

Immigration and African Americans

By John Sullivan

For African Americans, it is a supreme and frustrating irony that in the same year, 1965, Congress produced both the Voting Rights Act, forever changing Southern politics, and the Immigration and Nationality Act, establishing family unity preference as the paramount priority of national immigration policy. At that time, both were viewed as part of the civil rights movement. The extraordinary immigration of the intervening three decades, however, has pushed African Americans and immigration into conflict.

The Immigration and Nationality Act allowed immediate relatives of American citizens — spouse, children, and parents — to enter the United States to join their families, without numerical limit and regardless of their country of origin. Prior to passage of the legislation Senator Ted Kennedy promised that the policy of family reunification "will not flood our cities with immigrants. It will not upset the ethnic mix of our society." His brother Robert guessed that Asian immigration might reach 5,000 the first year, "but we do not expect that there would be a great influx after that." In a speech delivered at the Statue of Liberty after signing the legislation President Lyndon Johnson assured his audience that, "this is not a revolutionary act. It will not change the lives of millions." All three were very wrong.

Due to the chain migration resulting from family reunification — one immigrant eventually bringing in many relatives — the Act fueled massive immigration on a scale the country had not experienced since before World War I. By 1981, a presidential commission headed by Rev. Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame acknowledged that immigration was "out of control." Subsequent legislative efforts to reduce immigration, such the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, have failed. The 1986 act actually increased immigration by legalizing, through amnesty, 3 million unauthorized immigrants who can now bring their relatives into the country. The 1990s are expected to yield the largest number of immigrants of any decade in the history of the United States.

According to Dr. Frank Morris of the Center for Immigration Studies, immigration in all its forms — legal and illegal immigrants, refugees, and asylees — has expanded the foreign-born population of the United States at nearly six times the rate of growth of the domestic population. Nearly 60 percent of the population of Miami is now foreign-born as is almost half of East Los Angeles. These percentages may even understate the actual size of the foreign-born populace given the recognized undercount of illegal immigrants.

The net fiscal impact of this unprecedented immigration is hotly debated. Donald Huddle, an economics professor at Rice University in Texas, places the costs to all levels of government in Medicaid, AFDC, food stamps, unemployment compensation, and general assistance at \$45 billion annually. Jeffrey Passel, the director of immigration research at the Urban Institute, a Washington think tank, believes that immigrants contribute \$12 billion more each year than the cost in schooling, health care, and other services.

Whatever the effect on the country in macro-economic terms, the impact on African Americans is undeniable and devastating.

Immigrants typically compete for jobs with the most disadvantaged members of society. If immigrants dispersed evenly throughout the United States, the burden of immigration would be dispersed as well. But immigration strikes African Americans with added intensity because almost half of all immigrants are settling in six areas: Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, and Houston. One-fifth of the nation's African Americans live in these cities.

In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims in April, Dr. Morris explained that the massive, concentrated influx of labor, particularly unskilled labor, inevitably leads to wage depression and job displacement. African Americans have been especially impacted because they "have less education, work experience, and small business creation rates than other Americans." Displacement of African Americans by immigration has been most thorough in the construction, restaurant and hotel, and light manufacturing industries.

A 1988 General Accounting Office study of unionized black janitors in Los Angeles showed that displacement occurs in other industries as well. Three-fourths of the janitors who once cleaned high rise office buildings were displaced by Mexican immigrants over a five year period in the early 1980s, even though total janitorial employment rose. This happened because the Mexicans were willing and able to work for lower wages.

One of the traditional entry level jobs that sometimes leads to better opportunities is driving a taxicab. As was reported in the Summer 1994 issue of *The Social Contract*, more than 90 percent of the New York City cab driver applicants are now immigrants.

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Lower wages are not the only reason displacement occurs. Another vital force is the social networking among immigrants. Employers need not advertise openings since word of available jobs is passed among the immigrants. Cambodians run more than 80 percent of the doughnut shops in California. In the garment districts of Los Angeles, Miami, and New York City, writes Richard Rothstein, a columnist for the Spanish language publication *La Opinion*, entire plants are staffed by immigrants from the same village in Mexico, El Salvador or China.

The language barrier renders social networking among immigrants even more insurmountable for African Americans. A 1993 decision by the federal court for the Seventh Circuit, *EEOC v. O & G Spring Wire Forms*, illustrates this.

O & G Spring Wire Forms Specialty Company was founded in the mid-Sixties by Ted Gryeziewicz, who had fled communist Poland for the west side of Chicago. His business grew to employ 50 people, all of whom were Polish or Hispanic; none was African American. Despite what the court described as "low pay and apparently poor working conditions," the Polish and Hispanic immigrants eagerly sought work with O & G because operating presses to manufacture springs required little experience and no English proficiency. There was such a steady stream of immigrant applicants for jobs that O & G never had to advertise openings. Because Polish or Spanish was spoken on the shop floor, the likelihood of an African American being hired was further reduced.

The court in *EEOC v. O & G Spring & Wire Forms* ordered Mr. Gryeziewicz to pay \$378,000 in back pay to area African Americans. The EEOC, however, can only bring this kind of action against businesses with at least 15 employees. Most immigrants hired through ethnic networking work in smaller businesses.

Job displacement of African Americans is frequently followed by their geographic displacement, as Professors James Johnson and Curtis Roseman, writing in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, have shown.

The authors used Los Angeles as a case study. African American migration from elsewhere in the United States to Los Angeles began in the late 1800s. Lured by the same vision of greater economic and social opportunity that attracted whites as well as other minorities, African American migration peaked in the post-war boom of the 1940s and 1950s. Even though the area's economy continued to expand in the 1960s, the

number of African Americans arriving in Los Angeles was overtaken by the number of those leaving. Much of the reason, Professors Johnson and Roseman state, is that African Americans "face competition from immigrants from Mexico, other parts of Latin America, and Asia, many of whom have carved out occupational niches for themselves in the bustling Los Angeles economy."

Supporters of continued widespread immigration counter by saying that immigrants take jobs native-born Americans would not. In some cases that is true. The Department of Labor reports that most migrant workers in this country are foreign born. These migrants average about \$6.00 an hour for grueling, transient work. The Haitians toiling in Florida's citrus fields and the Hmong from Cambodia laboring on Minnesota dairy farms are not displacing African-Americans.

But African American workers cannot and should not be expected to compete with illegal immigrants willing to work at below minimum wage. As Vernon Briggs of Cornell University has said, immigrants will "work in violation of child labor laws and other employment standards. Literally speaking, no citizen or permanent resident can compete with such workers."

African Americans are being displaced politically as well. In testimony before Congress in April 1995, Norman Matloff of the University of California gave an example. When a fiscal crisis forced San Francisco to lay off some college administrators, he explained, the Chinese American Democratic Club lobbied so strenuously that no Asian Americans were pink slipped. Instead, several African American administrators were laid off.

Shifts in political muscle are directly related to demographic changes. 1990 Census Bureau data reveals that of the 20 largest cities in the United States, in four — Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, and San Antonio — African Americans are outnumbered by Hispanics. In San Francisco, there are more Asians than African Americans. In San Jose, both Asians and Hispanics are more numerous than African Americans. Due to immigration, African Americans are no longer the dominant minority in the country; there are more Asians and Hispanics combined than blacks. In a few years Hispanics alone will outnumber African Americans.

The sheer force of demographics is altering the African American share of the business sector. Joshua I. Smith, former chair of the United States Commission on Minority Business Development, has predicted that the percentage of small, minority-owned businesses owned by African Americans will slip from its current 28 percent to 18 percent by the year 2002. With overstated, though understandable, pessimism, he says, "In 10 years [African Americans] won't make a difference."

Tragically, struggles between minority groups sometimes turn violent. In 1980, the acquittal of an Hispanic policeman who had killed an African American motorist incited three days of rioting. The United States Commission on Civil Rights later compiled "Confronting Racial Isolation in Miami," a 350 page examination of the riot's causes. The Commission concluded: "Undeniably the violence that exploded in May 1980 was a sense of the black community's inability to produce change or affect fate ... By all social indicators blacks have been excluded from the mainstream of Miami..."

The Los Angeles riots following the acquittal of the policemen who beat Rodney King was similarly fueled by immigration. As former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall points out, immigration has permitted American businesses to pursue the Third World strategy of a low wage, low skilled work force. In no city is that strategy more apparent than in Los Angeles where, between the Watts riot of 1965 and the Rodney King riot of 1992, the Hispanic percentage of the city quadrupled. Without jobs, many African Americans have left Los Angeles, further reducing African American economic and political clout.

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In November 1994, Californians overwhelmingly approved Proposition 187, a ballot initiative barring illegal aliens from receiving almost all publicly funded benefits. The success of Prop 187 was not surprising. Polls now show most Americans in favor of more restrictions on immigration. What was surprising about the ballot initiative was how consistent support for Prop 187 was among various groups — African Americans (56%), Asians (57%), and all voters (59%).

But illegal immigration represents only a fraction of total immigration. Are Americans similarly ready to reduce legal immigration?

The answer increasingly is yes. The Federation for Immigration Reform has long called for a "time out" on immigration. Peter Brimelow's book *Alien Nation*, published earlier this year, persuasively makes this same argument. Many have called for an immigration policy no longer based almost exclusively on family reunification. Instead, immigration should be tied to unemployment. In times of higher unemployment, fewer immigrants would be permitted. This would be fairer not only to African Americans, the most frequent competitors of these immigrants, but to all American.■