

Reflections on International Migration, with Dr. Susan F. Martin

Migration in a Global Context

Thank you. Before I get into speaking about U.S. immigration policy, let me place these issues in a global context, because it's really important to understand the dynamics that are causing population movements throughout the world.

According to the United Nations Population Division, there are about 200 million international migrants in the world today. These are people who are living outside of their country of origin, country of permanent residency, for more than a year. It includes just long-term international migrants.

They send home to their families and to their communities more than \$200 billion per year. If you take into account that all of the rich world countries together only spend about 60 to \$100 billion on foreign aid each year, you realize that international migrants are sending twice as much money to poor countries as do all of the wealthy countries in the world combined. Remittances are a very, very significant input in terms of global economic development.

About half of all international migrants are women and the numbers actually coming to wealthy countries exceed 50 percent, particularly in Europe and in North America. So it's a phenomenon that affects everyone. However, you have to also take into account that 200 million people who are moving represent only 3 percent of the world's population. Most people prefer to stay at home, stay where their loved ones are, where they're familiar with their communities. It's only the exceptional people who choose to pick up and move to other countries.

Now, in some countries, of course, a much higher proportion of people migrate. In Mexico about 10 percent of the population lives in the United States. So it varies greatly from one country to another.

Key Factors of International Migration

In my view international migration is going to be increasing in the future. We're only now seeing the tip of what might be a much larger iceberg. And that's because international movements of people are driven largely by two factors: disparities amongst countries and networks that link people to other places where they can migrate. And the disparities are growing.

Certainly economic inequality between the poor countries and the rich countries of the world has been growing and expanding, making migration a very attractive alternative. Not for the poorest of the poor. They tend not to have the resources to migrate. But certainly for those with a little bit of money, a little bit of ambition and who find that migration is a way that they can get ahead in the world.

Even more so in terms of disparities are the demographic disparities. We're seeing in the wealthy countries of the North a slowing down of population growth. And in some cases, in many European countries, Japan, they're actually forecasting an absolute decrease in population because of very, very low levels of fertility.

As all of us know and have read about in the U.S. and other countries, we'll be experiencing population aging as the baby boom retires and a lot of jobs open up and perhaps are not going to be filled by successive generations within the country.

At the same time, the developing countries in the South are continuing to see population growth. Even though it has slowed down remarkably in many developing countries, the forecasts imply that they will still have more new workers than jobs for those workers. And so the push will be to find jobs where they exist and that will be movement from South to North.

There are also rights disparities. Many people move because of conflict, because of human rights repression. Many of these refugees are forced to migrate in order to find safety and to find refuge or to find greater respect for their rights.

Migration will also increase because of new opportunities for would-be migrants.

Technology has reduced the cost of migration. Also, as more people migrate, they form networks, connections and relationships that allow others to take the plunge and move from one place to another.

Types and Patterns of Migration to the United States

The U.S. remains the largest country of immigration in this global context, although other countries are starting to see significant migration, as well. There are more than 35 million international migrants in the United States and each year we're seeing about one million net new additions of people who are coming and remaining for long periods of time. The stock of migrants, this 35-plus million, is pretty equally divided into three groups:

- One-third are naturalized citizens.
- About one-third are legal permanent residents.
- About one-third are unauthorized migrants.

Immigration to the U.S. is also seeing two somewhat contradictory patterns taking place but at the same time. We continue to see great concentration of immigrants in about seven states. Certainly California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey remain major centers of immigration. And within those states, there is tremendous concentration in just a few cities. So most of the immigrants who come to Illinois, for example, locate in the Chicago metropolitan area.

But at the same time, we're seeing tremendous dispersal of immigrants throughout the United States and throughout every state within America. And so the fastest-growing states for migration are places like North Carolina, Georgia, some of the Midwestern states, Nevada, Utah: places that hadn't been traditional immigrant-receiving states but are now seeing significant new influxes of immigrants. So while concentration remains, this dispersal means that immigration has become a truly national phenomenon. There is almost no place in the country which is unremoved from

the influence of immigration.

The last point I'll mention in terms of immigrants, the other disparity in terms of our own immigration, is that they're either more highly educated than the average American or much less educated than the average American. About 25 percent of the immigrants in the country have more than a university education; whereas, about 40 percent have less than a high school education.

We, in fact, often refer to them as having an hourglass composition in terms of their educational attainment. By contrast, if you look at education for the U.S. natives, it tends to look like a diamond—relatively few people with very low levels of education, relatively few with very high levels of education. Most people are in the middle.

This educational distribution is what makes immigration a pretty positive experience altogether for the United States and causes relatively little competition. Because immigrants and natives are mirror images of each other, they're not competing for the same jobs.

It also, though, creates a challenge, because immigrants do tend to compete with those amongst us with the lowest levels of education and the least capacity to be able to compete in an information-age economy. And, of course, many of those who are at that lowest level are immigrants who have come in previous waves, who are struggling themselves and now are facing competition from new arrivals.

The Challenges Ahead

So given that pattern of immigration, I see four major challenges for the United States in the years ahead. The first is reducing unauthorized migration. The second is reforming our legal immigration system for it to operate more effectively and efficiently to serve the national interest. The third is to address issues arising from the integration of immigrants into the U.S., particularly with regard to this educational distribution that I mentioned. And the fourth is how we cooperate with other countries in managing flows of people.

Now, in terms of unauthorized migration, there're probably about 12 million people who are who are living in the United States without authorization. About 7 million of those are in the workforce; they're in the labor force. Others are spouses and children of people who are working.

They come into the country in two different ways: some, about 60 percent, cross the land border, particularly with Mexico. A majority of these are Mexican migrants, but we see people coming across the border in the South from just about every country imaginable, particularly from Central America.

About 40 percent of those who are now without authorization to be here have entered with legal documentation. They have been inspected, been admitted with legal visas. But then either they overstay their visa, or they work in violation of their visa. They've come legally but have now fallen into an illegal status because of the work that they're doing or the extended period of time in which they're residing.

They're also concentrated as the rest of the immigrants are, but they're also dispersed. And the other thing that's very significant is that many of them live in what we refer to as mixed households. They live in households with legal permanent residents and often with citizens—usually the U.S. citizen children of their own families but sometimes other citizens. And so any one household may not be purely of those who are here without authorization. Of course, it makes it much more difficult to address the problem when we have that type of mixture.

In my view -- and I've worked on this for many years -- it's extremely important that we come to grips with this large and rapidly growing illegal migration. Of the million people I said who were new entries into the U.S., a majority now have come illegally or without authorization, rather than have come legally. And that to me is a very unhealthy mix when more people are attracted to and able to enter the country without inspection or stay without authorization.

It's a difficult issue to address, though, because if you look at it purely from an

economic point of view, there are a lot of winners from this situation. Of course, the migrants earn more money than they could at home. Their employers benefit, either from having a lower-wage labor force than they might have had otherwise or because they couldn't have found the workers to do the jobs at the wages and under the working conditions that were being offered. And I emphasize this point: the attraction is that they work at certain wages and under certain working conditions. There may not necessarily be a shortage, per se, but there's this shortage given the nature of the jobs.

And certainly consumers benefit from lower-priced fruits and vegetables to lower-priced restaurants because of the workers, the low-wage workers. Hotels -- any hotel that you're in probably has lower rates for the rooms than might have otherwise been the case because of access to a low-wage workforce. Meatpacking, lots of industries pass on the savings to the consumer.

The Human Toll

It has a very, very heavy human toll, though, of course on the migrants themselves. Many of them in migrating clandestinely resort to the use of smugglers. Sometimes human traffickers, people who are moving them from one place to the other in order to exploit their labor. And so it's dangerous. And they're without rights in the destination country, the U.S. or other countries. And of course it's much more difficult for them to maintain contact with their families. So there is a human toll to illegal migration.

Very significantly, unauthorized illegal movements of people undermine the rule of law, and they undermine the nature of our legal immigration system. It's a mockery to have a legal system and then make it easier to circumvent that system than for people to actually abide by it.

And so any response to illegal migration has to take into account the nature of the problems that are there. And in my view that means you can't do it all at the border, because border fences frankly don't work. They make people go around them. They

don't stop them from coming in.

And they do absolutely nothing for the 40 percent who are coming with legal papers and then overstay. It's very important to do something about illegal migration at the work site. Because that's really what the draw for workers is. That's where the attraction to immigrating is, and it's reducing both the ability of employers to hire people who are in the country illegally and increasing the penalties on that action if they persist in doing so, where I think the real bang for the bucks is.

Reforming the System

But none of that will work unless we reform our legal system, which is my second point. Right now we have very inflexible, very unrealistic ceilings on various different immigration targets. It means that it's very difficult for an employer to find a legal worker to bring in as an immigrant.

And it's also particularly bad in terms of family reunification for the immigrants or for citizens, for that matter, who are already in the United States and want their families to come join them. If you are a legal permanent resident in the U.S. and you want your spouse and minor children to get the same access to legal status that you have, and you apply, by legislative ceilings that have been imposed, the average wait is more than five years. And if you're from Mexico, it's even longer. It's not surprising that many people, many families, decide that they're going to circumvent that process and hopefully wait in the U.S. until their green card becomes available.

Other family categories, such as siblings of U.S. citizens, are backlogged even more. If you apply today from a country like the Philippines where there are a lot of applications for admission of brothers and sisters, you may be eligible to enter in 44 years. The median age of the siblings currently arriving is 55. It means that we keep people out in their productive work years. We admit them as they approach retirement. This is a really, really stupid immigration system.

So basically if we are going to address undocumented migration and also provide the ability for our immigration system to serve valid national interests, we need to be making very, very basic reforms in our system.

For the employment system, rather than impose artificial ceilings that are almost always wrong, we need more flexible targets on admissions. We actually reduced the ceilings on high-tech workers just before the dot.com boom -- you know, when demand really went up because the amount of employment increased tremendously. We finally increased the numbers of visas about six months before the dot.com bust. Again, this type of immigration system makes no sense whatsoever.

We need to have market forces operating in order for us to be able to set realistic levels and have employers who have legitimate need for foreign workers to be able to gain access to those foreign workers. And we need to make our family system operate much more efficiently.

Now, you might ask why we have these problems. And that's because we've had a series of policy failures over the 1980s and 1990s, and they've persisted to the present. And I think at the heart of the policy failures is a basic ambivalence on the part of the American public about immigration.

We all look towards our immigrant forbearers as examples of what's great about the United States, and we all worry about the people coming in today and wondering whether they are going to be the same productive, contributing members of society that we see our parents in my case, or our grandparents or our great-grandparents, to have been.

And it's that ambivalence which we have always had as a nation. And it always makes it very difficult to take tough actions because we really don't know what we want as a country. And it's really important now that we have the dialogue on immigration to determine what it is that we see as the most important elements of our immigration policy.

The Role of Education

But it's also important that we take seriously my third challenge. And that's the challenge of integration of immigrants. And here again, I come back to the statistic that I started with, about the fact that about 40 percent of the immigrants to the United States have less than a high school education. In fact, many of them have less than six years of education.

They have difficulty competing, certainly, in an information-age economy. They're doing jobs though that are needed in the economy, and some of them could perhaps be mechanized, robotics, things of that sort, but they're performing very important work for the economy. The issue is what happens to their children. We know that there's a high correlation between the educational level of a parent and the educational achievement of children.

We have several problems that need to be fixed, and this is a perfect audience to talk about these problems. There are still much, much too high drop-out rates for the children of immigrants, particularly Hispanic immigrants, Latino immigrants, in the United States.

And we have another problem which I refer to as the "Failure to Drop In." We have teenagers coming, adolescents, 12, 13, 14 years old, who actually never even make it into the U.S. educational system. For those who don't get to the educational system and for those who drop out, of course they're going to be condemned also to a life of low-wage, low-skilled occupations and jobs.

And so unless we really deal with this problem and deal with it much more effectively than we have been, what immigration will do is produce a perpetual underclass rather than the stepping-stone, upward-mobility pattern that we have had in years past.

This has always been a problem, but in the turn of the 19th to 20th century, the educational disparities between immigrants and natives were not very great. Nobody

had that much education at that time. And we were in an industrial economy that rewarded hard work, strong backs and an ability to participate in the industrial life.

Today, of course, what we have is tremendous disparity between the less-educated immigrants and the more-educated U.S. population, taking out that 25 percent who are doing just fine, thank you. And we really need to create the opportunities for them and for their children so that they can compete in an economy which now values education and learning and knowledge much more than it values hard work and a strong back.

America in the World

My fourth area, fourth challenge -- and I'll end with this -- is the challenge of cooperation. Historically or traditionally, immigration was seen as the purview of individual states. We unilaterally made policies that determined who would be admitted, under what circumstances, in what numbers. We're finding increasingly, it's very difficult to manage international movements of people from a unilateralist perspective, because, in fact, what we're talking about are interests of source countries of immigrants, many transit countries through which immigrants come, and, of course, the destination countries to which they arrive.

And unless there are modes of cooperation in addressing the causes of movement at the source, having the migrants be a really useful and efficient and effective resource for development of their home countries, we'll continue to see people taking great risks in order to be able to get the gold ring of migration to a richer destination country.

If we don't help transit countries to be able to deal with the impacts of migration on them as people move through, for example, Mexico to come to the U.S. or move through Morocco to get to France, then the transit countries are going to have a deep problem, a difficulty in managing their migration.

Of course, the destination countries need to be developing the kind of rational,

realistic policies that I've been advocating, in order to ensure that there are legal avenues of entry.

Now, this is a new paradigm, the idea of actually managing migration through cooperation. It's a theme of a book that I've just published with two colleagues that Bruce knows quite well. For me, one of the biggest challenges of the future is figuring out how we move from a unilateral approach to migration to one in which cooperation becomes the norm, becomes the way in which we deal with these issues.

So there are tremendous challenges ahead. The U.S., as the principal and the largest country of immigration, has a responsibility, of course, to its own population in terms of making sure that our immigration system works; but it has, as with many other issues, a responsibility to the world to take a leadership in ensuring that this global system of immigration works to the benefit of all.

Thank you.