



# Immigration

## *Part I: Facts and Issues*

**Study Committee**  
Judy Prochko, Chair  
Ruth Zeul, Co-Chair  
Peg Honour, Editor  
Carla Bodaghi  
Jerry Boltz  
Maeke Ermarth  
Sue Farmer  
Jo Rubin  
Nina Solarz  
Shirley Olson,  
Program Coordinator

## Introduction

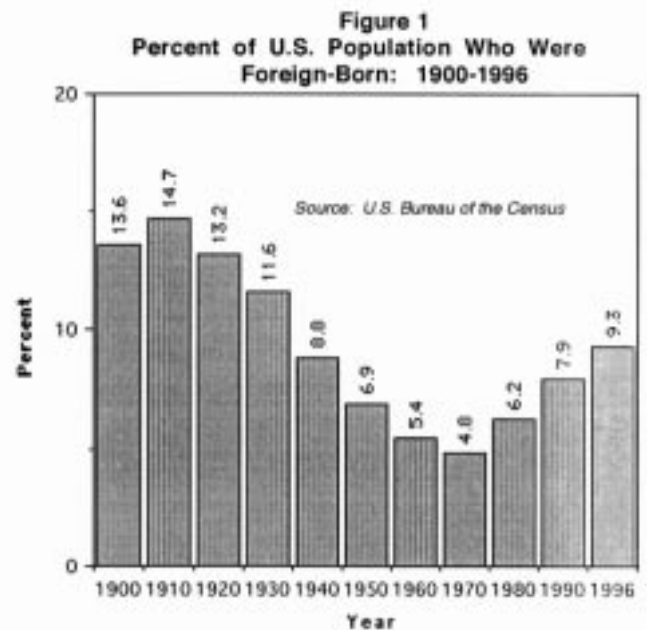
According to all indicators, immigration is an issue of great interest to Leaguers. Efforts to address immigration at the national or state level have not, as yet, been successful, so this is a local study. As the committee started gathering information, it soon became evident that there was enough material to provide unit programs for a year! Since the subject is so broad and complex, the study will be presented in two parts. Part I is a brief overview of immigration from a national perspective. It does not cover every aspect of immigration but serves as back ground for Part II, which will address the impact of immigration on the local area.

Immigration has emerged as one of the “hot” topics of the 1990s. Hardly a day goes by with out an immigration-related story in the news. Fueled by news of the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 by non-Americans and TV images of illegal immigrants entering the United States clandestinely, some fear that we are being overwhelmed by foreigners and have called for more restrictive immigration policies.

Over the years, U.S. immigration policy has struggled to balance humanitarian and political goals with concern over the impact of growing numbers of immigrants on our culture and economy. Pressure for more restrictive measures is usually more pronounced during periods of economic recession, when immigrants often become scapegoats for the nation’s ills. Ultimately, immigration policy is a complex mix of what we should stand for as a nation, our own self-interest, foreign policy issues, the level of altruism we are willing to support at a particular time, and the kind of country we envision for the future.

Debate over immigration policy is often avoided because it involves the emotional and divisive issues of race, ethnicity, and religion. And yet, debate is essential so that we can understand the issues and agree on the principles upon which immigration policy should be based. This study attempts to present the facts and to take the emotion out of the debate so that we can look at immigration from a balanced and informed point of view. First, let us examine Figure 1, which shows immigration from an historical perspective.

Although the foreign-born represented 7.9 per cent of the population in the United States in 1990, census figures show Virginia with 5 percent and Northern Virginia at about 14.1 percent in the same year. It is interesting to note that 1 in 11 people living in the United States in 1990 was foreign-born, and one-fourth of that immigrant population came here between 1985 and 1990. Comparison with 1990 data from other countries shows that immigrants represented 22.7 percent of the total population in Australia; 16 percent in Canada; 6.3 percent in France; 7.3 percent in Germany; 3.9 percent in Great Britain; and 5.7 percent in Sweden.



## A Brief History of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy

United States immigration policy evolved over more than two centuries from open, unrestricted immigration during the first century of our nation to a slightly tempered policy, which placed limits on the immigration of certain groups of people in the late nineteenth century. The first attempt to restrict immigration occurred in 1862, when Congress enacted a law forbidding the use of American vessels to transport Chinese immigrants to the United States. This was

followed in 1882 by the Chinese Exclusion Act excluding Chinese immigrants.

The first comprehensive statute for the control of immigration was enacted in 1891, and restricted the admission of persons to the United States who were likely to become public charges, those who suffered from certain contagious diseases, felons, polygamists, and aliens assisted by others through payments for emigration.

The Alien Contract Labor laws of 1885, 1887, 1888, and 1891 worked against unskilled laborers and gave preference to professionals, skilled workers, and personal and domestic servants.

In 1907, a “gentleman’s agreement” was made with Japan to the effect that Japan would not issue passports to Japanese laborers intending to go to the United States; the United States would not enact legislation excluding Japanese immigrants. In 1924, however, a U.S. law was enacted prohibiting Japanese immigration to the United States.

A trend toward a more restrictive policy in the twentieth century culminated in the national origins quota system of the 1920s, governing immigrant admissions to the United States. Differential national quotas were abolished in 1965, when immigration policy evolved toward a system in which provisions of the law apply equally to all prospective immigrants, regardless of the place of their birth. A chart of significant immigration legislation is shown on page 4.

In contrast to immigration policy, the United States had no official refugee policy prior to 1948. Although the United States has been a place of refuge since our earliest history, the tradition of welcoming refugees has not been consistent. In the years before World War I a refugee policy was not really necessary, since there were few barriers placed by this country on immigration in general. After the restrictive immigration legislation of the 1920s, however, the lack of special refugee provisions in immigration law caused persecution, loss of life, and suffering.

Since World War II, humanitarian concern for refugees has been reasserted and, in 1948, the first piece of legislation reflecting special concern for refugees was

passed by Congress. After that time, there were a series of special refugee admissions programs under the conditional entry provisions of the Immigration Act of 1965 and under the parole authority of the Attorney General.

More recently, the United States gave legislative support to admitting refugees, regardless of their country of origin or their ideologies, with the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. This law provided a systematic procedure for the admission and resettlement of refugees and established an annual ceiling of 50,000 refugees per year. It also established that, when circumstances required, the President, after consultation with Congress, could allocate emergency-flow numbers for additional refugees.

Today the process for the allocation of refugee slots is initiated by the State Department, in consultation first with private voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), and then it is negotiated with the relevant committees in Congress and with the President. Some feel the process is now driven by the budget, and the numbers of refugees to be admitted is determined by the amount of money available to resettle the refugees. For 1997, the number of refugees to be admitted was 78,000; for 1998, the President has requested the admission of up to 83,000 refugees.

### **Current Refugee Program**

The flow of refugees has risen dramatically since 1976, when the United Nations estimated that there were 2.8 million worldwide; by 1992 the number had increased to 18 million. A 1995 profile of refugees entering the United States reveals that an overwhelming number (91 percent) came from only five countries: Cuba (28 percent), republics of the former Soviet Union (27 percent), Vietnam, including Amerasians (25 percent), the former Yugoslavia (8 percent), and Laos (3 percent).

The U.S. refugee program has three aspects: humanitarian assistance to refugees over seas; selection processing of refugees; and U.S. resettlement.

The Department of State funds humanitarian assistance programs overseas through contributions to the

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and some U.S. assistance agencies.

The Department of State annually determines the number of refugees and the composition of the case-load, and selects the VOLAGs which will resettle the refugees. Presently, there are 11 agencies that participate. The Department of State, through reception and placement grants to these national voluntary agencies, supports resettlement of refugees for the first 3 months. After that time, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the VOLAGs

take over the process. In Northern Virginia, there are a variety of agencies involved in resettlement.

HHS is the parent agency of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which operates under the Refugee Act of 1980. ORR's purpose is to help refugees gain self-sufficiency and make social adjustments as early and as easily as possible by offering them specific services. As of FY 1996, ORR's funding for social services and targeted assistance programs, e.g., employment and other services for high-risk refugees

## Immigration Legislation

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1921 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Quotas established to limit number of immigrants of each nationality to 3 percent of numbers of foreign-born persons of that nationality living in the United States in 1910.</li> <li>•Limited European immigration to about 350,000 per year.</li> </ul>  |
| 1924 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Set annual quotas at 2 percent of nationality's U.S. population per 1890 census.</li> <li>•Limited immigration to 150,000 per year.</li> </ul>  |
| 1952 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Reaffirmed national origins system.</li> <li>•Limited immigration from Eastern Hemisphere (the half of the earth that is east of the Atlantic Ocean, including Europe, Asia, and Africa) to about 150,000 per year; Western Hemisphere (the half of the earth consisting mainly of North and South America and the surrounding oceans) unrestricted.</li> <li>•Tightened security and screening standards and procedures.</li> <li>•Established preferences for relatives of U.S. citizens, skilled workers.</li> </ul>                       |
| 1965 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Abolished national origins system.</li> <li>•Established annual ceiling of 170,000 for Eastern Hemisphere with 20,000 per country limit; ceiling of 120,000 for Western Hemisphere with no country limit.</li> <li>•Established 7 category preference system for Eastern Hemisphere favoring close relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent resident aliens.</li> </ul>   |
| 1976 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Extended 20,000 per country limit and preference system to Western Hemisphere with an annual ceiling of 170,000.</li> </ul>   |
| 1978 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Applied preference system and 20,000 per country limit uniformly.</li> <li>•Combined ceiling for both hemispheres at 290,000.</li> </ul>  |
| 1986 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Allocated 5,000 visas in 1987 and 1988 for aliens born in countries adversely affected by 1965 immigration laws.</li> <li>•Established amnesty program for undocumented workers living in the United States since January 1982.</li> <li>•Created sanctions system against employers knowingly hiring undocumented workers.</li> </ul>  |
| 1990 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Increased immigration under flexible cap to 675,000, beginning in FY 1995, with 480,000 family sponsored, 140,000 employment-based, 55,000 "diversity immigrants." (Refers to nationals of countries adversely affected by 1965 laws. See page 5 under "Current Immigration Law" for further explanation.)</li> <li>•Reduced visas for adult children, increased visas for spouses and minor children, beginning in 1992.</li> </ul>  |
| 1996 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Strengthened interior and border enforcement, expedited deportation procedures, improved employee verification process, tightened procedures against sponsors failing to support aliens, strengthened criteria for admitting individuals likely to become public charges, tightened citizenship requirements for receipt of some public benefits.</li> <li>•Limited benefits under the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program and Food Stamps.</li> <li>•Prohibited eligibility for Federal means-tested programs for 5 years.</li> </ul> |
| 1997 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Lengthened exemption from new SSI and Medicaid rules for refugees and asylees from 5 to 7 years after entry.</li> </ul>   |

in local areas, is limited to refugees who have been in the United States 5 years or less.

The program is federally funded, with much of the money going to states to provide cash, medical assistance and a broad range of social services. The Public Health Service receives money to monitor various aspects of refugee health, and works with state and local health departments to develop a national health screening protocol. The Public Health Service monitors the overseas health screening of U.S.-destined refugees, inspects them at the port of entry, notifies state and local health departments of new entries, and provides funds for refugee health assessments.

According to the Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, the number of refugees settling in Fairfax County from 1992 to 1996 totalled 1,801. The flow of Vietnamese (938) into the county was fairly even throughout the years. Somali refugees, the second largest group, totalled 416 and was also consistent. On the other hand, all Afghan refugees (107) came in 1992 and 1993. The newest group of refugees to Fairfax County is the Kurds. The total number of refugees settling in the City of Fairfax from 1992 to 1996 was 474.

## Current Immigration Law

According to a recent publication, "U.S. immigration law today is very complex with scores of provisions, but the main elements are these:

- No person can be refused immigrant status because of race, nationality, or religion.
- Preferences in issuing immigration visas will be shown for
  - family-sponsored immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and legally resident noncitizens
  - persons with special occupational and professional skills that will be useful in the United States
  - persons from 'underrepresented' countries, the countries to be determined annually and total visas [by lottery] limited to 55,000 in this preference category

- The annual limit on immigration is set each year by Congress, but there is some flexibility in the cap or ceiling. Limits are set on all of the above preference categories.
- Minor children and parents of legal immigrants do not count against the immigration limit.
- Refugees do not count against the immigration limit."<sup>1</sup>

## Immigration Process

Immigration policy strives to strike a balance by admitting persons who have a need to enter the country, and excluding those who would pose a threat to the health, welfare, or safety of U.S. citizens.

Immigrants outside the United States must apply for a visa through the U.S. consulate in their country of origin or in another country where they must live until granted a visa. The State Department is responsible for issuing visas and administering the refugee allocation system.

### For aliens outside the United States:

- The proper forms and documents are submitted to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) by relative, employer, representative, or self.
- INS sends the petition to the Department of State National Visa Center (NVC) in New Hampshire.
- The NVC sends forms to applicant within 3 months of the priority date for the relevant visa category under the "quota" or preference system (an immediate relative of a U.S. citizen needs no priority date).
- These forms and documents, translated into English, are sent to the U.S. consulate in the country from which the alien is emigrating and where the final interview takes place. If the alien has a current priority date, consular processing may take 6 to 9 months. Some immigrants can wait 10 years or more for a current priority date.
- The consular officer approves or denies request for an **immigrant visa**.

1. Brent Ashabranner, *Our Beckoning Borders, Illegal Immigration to America* (Cobblehill Books, NY, 1996), pp. 89-90.

**For aliens already in the United States on a temporary visa** (visitors and business visas, which are usually valid for 6 months with renewal for another 6 months or for students until a course of study is completed), the process is to request from INS a change in status from temporary to **permanent resident visa**.

- There are numerous forms and documentation required, as above, but all are sent to INS.
- After completion of the requirements and an interview at INS, an applicant may be given a green card which is permanently valid unless the alien commits a deportable offense. The visa must be renewed every 10 years.
- In the case of an alien changing status due to marriage to a U.S. citizen, the visa is conditional for two years, and the conditional status must be removed to obtain permanency. This was put into effect after INS discovered that many so-called marriages were “marriages of convenience” entered into only to obtain a green card. (The movie “Green Card” depicts this situation.)

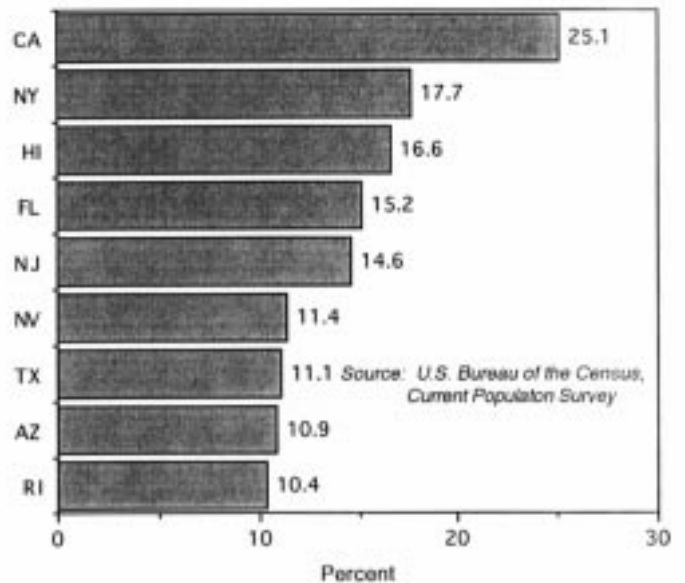
### Benefits and Limitations of Permanent Resident Status

- The alien may stay in the United States indefinitely, and hold a job or enter into a career.
- Certain family members may be sponsored under preference categories.
- Permanent resident aliens pay taxes, but they cannot vote.
- Generally, they cannot remain outside of the United States for more than 180 days, or, in certain cases, 1 year.
- It is harder for permanent resident aliens to become eligible for Federal supplemental security income (SSI), Medicaid, and Medicare. Those who were receiving SSI as of August 22, 1996, will continue to receive it as long as otherwise eligible; those not on SSI will have to become citizens to become eligible.

States and local governments will be faced with decisions about what services to provide to permanent resident aliens in the absence of some Federal funding.

According to 1995 statistics, Virginia ranked 8th as a destination for immigrants, although only 2 percent actually chose to settle here. Immigrants make secondary migrations within the United States for a variety of reasons: better employment or training opportunities, an established ethnic community, more generous welfare benefits, reunification with relatives, or a more congenial climate.

**Figure 2**  
Percent of the U.S. Population Who Were Foreign-Born by State: 1996



### Undocumented Immigration

About half of all undocumented immigrants enter the United States legally as students, tourists, or business people. When their visas/permits expire, they remain here as undocumented aliens. The remaining “illegals” enter the country clandestinely, primarily across our southern borders.

### Deportation

Any alien who is here illegally or who commits a criminal offense is subject to deportation. In the past, this process was so cumbersome that actual deportation could be delayed for years. The most recent immigration law authorized an expedited process. According to an August article in the *Washington Post*, the United States “has deported a record number of

illegal immigrants (75,743) so far this fiscal year, about half of whom had criminal records.” This includes only those who have gone through the formal deportation hearing process. It does not count the more than one million who are turned back at U.S. borders, or those who leave without going through the deportation process. “The INS removed nearly 60,000 illegal immigrants without formal proceedings during fiscal year 1997.”

A July article in the *Fairfax Journal* cited the concern of Attorney General Janet Reno that illegal aliens who have been here for years be treated fairly and be allowed to avoid deportation on humanitarian grounds. She was prepared to recommend administrative action to temporarily delay deportation of up to 190,000 Salvadorans, 50,000 Guatemalans, and 40,000 Nicaraguans who were allowed to stay here under special programs or court settlements during the 1980s. Congress ameliorated this situation in November 1997 by passing legislation that makes it easier for about a million illegal aliens to remain in the United States. If they pay a \$1,000 fine, and are otherwise eligible, they will be allowed to apply for a green card while waiting for permanent legal status. However, Congress stipulated that this will not be an option for future illegal immigrants.

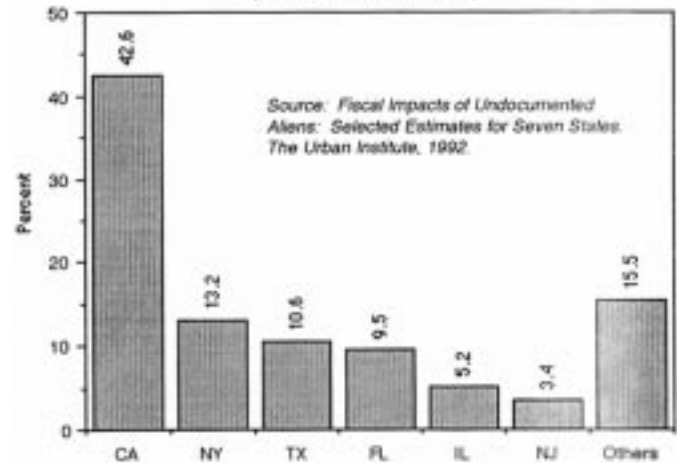
## Naturalization

Persons who have a green card and have been residents for 5 years, or 3 years if married to a U.S. citizen, may apply for citizenship. Refugees may apply 4 years after being granted permanent resident status.

- Again, requisite forms must be submitted to INS, along with a fee—currently \$95—and an interview will be scheduled.
- At the interview, documents must be presented and the applicant must pass a test in English proficiency and knowledge of U.S. history and government. (There are some exceptions for elderly persons, who have been here many years, and for the disabled, but everyone must show some knowledge of U.S. history and government.)
- If the tests are passed, the alien is scheduled to take the oath of allegiance to the United States.

**Figure 3**  
**Undocumented Immigrant Population By States**

Shown as Percent total undocumented population of U.S.  
(Estimated at 3 million in 1992)



## Benefits of Naturalized Citizenship

In contrast to a legal resident alien, a naturalized citizen

- CAN VOTE!
- can obtain a U.S. passport, which allows travel without restriction;
- can get immigrant visas for immediate family members (parents, spouses, and unmarried children under 21) without regard to preferences or quotas;
- can apply for jobs not open to non-citizens, such as law enforcement and most U.S. government jobs;
- can hold any political office except President and Vice-President;
- cannot be deported from the United States (unless they lied on citizenship application); and
- can obtain public benefits; many legal resident aliens are not entitled to benefits such as food stamps.

## Immigration Pros and Cons

Public interest in the costs versus benefits of immigration has prompted researchers to attempt to provide answers. However, there is wide disagreement in the findings of the researchers, because of conflicting and sometimes inadequate data. Although undocumented

immigrants are part of the equation, they are also, by their very nature, a difficult population to quantify. Therefore, the results are inconclusive. Some researchers maintain that immigrants are a major financial drain, while others conclude that immigrants eventually put more into the system than they take out. Even illegal aliens pay into the system through sales, gasoline, and other taxes and through income and social security with the use of forged green and social security cards.

A comprehensive study released by the National Academy of Science in May 1997 found that immigrants compete for jobs with low-skilled American workers, especially high-school dropouts. Although immigration increases overall employment, it decreases the job prospects of some native-born workers and reduces the earnings of others. However, the economy as a whole benefits from the goods and services provided by cheap immigrant labor. Small businesses, in particular, benefit from inexpensive labor which allows them to be competitive. Some studies conclude that immigrant workers improve the economy because their demand for goods creates more jobs than they fill.

Although immigrants have a positive impact on the overall economy, they have a negative fiscal impact at the state and local level. The largest immediate cost is in education. Local schools must deal with the difficulty of teaching children who have little or no English skills and who come from many different cultures. The Spanish-speaking population, for instance, shares a common language but represents a mosaic of cultural traditions. In some parts of the country, teachers must be bilingual as a prerequisite to employment. However, once educated and employed, the immigrant population becomes a plus as they begin to pay into the system through income and social security taxes.

Because the number of births of American-born women is declining, most of our population growth has come, and will continue to come, through the influx of immigrants. This has prompted some to conclude that the current immigrant population will pay for the baby-boomers' retirement, since most immigrants are young and have many years of employment ahead of them.

Many immigrants coming to the United States are well-educated, but find that they must take a job below their skill level because employers disregard foreign diplomas. This makes these immigrants a valuable asset to employers. On the other hand, recent statistics indicate that growing numbers of immigrants are coming from poorer countries where education levels are far below U.S. standards. This means that the cost of turning them into productive citizens will be greater.

Another area of concern is that low-skilled, English-deficient immigrants are vulnerable to employer exploitation. Sweatshops have been discovered where immigrants are employed at sub-minimum wages, receive no benefits, pay no social security, and work under conditions that violate health and safety standards.

Recent immigrants are more likely to have lower incomes, live in poverty, and have a higher rate of unemployment than the native-born, but seem to improve their condition after living here for 6 years. In fact, those that have been here since the 1970s have incomes comparable to natives.

### **Environmental Impact**

Many environmentalists are opposed to increased immigration because the added population puts additional stress on the environment. According to the Population Reference Bureau's 1995 World Population Data Sheet, the birth rate for American-born women is 1.5 as compared to 3.1 for Mexican, Latin American, and Caribbean women, which is where the bulk of our immigrants originate. However, statistics show that although the first generation immigrant has a higher birth rate, this declines with succeeding generations. The real impact on the environment comes as the immigrants become Americanized and adopt a lifestyle that consumes 30 percent of the earth's bounty, produces 19 percent of its waste, and represents only 5 percent of its total population.

### **Multiculturalism**

The restrictive immigration policies prior to 1965 kept the demographic composition of the United States primarily European and comparatively homogenous. The

1965 immigration laws changed the demographics of the immigrant population by relaxing quotas that previously favored Europeans, thus enabling greater immigration from Third World countries. This has created a widely diverse population, making the United States perhaps the most multicultural society in the world.

Extrapolating from current rates of immigration, it is predicted that by the year 2050 no single group (white, black, Asian, or Hispanic) will be in the majority. Some view this with alarm, but others speculate that this will not be as unsettling as it may now appear because our historical experience proves that assimilation, intermarriage, and Americanization blurs ethnic differences with each succeeding generation. Supporters of multiculturalism contend that immigration contributes to our strength as a nation and brings needed vitality. Twenty percent of our physicians and one-third of all American Nobel prize winners are foreign born. Immigrants often settle in decaying areas of the inner city, breathing new life into areas deserted by urban flight.

Opponents of liberal immigration policy question whether recent immigrants will be as easily assimilated as earlier immigrants who were culturally similar. They also fear that diversity can be divisive. The current trend of fostering racial and ethnic pride could threaten our social cohesion and destroy our country. How can we maintain national unity without a common culture and shared values? Some feel that we must share a common language and have urged that English be adopted as the official language. They also advocate teaching distinctively American values and traditions in school with less emphasis on other cultures.

## Conclusion

The issue of immigration will not go away. People will continue to emigrate as long as there is the perception and the reality that life will be better elsewhere. In most cases, that flow will be from impoverished, resource-depleted, and overpopulated regions to richer countries. As other nations adopt more restrictive immigration policies, more immigrants will seek admission to the United States. Should our policy be

more restrictive or less restrictive? Is multiculturalism a problem or an asset?

## Acknowledgments

The committee is grateful to Jere Gibber and Bob Prochko for their special contributions of time and talent as well as the following who kindly reviewed and clarified parts of the study:

- Sheppie Amramowitz, Vice President, Government Affairs, International Rescue Committee.
- Allison Rutland Soulen, a public interest attorney with Just Friends Ministry in Falls Church, which provides assistance to immigrants and refugees.

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## Glossary of Terms

**Immigrant:** General term for all foreign-born persons, as opposed to “natives,” who are persons born in the United States, Puerto Rico, or an outlying area of the United States, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Guam, and persons who were born in a foreign country, but who had at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen.

**National / naturalized citizen:** One who has U.S. nationality conferred upon him/her.

**Alien:** A person who is not a citizen or a national of the United States.

**Non-immigrant alien:** An individual allowed to enter the United States with appropriate visa for a specific period of time, e.g., students, tourists, ambassadors, United Nations or World Bank employees, agricultural workers.

**Asylee:** A noncitizen who, at a port of entry, seeks U.S. protection because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

**Refugee:** A noncitizen (often in a refugee camp) who seeks protection by application prior to entering the United States because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

**Parolee:** An alien who has been given permission to enter or to stay in the United States under emergency conditions or when entry is considered to be humanitarian or in the public interest (e.g., Cubans who landed in Key West, Florida).

**Lawful permanent resident:** Holder of “green card” (now rose or salmon colored)/alien registration card (also called an immigrant visa). A person who qualifies to be in the United States permanently. Most get immigrant visas because they are related to a U.S. citizen or permanent resident; the next largest group qualifies because they have a needed or desirable job skill or ability. Then there is a group that gets visas in special ways, including a lottery.

**Undocumented/illegal alien:** A foreign national who entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documentation, or who entered legally with a temporary visa and remained after the visa expired. (According to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), 41 percent of all illegals are visa overstays.)

**Amnestied alien:** Undocumented aliens (numbering in the millions) who resided in the United States prior to 1982 and who were granted amnesty by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986; they could become legalized residents if they met certain criteria.

*Prepared by:  
League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area Study Committee  
4026 Hummer Road  
Annandale, Virginia 22003  
February 1998*