



Focus On

Hispanics

The 2006 “Focus on Hispanics” looks at one of the most volatile political and educational issues facing the nation today: immigration. Because the 2006 NEA Representative Assembly adopted a legislative program that supports “comprehensive immigration reform that—Promotes a fair and orderly system of legal immigration that also protects national security and civil liberties; —Recognizes the importance of family unity and rejects laws and delays that undermine keeping families intact; and—Deals effectively with undocumented immigrants who have worked and lived in the United States and may include a path to citizenship once they undergo background and security checks,” this “Focus On” will examine the issue of Hispanic immigration in the context of U.S. immigration policy.

Some Myths and Falsehoods About Earlier Immigrants

Before embarking on a brief review of U.S. immigration history as it affects Hispanics, let’s dispel some myths and falsehoods about earlier generations of immigrants. Everyone has heard them. They usually begin with someone whose ancestors immigrated to the U.S., possibly during the last two centuries, complaining about all of the benefits today’s immigrants—some undocumented—are receiving at the expense of hardworking American taxpayers. “My ancestors made it by the sweat of their brows,” the refrain usually goes. “No one gave them any assistance.” We’ve all heard it. But is it true?

No, it’s not, according to a *Wall Street Journal* article published in 1995. Written by Frederick Rose, the article states that immigrants to the U.S. in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries received much more assistance than immigrants today. As a review of census documents, government investigations, and academic tomes from the period revealed, “More than half of public welfare recipients nationwide in 1909 were immigrant families,” says Rose, “making new arrivals three times more likely to be on the public dole than natives.... In Chicago, two-thirds of those receiving public assistance were foreign born.... Today, less than nine-percent of immigrant household receive welfare payments, as compared with less than seven percent of households headed by native-born Americans.”

Differences can be seen in healthcare, too. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Rose points out, “a third of those in public hospitals and insane asylums were foreign born, more than twice the proportion of foreign born in the general population.... Such proportions are a far cry from today, when only about 6.5-percent of all Medicaid recipients (a figure including hospital as well as office patients) are immigrants.”

Earlier generations of immigrants also benefited greatly from public education, although they did not finish high school in the numbers students do today. “In the nation’s 30 biggest cities,” says Rose, “more than half the students in public schools were from immigrant families during the early years of this [the Twentieth] century.

In New York alone, nearly three-quarters of the children in public schools “were the children of new arrivals. In Chicago, it was more than two-thirds. The national burden today [posed by immigrants in schools] estimated at a bit over 5-percent, is relatively light.” Immigrants in the Nineteenth Century also received another benefit. In certain parts of the west, they were given free land, which they could pass on to their heirs.

Of course, no one is saying that earlier generations of immigrants did not work hard to attain their piece of the American pie. But the argument that they received no government assistance is totally without merit.

U.S. Immigration: A Brief Review:

Myths aside, a fact often forgotten by many Americans is that, excluding American Indians, all American families at one time or another were immigrants. Indeed, the U.S. immigrant population stood at about four million in 1790; by 1860 that number had swelled to some 32 million. The majority came from England, Germany, and Ireland. Between 1820 and 1920, the U.S. received approximately 60 percent of the world’s immigrants.

They came because of population expansions in developed parts of the world, improved methods of transportation, and a U.S. desire to populate large, undeveloped areas of the country. During this period, the U.S. was in the midst of an agricultural, then an industrial, expansion that needed the cheap, unskilled labor and profits that immigrants could yield. Immigrants, along with enslaved Blacks in the Nineteenth Century, were responsible for the rapid development of the country.

The Mexican-American War:

Of course, Mexicans did not have to immigrate to America. Following the Mexican-American War (1846-48) and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans became immigrants in their own country when the U.S. annexed all of the current States of California, Nevada, and Utah, and portions of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming. The treaty also recognized the annexation of Texas by the U.S. three years before.

Signs of racism:

However, even before the Twentieth Century had dawned, there were signs that some immigrants were not welcome. The U.S. passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which shut the door on Chinese and other Asian immigration, exempting immigrants from Japan and the Philippines. Nonetheless, by 1907 the number of immigrants in the U.S. had reached 1.3 million.

After World War I, Madison Grant’s *The Dying of the Great Race* helped to fuel the U.S. immigration debate by asserting that the majority of American immigrants were no longer coming from England, Germany, and Scandinavia, but from Italy, Greece, Poland, Hungary, and Russia—places that Grant felt produced inferior Caucasian stocks. Grant also believed America would be in trouble in the future if large numbers of these immigrants entered the country and birth rates of existing minorities, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, were not kept down.



The Immigration Act of 1924:

So wide spread was concern about who would become an American that a geneticist sat in on Congressional hearings that led to passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act), which established a national quota system that allowed immigration on the basis of national origin. Great Britain was allotted 50 percent of the slots. Asian immigration was prohibited, and Hispanic immigration was kept low.

Excluding Puerto Rico, which is part of the United States, Hispanic immigrants have traditionally come from Spain, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and other parts of North, South, and Central America.

America has always had an ambivalent relationship with Hispanic immigrants. Ironically, while national policy was keeping down Hispanic immigration in the 1920s and 1930s, Hollywood was romanticizing the Latin lover in gaucho films of the period, starring movie idols like Rudolph Valentino.

Nonetheless, the effects of the Immigration Act of 1924 can be seen in the fact that first generation immigrants represented 3.3 percent of the U.S. population in the 1920s; by the 1940s, that percentage had plummeted to seven-tenths of one percent. The U.S. also turned away thousands of European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution during World War II.

After World War II, as the Cold War heated up, this quota system continued during the 1950s, buttressed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which conducted a program racistly dubbed "Operation Wetback" that sought to identify undocumented Mexicans living in the U.S. and deport them.

A More Liberal Policy:

It was not until 1965 that the racist system of national quotas was dismantled with passage of the "Immigration Reform Act," which opened the U.S. to immigrants from undeveloped regions and allowed each country, regardless of race or ethnicity, an annual quota of 20,000. Large numbers of Hispanics began to enter the U.S. at this time.

However, during the 1980s, a period that saw the greatest influx of new immigrants since the first decade of the Twentieth Century, immigration legislation began to focus more on undocumented immigrants, particularly Hispanics. Congress passed and President Reagan signed the "Immigration Reform and Control Act" of 1986, which targeted immigrants living in the United States without proper documentation. Mandating employer sanctions for those who knowingly employed undocumented workers, the law also offered amnesty to undocumented immigrants who met certain criteria.

Although "The Immigration Act of 1990" strengthened provisions for the entry of immigrants with "desirable job skills" and financial resources (and raised the ceiling on the total number of immigrants admitted into the U.S. per year to 675,000), it also, once again, targeted undocumented immigrants, particularly Hispanics and revised the grounds upon which immigrants could either be prohibited from entering the U.S. or deported.

Current Immigration Policies, Hispanics, and Public Education:

For Hispanics, immigration and education remain the hotbed issues. Whether a Hispanic family is documented, undocumented, or native born has important educational implications. Undocumented Hispanics, age 25 and older, for example, are less likely to have graduated from high school than Hispanics from documented families. Their families are also less likely to be able to help them.

Current immigration laws are in direct correlation to changing demographics in the U.S. population. The fact that Hispanics have become the largest minority in the U.S. is not unrelated to various anti-immigration initiatives being proposed to deal with undocumented immigrants. Nor are these laws unrelated to the views of some politicians, who are attempting to capitalize on the immigration issue or the feelings in some communities that undocumented immigrants must be dealt with harshly.

Measures, such as California's Proposition 187, which that state's voters passed in 1994, and which sought to completely prohibit healthcare, education, and all social services to undocumented immigrants, although found to be unconstitutional, are still being enacted by local and state governments. Other proposals, such as the Bush Administration plan to build a 700-mile wall between Mexico and the U.S. attest to the lengths some politicians will go to curry favor with a frightened electorate.

Nonetheless, the primary target of most of the anti-immigrant sentiment floating around the U.S. today remains undocumented Hispanic workers who, although many contribute to the nation's economy—and are taxed—receive few of the benefits.

The challenge for educators is obvious: to cut through the political rhetoric and grandstanding and help other Americans overcome their baseless paranoia. It is to remind our fellow citizens and students that practically all American families were once immigrant families, and America wasn't afraid to lend a helping hand, then.

Classroom Exercise: To help students to grasp the concept of immigration, ask them to interview their family members to learn whether they or any of their ancestors migrated from one part of the U.S. to another part or from a foreign country to the U.S. Let your students also ask why their family members migrated.

Sources

- Rose, Frederick, "Muddled Masses: The Growing Backlash Against Immigration Includes Myths," *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 1995.
- American Civil Liberties Union, Rights Project, "Introduction to Immigration in the United States," a briefing paper, September 6, 2001.
- Tolbert, Caroline J. and Hero, Rodney, E., "Race/Ethnicity and Direct Democracy: An Analysis of California's Illegal Immigration Initiative," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 58, No. 3, August 1996.
- Grow, Brian, "Hispanic Nation," *Business Week*, March 15, 2004.
- Passel, Jeffrey, "The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.," a research report, Pew Hispanic Center, March 7, 2006.



Great Public Schools for Every Child