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GROWTH OF FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION SURGES AS U.S. ECONOMY RECOVERS

An NPG Forum Paper

by David Simcox

Summary and Introduction

Census projections proclaim that, with Americans' fertility falling and deaths soon to begin rising, immigration – not natural increase – will become the principal driver of U.S. population growth as early as 2023 (*Rubenstein, 2016*).

A September 2014 Census projection estimated that, despite some slowing growth attributed to the 2008 recession and aftermath, as well as to improved conditions within Mexico since 2000, the nation's foreign-born population reached 43.2 million in 2015. This represents a net increase of 12.2 million – a rise of almost 40 percent – since 2000 after subtracting emigration and deaths of the foreign-born (*Colby and Ortman, 2015*).

The 43.2 million figure would include legal and illegal immigrants, plus nearly 2.0 million foreign-born sojourners living in the country under the increasing number of long-term but nominally temporary visa, parole and deferred deportation arrangements. This would include: perennial students, temporary workers of all skill levels, investors, treaty traders, journalists, international civil servants and businessmen, and special protected classes of aliens.

The latest Census projections (2014) show net immigration rising from 1.2 million annually in 2015 to just under 1.5 million in 2060, with total U.S. population reaching 417 million. In 2023, population gains from immigration would surpass natural increase. In that same year, the share of the foreign-born (14.8 percent) will supersede the previous U.S. all-time record of 14.7 percent set in 1910. By 2040 natural increase would have declined to 0.5 million, while net immigration will have climbed to 1.43 million – with the large spread projected to grow through 2060. In 2060 the foreign-born share of the total population would reach 18.8 percent, or 78 million persons. Of the 196.6 million births projected in the U.S. between 2015 and 2060, 40 percent would be to foreign-born mothers.

Five years earlier in its 2009 projections, Census calculated net immigration as larger – reaching 2.0 million in 2060 versus 1.5 million assumed in its 2014 projections. But the indications are strong that the 2.0 million projections are more likely in view of the tendency of the U.S. immigration system, with its enforcement and regulatory flexibility and its absence of hard ceilings, to increase intake in the absence of explicit statutory changes. Accepting the higher estimates of net immigration, the U.S. population by 2060 would be nearer the 439 million projected in 2009 than the 2014 projection of 417 million.

Foreign-Born Growth Now Three Times National Population Growth Rate

In the quarter century since 1990, America's foreign-born population has doubled, an explosive annual growth rate of just under three (3.0) percent. The percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born rose during the same period, surging from 8.0 percent to its present 13.4 percent. That foreign-born percentage is the highest for the U.S. since 1920.

But while today's mass immigration is trending upward, the peak in 1920 marked the beginning of a period of immigration restraint that would take the foreign-born share to a low of just 4.7 percent by 1970. Immigrants' share of total population remained by today's standards low between 1940 and 1980 – decades in which the Great Depression ended, with a following period of prosperity, rising productivity, strong trade unionism, and more equitable income distribution.

This 2.4 percent annual growth of the foreign-born since 2000 occurred despite some slowing of illegal immigration due to the recession in 2008, leading to fewer entries and increased out-migration of the foreign-born. The Mexican-born segment of the foreign-born population, about 11.1 million or about 30 percent of the total, also showed a slight decline during the decade of the 2000s. This can be attributed to an improving Mexican economy and aging of the population, which reduced the numbers of Mexicans in the most migration-prone age groups. From 2000 to 2010, arrivals from Mexico fell about 80 percent. The undocumented population was a million lower in 2013 than in 2007 (*Warren and Kerwin, 2014*).

This slow-down may only be a temporary lull. Mexico, now 124 million, is projected to add another 35 million persons by 2060. And prolonged drought, rapid population growth and social disorder in much of Central America is providing ample replacements for illegal Mexican workers.

More recent Census data for 2014 and 2015 now show an intake averaging 1.6 million a year, a reversion to the higher levels of the pre-recession period of the early 2000s (*Camarota, 2016*).

America's Full Speed Ahead Immigration Mill

What is apparent in these numbers is the mechanistic and rigid nature of the U.S. legal immigration system: it continued intake of 1.0 million to 1.1 million or more newcomers yearly between 2007 and 2014 – despite America's worst recession since the 1930s (*DHS Immigration Statistics)*. These numbers of legal admissions show little decline in legal immigration during the hard times of the past decade.

Particularly revealing are legal admission figures for the years 2009-2011 – during which the country suffered thirty straight months of unemployment above nine percent, peaking at ten percent in the last quarter of 2009. During those three critical years, admissions of immigrants in employment categories still averaged 143,000 yearly – close to the pre-recession level.

The U.S. legal immigration system has become a mindless machine, with no "slow" or "stop" button – only "full ahead." Familiar arguments of neo-classical economists persisted during the recession and recovery that immigration does not aggravate unemployment, as it "creates jobs." Even the "market driven" theory of immigration favored by growth economists seems confounded by immigration's persistence through the period of widespread U.S. joblessness and business failures.

Zero Net Immigration: A Receding Goal

For those hoping for a smaller, more sustainable population, the numbers offer little encouragement. NPG has long called for the reduction of overall immigration to about 200,000-250,000 a year. That amount, when balanced against emigration and deaths among the foreign-born, would yield zero net migration. While intake may have slowed modestly because of the recession and improved conditions in Mexico, the longer-term trajectory of growth of the foreign-born remains stubbornly upward, precluding any reduction of the U.S. population to a more sustainable level. In terms of its massive consumption of resources and destruction of natural capital, the U.S. is already the world's most over-populated nation. Any population growth at all sharpens this predicament for the nation and the world.

U.S.-Born Children of Immigrants Boost Growth

These numbers only tell part of the story of immigration's initial impact on U.S. population growth. In 2012, Census found that the second-generation, U.S.-born children of immigrants numbered 36 million – a population that is increasing faster than the total U.S. population, owing to higher birth rates among the foreign-born. The current foreign stock of over 78 million is projected to continue growing rapidly. Birth rates for immigrant women, though now gradually falling, are still nearly 50 percent higher than their native-born counterparts due to their younger average age and lower education.

The foreign-born will continue producing a disproportionate share of the children. Census projects (2014) that out of 196.6 million births in the U.S. by 2060, 39.8 million (20.3 percent) will be to foreign-born mothers.

Outlook: A Culture of High Immigration in a World on the Move

Explaining their finding, the authors of the 2014 projections said they assumed fertility rates will continue to decline and that there will be a "modest decline in the overall rate of net international migration" (*Census, Colby and Ortman, 2015*).

This assumption about future immigration is questionable.

Present and prospective conditions in the world and within the U.S. suggest that net immigration to the U.S. between now and 2060 will be closer to the 1.5 million to 2.0 million annual range projected in 2009. Can and will the U.S. slow immigration? Right now, the prospects are not encouraging. The world-wide demand for settlement in the U.S. is astronomical, and the prevailing attitude of America's political elites is acquiescence.

World population trends are likely to nourish continued growth in the overseas millions seeking to settle in the U.S. The latest U.N. projections have abandoned earlier projections of stabilization of world population by century's end. With high fertility persisting in Africa and South Asia, according to a 2014 study in Science magazine, there is an 80 percent chance that world population will increase to between 9.6 billion and 12.3 billion between now and 2100. Population Reference Bureau projects that world population, now 7.3 billion, will reach 10 billion in 2053 (*PRB, 2016*).

Much of this growth with come in countries that are already major exporters of migrants to the U.S.: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam, the Central American republics, Nigeria and Ethiopia. All those nations, through earlier refugee and immigration programs,

have established large diasporas in the U.S. with effective networks and migration channels back to their homelands. A disconcerting trend is that rapid economic development in a number of formerly poor countries (e.g. China, Korea, Vietnam) often does not dampen the desire of many to immigrate to the U.S. It may even stimulate flows by giving even more people the mobility and means to resettle here.

Along with vast population growth, America's migrant-sending nations are also experiencing rapid urbanization – a process which raises awareness of millions more of the migration option and the aid and resources they need to make it happen. Nigeria, for example, with the migration advantages of an English-speaking state, is already Africa's leading immigration sender. Urbanizing rapidly, its population is expected to grow from its present 174 million to over 440 million by 2050, overtaking the U.S. as the world's third largest nation. With its fertility falling more slowly than previously projected, Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, will top all regions in growth – adding 1.3 billion people by 2050, portending a vast pool of candidates for migration to the U.S.

The demand for immigration to the U.S. is immense. Annually the U.S. awards by lottery 50,000 "diversity" residence visas for persons from countries that are not the top sources of immigrants. In 2014 and 2015 there were 9.3 million applicants each year, representing over 14.0 million persons, if dependents are included. And the lottery was not open to seekers in such mega-senders as China, India, Mexico, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Nigeria alone in the 2014 lottery had 1.7 million applicants (*Dept. of State, 2015*).

The UN Population Division found in 2015 that the number of the world's migrants – people now living outside of their country of birth – has reached 244 million, a 41 percent increase over the 173 million counted in 2000. Migrants constitute 3.3 percent of the world's population, up from 2.8 percent 2000. Migrants strongly prefer settlement in the West: they now form ten percent of the total population of Europe, North America, and Oceania. Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean have only two percent.

The U.S. is the world leader in hosting immigrants. It has 19 percent of the world's migrants, but only 4.5 percent of the world's population. (*Note: the UN Population Division consistently estimates the U.S. foreign-born population at about eight percent higher than does the Census bureau – in this estimate at 46.4 million, compared to Census' 43.2 million. By Census' reckoning the U.S. would have "only" 17.7 percent of the world's migrant population.*)

In a 2009 public opinion poll of 260,000 adults in 135 nations, Gallup found that about 16 percent of the world's adults – at that time some 700 million – would like to move permanently to another country. The U.S. was the easy first choice, being the preferred destination of 24 percent of respondents – about 165 million people. The pull of jobs and family reunification in the U.S., and the need for refuge from climate change and proliferating failing states will further stimulate the rush of migrants to North America and Europe.

For American Elites, No Such Thing as Too Much Population Growth

In ruling political sectors of the U.S. there is indifference to these population trends or, all too often, a view of them as beneficial for the planet and for the U.S. These are the sectors that fear that somehow the U.S. is running out of people and that it can immigrate and populate itself into a secure and prosperous future. "Population growth means economic growth" has long been an axiom among America's business interests, financiers, growth theory economists and their political spokesmen.

That conviction underlays the Senate's 2013 immigration reform bill S. 744, which would have doubled legal immigration if not rejected by the House. But that growth ideology, energized by the fear of an aging population, retains strong backing within both political parties. It can be counted on to produce major immigration expansion proposals again in the future, regardless of the partisan balance of power.

Then there are major U.S. political constellations that regard immigration policy as a sort of global social work. They will remain a powerful force for expanding humanitarian immigration, while ever-widening and loosening the definition of "humanitarian need." Leading them are the churches, human and civil rights advocates, and cosmopolitan advocates of maximum diversity.

Closely related and supportive of this bloc are the ethnic and immigration lobbies and their service providers in government, the non-profits and the legal profession. The ethnic and immigrant lobbies have acquired an unprecedented amount of political clout, particularly within the Democratic Party, to expand legal admissions and tolerate illegal settlement. Under-enforcement of immigration rules has become a form of patronage.

A U.S. Immigration Regime with Growth Built In

Even without legal expansion of immigration, rising numbers are built into the existing laws and practices. Entries of close family members of citizens have no limits – and neither do refugee and asylee admissions. Both categories then usher in cascading family reunification. And over time, Washington has developed myriad ways to admit people to the U.S. other than through rationed legal immigration visas: temporary protected status, parole, deferred enforced departure, deferred action for childhood arrivals, or just plain non-implementation of legally

prescribed deportations. The executive branch, by practice and by loosely-written legislation, has assumed enormous discretionary authority. It will take a united and determined Congress to curb those powers and reassert its traditional "plenary powers over immigration."

Events within the U.S. and grave trends beyond its borders between now and mid-century will go far in determining whether the U.S. can recognize and act on the vital need for a rigorous balance between its population and its environmental and resource limits.

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