

### **The Benefits of Family Sponsorship**

U.S. immigration policy has, from its inception, been predicated on a strong defense—and indeed a celebration—of family values. This family sponsorship system, known as “family reunification,” has been the cornerstone of U.S. immigration policy for decades, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all immigrant admissions to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Now, for the first time in two decades, this pro-family policy is being questioned, and some lawmakers are pushing to make it harder—in some cases impossible—for legal immigrants, and even U.S. citizens, to sponsor their relatives for legal residency.

So why is it in our interest for family reunification to be a goal of our immigration system?

#### **Education: Foreign-Born Children More than Hold Their Own**

- A major study by the National Academy of Sciences published in 1998 found that both the health status and academic achievement of foreign-born children was equal to or greater than that of children in native-born families—despite the greater exposure of children in immigrant families to socioeconomic risks, racial/ethnic discrimination, and other psychological factors that tend to produce negative outcomes for children generally.<sup>2</sup>
- Sixty percent of the top science students in the United States and 65 percent of the top math students are the children of immigrants, many of them foreign-born.
- Foreign-born high-school students regularly win between 25 percent and 50 percent of the most prestigious awards for young scientists and mathematicians in the United States. Approximately 25 percent of these award winners—the nation’s rising intellectual superstars—entered the United States through the family-based immigration system.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Employment: Family-Based Immigrants Are Productive Workers**

- While research confirms that family-based immigrants often lack the initial earning potential of employment-based immigrants, the incomes of family-based immigrants tend to grow more rapidly than the incomes of employment-based immigrants. In fact, the incomes of the two groups tend to equalize over time.<sup>4</sup>
- Family-based immigrants possess human-capital skills from their countries of origin that are undetected at admission, but which prove highly useful in helping them to navigate the U.S. labor market, learn English, etc. Research has also shown that, because of their unique backgrounds and abilities, family-based immigrants are more likely to adapt to the evolving demands of the labor market and less likely than employment-based immigrants to compete with the native-born for jobs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Lochhead, “Immigrant Plan Puts Job Skills Ahead of Family,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 9, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Hernandez & Evan Charney, eds., *From Generation to Generation: The Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Anderson, “The Multiplier Effect,” *International Educator*, Summer 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See Harriet Orcutt Duleep & Mark C. Regets, “Immigrants and Human-Capital Investment,” *American Economic Review* 89(2), May 1999: 186-191.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Elaine Sorenson, “Measuring the Employment Effects of Immigrants with Different Legal Statuses on Native Workers,” in Harriet Duleep and Phanindra V. Wunnava, eds., *Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Individual Skills, Family Ties, and Group Identities*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996.

### **Entrepreneurship: Family-Based Immigrants Are Entrepreneurs**

- The Kauffman Foundation's index of entrepreneurial activity is nearly 40% higher for immigrants than for natives.<sup>6</sup>
- Evidence suggests that immigrants, especially family-based immigrants, have played a key role in reversing the decline in self-employment in the non-farm sector of the U.S. economy over the past three decades.<sup>7</sup> According to data from the Small Business Administration, immigrant women in particular "are one of the fastest-growing segments of small business owners in the United States."<sup>8</sup>
- These businesses range from "mom-and-pop" outfits like grocery stores and restaurants to larger enterprises such as community banks, clinics, supermarkets, and food-manufacturing operations.<sup>9</sup>
- A growing number of studies demonstrate that immigrant-owned family businesses are a driving force behind inner-city revitalization and job growth in nearly every major metropolis, from New York and Miami to Chicago and Los Angeles.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, these businesses have the potential to contribute to wage equalization and social cohesion in otherwise depressed and troubled urban areas.
- Immigrant small businesses employ not only immigrants, but also increasing numbers of native-born workers. If family-based immigration were to be sharply curtailed, this important "force multiplier" for the U.S. economy and society would be greatly diminished.

Critics suggest that because family-based immigration is not formally predicated on skill or employment criteria, it must inevitably be dysfunctional for the U.S. economy and for the interests of the native-born. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The best available evidence indicates that family-based immigrants are making vital contributions to the U.S. economy as productive workers and, even more so, as entrepreneurs.

The United States derives the greatest economic and social benefits from immigration when the employment-based and family-based systems are functioning together in a well-balanced fashion. Bill Ong Hing, Professor of Law and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis, explains that the two systems are "complementary ways of achieving and reflecting our goals and values as a society" since "we use immigration to help our economy, to promote the social welfare of the country, and to promote family values." As a result, portraying immigration reform as a choice between employment-based and family-based immigration is, in fact, a false choice.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kauffman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity, 1996-2005, available at: <http://www.kauffman.org/items.cfm?itemID=704>

<sup>7</sup> "Immigrant Entrepreneurs," *Migration Perspectives* 1(2), January/February 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See Elizabeth Kelleher, "Immigrant Women Fuel Small Business Growth in the United States," at [www.usinfo.state.gov](http://www.usinfo.state.gov), March 2, 2007. Since 2004, start-up rates for immigrant women were 41 percent higher than for native-born women.

<sup>9</sup> See Pyong Gag Min & Mehdi Bozorghemr, "Immigrant Entrepreneurship in the United States: Trends, Research and Theory," in Robert Kloosterman & Jan Rath, eds., *Venturing Abroad: Global Processes and National Particularities of Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Advanced Economies*. Oxford & New York: Berg Publishers and New York University Press, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> See Edward Wiata, "Study Shows Immigrants A Real Engine for Growth, USA Today, May 4, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Testimony of Bill Ong Hing, Professor of Law and Asian American Studies, University of California, Davis, before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law, regarding "The Role of Family-Based Immigration in the U.S. Immigration System," May 8, 2007.