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# Immigration: Issues and policies

Edited by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., and Marta Tienda

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The United States, though it has legally admitted in the 1970s and 1980s twice as many immigrants as the rest of the countries of the world combined—plus uncounted clandestine immigrants who number in millions—has no explicit policies to relate the influx of foreign workers to the labor-market needs of the country. The immigrants come whether jobs are scarce or plentiful. Most of the legal immigrants are admitted under regulations authorizing “family reunification” rather than because they possess needed skills. This infusion of foreign labor has taken place during the same period that witnessed a great jump in the U.S. labor supply from women and the baby-boom generation.

The labor-market consequences of contemporary immigration to the United States, particularly since the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, were examined at a conference sponsored by the National Council on Employment Policy, held in Washington, April 5–6, 1984. The papers, which have been gathered in a monograph, *Immigration: Issues and Policies*, illustrate the controversy over the labor-market consequences of recent immigration.

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., argued for a more restrictive immigration policy, one that could be adjusted to the labor needs of this country. He stated, “It is likely that immigration in the 1980s is accounting for as much as half of the annual growth in the population and probably an even greater percentage of the real growth of the labor force (p. 13).”

He cited studies to show that immigrants, whose occupational distribution is similar to that of native minorities, will depress the wages of native low-skill minority groups.

Evidence presented by George Borjas showed the opposite effect. Using 1970 and 1980 census data, he found that male immigrants did not have a negative impact on the earnings of the native-born population. The immigrants and native-born workers appeared to be complements in production. His study is reported in greater detail in a related article in this issue of *Focus*.

Robert L. Bach and Marta Tienda examined the labor-market integration of immigrants and refugees in terms of their occupational placement and showed that immigrant men and women enter declining low-skill occupations, such as laborer and farm laborer, at rates that exceed the growth of the immigrant work force. They discussed the responsiveness of current employment and training programs to the needs of these newcomers. This study is also described in greater detail elsewhere in this issue.

Comments—by Philip L. Martin, Douglas S. Massey, and Michael J. Piore—all stressed the need for more data:

A critical lack of information remains one of the hallmarks of the immigration field, and anyone who works in the area for a little while soon realizes its role in fomenting controversy, disagreement, and ultimately, inaction. Accurate information is a prerequisite to effective policy, and it is a necessary, though not a sufficient, ingredient of consensus (Massey, p. 135).

*Hispanics in the U.S. Economy* and “Research on the Labor Market and Program Participation of Hispanics and Southeast Asian Refugees,” a study done for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are first steps in addressing this deficiency. Both are discussed in this issue.

Because of the controversial nature of the immigration question as it pertains to labor-market and employment-related policies, the National Council on Employment Policy was unable to prepare a policy statement that could be endorsed by all members. It did, however, support the concepts of imposing sanctions against employers who hire illegal immigrants and of extending amnesty to illegal aliens who had worked satisfactorily in the United States for three years or more.

Copies of the monograph may be obtained free while the supply lasts from the Institute for Research on Poverty, 1180 Observatory Drive, 3412 Social Science Building, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706. ■