

Immigration

Reforming U.S. Immigration Policy

Open New Pathways to Integration

Background

An estimated 11 million to 12 million people reside illegally in the United States, and their fate is the most controversial aspect of the current immigration debate. Current federal policy has frustrated state and local officials and inspired some of them to craft their own laws.

A fractious 109th Congress tried but failed to pass legislation to change the functioning of current immigration policy. Over the next decade or two, the U.S.-born labor force will decline, as baby boomers retire, and most of the net increase to the labor force will come from immigrants and their children. A new group of cities and suburbs, many in the South, has become increasingly common immigrant destinations. Local leaders are grappling with the costs to institutions where immigrant newcomers have the greatest impact, such as schools, hospitals, and public safety.

The current need for immigration reform comes at a time when the United States has more foreign-born residents than ever before—35.7 million. Among the undocumented, about 40 percent entered the United States with a legal temporary visa and then violated the terms of the visa, while the remainder evaded authorities at the border. These immigrants—the *illegal*, the *unauthorized*, the *undocumented*—are the subject of a fierce debate about their costs, their contributions, and their future.

Recommendations

Reforming immigration policy entails a broad set of policy reforms. The next President, in order to ensure the economic, social, and civic integration of illegal immigrants, should support policies that:

- recognize the economic role and contribution of undocumented workers by implementing an earned legalization program
- create an Impact Aid Program that would offset state and local expenditures related to the program
- create a New Americans Initiative—a program to support state-level public-private partnership that would help *all* immigrants integrate into American



society in a systematic, coordinated, and effective way, through local government and nonprofit programs

Key Facts

- the United States has more foreign-born residents than ever before—35.7 million; but they currently make up 12 percent of the population, a lower rate than in the early 20th century
- about a third of this group is here illegally, and the number has grown by some 500,000 people each year since 2000
- among the undocumented, about 40 percent entered the United States with a legal temporary visa and then violated the terms of the visa, while the remainder evaded authorities at the border
- about 40 percent of the nation's 6.6 million "unauthorized households" (ones where the head or spouse are undocumented) contain children, about two-thirds of whom are U.S.-born citizens

A full version of this proposal, as well as supporting background material, is available at www.opportunity08.org.

About the Author and the Project

Audrey Singer

Audrey Singer is a demographer and Immigration Fellow at Brookings. She is an expert on the Census, emerging immigrant gateways, and metropolitan demographics. Singer, a former demographic analyst at the U.S. Department of Labor, has written extensively on U.S. immigration trends such as naturalization and citizenship issues, undocumented migration, and the nation's changing racial and ethnic composition.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.