

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Contributions of immigrants must not be ignored

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As Canadians went about setting up immigration policy to promote social integration of new immigrants in 2001, the immigration minister of Canada, Elinor Caplan, stated straightforwardly, "Immigrants are a vital source of human capital that continues to expand our economy and strengthen our communities."

The same message was once obvious in our own nation. It was what the eminent historian Oscar Handlin had in mind more than half a century ago when he declared: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history."

Since Handlin, the phrase "We are a nation of immigrants" has become the obligatory cliché to start all public discourse about immigration. These days, however, the well-worn preposition is usually followed by contentious arguments rooted in fears, hesitations, qualifications, limitations and exclusions.

If Canadians are clarifying the meaning of a nation of immigrants, Americans are surely muddling it.

It is not that evidence fails to show how immigrants contribute to the fabric of American life in meaningful and innovative ways. In our own backyard, for example, Fazlur Rahman has been a pioneer of cancer treatment in West Texas.

The first oncologist in San Angelo, Rahman arrived in 1975 from then-war-torn Pakistan. Resulting from the turbulence, his home country partitioned to become Bangladesh by the time his wife, Ara, was able to join him in San Angelo.

The Rahmans' story is similar to that of other immigrant families who flee traumatic situations in all parts of the world to seek refuge, security and opportunity in a new land.

The Congressional Budget Office reports that in 2009 the Immigration and Naturalization Service granted 191,000 immigrants legal permanent residence status for humanitarian reasons. These immigrants accounted for 17 percent of all admissions into the nation for 2009.

Long periods of duress and separation between parents, spouses and children are common to the immigration experience. It is an experience that creates what Ara Rahman has called "invisible populations."

We learned lasting lessons about the invisibility of immigrants when ASU's Community Development Initiatives served as hub for the local effort to promote public awareness and responsiveness to the 2010 census.

On one hand, we heard seething arguments about why immigrants should not be counted in the census because they are reputed to be lawbreakers, a drain on the community and society, and largely uncommitted to one or another imagined "American" way of living.

On the other hand, we heard firm arguments that few immigrants would step forward to be counted in the census for fear of being targeted for punishments ranging from the jeers of nativists to arrest or deportation.

Clearly, the duress, difficulties and contributions of immigration are largely invisible to Americans. And many immigrants choose to stay under the various radars that record and document our daily lives.

To understand the contributions of immigrants beyond storied families such as the Rahmans, it is necessary to consult aggregate numbers. It is true that the census undercounts immigrant populations because they are invisible. Yet it also is true that there is no more complete statistical portrait of immigrants in America.

Despite flaws, it is important to know what census numbers tell about immigrants in the local community.

The most recent census data indicates that some 7,600 foreign-born people live in Tom Green County. They represent about 7 percent of the population.

Most foreign-born (about 59 percent) are not U.S. citizens, but most also are not recent arrivals to the nation. About 76 percent entered the U.S. before 2000. More than 5,700, some 75 percent, came to the U.S. from Latin American nations, predominantly Mexico.

Nearly 3,000, or 66 percent, of local noncitizen immigrants age 5 and older are "language isolated" in the sense that English is not the main language spoken at home, and by self-admission, these individuals do not speak English "very well." Nearly 2,000 noncitizens 25 and older (about 58 percent) have not completed high school.

Despite these stumbling blocks to work in America, noncitizen immigrants are more engaged in local labor markets than others in the community. Among residents 16 and older, 69 percent of immigrant noncitizens are participating in the labor force and 67 percent are employed. Among native-born locals, the parallel labor force participation rate is 65 percent and the employment rate is 56 percent.

Noncitizen immigrants often work lower-wage jobs and have a higher poverty rate. In Tom Green County, the median earnings for full-time male immigrant noncitizen workers was \$21,038 in 2010. This compared with \$36,699 for full-time native-born male workers.

The corresponding poverty rates are 16.4 percent for native-born residents and 29.7 percent for noncitizen immigrants.

Low earnings and high poverty, however, do not translate into greater reliance on public assistance or entitlements on the part of immigrants. Ninety-eight percent of local households with noncitizen immigrant occupants receive earned income from employment while 13 percent have some Social Security income and less than 1 percent receive cash from public assistance programs.

Twenty percent fewer native-born occupied households receive earned income, while larger percentages have Social Security benefits and cash payouts from public assistance.

The best statistical information shows summarily that noncitizen immigrants contribute significantly, if often invisibly, to the local community. They comprise the majority of a relatively small foreign-born population. The majority have been in the U.S. for more than 10 years.

Despite language obstacles and low levels of education, immigrants engage the labor force more strongly than the native-born population, and even with low wages and high poverty, they are less reliant on public assistance and entitlements. Can anyone really doubt their value to the community?

Something obscured by the noisy political rhetoric over the national immigration issue is that the ethos of current immigration and nationality law invites immigrants to our borders. Current policy recognizes that immigrants provide goods and services, fill labor shortages, enrich our cultural diversity and deserve the same protections as any American.

In San Angelo, however, there are surprisingly few places for immigrants to turn for assistance at wending the way through complex status and citizenship issues, let alone services to aid their integration into the community. Thank goodness for the limited counseling Catholic Charities provides and for the English training and GED services at Adult Literacy Council.

San Antonio-based immigration attorney Marisol Perez meets with local immigration clients every month and does an immigration information session on local radio.

Alfredo Lozano, another San Antonio-based immigration attorney, also sees clients in San Angelo once a month. He notes that about 80 percent of his San Angelo clientele are legal permanent residents who could petition to have family members come to the U.S. The other 20 percent are undocumented workers who have family here with legal status, but who rely on the alien-family member for key support.

In most of these cases, says Lozano, the aliens could successfully return to their native country to petition for re-entry and status as a legal permanent resident. However, the wait time is two to five years — a long time for their resident dependents to suffer.

March is National Ethics Awareness Month. Consider the ethics of leaving populations "invisible" and vulnerable as we do with productive, contributing, aspiring immigrants. Help find legal remedies to complications of their status in America. Help embrace their inclusion into the community.

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