

*State and local governments bear the brunt of dealing with the effects of federal immigration policy. So powerful is the taboo barring discussion of the cause — immigration policy itself — that the locals' complaint is reduced to a plea for funds, as these two excellent items show. The essay by Rob Gurwitt, and the editorial which introduced it, are reprinted by permission from the June issue of Governing magazine, © 1992.*

## Back to the Melting Pot

By Rob Gurwitt

[From the editors of *Governing magazine*.]

A year ago, a riot swept through a section of Washington, D.C. inhabited largely by immigrants from Central America. The riot was sparked by a rookie black police officer's shooting of a recent Salvadoran immigrant. Two days of looting and burning unveiled deep Hispanic resentment against the city government and its police force.

As I write, Los Angeles is still smoldering. The strongest magnet for immigration — legal and illegal — in the country was the epicenter of one of the worst urban convulsions of the century, as a crowd largely made up of black and Hispanic youths targeted white and Korean-owned businesses. Again, the igniting spark involved the police. Though this time it was white officers exonerated by a white jury for the beating of a black man.

Our cover story by Rob Gurwitt on the challenge state and local governments face in managing the deluge of immigrants had already been written when the Rodney King jury delivered its verdict. But the timing was appropriate, for the waves of immigrants from Central America and Asia that have washed over Los Angeles and other cities in the past decade are the ingredient in any story on problems in urban America.

The pattern is familiar. Federal policy determines how many people with what skills are allowed to enter the country either as immigrants or as refugees. Counting in illegal immigrants, around a million people are arriving every year. But Washington is less willing to pay for resettlement, leaving the burden to state, local and private agencies. The Bush administration is proposing to cut the federal program for refugees almost in half; the money promised for the transition of "legalizing aliens" has been withheld.

So, once more, there is no national plan or standard. The plight of newcomers depends on the programs and resources of the states and cities where they settle. The strain is noticeable, with recent arrivals quickly showing up in overburdened social service and criminal justice systems.

No matter what your feelings are about immigration, this is nuts. We should curtail immigration until we are ready and willing to handle it. We no longer have a vibrant manufacturing sector eager to put new arrivals to work. In fact, the area of Los Angeles experiencing the brunt of the recent riots

has lost some 70,000 manufacturing jobs in recent years.

"If you neglect young children and new families when they come in, you are in effect spelling out the standards for the community for the next 10 to 20 years," Gurwitt quotes one county manager as saying. "These immigrants here now are a good portion of our work force and of the citizenry for the 21st century. It doesn't make good sense not to invest in them."

That's right. It does not.

\* \* \* \* \*

[The article by Rob Gurwitt.]

Two and a half years ago, a week shy of Thanksgiving, two young Hmong refugees were shot and killed by a policeman in a town just south of St. Paul, Minnesota. The boys, both of them 13-year-olds, had been in trouble before; this time, they'd stolen a car. They were shot as they tried to escape into a cornfield after a chase.

The Hmong community in St. Paul was stunned. So, for that matter, was the rest of the city. The Hmong come from the mountains of Laos; struggling to make the transition from an ancient, isolated culture to a world of public housing projects and 9-to-5 jobs, they had been keeping a low profile in the city. No one expected to see them showing up in newspaper headlines in so tragic a fashion.

Worried about the fallout among the boys' Hmong classmates, local authorities asked another newcomer to the city, an Englishman named David Loveridge, to spend some time with them in school. Loveridge had just arrived in St. Paul after 15 years in Southeast Asia, eight of them working at refugee camps in Hong Kong and Thailand. He had come to town to direct a program helping Southeast Asian refugees adjust to this country.

---

***"The Federal government sets the terms under which people from other countries enter, and the states, localities, and a variety of private agencies help them settle here."***

---

That day in school proved to be a somewhat disjointed experience. The young refugees Loveridge talked with all seemed to have taken wholeheartedly to the culture around them. They spoke excellent English. They wore clothes and makeup that fit right in with teen society. A few had even dyed their hair orange. "They had all the paraphernalia of what it takes to be cool," Loveridge recalls. But their reaction to the shooting was not typical — anger at police injustice or concern about racism. Instead, the trauma had exposed something deeper. "They were talking about their fear that spirits of these two dead kids would be on the loose," says Loveridge, "that they would come through their window at night if they didn't do the right things to please them."

Coping with restless spirits is not ordinary fare for social service agencies. But then, these are not ordinary times. As the 1990 Census made abundantly clear, immigrants and refugees are arriving all across America in numbers that have not been seen since the early years of this century. In many places, it is already clear that foreign-born newcomers will be the dominant demographic fact of life for the rest of this century and beyond.

Two years ago, Congress raised the number of regular immigrants allowed into the United States — most of them people with family ties or specific job skills — by about 40 percent, from 492,000 admissions a year to 675,000. Meanwhile, the number of refugees, those brought in because they are fleeing persecution, has been ranging between 130,000 and 140,000 a year. And the best guess is that about 200,000 people are coming to America annually on an illegal basis.

Altogether, it appears to mean at least a million new arrivals a year for the society to absorb in the 1990s. And it means two distinct challenges for state and private agencies they work with.

One of them is simply to open up the obvious avenues to resettlement — bilingual education, English-language courses, job training, and financial and medical assistance. Over the years, a fairly integrated structure of state, local and private agencies has developed to provide those services, usually with funds from the federal government.

The other is the far more nebulous, long-term task of helping newcomers become a part of the community. These new residents come from an astounding array of backgrounds and cultures. In 1990, the top two countries of origin for legal immigrants into this country were Latin American countries: Mexico and El Salvador. Then came two Asian countries: the Philippines and Vietnam. Ranked after that were the Dominican Republic and Guatemala, followed by Korea and China. In all, Asia sent 338,581 legal immigrants in 1990: Latin America (including Mexico and the Caribbean) accounted for a little over a million although that includes formerly illegal immigrants already in this country who won

legal status in the 1980s.

For local government, coming to terms with the deluge has not only meant hiring bilingual staff and translating forms into unfamiliar tongues, but learning to deal with foreign cultures on their own terms. And it has meant helping people of other cultures adapt to this one, especially by bringing newcomers into the political process without threatening longtime residents.

None of it has been easy. Local officials have been called on for everything from soothing land-lords enraged by the discovery that tenants were cooking meals over open fires in the living room to explaining to young men that snatching their bride of choice from her home is considered kidnapping in this country. Still, as long as the basic resettlement system held up, the task has seemed manageable, if slow-going.

But state and local officials are now at an unexpected and unwelcome crossroads. The federal money that fueled their efforts to help newcomers become self-sufficient is drying up, just as state and local budgets are withering as well. The result is great uncertainty among the people who deal with immigrants and refugees in state capitols, county courthouses and city halls about whether they can cope with the basic needs of newcomers.

One state, Kentucky, has already shut down its refugee program for lack of funds. Others are hanging by a thread: With the present level of federal cash and medical assistance, "we think we can operate through September 30," says Wayne Johnson, chief of Iowa's Bureau of Refugee Services, "but all we need is one heart transplant and all the projections I've done are in the trash can." With the ability of states and localities to deal with newcomers' immediate needs suddenly up in the air, no one is sanguine about how well the longer-term work of integration into society will go.

This country's basic approach to immigrants and refugees is simple: the Federal government sets the terms under which people from other countries enter, and the states, localities and a variety of private agencies help them settle here. That means that the services and attitudes that immigrants and refugees find can vary considerably from state to state and city to city; there is very little national policy aimed at helping immigrants once they actually arrive on these shores. "The nation," a recent Urban Institute report concluded, "has no deliberate and coherent newcomer integration policy."

But when it comes to the actual provision of services, the system does depend heavily on Federal money. One result is that state and local programs have generally been constructed around Washington's priorities — to help resettle those who qualify as refugees, or to service those legalized by the immigration law passed by Congress in 1986. Helping the vast bulk of ordinary immigrants get their feet on the ground has held only minor interest for the Federal government, so states and localities have developed

few programs directed at them.

Now, though, Washington appears ready to turn off the spigot even for the programs it does take an interest in. The Bush administration's proposed fiscal 1993 budget would cut the refugee program almost in half, from \$410 million to \$227 million — and that measures from levels that had already fallen dramatically over the last decade. According to the Urban Institute, direct aid to refugees, in the form of cash and medical assistance, fell from \$6,000 per refugee in 1982 to \$1,900 in 1991, in constant dollars.

At the same time, some of the money promised to states to offset costs related to education, health and public assistance for the 2.5 million or more so-called "legalizing aliens" — former illegal immigrants — is being withheld. Funding levels for immigrant education, including bilingual education, have been in virtual free-fall.

For states and cities already hit by budget cuts, all this is creating bitterness toward a Federal government that seems willing to pay attention to immigrants only until they've cleared customs. "People are starting to talk about immigrants as a sort of walking unfunded Federal mandate," says Michael Fix of the Urban Institute.

---

***"Los Angeles is the strongest magnet; of the county's 9 million residents in 1990, almost one-third were foreign-born."***

---

The problem, of course, does not affect everyone equally. About three-quarters of all the known immigrants who came to this country between 1980 and 1990 went to just six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New Jersey. California alone accounted for 35 percent of the total. Among communities, Los Angeles is the strongest magnet: of the county's 9 million residents in 1990, almost one-third were foreign-born. Moreover, Los Angeles County estimates that roughly 1.5 million of its residents in 1990-91 were undocumented or legalized aliens.

As outsized as Los Angeles' situation is, though, there are places where the numbers are far smaller but the resonance is just as deep. Lowell, Massachusetts has somewhere between 15,000 and 25,000 Cambodian refugees, about a quarter of its population. Wausau, Wisconsin has 2,800 Hmong, out of a total population of 37,000; some of its schools now have classes that are half Asian, in a city that until 1980 was, as its mayor puts it, "one of the lilyest white communities in the nation." In Arlington County, Virginia, Southeast Asians, Hispanics, Afghans, Ethiopians and other refugees have all clustered in distinct neighborhoods, with considerable impact on neighborhood schools and on the county's health care system — tuberculosis cases have doubled in the last

year, with 75 percent of them developing among foreign-born residents.

Just as the numbers vary from community to community, so do the levels of strain. Florida, for instance, has huge, already-established communities of Cubans and Haitians that can take it upon themselves to help newcomers get their feet on the ground; nationally, the Jewish community is matching Federal money dollar for dollar to help Soviet Jewish refugees, softening their impact on the cities in which they've settled. On the other hand, Los Angeles County's chief administrative officer estimated that undocumented aliens alone cost the county \$276 million for extra services in 1990, and through fiscal 1991, the county had spent a total of \$500 million on indigent health care costs just for legalized aliens.

Some states and localities have been doing a much more conscientious job than others. Texas — despite the numbers of immigrants it has received — has historically done very little to provide services for them. Massachusetts, on the other hand, not only declared in 1985 that refugees and immigrants were welcome in the commonwealth, but essentially required all state agencies to consider the newcomers' special needs. The result was a broad array of services, from domestic violence programs for Southeast Asian women to AIDS education radio programs in Haitian Creole and cross-cultural training for mental health providers.

Ironically enough, however, Massachusetts and Texas appear to be moving closer to each other. The Texas legislature recently created an Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs and placed it under the governor's direct supervision. Although the agency's scope is fairly limited now, it hopes to begin developing a plan this summer for addressing immigrants' impact on the state — "a monumental task," in the words of Marguerite Rivera Houze, the office's deputy director, "because we don't even know what's out there."

Meanwhile, many of Massachusetts' programs have been cut back or eliminated, along with mainstream support systems that were heavily used by new residents, such as general welfare assistance to the able-bodied poor. With those cutbacks, the state is losing its expertise, and especially its bilingual capacity. Even should the economy turn around, it will be a long time before it gets it back. "Once those structures are dismantled, we know it will be very difficult to rebuild them," says Regina Lee, director of the state's Office for Refugees and Immigrants.

At the same time, while the so-called "impact states" such as California and Florida have been forced by circumstances to build the most elaborate programs for refugees and immigrants, some of the more interesting approaches have developed in smaller states. Iowa, whose 11,000 refugees would form a small neighborhood in Los Angeles, is one example.

---

***"The result [in Oregon] is that instead of 80 percent of the refugee population relying on cash assistance when their benefits run out, now only 46 percent do."***

---

Normally, the refugee settlement process is handled by a series of private and public agencies, from the private volunteer agency that brings a family into the country and helps it through its first month, to those that take over afterward, providing cash assistance, language instruction and job training. In Iowa, however, the state does it all: it is a resettlement agency and a money and service provider. The refugee bureau functions as welfare office and employment agency at the same time.

Employment is also the centerpiece of Oregon's refugee strategy. When the state began its program in 1985, it found that most of the refugees who'd been there for up to 18 months — the point at which Federal benefits ran out in those years — were relying on cash assistance as their sole source of income. "That was a luxury we couldn't afford," say Ron Spendal, the state's refugee coordinator.

Instead, Oregon decided to "front-load" the system, putting refugees into job training and English-language programs simultaneously. From the day they arrive, refugees are expected to work for their money. "Their assistance check is a paycheck for participation in employment training," says Spendal. "It is not an entitlement." The result is that instead of 80 percent of the refugee population relying on cash assistance when their benefits run out, now only 46 percent do.

There are those who argue that, given the nature of today's economy, job training is the single most important service that government can provide. "European immigrants could aspire to the middle class because of the manufacturing base, even if they didn't speak English," says Massachusetts' Regina Lee. "Nowadays, there are very few manufacturing jobs left that pay a decent wage, so today's immigrants face an economy where they need more English skills and a higher level of skills just to get entry-level jobs."

Meanwhile, at the local level, leaders are looking for creative ways to deal with the problem of community integration. The city of Pasadena, California, besides mailing newsletters in Spanish and Armenian and providing a bilingual telephone information line, is looking for ways to have immigrant groups provide more services to their own communities. "We're moving slowly but tentatively away from the idea that white people should provide the appropriate services to non-white people," says Rick Cole, the city's mayor. "The idea is to build some self-sufficiency."

In Arlington, the county created a series of videotapes in different languages going over some of

the fundamentals of living in this country — cooking in the kitchen, for instance, and leaving windows closed when the air conditioning is on. It has set up apartment-based centers for language and job training, and developed a program in the county's many hotels giving release time to employees to learn English.

In Merced County, California, which is home to huge numbers of Southeast Asian refugees, the county government has been working to convince the Hmong community that for families to survive, people other than the father will probably have to work. It has been a hard sell, as has the notion that women and children are eligible for services. But local officials insist it is vital. "It's the sort of learning that the rest of us do through growing up in this country," says John Cullen, the Human Services director. "Society expects Southeast Asians to become successful overnight, but it didn't happen to any of us in this country, and it's sort of unrealistic to expect it of people who come from a 14th-century country."

In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Broward County is setting up what Ellen Rodriguez, the county refugee coordinator, calls a "cultural and linguistic brokering agency." In an effort to make its services more widely available, the county is funding bilingual case management programs, a multilingual telephone access line — in French, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Romanian, Vietnamese and Chinese — and an interpretation service available to county agencies both at scheduled times and in emergencies.

---

***"The county is funding ... a multilingual telephone access line — in French, Haitian Creole, Spanish, Romanian, Vietnamese and Chinese..."***

---

Rodriguez believes that by intervening early, the county may be able to save itself money down the road. "If we get a call from someone who tells us some woman is going to work and leaving three kids home alone, we can intervene and get her day-care help before child protective services are called," she says. "There are lots of areas where interpretation could prevent people from getting into trouble and costing taxpayers money."

For all the innovative ideas, though, the somewhat-disjointed system is not really managing all the needs it faces, especially in light of Federal cutbacks. To take one small example, cuts in medical assistance aim directly at what may well be the single most heavily used service provided to newcomers. Refugees in particular have been arriving with conditions made especially dire by years of neglect. "We're seeing people with longstanding chronic health problems," including tuberculosis and hepatitis B, says Oregon's Ron Spendal. "It is an almost dangerous situation."

Just as worrisome is the growing incidence among immigrant families of drug abuse, alcoholism and gang activity. In St. Paul, for instance, not only are Southeast Asians beginning to show up in the area's criminal justice systems, but mental health problems have been on the upswing as well. "Things don't necessarily get better the longer you've been here," says David Loveridge. "One of the things that buoys people in the camps is that however miserable things are, there is a future. But when people come here, they're no longer refugees, they're exiles; for some of them, the future ends here, it doesn't begin. So you see people who survived all sorts of appalling events fall to pieces here."

The result is considerable strain on the local social service system, says Diane Ahrens, a county commissioner in St. Paul. "Our normal mental health system is equipped to deal with people who speak our language and understand our culture. We don't frankly have the professionals to deal with this kind of issue." As a result, the state, county and city are funding a program through a local foundation, directed by Loveridge, to train Southeast Asians as "paraprofessionals" to work with troubled refugees.

But just as the ability of state and local governments to provide those basic services is being called into question, they are recognizing deeper needs as well, such as how to deal with the emergence of a multicultural community. In Pasadena, Rick Cole notes that the local daily newspaper reaches only a third of the city's households. "We are facing what *Time* called the 'Fraying of America,'" he says. "Immigration is on the one hand reinfusing our community with some of the positive values that our culture has seen erode, such as hard work, family and spiritual values. On the other hand, in many cases there's not a high value placed on citizenship in the larger sense of the word — being part of government, and seeing government as owned by the people." Local governments, he argues, will have to address that issue head on. "We can't force people to adopt particular values, but I think the encouragement of certain values in the society is absolutely essential," he says.

It is not going to be easy to find a way to teach newcomers democracy when there is scarcely enough money available to teach them English. But failing on either count will be costly, says Arlington County Manager Tony Gardner. "If you neglect young children and new families when they come in, you are in effect spelling out the standards for the community for the next 10 to 20 years — if you don't educate children or invest in educating and employing parents, you end up spawning problems for the community as a whole. These immigrants here now are a good portion of our work force of the citizenry for the 21st century. It doesn't make good sense not to invest in them." ■

## Keeping the Categories Straight

Any local official who deals with newcomers from abroad quickly learns that labels matter. An "immigrant" has a different legal status from a "refugee" or a "legalized alien," and each is entitled to (or barred from) different Federal programs.

It's not at all uncommon for a single family to have both refugees and immigrants among its members — which means that the Federal government may be willing to subsidize English-language training for one parent, for instance but not the other. The chief categories are:

**Immigrants**, who form the vast bulk of newcomers. They are admitted to the country according to a system of preferences that include family ties, job skills and, under recent legislation, wealth. Immigrants are, in general, entitled to no special services.

**Refugees**, who are escaping persecution based on their ethnicity, political beliefs, race, religion or membership in a social group. Their number is set yearly by the U.S. Department of State. For fiscal 1993, 122,000 will probably be admitted. The cash assistance and services to which they are entitled are being cut back drastically.

**Asylees**, who are already living in this country at the time they apply for refugee protection.

**Legalized aliens**, who number somewhere between 2.5 and 3 million (or roughly one of every hundred residents of the country). They are former illegal entrants who were granted amnesty under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. States and localities providing them with services are theoretically entitled to reimbursement from the Federal government, but a large chunk of the funds supposedly available has been held back by Washington.

**Undocumented or illegal aliens** have no legal status. The Census Bureau has estimated their number at 3.3 million — or about the same as at the time of the 1980 Census. Although they are not entitled to any Federal services and tend to shy away from applying for state or local assistance, some states and communities have made it a policy not to discriminate according to immigration status.