Immigration and U.S. Population Growth

An Environmental Perspective

By Mark W. Nowak

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Controversy over U.S. immigration policy is by no means new to the political landscape. Since 1819, when Congress passed the first significant law regulating immigration into the United States, successive debates over immigration have stirred emotions and polarized perceptions. It is not surprising, then, to find that environmentalists, confronted by the issue with increasing frequency, are by no means in agreement about the relationship between immigration and the environment.

On the one hand are those who argue that immigration, notwithstanding the benefits it provides, is fundamentally a form of population growth. Therefore, say supporters of this position, levels of immigration must be reduced (and fertility held at replacement-level or below) if we are to move toward environmental sustainability in the United States.

The demographic consequences of our immigration policy will be considerable.

Others argue that treating immigration as an environmental issue is a wrong-

headed approach to environmental protection. Rather than focusing on immigration, say these proponents, the environment would be better served by addressing issues such as Americans' hyper-consuming lifestyle, which are more to blame for our environmental ills.

It's true that numerous factors – including the high consumption rates of Americans – contribute substantially to environmental degradation, but diminishing or discounting the real role that immigration plays makes little sense. All other factors being equal, the environmental consequences of human activity increase with the growth of the population. This essential relationship is nearly universally recognized – particularly among environmental and population groups – as one of the fundamental bases for providing international population stabilization funding.

If immigration, then, serves as a contributor to U.S. population growth, what is the basis for excluding immigration from any comprehensive analysis of the consequences of U.S. population growth? It's time to look at and evaluate the arguments that are used against viewing immigration as a domestic population issue.

Argument: Immigration contributes little to U.S. population growth

A common assertion about U.S. immigration is that its demographic effect is (and will continue to be) small, implying that any environmental consequence of immigration will be minimal. In reality, the demographic consequences of our cur-

The world grain carryover stocks – the amount of food in bins and transport when the new harvest begins – could today feed the world for about 60 days.

rent immigration policy will be considerable, as revealed by the population projections prepared by the Census Bureau.

In building its projections, the Census Bureau analyzes four factors – birth rates, death rates, immigration and emigration.

Sixty percent of the increase in our population between 1994 and 2050 will be attributable to immigration and the descendants of immigrants.

Each time the Bureau prepares a substantial update to their projections, they vary their assumptions about each of these components to present a range of possible demographic outcomes.

The Bureau's latest projection, which assumes, essentially, that current demographic trends will continue, projects that the United States will grow from its current 268 million people to 393 million people in 2050, an increase of 125 million people.[1]

Immigration emerges as a prominent component in the calculation: 60% of the population increase in the United States between 1994 and 2050 will be attributable to immigration and the descendants of immigrants.[2]

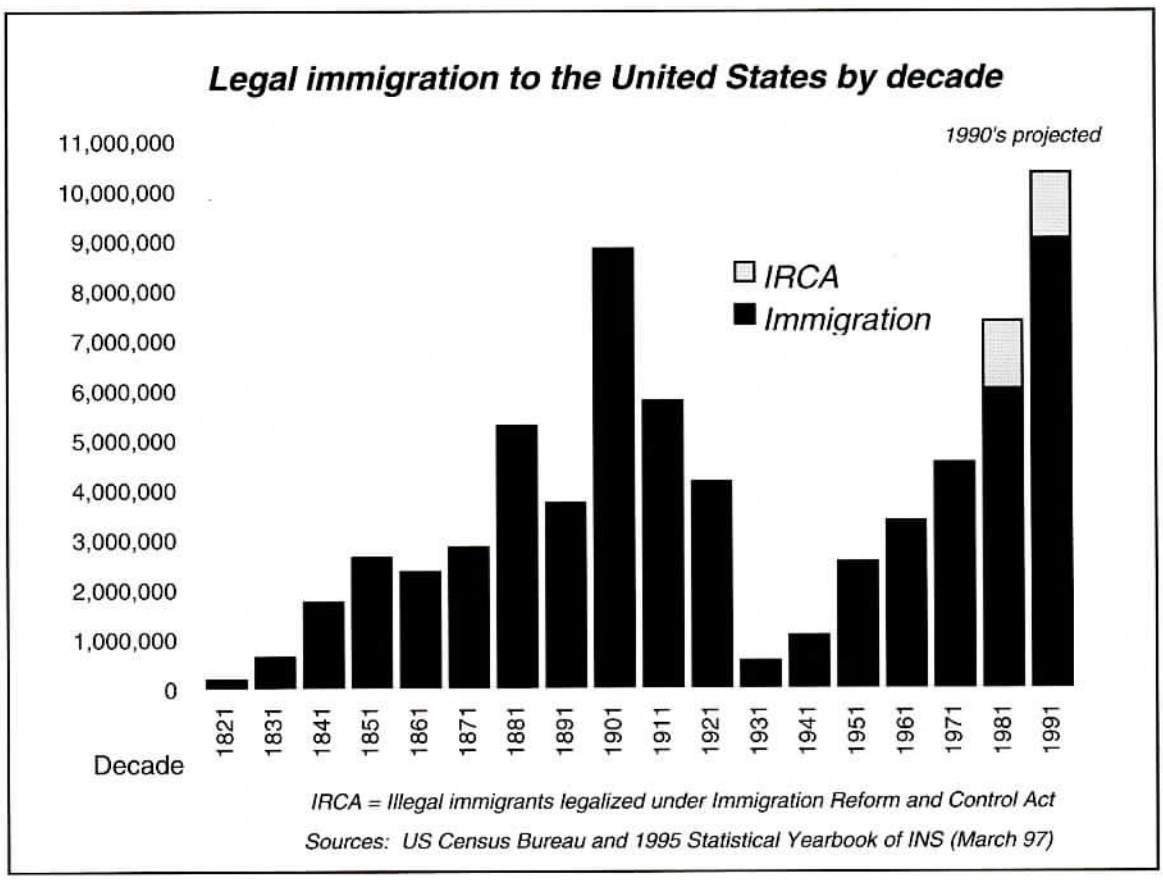
What this means is that immigration will not be a marginal contributor to future U.S. population growth, but, in fact, the primary one. Further, the absolute numbers in the Census Bureau projection are large: adding 125 million people to the current U.S. population is the equivalent of adding 48 more cities, each the size of Chicago.

Argument: Historic levels of immigration are higher than the current level

Regardless of immigration's demographic effect, immigration should not be considered solely a demographic issue, say some. It is equally important that we honor our past as an immigrant-receiving nation, and reducing immigration to stabilize the population flies in the face of this tradition. Furthermore, say proponents of this position, the percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born is far lower today than it was at the turn of the century, implying that we actually ought to consider *increasing* immigration levels so that our current policy might be consistent with tradition.

Pointing to the percentage of the population that is foreign-born as a measure of annual immigration makes little sense, however, since each is, at best, an indirect measure of the other. If we are interested in determining the traditional level of immigration into the United States, it makes much more sense to look at annual immigration flows. When we do, we see some surprising facts emerge.

The first chart on the next page details legal immigration to the United States between 1821 and 1990, a period that saw more than 61 million people make this country their home.[3] (Annual statistics prior to 1821 are not available since the Federal government didn't begin recording immigration until that



year. For the period 1776 - 1819, however, immigration is estimated at only about 300,000 total.) This chart conveys two extremely important facts about immigration. The first is that no decade appears on the chart that we can point to as "typical." Immigration levels range from a ten-year low of 143,000 (1821-1830) to a ten-year high of 8.8 million (1901-1910). Immigration during the current decade will likely set a new record high. When we observe individual years, the range is even greater: 1823 saw only 6,300 people arrive, while 1.8 million people became legal immigrants in 1991.[4]

In other words, while it is true that the United States has enjoyed a long tradition as an immigrant-receiving nation, there is no such thing as a traditional level of immigration to the United States. A proposal to set a net immigration level of 100,000 annually has as much historical authority as a proposal to cap immigration at 500,000 a year. Consequently, while the simple reminder that we are a nation of immigrants reveals a historic truth, it tells us precious little about what, specifically, our immigration policy should be.[5]

The second fact is that, while the level of immigration into the United States has varied considerably, for the last 65 years absolute levels of immigration have risen steadily and appreciably from one decade to the next. This general trend of rising immigration levels, combined with a relatively steady annual rate of natural increase (births minus deaths), has meant that immigration's share of annual U.S.

population growth has been growing larger and larger.

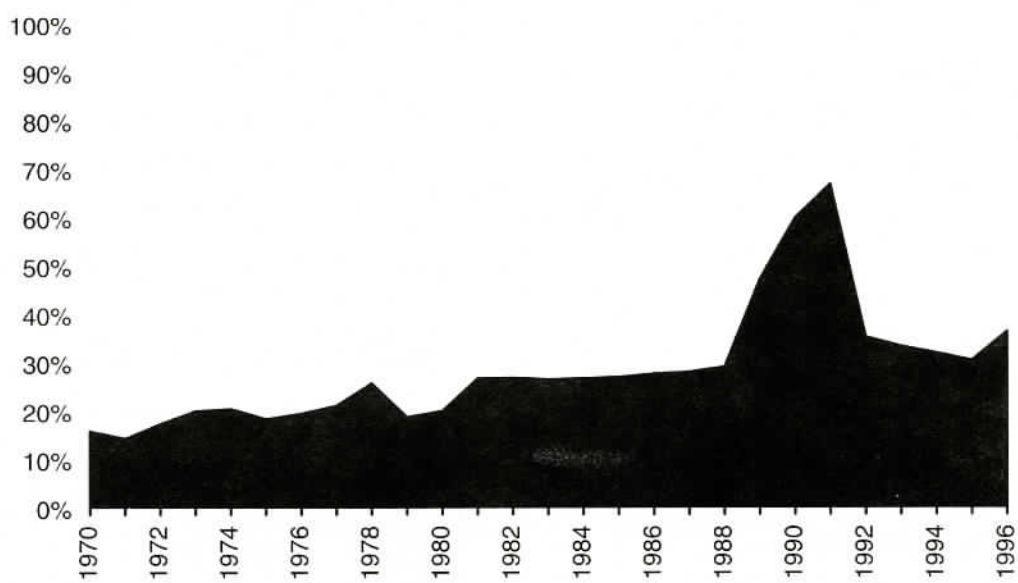
First-generation immigrants tend to have higher fertility rates than the native born.

The second chart shows that in 1970, first-generation legal immigrants (annual new arrivals) accounted for 16% of the increase in the U.S. population. By 1996, that figure more than doubled to 36%.[6] These figures represent just the increase contributed by first-generation immigrants. In addition, the Census Bureau has found that first-generation immigrants tend to have higher fertility rates than the native-born. When the demographic contribution of immigrants and their descendants is combined, we find that immigration will account for about two-thirds of future U.S. population growth.

It's true that the percentage of foreign born in the United States is lower now than it was at the turn of the century, but that is because the U.S. population is so much larger now. The absolute size of the population of foreign born is actually larger today than it was at the turn of the century, even though it represents a smaller percentage of the total population.

In 1910, the United States had 92 million residents. At that time, the nation's 13.5 million first-generation immigrants accounted for a rather significant share of the total population – about 15%. In 1990,

First-generation legal immigrants as a percentage of U.S. population growth



Sources: US Census Bureau and 1995 Statistical Yearbook of INS (March 97)

when the population had grown to 248 million, the nation's 19.5 million first-generation immigrants constituted a far smaller share – about 8%. But the percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign born has little bearing on the environmental risks of maintaining our current rate of population growth, which as we have seen, will be driven primarily by immigration in the future.

Argument: High consumption levels are more to blame than population growth

Environmental degradation is a function of more than just sheer population size. The level at which a particular population consumes energy, natural resources and other materials plays a large role in determining total environmental impact, as well. Per capita consumption and waste production rates in the United States are among the highest in the world, leading some to argue that far more benefit would accrue to the environment if we focused our efforts on reducing consumption, rather than working to reduce population growth (and, by extension, immigration). Consumption and population growth, however, are not mutually exclusive issues. Both have a significant consequence, so both must be addressed.

Consider, for example, car and truck ownership by U.S. residents (which includes both the native-born and immigrant population). In 1970, there was one car or truck on the road for every two U.S. residents. Since then, vehicle ownership has increased. By 1994, there was one car or truck on the road for every 1.5 residents. While much of the increase in the number of vehicles on the road stems from higher per capita ownership, population growth accounted

More than 90% of the increase in U.S. energy consumption between 1970 and 1990 was due entirely to population growth.

for 27% of the rise – not an insignificant figure. This means that had there been no change in the per capita consumption of vehicles at all, the number of cars on the road would still have increased by nearly 26 million – due entirely to the increased size of the population.

The impact of population growth on total energy consumption between 1970 and 1990 is especially dramatic. During this period, numerous conservation and efficiency measures were enacted and, as a result, per capita energy consumption barely increased over the two decades. But, because the U.S. population continued to grow during this period, total

Wildlands and wetlands are threatened by human population growth.

energy consumption increased by 36%, with more than 90% of this increase in energy consumption due entirely to population growth.

We can – and should – reduce consumption, but unless we address population growth our net gains will be reduced (or even reversed) by the demands imposed by our growing population.

Argument: Environmental gains can be made despite population growth

Immigration's strong showing as a contributor to U.S. population growth provides a fundamental basis for including immigration in environmental policy discussions. Some, however, have argued that linking immigration to environmental policy is not necessary because, they say, population stabilization is not a necessary condition for environmental improvement. The basis for this argument is that every environmental advance of the last two decades – including improvements in air quality, water quality and habitat restoration, has been made while both immigration rates and total population size were increasing.

The introduction of environmental regulations and the adoption of more efficient technologies have certainly led to some recent gains in environmental quality, but environmental gains are only half the story. Consider some of our environmental losses:

❖ Annual energy consumption, despite the introduction of efficient technologies, has increased 36% since 1970.

❖ The United States continues to lose more than a million acres of farmland every year to urban sprawl and erosion.

❖ More than 90% of all old growth forests in the United States have been cut down.

❖ About 50% of all wetlands in the United States have been lost. Wetland loss is highest in areas with higher growth rates (and therefore more rapid development): in California, 93% of all wetlands have been destroyed.

❖ Scientists estimate that since the Declaration of Independence was signed, more than five hundred species in the United States have gone extinct. Nearly 1,100 species are currently listed as threatened or endangered.

❖ In many parts of the United States, demand for water exceeds supply so that we are now overdrafting our surface waters and "mining" our aquifers. By consuming water faster than the recharge rate, we are destroying an otherwise renewable resource.

The United States continues to lose more than a million acres of farmland every year to urban sprawl and erosion.

❖ Over the past thirty years, nutrient loads in Chesapeake Bay (including nitrogen and phosphorus from agriculture) have increased as much as 250-fold, while areas of the bay that are oxygen depleted have increased 15-fold. The bay's famous oyster harvest has been decimated and harvests

of other species, including crabs, are seriously threatened.

❖ Emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds have fallen very slowly or not at all since 1980.

If the population increases, as projected, to 393 million by 2050, will our current environmental victories survive?

The significance of any environmental gains can only truly be measured in the long term. If the population increases, as projected, to 393 million by 2050, will our current environmental victories survive?

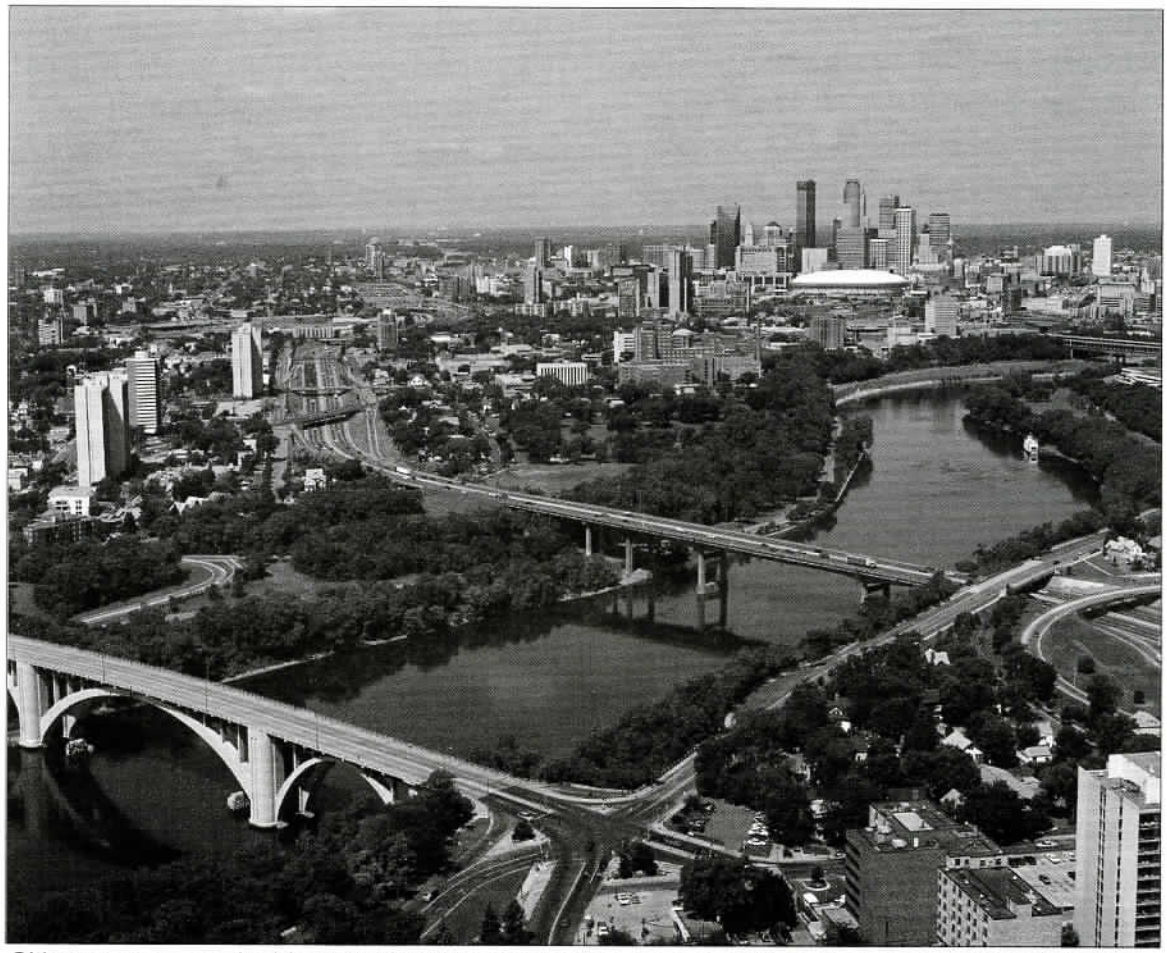
Argument: We should focus on international development, not immigration policy

Finally, some contend that immigration is simply too complex to be treated fundamentally as a demographic issue: instead of reducing immigration, which unfairly blames immigrants for problems in the United States, the U.S. should work internationally to reduce the push factors (such as poverty, overpopulation and war) that compel people to leave their own countries and move here. This argument, which essentially characterizes immigration as an inevitable economic process, identifies incorrectly the basis for most legal immigration. It also fails to recognize that immigration policy and foreign policy goals can be complementary.

"Push" factors explain primarily illegal, not legal, immigration into the United States. Legal immigration, in fact, is driven in part by the desire for economic gain, but a variety of other factors play a role. In 1994, 65% of immigrants arrived solely on the basis of family affiliation – a spouse, parent, child, brother or sister was already living in the United States. About 15% arrived as refugees or asylees (refugees and asylees are able to demonstrate that they would be persecuted if they remained at home), and about 8% arrived on the basis of possessing an identifiable skill. The remaining 12% arrived under one or more of several temporary programs.

In other words, poverty may explain the reason some potential immigrants come to the United States, but no legal immigrant arrives explicitly because he or she is poor – the current immigration law offers no provision to do so. Consequently, dramatically increased foreign assistance might help reduce the flow of illegal immigration (and flight by refugees and asylees), but its consequence for most legal immigration is less certain.

Second, the argument above suggests that trade and foreign aid should serve as a substitute for immigration policy – that rather than setting immigration levels directly, "immigration demand" should be allowed to evolve indirectly as a natural economic consequence of foreign assistance. A far more effective and reasonable strategy is to recognize the value (both environmental and economic) in



Cities pave over valuable agricultural lands and open space as they grow to accommodate our increasing population. They require tremendous inputs of materials and energy, while producing equally staggering amounts of waste.

regulating immigration levels while simultaneously pursuing our foreign aid and trade goals.

Argument: Immigrants are being unfairly blamed

Some have argued that by identifying immigration's contribution to population growth and advocating a reduction in that contribution, we are unfairly blaming immigrants for America's environmental problems. This argument makes little sense on the face of it. If such an argument were necessarily true, then demographers would be unfairly blaming couples – or their newborn children – for environmental degradation in the United States simply by acknowledging fertility's contribution to population growth. The blame game yields no profit, but does serve to sidetrack a critical policy issue with an unproductive and highly emotional debate.

Our past – and possible futures

Over the past 25 years, the link between population growth and environmental degradation has been so well established that it is hard to find an environmental advocate who does not acknowledge it. Numerous gov-

Immigration is a highly emotional issue so any debate over immigration policy is likely to be heated.

ernments have recognized the need for population stabilization, as well, and several international agencies now exist to address population growth directly. In the United States, officials at the highest levels of office have considered whether the United States should adopt a national population policy. In 1972, the recommendations of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (also known as the Rockefeller Commission) demonstrated what such a policy might look like: in part, the Commission recommended freezing immigration at its then-current level of about 400,000 a year as part of a national population policy. More recently, the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) advocated the goal of voluntary population stabilization in the United States, but fell short of recommending a specific immigration level.

Consider, also, the overwhelming national and international consensus on the relationship between population growth and environmental degradation. As recently as 1994 at the International Conference on Population and the Environment, the United States (with the endorsement of numerous U.S. environmental organization) and dozens of other countries, reaffirmed the goal of stopping population growth as a key element in any environmental protection plan.

Immigration is a highly emotional issue so any debate over immigration policy is likely to be heated. Unfortunately, much of the population and environment community is reluctant even to acknowledge that immigration has a demographic impact, an issue that was long ago resolved by the demographers. Once this first step has been taken, then the environmental debate over immigration can truly begin.

Endnotes

1. Jennifer Cheeseman Day, Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050, Middle Series Projection, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996. This projection assumes that life expectancy (which includes projected mortality from AIDS) will increase slightly from 75.9 years in 1995 to 82 years in 2050, which is consistent with the mortality improvements experienced during the 1980's. Age- and ethnic-specific fertility rates are based on current levels and are assumed to remain constant. Since Hispanic-origin fertility is higher than other groups, as the Hispanic share of population increases (through fertility and immigration), so will the total fertility rate of the population. The total fertility rate is expected to rise slightly from a replacement level of approximately 2.1 today to about 2.2 in 2050. Net immigration is assumed to remain constant at 820,000 per year, roughly equivalent to current net immigration rates. Because life expectancy improvements are expected to be modest during this period and fertility is projected to remain near replacement level, immigration will be the majority contributor to future U.S. growth.

2. The share of U.S. population growth attributable to immigration could rise or fall, depending upon the actual immigration and fertility rates

that prevail during this period. In their book, *How Many Americans?*, Leon F. Bouvier and Lindsey Grant project that immigration will account for fully 72% of population growth between 2000 and 2050, assuming a fertility rate of 2.0 (just below today's replacement level rate of 2.1) and an annual immigration rate of one million a year (consistent with the levels experienced during the early 1990's). The National Research Council, in a report prepared for the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, recently projected that the U.S. population will grow to 387 million people by 2050, with immigration contributing two-thirds of that growth.

3. These figures encompass legal immigration only and do not include illegal immigration, which is currently estimated by the Immigration and Naturalization Service at 300,000 annually. They do include the 2.7 million illegal immigrants legalized since 1989 under the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Immigration estimates for the decade beginning 1991 represent total (not net) immigration, to maintain consistency with the historical data.

4. The figures for 1991 reflect the legalization of 1.1 million illegal immigrants under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). If we exclude years containing IRCA legalizations (1989-1995), the range between the highest and lowest level of immigration in any given year is still enormous: 6,300 in 1823 and 1.3 million in 1907.

5. We might look at the statistical average level of immigration to the United States – about 350,000 a year – to see if such a level qualifies as "traditional." What we find is that in only 19 of the 170 years between 1820 and 1990 was the level of immigration into the United States within 10% of the average level. In 17 of the years the level was 10 times lower than the average, and in nine years the level was three or four times higher. The average level of immigration fails to reveal the enormous range in the distribution of yearly immigration flow, and hence is not a good measure of the typical immigration level into the United States.

6. The spike during the early 1990's reflects the legalization of illegal immigrants under the provisions of IRCA.

About the Author Mark W. Nowak is an environmental writer and a resident fellow of Negative Population Growth. His writing has appeared in national newspapers, magazines and environmental journals, and he has contributed to several books on population, immigration and the environment. He is the former executive director of Population-Environment Balance, and a long-time advocate of U.S. population stabilization. He lives in Arlington, Virginia and currently serves as Board Chair for a local environmental organization.

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