

The U.S. — A Retirement Home for Immigrants

Elderly newcomers apply for SSI and Medicaid

by Robert Rector

The U.S. welfare system is rapidly becoming a deluxe retirement home for the elderly of other countries. In 1994, nearly 738,000 noncitizen residents were receiving aid from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. This was a 580% increase — up from 127,900 in 1982 — in just 12 years. The overwhelming majority of noncitizen SSI recipients are elderly. Most apply for welfare within 5 years of arriving in the U.S.

An analysis by Norman Matloff of the University of California at Davis shows that 45% of elderly immigrants in California received cash welfare in 1990. Among Russian immigrants the figure was 66%; among Chinese, 55%. Worse, recent immigrants are far more likely to become welfare

dependents than those who arrived in the U.S. in earlier decades. If current trends continue, the U.S. will have more than three million noncitizens on SSI within 10 years.

Without reform, the total cost of SSI and Medicaid benefits for elderly noncitizen immigrants will amount to more than \$328 billion over the next decade. The cost of providing SSI and Medicaid

benefits for these individuals will reach more than \$67 billion a year by the year 2004 (see table).

Even if the rapid increase in the number of elderly noncitizens receiving welfare were to halt and remain at current levels — which is highly unlikely — U.S. taxpayers would still pay more than \$127 billion over the next 10 years for SSI and Medicaid benefits for resident aliens.

Professor Matloff found that most elderly immigrants are well aware of U.S. welfare policies

and procedures when they arrive here. Besides word of mouth, many receive formal counseling or read publications on how to obtain welfare benefits. For example, “What You Need to Know About Life in America,” a Chinese-language publication sold in Taiwan and Hong Kong and in Chinese bookstores in the U.S., includes a 36-page

guide to SSI and other welfare benefits. The largest-circulation Chinese-language newspaper in America, *World Journal*, runs a regular “Dear Abby”-style advice column on SSI and other immigration-related matters.

Prudent restrictions on providing welfare to recent immigrants long have been part of the American tradition. America’s first immigration law, passed by Congress in 1882, prohibited the entry of paupers and others who were likely to become public charges. Similar restrictions have appeared in subsequent immigration laws. Today, the Immigration and Nationality Act declares unequivocally: “Any alien who, within five years after the date of entry, has become a public charge from

Projected costs (in billions) for resident aliens				
	Number of aliens on SSI	SSI cost	Medicaid cost	Total
1995	854,323	\$4.3	\$7.7	\$12.0
1996	988,794	\$5.1	\$9.3	\$14.4
1997	1,144,430	\$6.1	\$11.4	\$17.5
1998	1,324,563	\$7.3	\$14.0	\$21.3
1999	1,533,049	\$8.7	\$17.0	\$25.7
2000	1,774,351	\$10.4	\$20.8	\$31.2
2001	2,053,634	\$12.3	\$25.4	\$37.7
2002	2,376,876	\$14.7	\$31.0	\$45.7
2003	2,750,997	\$17.5	\$37.9	\$55.4
2004	3,184,003	\$20.9	\$46.2	\$67.1

Source: SSI and Medicaid costs from Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives, “Overview of Entitlement Programs,” 1994 Greenbook.

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causes not affirmatively shown to have arisen since entry is not deportable." This provision of the law is routinely ignored.

Although many elderly immigrants on SSI come from politically oppressive nations, such as Cuba and the former Soviet Union, the majority do not. The single greatest number of resident aliens on SSI comes from Mexico. Other nations, such as the Dominican Republic, India, South Korea and the Philippines, also contribute large numbers of recipients.

The presence of large numbers of elderly immigrants on welfare is a violation of the spirit, and arguably the letter, of U.S. immigration law. The relatives who sponsored the entry of these individuals implicitly promised that the new immigrants would not become a burden to U.S. taxpayers. But many, if not most, sponsors are enrolling their elderly relatives on welfare soon after the end of the three-year waiting period. Once on SSI, there is every indication that these immigrants will remain on welfare indefinitely.

Just as Americans expect an absent parent to pay child support for his children, so they also must expect individuals who voluntarily bring elderly and near-elderly relatives to the U.S. to support those relatives fully. This obligation to support should be permanent and should not be limited to three or five years, as under current law. Under no

circumstances should the cost of supporting elderly immigrants be passed on to general taxpayers.

To rectify the situation, dramatic changes in both the current welfare system and immigration policy will be required. First, eligibility for SSI and Medicaid should be restricted to U.S. citizens. Then, to prevent a huge number of elderly immigrants from simply applying for U.S. citizenship so they can qualify for welfare, elderly and near-elderly foreigners should in the future be permitted to enter the U.S. only as guests of American relatives who sponsor them. Such elderly "guests" would not have the option of becoming citizens and thereby becoming a future burden on the U.S. taxpayer. They should be supported permanently by the relatives who sponsored their entry.

Since immigration and citizenship automatically give access to the U.S. welfare system, the only real mechanism for reducing the growth in the number of elderly immigrants on welfare is to reduce the number of such immigrants who enter the U.S. with the option of eventually becoming citizens.

Immigration should be open to individuals who wish to come to the U.S. to work hard and have the capacity to support themselves. Immigration should not be an avenue to welfare dependency. □

Census Shenanigans

by Linda Thom

In August 1995, the U.S. Census Bureau released a short report entitled, *The Foreign-Born Population: 1994*. Additional data such as child poverty statistics are available on the Internet (www.census.gov). No Census Bureau data in print or available electronically give the numbers of U.S. citizen children living in households with foreign-born parents. This aberration prohibits the understanding of the poverty and population

impacts resulting from immigration. This is a significant problem because the foreign-born have very high fertility rates.

Almost half (46%) the nation's immigrants are Hispanic origin with the majority originating from Mexico. In California, the fertility of foreign-born women is double that of native women and Hispanic, foreign-born women have over four children per woman (California Dept. of Finance, Heim and Austin). Moreover, the lower the educational attainment of the mothers, the higher are their fertility rates.

Child poverty data illustrate the distortion caused by not including citizen children. Table 1 shows child poverty data from the 1994 Current Population Report available electronically from the

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Census Bureau.

Table 1
U.S. Childhood Poverty
(Numbers in thousands)

Age of Children	All Children	Native Born	All Immigrants Under 18
Under 5	5,367	5,221	146
5 to 15	9,065	8,372	692
16 to 17	1,295	1,137	159
Total poor children	15,727	14,730	997
Total above poverty	53,564	52,109	1,457
Total pop. under 18	69,291	66,838	2,454
Poverty Rate	23%	22%	41%

The poverty rate for foreign-born children is 41% as compared to a 22% poverty rate for native-born children. Looking at the absolute number of poor children one could believe that the 41% poverty rate for foreign children is not a problem because there are so few of them. There are only 146,000 foreign-born children under five years old living in the United States. No problem, right? Wrong. Any children who were born in the United States to foreign parents are not included in these numbers. The Census Bureau has systematically understated the impact of immigration by shifting the U.S. citizen children of immigrants into the totals for native-born families.

To further demonstrate other distortions caused by Census Bureau practices, Table 2 summarizes poverty data from the 1990 Census (United States Summary, Table 5, Income and Poverty Status of Hispanic Origin Groups, Mexican Origin).

Table 2
Poverty Status of Mexican Origin Children Under 5 Years

	All Persons	Native Born	Foreign Born
Poor families w/ children under 5	104,461	51,977	52,484
Related poor children under 5	513,242	467,717	45,525
Average children under 5 per family	4.91	9	0.87

According to the Census data, the 51,977 native-born, Mexican origin poor families have 467,717 children under 5 years or 9 children under

5 years per family; whereas, the foreign-born, Mexican origin poor families have .87 children per family. Something is wrong — it is quite impossible for families to have an average of nine children under five years of age. Obviously, the native-born children of foreign families have been shifted to the native-born families. Further, if there is at least 1 child under 5 in the 52,484 foreign-born, poor families, how could there be only 45,525 “related” poor children under 5 in foreign families or an average of less than 1 per family?

The Census Bureau makes it even more difficult to sort out because the children under 5 are not specifically listed. One must subtract the children aged 5 through 17 from all children under 18 to arrive at the number of children under 5. Further, the children are enumerated under native-born or foreign-born families and labeled “related” children. But to whom are they “related”? The U.S.-citizen children living in foreign families are not “related” to U.S. families but that is where the Census Bureau has included them.

Of course, many U.S. citizen children are older than 5. The number of U.S. citizen children of immigrant parents is immense. Table 3 shows the births to native-born and foreign-born women in California (California Dept. of Health).

Table 3
Annual Births in California by Birthplace of Mother

	Total Annual Births	Foreign-born Mothers	U.S.-Born Mothers
1989	569,308	215,726	353,582
1990	611,666	250,315	361,351
1991	609,228	261,158	348,070
1992	600,838	266,830	334,008
1993	584,483	261,673	322,810
1994	567,034	251,869	315,165
Total	3,542,557	1,507,571	2,034,986
Avg/year	590,426	251,262	339,164

Between 1989 and 1994, just six years, foreign-born women have given birth to over 1.5 million children in California. Presumably these children live in immigrant families with their foreign-born siblings who have a 41% poverty rate. This is one state’s births in six years. The national numbers must be staggering but the public will never know because the Census Bureau does not publish them, provide them electronically, or appear to keep any records on them.

The impacts are significant. Whether the children are poor or not, they will go to school and California has the most over-crowded classrooms in the nation. Between 1989 and 1996, California has spent an additional \$6 billion on K-12 public schools to try to keep pace with the increased enrollment. In this period, 7 out of 10 of the added students did not speak English (California Dept. of Education). Poor or not, these children take baths, flush toilets, have their clothes washed, generate trash and do all the ordinary things other kids do. They grow up and have children of their own.

Neither California nor the nation needs any more people. When the Census Bureau reports that 1 of every 4 people in California is an immigrant that does not begin to reveal the enormity of the problem. The American people need to know how many citizen children there are and how poor they are but the folks at the Census Bureau will probably continue their current practices in the next census in the year 2000 because so few people know the truth. Most of those who know the truth work for the Census Bureau and they aren't telling. □

What Immigration Can Cost

As experienced at the community level

by B. Meredith Burke

That art can make a political statement is one of its strengths. Photo-graphic images can be particularly potent, whether evoking love, community, work, or war.

Once they impart more than the essential artist identification, the captions accompanying a formal art exhibit may also become political commentary. A case in point is the caption to the final image in "A Nation of Strangers," currently at the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco.

The untitled work by American Leonard Freed shows a group of Hmong refugees in Wausau, Wisconsin in 1994. The caption, by Arthur Ollman, director of San Diego's Museum of Photographic Arts and co-curator of the show, informs us:

As immigrants have settled principally in large inner cities, they have filled neighborhoods often left nearly empty by white flight. ... They also have revitalized the schools in such neighborhoods, with the influx of new students

B. Meredith Burke, an economist and demographer, researches and writes on California fertility and population changes. This article was published in the February 26, 1996 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle and is reprinted by permission.

and the attendant \$5,000 or more in state funds that are spent annually on each student. In smaller communities, a sudden influx of immigrants can present many problems. This Hmong community is in a small Midwestern city that is having difficulty accommodating a large number of new arrivals.

"Having difficulty" is a deceptive understatement of the Wausau dilemma, initiated by its townsfolk generously supporting a few dozen refugees in 1978. A thriving city of about 35,000 with a diverse, well-paying economic base, it was the most ethnically homogeneous city in the country in the 1980 census — 99 percent white, descendants of Germans, Poles, and New England Yankees. It had no abandoned urban core or emptied schools, just well-tended, safe, generally middle-class residential areas. No one foresaw that by April, 1994, Wausau would be the subject of an *Atlantic Monthly* article about one of the swiftest and most massive peacetime demographic transformations.

Among post-1965 newcomers, the Hmong are arguably the furthest removed from industrial culture. In their home country they lived isolated in the mountains, lacked a written language and had the early and high rates of childbearing necessary for perpetuating a society in which barely half those born survive to puberty and many women die in childbirth. In an industrial society these reproductive patterns lead to families with eight or 10 children (a fivefold increase per generation).

Without marketable skills but with many dependents, Hmong adults move permanently onto the welfare rolls. In December 1995, 72 percent of the Hmong in Marathon County (where Wausau is by far the largest municipality) received welfare vs. 4.7 percent for non-Hmong residents. Alternatively, Hmong are 3.9 percent of the county's population and 39 percent of its welfare recipients.

“...Hmong are 3.9 percent of the [Marathon] county's population and 39 percent of its welfare recipients.”

As of fall, 1995, the Wausau school district had 9,100 students, 1,800 of whom were Southeast Asian. The latter were 16 percent of the grade 6 through 12 enrollment; 30 percent of grade K-5.

Racial polarization, incipient busing, gangs, pregnant girls — longtime Wausau residents never envisioned such phenomena and generally do not consider them cultural enrichments.

Wisconsin schools spend nearly \$7,000 per student annually, nearly all of it coming from local property taxes. The state devotes some funds toward equalizing tax rates in the 400-plus school districts, but differences remain. It does not fund ESL (English as a second language) instruction. The Department of Public Instruction informed me that federal ESL funding is low and that local districts carry most of the load. For 1994-95, Wausau spent \$2.1 million on ESL instruction, the equivalent of 37 teachers and 38

aides.

Arthur Ollman, the San Francisco show's organizer, is a decent liberal arts administrator. He delights in his multi-cultural circle of (presumably well-educated and low-fertility) friends and colleagues, frowns upon “nativists” and relishes a vision of the United States as a microcosm of the world. A true urbanite, he welcomes larger cities and a larger American population. He cannot allow that a country's citizens (or its ecologists) should have any, let alone a final, say in a desirable population level. That power resides outside our borders.

The caption he drafted has factual errors. More importantly, it uses such subjective terms as “large” or “difficulty” rather than give numbers. The show succeeds as propaganda, but fails the prime goal of an educational institution — equipping the viewer to reach his own interpretation of events. □

