wire. Only near a few metro areas is there any substantial fence or wall dividing the two countries. To the north, the United States shares 5,525 miles of border with Canada—much of it less clearly marked than the Mexican border. In addition to thousands of miles of coastline, there are over 350 official international points of entry (e.g., ports, airports) into the United States. There is sharp concern that our vast borders and numerous points of entry make us vulnerable to illegal economic immigration, drug smuggling, and to efforts by international terrorists to sneak into the country.

In 2003, the new Department of Homeland Security assumed control of protecting U.S. borders. While working to safeguard the United States, the department also hopes to ensure the smooth flow of legitimate traffic. More than 440 million people, 105 million vehicles, 11 million trucks, and 2.5 million railcars cross the borders of the United States each year. The Department of Homeland Security now coordinates and manages the work of the INS (now called the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Department, or USCIS), the Customs Service, and Border Patrol, and several other agencies associated with border control.

States could help generate new local jobs that would keep potential illegal aliens at home.

While the economic impact of NAFTA on United States, Canada and the developing economy of Mexico is debated, it is clear that NAFTA has not stemmed the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico. Mexico's high rate of unemployment and low wages continue to push laborers across the border in search of employment.

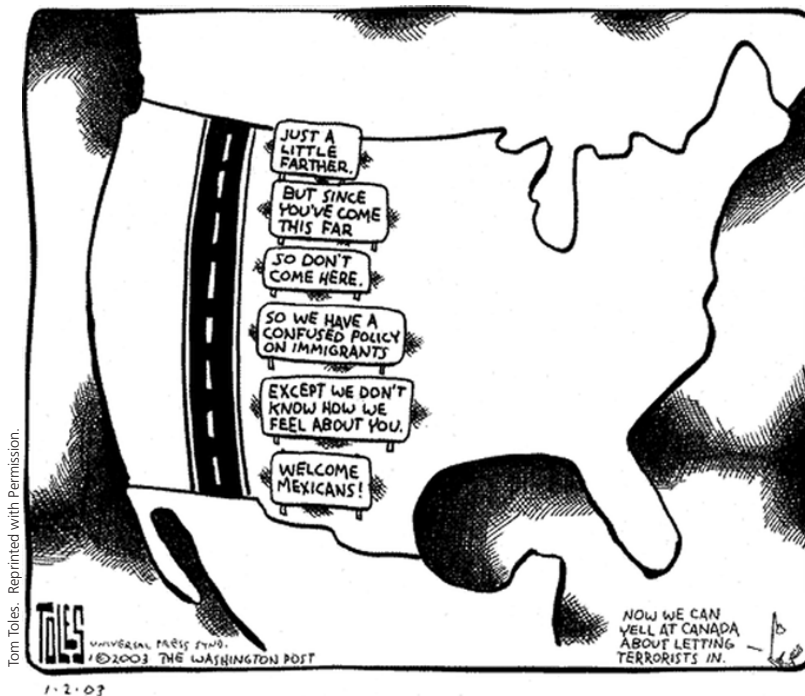
proportion of illegal aliens than in the past. Increasingly, illegal aliens are arriving from Central America, the Caribbean, and Asia. International smuggling rings, for example, funnel an estimated hundred thousand illegal immigrants from South Asia and China across the U.S.-Mexican border annually.

#### *How has the profile of the illegal immigrant changed?*

The composition of the illegal alien population has changed in the last two decades. Although the typical undocumented immigrant is still a single young man, more women and children are entering the country illegally as well. Fewer than one-fifth of today's illegal aliens work in agriculture. The majority live and work in large cities.

In addition, Mexicans make up a smaller





### ***What impact do illegal aliens have on state and local economies?***

Illegal aliens are concentrated in a few states, primarily California (which is home to about 40 percent of all undocumented immigrants), Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois.

In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that states must provide illegal aliens with schooling. That decision, along with the growing proportion of women and children among the illegal alien population, has added to the education and health care budgets of several states. Some estimate that California spends more than \$7 billion a year on educating illegal immigrant children. With financial pressure mounting, state officials have demanded that the federal government either tighten border control or pay for social services offered to illegal aliens.

The same states that are burdened by the social service needs of illegal aliens are also home to businesses that employ them. Whether stitching pants in a clothing factory, washing dishes in a restaurant, or harvesting fruits and vegetables, illegal aliens have become a crucial element of the work force

in many areas. Most are willing to accept difficult, demanding jobs for low wages. Los Angeles has emerged as the center of America's garment industry in large part due to the labor of undocumented workers.

Critics of the practice maintain that some employers prefer hiring undocumented workers because they are unlikely to complain about low pay and poor working conditions. In fact, law enforcement officials report that clothing factories operating outside the law, known as "sweatshops," have made a comeback in Los Angeles and New York thanks to the availability

of illegal alien labor.

Penalizing employers in the U.S. for hiring illegal aliens has proven difficult. Job applicants can prove their eligibility to work by producing any one of twenty-nine documents, and employers are not required to verify their authenticity. Illegal aliens in most areas have little problem obtaining false documents to qualify for jobs.

## **Refugees**

The issue of refugee policy has acquired increasing prominence in recent years. The 1980 Refugee Act opened the United States to more refugees and changed the definition of refugee to conform with United Nations (UN) standards. Although the Refugee Act called for the admission of roughly fifty thousand refugees and asylum seekers a year, the annual total has averaged over eighty-five thousand since the law was enacted.

U.S. refugee laws during the Cold War were primarily an instrument of foreign policy. Preference was given to refugees escaping from

communist countries. In the past two decades, however, a worldwide refugee crisis has challenged old assumptions. Today, the internationally recognized refugee population is almost ten million, largely due to war and famine in poor, developing countries. Refugee applications to the United States have shot up more than twenty times.

**“A refugee is a person “unable or unwilling to return to [his or her home country]...because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”**

—Refugee Act of 1980

U.S. policy has changed more slowly than the refugee population. Of the more than two million refugees admitted from 1980 to 2001, 85 percent came from communist or former communist nations.

Since 2001, U.S. policy has shifted to



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admit more refugees from crises and conflicts in the developing world. Of the seventy thousand immigration visas set aside for refugees in 2006, twenty thousand were earmarked for Africa. In contrast, Europe was set at fifteen thousand (considerably lower than in years past), and Latin America at five thousand.

Critics of U.S. refugee policy are sharply divided among themselves. Some charge that the United States has lost sight of humanitarian considerations in awarding immigration visas. They want refugee and asylum applicants to be evaluated in strict accordance

### Refugees and National Security

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States suspended admitting refugees to the United States for two months. The attacks have had a clear impact on U.S. refugee admissions. Increased security checks have delayed the arrival of refugees. Although the United States planned to admit seventy thousand refugees in 2001, only twenty-seven thousand actually arrived. In many cases, refugees approved for admission to the United States remained in camps in Africa where conditions are poor and even dangerous, while the FBI and CIA compared their names against lists of known or suspected terrorists. After September 11, several European countries, including the United Kingdom and Denmark (traditionally very hospitable to refugees seeking asylum), tightened their laws making the plight of many refugees more dire. The United States continues to seek the balance between its traditional commitment to those fleeing persecution and its own security needs.

with UN standards, regardless of the political significance of their countries of origin. Others assert that many of the people admitted as refugees and asylum seekers are not fleeing persecution but simply looking for a better life. They favor lowering the overall ceiling for refugees.

***How are other developed nations dealing with immigrants and refugees?***

The United States is not alone among wealthy, developed countries in wrestling with refugee problems. In the early 1990s, Western Europe was the destination of at least four million people seeking refuge. Most were fleeing from war in the Balkans. Thousands of others sought to escape the poverty of the former Soviet bloc and Africa. From 1990 to 1995, Germany took in 2.4 million foreigners, many of them asylum seekers. In 1993, however, Germany narrowed its definition of political asylum and began deporting foreigners who did not meet the new standards.

Other European countries have followed Germany's lead, tightening their policies on both asylum and general immigration. Nonetheless, the peace and prosperity of Western Europe continues to attract millions of would-be immigrants. As many as four million of them are thought to be living illegally in the region. Moreover, efforts to eliminate borders within Western Europe have compounded the problem. Illegal immigrants entering Italy or Spain encounter few barriers to travelling throughout the region.

In Canada too, recent adjustments in immigration standards reflect a change in priorities. In 2006, Canada admitted about 250,000 immigrants—a much higher percentage of its population than immigrant admissions to the United States. Unlike America's immigration laws, however, Canadian standards are geared toward admitting young, college-educated newcomers who speak fluent English or French. Emphasis on reunifying families has been downgraded.

**National Security: A  
New Climate**

The debate surrounding immigration is not limited to economic issues. Maintaining national security has long been an important consideration in immigration and refugee policy. For example, in 1992, thousands of Haitians set sail for American shores after the Haitian army overthrew the island nation's newly elected president. The refugee crisis was a key factor in the U.S. decision to send twenty thousand American troops to Haiti in September 1994 in an attempt to restore a democratic government on the island.

For a long time, drug smuggling was seen as the biggest issue surrounding immigration's potential threats to national security. The INS and Customs devoted huge resources to stopping drugs from entering the country, especially across the U.S.-Mexican border.

***How did September 11 change attitudes about security?***

The September 11th terrorist attacks changed how many Americans look at the world. The attacks awakened the belief in many that open borders and an open society had made the United States vulnerable to this terrible event. The nineteen hijackers were Islamic extremists from the Middle East. Sixteen had entered the United States on student visas—not as immigrants or refugees.

The terrorist attacks provoked debate about immigration and the place in the United States for those from other countries. While some experts warned of sleeper cells of terrorists in the United States, legal immigrants from the Middle East and Muslims from other areas worried that suspicions would be directed at them simply because of who they were. While some wondered whether the United States had learned the lessons of internment 120,000 Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor, others called for a moratorium on immigration and visitors from Islamic countries. Balancing the need for security and a tradition of receiving people from all over the world remains a topic of debate.

***How have new laws affected the legal rights of immigrants?***

After September 11, Congress passed legislation known as the Patriot Act to combat terrorism. Prior to the Patriot Act, non-citizens had many of the same legal protections as citizens. Today, non-U.S. citizens may be held by immigration officials for seven days without charges or detained indefinitely if they are seen as a threat to national security. Deportations have skyrocketed and detainment is much more common. The government will not release the names or location of those it has detained. Since November of 2001, the government has not disclosed how many have been detained. Evidence can be used against suspects that neither they nor their lawyers can see. Government officials say that these measures are essential for ensuring national security.

Additionally, new legislation in 2003 requires all males sixteen and older from nineteen Middle Eastern and North African countries or from North Korea who are here on temporary visas to register with the U.S.

government. Anyone who does not register is subject to deportation. The law exempts refugees, permanent residents, and naturalized citizens. Supporters of these laws say that these measures will help defend America against the threats posed by foreign terrorists.

***“The national security demands that we know who is living within our borders, especially since 9/11.”***

—Senator John Cornyn

Critics worry these laws violate the Constitution and may lead to a loss of civil liberties for law-abiding immigrants.

***“If, in response to the events of September 11, we engage in excess and shut out what has made America great, then we will have given terrorists a far greater victory than they could have hoped to achieve.”***

—James Ziglar, (former) INS Commissioner

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**I**n the coming days, you will have an opportunity to consider a range of alternatives for U.S. immigration policy. Each of the four viewpoints, or options, that you will explore is based on a distinct set of values and beliefs. Each takes a different perspective on our country's role in the world and our prospects for the future. You should think of the options as a tool designed to help you better understand the contrasting strategies from which Americans must craft future policy.

At the end of this unit, you will be asked to make your own choices about where U.S. immigration policy should be heading. You may borrow heavily from one option, or you may combine ideas from several options. Or you may take a new approach altogether. You will need to weigh the risks and trade-offs of whatever you decide.