

*In a letter to the editor of the New York Times published February 1, 1990  
Vernon Briggs comments on the effect of immigration on black unemployment.  
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# Immigration Policy Sends Blacks Back to the South

By Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.

The explanations offered by the Census Bureau for confirmation of the movement of blacks back to the South, where the percentage of black Americans rose in the 1980s, overlooks the major reason for this exodus: namely, the urban black work force has been adversely affected by the resurgence of mass immigration into the cities of the North and West.

As late as 1910, more than 92 percent of the black population lived in the South. It was not until mass immigration from Europe was curtailed by the outbreak of World War I that blacks began to leave the South in unprecedented numbers. After that war, immigration was sharply curtailed by legislation. Immigration receded dramatically over the subsequent four decades. The percentage of the population that was foreign born fell from 13.2 percent in 1920 to a low of 4.7 percent in 1970. By then, the percentage of blacks living in the South had fallen to 53 percent.

In the mid-60s, a new immigration law was adopted. It more than doubled the annual number of legal immigrants admitted. Significant increases have also occurred in refugee admissions (through administrative parole procedures and by new legislation enacted in 1980). Extensive abuses of the laws by illegal immigration, as well as the new gimmick of allowing United States employers to hire tens of thousands of nonimmigrant foreign workers each year have added to the scale of the immigration flow.

As a result, the 1980 Census showed that the foreign-born population had reversed previous declines and had risen to 6.2 percent of the population (the real figure was higher because of the acknowledged undercount of illegal immigrants — especially in areas like New York City and Los Angeles). With the immigration and refugee policy developments of the 1980s, the foreign-born population should easily reach or exceed 9 percent of the population in the 1990 Census.

The impact of immigration is wholly an urban phenomenon. The 1980 Census showed that while 74 percent of the United States population was urban, 92 percent of the foreign born were. In cities like New York the impact has been far greater (for example, 23.6 percent of New York City's population was foreign-born in 1980, and the figure should easily exceed 25 percent in 1990). As the Census report shows, outside of the South the black population is overwhelmingly

concentrated in urban areas — especially in the inner cities. Consequently the urban black population has borne the brunt of the competition with immigrants for jobs, training opportunities, community services and housing.

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In 1981 the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy (the Hesburgh Commission) found that United States immigration policy was "out of control." It urged reforms that would confront "the reality of limitations." Unfortunately, Congress has paid only lip service to this request and has found piecemeal ways to increase the annual flow of immigrants, refugees and nonimmigrant workers. Pending legislation will add only more ways to increase the size of the annual immigrant flow.

As matters stand, immigration is more out of control than it was when the reform movement began in the early 1980s. The major deficiency is that immigration policy is primarily designed to accommodate political goals. It is not accountable for its economic consequences. For much of the nation's urban black population outside the South, immigration policy is but a revived instrument of institutional racism. It provides a way to bypass the national imperative to address the employment, job preparation and housing needs of much of the urban black population.

Before the 1920s, the effect of immigration policy was to keep blacks out of the urban North and West; in the 1980s it has sent blacks back to the South. ■