

Immigrants at Mid-Decade

A snapshot of America's foreign-born population in 2005

by **Steven A. Camarota**

[This is the executive summary of a highly detailed analysis of the immigrant population of the United States published by the Center for Immigration Studies in their Backgrounder occasional papers. The full report is 31 pages of charts and analysis available from the address below.]

An analysis of Census Bureau data shows that the nation's foreign-born or immigrant population (legal and illegal) reached a new record of more than 35 million in March of 2005. The data also indicate that the first half of this decade has been the highest five-year period of immigration in American history. This *Backgrounder* provides a detailed picture of both numbers and the socio-economic status of immigrants. Among the

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report's findings:

- The 35.2 million immigrants (legal and illegal) living in the country in March 2005 is the highest number ever recorded – two and a half times the 13.5 million during the peak of the last great immigration wave in 1910.
- Between January 2000 and March 2005, 7.9 million new immigrants (legal and illegal) settled in the country, making it the highest five-year period of immigration in American history.
- Nearly half of post-2000 arrivals (3.7 million) are estimated to be illegal aliens.
- Immigrants account for 12.1 percent of the total population, the highest percentage in eight decades. If current trends continue, within a decade it will surpass the high of 14.7 percent reached in 1910.
- Of adult immigrants, 31 percent have not completed high school, three-and-a-half times the rate for natives. Since 1990, immigration has increased the number of such workers by 25 percent, while increasing the supply of all other workers by 6 percent.
- Immigrants were once

significantly more likely to have a college degree, but the new data show that natives are now as likely as immigrants to have a bachelor's or graduate degree.

- The proportion of immigrant-headed households using at least one major welfare program is 29 percent, compared to 18 percent for native households.
- The poverty rate for immigrants and their U.S.-born children (under 18) is 18.4 percent, 57 percent higher than the 11.7 percent for natives and their children. Immigrants and their minor children account for almost one in four persons living in poverty.
- One-third of immigrants lack health insurance – two-and-one-half times the rate for natives. Immigrants and their U.S.-born children account for almost three-fourths (nine million) of the increase in the uninsured population since 1989.
- The low educational attainment of many immigrants and resulting low wages are the primary reasons so many live in poverty, use welfare programs, or lack health insurance, not their legal status or an unwillingness to work.

- A central question for immigration policy is: Should we allow in so many people with little education, which increases job competition for the poorest American workers and the size of the population needing government assistance?

- Immigrants make significant economic progress the longer they live in the United States, but even immigrants who have lived in the United States for 14 or 15 years still have dramatically higher rates of poverty, lack of health

insurance, and welfare use than natives.

- States with the largest increase in immigrants are California, Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Washington, Virginia, Arizona, Tennessee, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Mississippi.

- Immigration accounts for virtually all of the national increase in public school enrollment over the last two decades. In 2005, there were 10.3

million school-age children from immigrant families in the United States.

- Immigrants and natives exhibit remarkably similar rates of entrepreneurship, with 13 percent of natives and 11 percent of immigrants self-employed.

- Recent immigration has had no significant impact on the nation's age structure. Without the 7.9 million post-2000 immigrants, the average age in America would be virtually unchanged at 36 years.