

Part II: Immigrants Today

Today, immigrants are drawn to a life in the United States in record numbers. The United States continues to lure many with the promise of a better future. More than 11 percent of the U.S. population was born in another country. And yet, as the number of immigrants coming into the United States has increased, so has the scope of the immigration debate. Concerns about the economic security of American workers fuels the debate, just as it has throughout our history. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 have also added another dimension to the questions surrounding immigration.

As the new century begins, immigration policy has come head to head with health care, welfare reform, crime, and other important domestic issues. In the foreign policy arena, immigration has left a mark on human rights, international trade, the worldwide refugee crisis, and U.S. relations with Latin America. The question to answer at the end of this reading is: What should U.S. immigration policy be?

Before you consider the future of U.S. immigration law, you will explore the chief issues that frame the current policy debate. This reading reviews the economic impact of immigration, the role of illegal immigration, refugee policy, and concerns about national security.

Immigration and the Economy

Economic concerns have long dominated discussions about immigration. For most of the past century, business leaders and big farmers have generally favored open immigration to ensure an adequate supply of workers. In the early 1900s, the steady flow of unskilled immigrants into the labor force helped fuel the boom in manufacturing. Although opportunities for unskilled factory workers have declined since World War II, other businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and agriculture continue to depend on low-wage labor to hold down costs.

What are the economic arguments in favor of immigration?

Supporters of open immigration policies note that many high-tech industries have come to rely on newcomers. About 12 percent of immigrants earn graduate degrees, compared to 8 percent of native-born Americans. Immigrants also tend to specialize in engineering, computer science, chemistry, and other fields that are in high demand. One in four people living in America with a university degree in the sciences was born abroad. In 1998, America's high-tech industries persuaded Congress to grant an additional fifty-thousand immigration visas each year to skilled foreign workers until 2001.

Many economists attribute the success of the U.S. economy to the openness of our society and the influx of skills and labor from overseas. For example, recent immigrants from China and India started 30 percent of the high technology startups in Silicon Valley during the 1990s. Preserving the vitality that immigrants bring to the country is seen by many as extremely important.

In the biggest U.S. cities, immigrants have helped revive downtown business districts in the past two decades. Many have opened up small businesses, created new jobs, and strengthened the local tax base. Without the influx of immigrants, the nation's largest cities would have experienced a drop in popula-

Immigration to the U.S. in 2002

Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens.....	486,748
Skilled workers, professionals, and unskilled workers	88,555
Refugees	115,832
Asylees	10,252
Total.....	1,063,732

data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

