

Thinking Ahead About Our Immigrant Future: New Trends and Mutual Benefits in Our Aging Society

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There are two stories now being told about immigration and the future of America. Each has some basis in fact, although one is based on newer trends and is more optimistic than the other. These stories differ in their answers to three crucial questions: whether immigration to the United States is accelerating out of control or is slowing; how much immigrants are assimilating into American society and progressing economically over time; and how important immigrants are to the U.S. economy. The pessimistic story—in which immigration is portrayed as increasing dramatically and producing a growing population of unassimilated foreigners—draws upon older evidence. But more recent data and analysis suggest a far more positive vision of our immigrant future. Immigration has not only begun to level off, but immigrants are climbing the socio-economic ladder, and will become increasingly important to the U.S. economy as workers, taxpayers, and homebuyers supporting the aging Baby Boom generation.

Among the findings of this report:

- **The Story Behind the Numbers: Immigration is Slowing Down, Not Speeding Up** – Immigration had been accelerating up until about 2000, but since then the annual flow has declined in the United States as a whole and in most states. Nonetheless, some alarmists suggest that immigration is rising and continues at record levels by averaging the years from 1995 to 2006 and disguising the downturn after 2000.
- **Indices of Assimilation: Knowing Where to Look for Meaningful Assessments** – In places where immigration is a new event, most immigrants are newcomers and are therefore less assimilated. However, in locales where immigrants are longer settled, such as California, they have achieved much greater socioeconomic advancement. For example, in California the share of Latino immigrants who are homeowners rises from 16.4 percent of those who have been in the United States for less than 10 years to 64.6 percent of those who have been here for 30 years or more. Similarly, English proficiency more than doubles from 33.4 percent of those who have been in the country for less than 10 years to 73.5 percent of those who have been here for 30 years or more. The pessimistic outlook on immigrant assimilation is more commonly found in states where immigration has only recently begun to increase, but such new experience does not afford a reliable projection of the future.
- **Aging America: Immigrants' Contributions Make a Difference** – Failure to examine how much immigrants typically advance over time leads to the false conclusion that they are trapped in poverty and impose an economic burden on society. Moreover, U.S. society is itself changing, and the aging of the Baby Boom generation will create growing demand for younger workers. The ratio of seniors (age 65 and older) to working-age adults (25 to 64) will soar by 67 percent between 2010 and 2030. The rapid rise in the senior ratio will precipitate not only fiscal crises in the Social Security and Medicare systems, but workforce losses due to mass retirements that will drive labor-force growth perilously low. Immigrants and their children will help to fill these jobs and support the rising number of seniors economically. At the same time, immigrant homebuyers are also crucial in buying homes from the increasing number of older Americans. Immigrants will clearly be important in leading us out of the current housing downturn.

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