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CHAIN MIGRATION: HOW IMMIGRATION BEGETS MORE IMMIGRATION

An NPG Forum Paper
by Jessica Vaughan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Just over 1.05 million new legal permanent immigrants were admitted to the United States in 2015 – a slight increase of 34,000 over the prior year, according to figures recently released by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).[1] The total number of new immigrants admitted in the last decade is just over 12.8 million.

Legal immigration's contribution to the U.S. population in the last decade is roughly the equivalent of adding a population equal in size to our nation's two largest cities: New York City (8.6 million people) and Los Angeles (4.0 million people).

Immigration is the main driver of U.S. population growth. According to Census Bureau projections, immigration is expected to account for three-fourths of our future growth.[2]

One of the aspects of our immigration system that ensures continued high immigration demand is chain migration – the provisions in our law that allow immigrants to sponsor their family members to join them in the United States. In order to curb immigration-driven population growth, it is necessary for policy makers to address chain migration. This paper explores the scale of chain migration in the U.S. immigration system and presents a set of policy recommendations which will slow it – aiding the goal to slow and ideally reverse U.S. population growth until our nation reaches a smaller, more sustainable size.

Key Findings:

- Chain migration exceeds new immigration by a factor of roughly two to one. Out of a total of nearly 26 million immigrants admitted over a 28-year period from 1981 to 2009, more than 16 million were chain migration immigrants (63%).

- According to the most complete contemporary academic studies on chain migration, in recent years **each new immigrant has sponsored an average of 3.45 additional immigrants**. In the early 1980s, the chain migration multiplier was 2.59 – more than 30 percent lower.

- Of the top immigrant-sending countries, Mexico has the highest rate of chain migration. In the most recent five-year cohort of immigrants studied (1996-2000), new Mexican immigrants sponsored an additional 6.38 additional legal immigrants.

- Chain migration is contributing to the aging of the immigration stream. In the early 1980s, only about 17 percent of family migrants were 50 or over. In recent years, about 21 percent of family migrants were age 50 or older – a rate that is about 24 percent higher. This trend has important implications for the fiscal consequences of immigration.

- When the second-generation offspring of immigrants are counted, the population multiplier effect of each new immigrant admitted over the period 1972-1997 was 5.3.

• To reduce the contribution of chain migration to immigration and by extension population growth, Congress should eliminate the visa lottery and three categories of legal immigration for extended family members and limit the number of parent admissions. These changes would reduce legal immigration by 20 percent and reduce chain migration demand.

• The President should begin requiring immigration agencies to complete an environmental impact analysis of all immigration actions and policies that increase the number of immigrants.

MEASURING CHAIN MIGRATION

It is not easy to determine the scale of chain migration from the annual statistics published by the Department of Homeland Security, which presents the figures according to the categories of the law that provided for the admission of the immigrant. Some of these categories – like the employment categories, the visa lottery, and most humanitarian admissions – are clearly new arrivals, or what some scholars have called "initiating immigrants," not chain migration. Some categories are entirely chain migration, such as the categories for parents, siblings, and adult sons and daughters of naturalized U.S. citizens.

In other categories, primarily the categories for spouses and children, the immigrants could be either chain migrants or initiating immigrants. For example, the sponsor of a spousal immigrant could be a native-born citizen who marries someone already in the country, such as a foreign worker; or could be a naturalized immigrant or permanent resident marrying a non-citizen living here or abroad.

Further, there is a lag time for chain migration to occur, which can be hard to measure. For instance, while new/initiating immigrants are able to sponsor spouses and children as soon as they have permanent residency, they are not able to sponsor parents or siblings from abroad until they become citizens. Because worldwide demand for immigrant visas far exceeds the annual number available, there are long waiting lists in every category. As of November 2016, there were 4.3 million people who have been sponsored by a U.S. relative who were on the waiting list for family-based immigrant visas.[3] All of these are chain migration applicants. They face waiting periods of 22 months to 23 years, depending on the category and the country of origin.

Scholars have been trying to measure chain migration at least since the 1980s. The earliest studies were done through interviews and surveys, often concentrating on specific ethnic groups. They arrived at widely different estimates for chain migration multipliers, ranging from 0.5 to 18 sponsored chain migration immigrants per new immigrant.

A more recent and more comprehensive study of chain migration was conducted by Princeton University researchers Stacie Carr and Marta Tienda. The findings were published in 2013 in a series of papers.[4] Carr and Tienda used administrative data from federal immigration agencies on cohorts of immigrants who arrived between 1981 and 2009. They built on and refined the findings of an earlier study by Brown University PhD candidate Bin Yu, which used administrative immigration data from 1972 to 1997 and Census Bureau data.[5] Carr and Tienda updated Yu's findings and added data on aliens legalized in the 1986 amnesty.

CHAIN MIGRATION IS THE MAIN SOURCE OF IMMIGRATION

Carr and Tienda classified all the immigrants who arrived between 1981 and 2009 as either "initiating immigrants" or "family unification immigrants." The initiating immigrants were in the following categories: employment-based, government-sponsored (visa lottery, humanitarian, or amnesty beneficiaries), and spouses of native-born citizens. The family unification immigrants were admitted in all of the other family categories; i.e. dependents of new immigrants, spouses of naturalized citizens and Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), and parents and other extended family members of naturalized citizens.

To determine the share of immigration that came from chain migration, I compared Carr and Tienda's calculation of family unification immigration to the total level of immigration for the same period (see Figure 1). **Over this 28-year period, chain migration has never been less than half of total**

Figure 1. New Immigrants and Chain Migration Immigrants: 1981-2009
(**Source:** Carr & Tienda and DHS Office of Immigration Statistics)
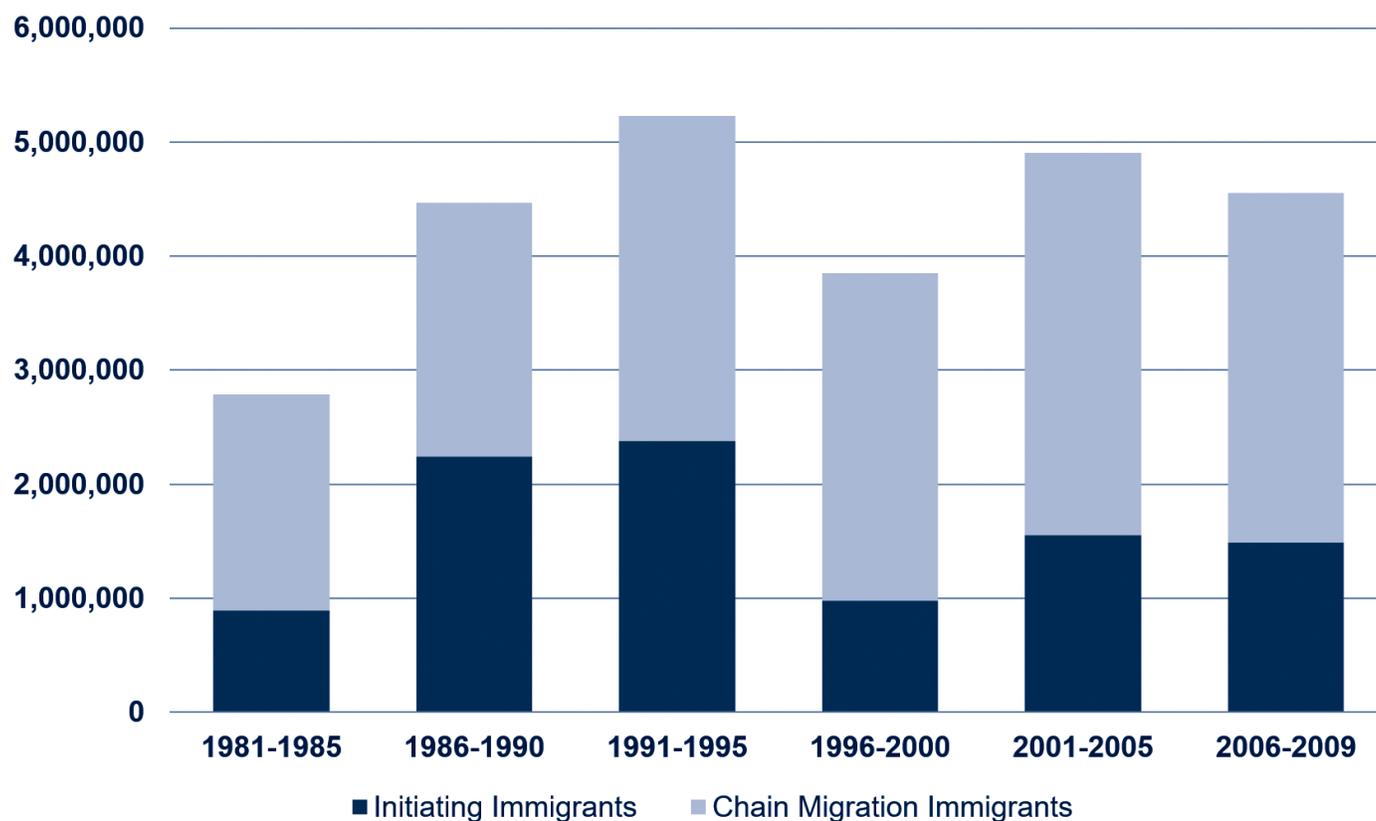
immigration, and averages about two-thirds of total immigration. Out of a total of nearly 26 million immigrants admitted between 1981 and 2009, more than 16 million were chain migration immigrants (63%).

The lowest period of chain migration was in the decade following the 1986 amnesty, when more than half of total legal immigration was comprised of former illegal aliens who received green cards. Those who were legalized were not able to sponsor family members from abroad until several years after their legalization, following a period of temporary legal residency and then processing for a green card. The relatives sponsored by these legalized aliens make up a large share of the chain migration beginning in the mid-1990s and beyond.

RECENT IMMIGRANTS BRING AN AVERAGE OF 3.45 ADDITIONAL FAMILY MEMBERS

Carr and Tienda produced detailed estimates of chain migration multipliers for five-year cohorts of new immigrants. They found that on average, the immigrants who arrived between 1981 and 2000 sponsored an average of 1.77 additional immigrants. Their findings varied greatly according to the years in which the immigrants arrived (see Table 1). The periods 1986-1990 and 1991-1995 had much lower future sponsorship rates than the 1981-1985 and 1996-2000 cohorts.

The multipliers in the 1986-1995 cohorts likely skew low for a couple of reasons. First, as discussed above, the IRCA-legalized aliens make up the majority of immigrants in these years. Under the terms of that amnesty, they had to wait several years to complete the processing before they could sponsor family members. In addition, these immigrants turned out to be less likely to naturalize, or naturalized much later than other immigrants.[6] This means that they were less likely to use the extended family immigration categories (such as parents and siblings) – or if they did, because of the long waiting lists the sponsored family members arrived after 2000 and thus were not counted in Carr and Tienda's study.

Table 1. Chain Migration Multiplier by Year of Admission			
Year of Admission	New Immigrants	Sponsored Family Immigrants	Multiplier
1981-1985	889,030	2,300,562	2.59
1986-1990	2,238,350	2,474,425	1.11
1991-1995	2,375,637	3,327,977	1.4
1996-2000	979,176	3,392,130	3.46
Total	6,482,193	11,495,094	1.77
Source: Carr & Tienda, "Family Sponsorship and Late-Age Immigration"			

The chain migration multiplier for the more recent cohorts of immigrants is much higher than historical norms. Immigrants who arrived in the 1996-2000 cohort sponsored an average of 3.46 additional family members for admission, **more than double the rate for immigrants who were admitted in the previous ten years**, and even higher than those who came in the pre-IRCA period.

Table 2. Chain Migration Multiplier by Region of Origin: 1996-2000			
Region	New Immigrants	Sponsored Family Immigrants	Multiplier
Europe	215,868	359,383	1.67
Mesoamerica (includes North and Central America and Caribbean)	312,381	1,313,381	4.2
South America and Oceania	61,239	325,445	5.31
Asia	301,427	1,192,213	3.95
Africa	88,261	201,708	2.29
Source: Carr & Tienda, "Multiplying Diversity"			

Chain migration rates varied greatly according to the country of origin of the immigrants. When Carr and Tienda examined sponsorship rates by region of the world, they found that immigrants from the Western hemisphere had the highest rates of chain migration and immigrants from Europe and Africa had the lowest rates (see Table 2). Of the four top countries of citizenship of immigrants, in recent years those from China and Mexico have had the highest chain migration rates, although in the 1980s immigrants from India had the highest rates (see Table 3).

Table 3. Chain Migration Multiplier by Top Sending Countries: 1996-2000			
Country	New Immigrants	Sponsored Family Immigrants	Multiplier
China	32,521	202,944	6.24
India	36,162	184,830	5.11
Philippines	39,568	200,769	5.07
Mexico	102,647	654,398	6.38
Source: Carr & Tienda, "Multiplying Diversity"			

U.S.-BORN CHILDREN COMPOUND THE POPULATION IMPACT OF INITIAL IMMIGRANTS

A few other scholars have tried to develop a more complete empirical measure of the population effect of immigration by calculating not only chain migration but also the offspring of new immigrants. In one such attempt, Brown University doctoral candidate Bin Yu created a two-part immigration multiplier including both sponsored family and the first generation of U.S.-born children. He concluded that each new immigrant who arrived from 1972 to 1997 added an average of 5.3 people to the U.S. population.[7] One major limitation to Yu's analysis is that he did not include illegal aliens who received amnesty under IRCA or other smaller legalizations during the period.

Using administrative data from the federal immigration agency and Census Bureau data, Yu found that new immigrants over this 25-year period sponsored an additional 2.1 immigrants and had an average of 2.2 children, for an average of 4.3 people added to the U.S. population plus the original immigrant (see Table 4). Over the same time period, the United States admitted approximately 5 million initiating immigrants and 10.6 million sponsored family members. Together with the 10.3 million U.S.-born children of the original immigrants, **the total population impact of these immigrants was 25.9 million people**.

Table 4. Immigration, Chain Migration and Second Generation by World Region: 1972-1997			
Region	**New Immigrants**	**Chain Migration**	**Second Generation**	**Total**
Latin America	1,845,059	4,145,224	4,692,492	**10,682,775**
Asia	1,449,523	4,047,146	3,133,058	**8,629,727**
Europe	1,001,807	1,403,633	1,310,551	**3,715,991**
Middle East	256,054	519,790	577,545	**1,353,389**
Africa	235,722	250,740	368,125	**854,587**
North America	162,973	186,186	214,283	**563,442**
Oceania/ Other	44,002	54,822	43,796	**142,620**
Total	**4,995,140**	**10,607,541**	**10,339,849**	**25,942,530**
Source: Yu analysis of Immigration and Census data			

Like Carr and Tienda, Yu found significant regional variations in the immigration multiplier calculation, with immigrants from Latin America, Asia and the Middle East having the greatest population impact, and immigrants from Europe, Africa, North America and Oceania having a smaller impact.

The multipliers for immigrants from some regions were due more to chain migration, and immigrants from some regions had more of an impact due to U.S.-born children. For example, the population impact of Asian migration is due more to chain migration than U.S.-born children, and the impact of Latin America and the Middle East is due to both a high chain migration rate and more offspring born in the United States. Yu notes that roughly the same number of initiating immigrants came from the Middle East and Africa over the time period, but because Middle Eastern immigrants sponsored more family members and had larger families, the size of the combined African immigrant and second generation population was only 60 percent of the size of the new Middle Eastern population (0.85 million African immigrants and U.S.-born children compared to 1.35 million Middle Eastern immigrants and U.S.-born children).

CHAIN MIGRATION CAUSED AGING OF IMMIGRATION

One interesting trend in legal immigration that was detected by Carr and Tienda is that the stream of immigrants has aged gradually but significantly over the last three decades, which they attribute to chain migration – especially the sponsorship of parents. **This trend would seem to contradict claims that immigration is needed to mitigate the aging of the U.S. population as a whole**, and that immigration is a fiscal benefit to the United States.

The researchers found that the number and proportion of "late-age" immigrants, defined as those over age 50, has increased since the 1980s. At that time, about 17 percent of family migrants sponsored were 50 or over. In contrast, about 21 percent of the family members sponsored by those who arrived in the late 1990s were age 50 or older – a rate that is about 24 percent higher, coming at a time when the total inflow of new immigration was higher. **In other words, since the 1990s a larger share of a larger pool of new immigrants has been over age 50**.

These older chain migration immigrants were found mainly in three categories: parents, adult sons and daughters, and siblings of naturalized U.S. citizens. More than 90 percent of the parents sponsored as family immigrants and about 20 percent of the extended family immigrants sponsored by immigrants who arrived in the latest cohort were over age 50. Admissions in the extended family categories are subject to numerical limits, but admissions in the parents' category are unlimited.

While the dependency rates and costs of health care and other social services to older immigrants are beyond the scope of this report, at a minimum it is fair to say that these were less of a fiscal concern when the immigration system was created in 1965 than they are today. New realities – such as different demographics and a changing health care system – demand a review of whether a growing inflow of older immigrants is either sustainable or helpful to our country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Unlike earlier times in our history, when immigration ebbed and flowed in distinct waves, the last several decades have been a time of constantly increasing immigration. Our immigration system allows this growth both through family chain migration and by expanding the number of initiating immigrants – such as through amnesties, humanitarian admissions, employment visas and the visa lottery, all of which set off new chains of family migration.

The most direct way to reduce immigration is through Congressional action to eliminate entire categories of immigrant visas and green cards that are reserved for the extended family members of prior immigrants (siblings and adult sons and daughters) and thus facilitate chain migration. Admissions in these two categories amount to about 85,000 per year – or about 8.5 percent of all legal immigration.

In addition, Congress should eliminate the visa lottery, which admits about 50,000 per year. **Together, these reforms would reduce total legal immigration by 135,000 per year, or just over 13 percent**. Cutting these categories at the same time would reduce the multiplier effect of admitting new immigrants, as these immigrants would not be able to sponsor as many family members to follow them.

Congress also should place limits on the number of admissions of parents of prior immigrants. **This category admits between 110,000 and 125,000 new immigrants each year – nearly equal to the number who come in the extended family categories**. Limiting the number of parents would reduce total immigration, help reduce chain migration and, since these are the oldest immigrants, also might alleviate some of the fiscal costs associated with immigration. If the number of parent admissions were limited to 65,000 per year, and the other chain migration categories were eliminated as suggested above, then total legal immigration would be reduced by **200,000 per year, or 20 percent**.

Above all, Congress should refrain from enacting new legalization programs, which increase both new immigration and chain migration. These recommendations are largely consistent with the recommendations of the blue ribbon 1995 Commission on Immigration Reform, chaired by the late civil rights leader Barbara Jordan.[8]

The President, too, can act to reduce legal immigration and to increase awareness of its population impact. **One of the first acts of the Trump administration should be to direct the immigration agencies to begin complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)**. This law requires all federal agencies to perform an environmental impact analysis on all government policies and actions. According to the Immigration Reform Law Institute (IRLI), a public interest law group, the federal government has been ignoring this requirement with respect to immigration actions. In October 2016, IRLI filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking to force the government to do an environmental review of past and future executive immigration actions.[9]

Compliance with NEPA would ensure that the federal government addresses the potential environmental impacts of increasing the U.S. population through immigration. **In addition, the disclosure of the population-increasing effects of executive immigration actions will increase public awareness of the environmental impact of immigration policies**.

The executive branch also must refrain from using executive action to increase immigration. The aforementioned lawsuit documented more than 30 executive actions taken by the Obama administration and prior administrations that increased the settled population by **more than one million people**. Some of these actions offered permanent legal status to individuals who did not qualify under the categories established by Congress, thus increasing immigration and setting off potential chain migration.[10]

The annual number of immigrants admitted by executive decisions is significant. In 2014, more than 165,000 new immigrants were admitted through presidential discretion, including refugees, asylees, and unspecified "other immigrants." This number should be reduced by half in order to approach a more responsible level of total immigration.

Over time, U.S. population growth must be reduced to preserve our nation's environment, economy, resources, and quality of life. Immigration is the main driver of U.S. population growth – and the chain migration multiplier significantly exacerbates the population impact of our current immigration

system. It is therefore imperative that Congress and the Trump administration work toward policy changes which will reduce chain migration numbers – as part of the greater effort to slow, halt, and ideally reverse U.S. population growth.

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ENDNOTES

1. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2015*, https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015.

2. Leon Kolankiewicz, *Immigration, Population Growth and the Environment*, Center for Immigration Studies, April 2015, http://cis.org/Immigration-Population-Growth-Environment.

3. U.S. State Department, *Annual Report of Immigrant Visa Applicants in the Family-sponsored and Employment-based Preferences Registered at the National Visa Center as of November 1, 2016*, https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/Immigrant-Statistics/WaitingListItem.pdf.

4. These include Stacie Carr and Marta Tienda, "Multiplying Diversity: Family Unification and the Regional Origins of Late-Age Immigrants, 1981-2009," Princeton University, March, 2013, http://paa2013.princeton.edu/papers/130577, and Carr and Tienda, "Family Sponsorship and Late-Age Immigration in Aging America: Revised and Expanded Estimates of Chained Migration," Princeton University, August, 2013, http://wws.princeton.edu/faculty-research/research/item/family-sponsorship-and-late-age-migration-aging-america-revised-and.

5. Bin Yu, "Immigration Multiplier: A New Method of Measuring the Immigration Process," Brown University, 2005 http://paa2006.princeton.edu/papers/61643.

6. Naturalization rates are strongly correlated to country of origin. The majority of IRCA-legalized immigrants were from Mexico and, for a variety of reasons, immigrants from Mexico have had much lower and slower rates of naturalization than other nationalities. See Paul Taylor et al, "Recent Trends in Naturalization, 2000-2011," Pew Hispanic Center, November, 2012, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/14/ii-recent-trends-in-naturalization-2000-2011/.

7. Yu, op cit.

8. Jordan Commission, Executive Summary, 1995, https://www.numbersusa.com/sites/default/files/public/from_drupal5/JordanCommissionlegal-summary.pdf.

9. See Whitewater Draw Natural Resource Conservation District v. DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson, http://www.irli.org/nepacomplaint.

10. Affidavit of Jessica Vaughan in Whitewater Draw Natural Resource Conservation District v. Johnson, http://media.wix.com/ugd/1a0a2e_f26b22661e324a7a9b21483d6f683392.pdf.

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NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.

ABOUT NPG

Negative Population Growth (NPG) is a national nonprofit membership organization. It was founded in 1972 to educate the American public and our political leaders about the devastating effects of overpopulation on our environment, resources, and standard of living. We believe that our nation is already vastly overpopulated in terms of the long-range carrying capacity of its resources and environment.

NPG advocates gradually halting and then reversing our U.S. population growth so that, after an interim period of population reduction, our population can be stabilized at a level that would be sustainable indefinitely, and afford an adequate standard of living for all, in a healthy environment. We believe that in order to be sustainable indefinitely our population should not exceed 150 million, its size two generations ago. We are convinced that goal could be reached within several generations by non-coercive tax incentives to encourage parents to have not more than two children, coupled with a substantial reduction in immigration.

NPG POSITION PAPERS

A Proposed National Population Policy (2006)
NPG believes that a national policy to turn U.S. population growth around is critically needed. In this paper, we offer a series of specific proposals as to how to accomplish that goal. We recognize the political resistances in the way of such policies, but still we think it useful to set forth our recommendations in one compact document, for the use of those who may come to share our concerns.

Toward Negative Population Growth: Cutting Legal Immigration by Four-Fifths (2014)
Mass immigration, whether through established or extra-legal channels, has by default become the nation's de facto population policy. While Washington debates the immigrants' skills, status and provenance, their environmental impact is the same: immigrants and their children become part of the population base that intensifies the nation's depletion of resources and environmental stress. Current immigration numbers are excessive, if the U.S. is ever to reduce its population to an environmentally-sustainable size. NPG believes that this goal can only be met if illegal immigration is reduced to near zero, and legal immigration is reduced by four-fifths – to about 200,000 yearly.

A No-Growth, Steady-State Economy Must Be Our Goal (2014)
In this paper NPG will argue that in order to create a sustainable economy, and thus prevent the destruction of our environment and resources, and a drastic reduction in per capita income and our standard of living, we must renounce and discard the goal of macro-economic growth (as distinct from per capita income). Even a steady-state economy, however, in order to be sustainable indefinitely, would need to be of a size relative to our ecosystem that would allow it to be in balance with our resources and environment.

Sanctuary Cities: Politics Overshadow Responsible U.S. Immigration Policies (2016)
In recent years, America's radio stations, televisions, newspaper headlines, and magazine covers have been inundated with talk of "sanctuary cities." Experts on both sides of the argument have proclaimed their position – it's the "absolutely right" or "absolutely wrong" thing for America to do, depending on who you ask. However, a few critical pieces of information seem to be missing from this debate – information which is necessary if our nation is to make an informed decision on such an important policy.