



IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

...providing factual information about immigration and immigrants in America

Immigration: Long Term Trends and America's Future Arrival Rates, Integration Patterns, and Impact on an Aging Society

Critics of immigration often claim that immigration to the United States, and the growth of the Latino population more broadly, are accelerating out of control and that immigrants today are neither assimilating nor contributing to the U.S. economy and society like their predecessors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, according to a January 2008 Immigration Policy Center report by demographer Dowell Myers¹, immigration has, in fact, begun to level off and immigrants are climbing the socio-economic ladder and becoming increasingly important to the U.S. economy as workers, taxpayers, and homebuyers supporting the aging Baby Boom generation.²

In the report, *Thinking Ahead about Our Immigrant Future: New Trends and Mutual Benefits in Our Aging Society*, Myers finds that the rate of immigration to the United States has decreased in recent years, after peaking around 2000. And while it is true that Latinos are the fastest-growing minority group in the country, they are no different in their assimilation patterns than previous waves of immigrants. Just like the European immigrants who came before them, today's immigrants from Latin America and elsewhere are, over time, learning English, earning higher wages, buying houses, and integrating into U.S. society. Moreover, low U.S. birthrates and the impending retirement of the Baby Boom generation have made immigrants far more important to the U.S. economy in maintaining labor-force growth, caring for aging Americans, and sustaining the Social Security system.

Immigration is Slowing Down, Not Speeding Up

- 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 2000.³ In reality, the annual flow of new immigrants to the United States appears to have peaked around 2000,⁴ and projections by the Census Bureau and Social Security Administration foresee continued decline through 2015 or longer.⁵ [New projections](#) by the Pew Hispanic Center also expect that immigration will not renew its acceleration in future decades.⁶

The “Newcomer Effect” and the “Peter Pan” Fallacy

- Although the flow of new immigrants has slowed markedly in traditional “gateway” states (and the nation as a whole) since 2000, immigration accelerated sharply after 1990 in other parts of the nation. The perceptions of immigrants in these new destinations are heavily skewed by the fact of their “newness.”
- The upsurge in numbers of new immigrants in some parts of the country often equates to a dramatic increase in the number of non-English speaking residents, creating the impression that English usage is being threatened and that immigrants are doomed to remain in their current status as unassimilated newcomers for the rest of their lives. The fallacy is to assume that immigrant newcomers are frozen in time and that, like Peter Pan, they never change in any way, never grow older, never assimilate, and always remain “new” immigrants.⁷

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Knowing Where to Look for Meaningful Indices of Assimilation

- It is difficult to see assimilation in locations that are full of newcomers. For that we need to look at indicators of integration and upward mobility in a state such as California, where immigrants have settled for a longer period of time.
- *English Proficiency*: Among foreign-born Latinos in California who had resided in the United States for less than 10 years as of 2000, 33.4 percent claimed proficiency speaking the English language, compared to 73.5 percent among residents of 30 or more years.
- *Income Below the Poverty Level*: In 2005, 28.7 percent of foreign-born Latinos in California who had been in the United States less than 10 years lived below the poverty line, compared to 11.8 percent of those who had resided here 30 or more years.
- *Homeownership*: Among Latino immigrants in California in 2005, 16.4 percent of those who had arrived in the United States less than 10 years before were homeowners, compared to 64.6 percent of those who had lived here for 30 or more years.⁸

Aging America: Immigrants' Contributions Make a Difference

- The aging of the Baby Boom generation (the 78 million individuals born between 1946 and 1964) will cause massive changes throughout the U.S. economy and society. Between 2010 and 2030, the ratio of seniors (age 65 and older) to working-age adults (age 25 to 64) will soar by 67 percent.⁹
- Similarly, a [February 2008 report](#) by the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that the “elderly dependency ratio,” which stood at 20 seniors per 100 working-age adults in 2005, would rise to 36 by 2050 under a “low immigration” scenario (an average of 900,000 new immigrants per year from 2005 to 2050), 32 under a “baseline” scenario (1.7 million immigrants per year), and 29 under a “high immigration” scenario (2.6 million immigrants per year). In other words, the elderly dependency ratio would be 24 percent *higher* by 2050 under the low-immigration scenario than under the high-immigration scenario. This amounts to 73 million *fewer* working-age adults to offset the growth of the senior population.¹⁰
- 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 replace retired Baby Boomers in the workforce and support the rising number of seniors economically.¹¹
- Since seniors are net home sellers, there will be 67 percent more people in the selling ages relative to the younger adults who are likely to be buyers.¹² Immigrant homebuyers are crucial in buying homes from the increasing number of older Americans. The foreign-born share of growth in homebuyers has doubled each decade, rising from 10.5 percent in the 1980s, to 20.7 percent in the 1990s, to 40.0 percent in the 2000-2006 period.¹³
- New arrivals by themselves can offset about one-quarter of the increase in the senior ratio.¹⁴ Another component of the solution to the crisis of aging is to build a larger middle class from the youth of America by promoting higher education for all.

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- ¹ Dowell Myers is Professor of Urban Planning and Demography in the School of Policy, Planning, and Development, and director of the Population Dynamics Research Group, at the University of Southern California. This report is drawn from his new book, *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007).
- ² Dowell Myers, *Thinking Ahead About Our Immigrant Future: New Trends and Mutual Benefits in Our Aging Society* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, January 2008).
- ³ See, for example, Steven A. Camarota, *Immigrants in the United States, 2007: A Profile of America's Foreign-Born Population* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, November 2007).
- ⁴ Jeffrey S. Passel & Roberto Suro, *Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992-2004* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, September 27, 2005), p. 1.
- ⁵ Congressional Budget Office, *Projections of Net Migration to the United States*, Washington, DC: June 2006.
- ⁶ Jeffrey S. Passel & D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, February 11, 2008), pp. 4-7.
- ⁷ Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers*, chap. 2.
- ⁸ The conclusions from these "snapshot" observations are confirmed by cohort analysis that traces groups of arrivals between 1970 and 2000, as they settle longer in the United States. See Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers*, chap. 6.
- ⁹ See Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers*, chap. 3.
- ¹⁰ Jeffrey S. Passel & D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050*, pp. 23, 26, 28.
- ¹¹ See Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers*, chaps. 3 & 10.
- ¹² Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers*, chap. 11.
- ¹³ Dowell Myers & Cathy Y. Liu, "The emerging dominance of immigrants in the U.S. housing market 1970-2000," *Urban Policy and Research* 23(3), September 2005: 347-66; 2006 American Community Survey.
- ¹⁴ House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law, *Hearing on: Past, Present, and Future: A Historic and Personal Reflection on American Immigration*, 109th Cong., 1st sess., March 30, 2007.