

## Reliable data crucial in developing sound immigration policy

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In recent years, many states have expressed concerns about the ways in which the federal government handles immigration matters. At the center of the debate is the age-old question about whether immigration helps or hurts the socioeconomic fabric of American society.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the discussions on immigration are usually based on emotional sentiments and anecdotal information. A good immigration policy must be based on a sound understanding of the immigration process and the use of reliable data about the size and characteristics of the immigrant populations.

How many immigrants, or foreign-born people, live in the state of Alabama? How does Alabama rank among other states in terms of number of immigrants? What are the countries of origin of Alabamian immigrants? How many of these immigrants are here illegally?

It was not possible to produce accurate, reliable figures about immigration in the United States, or even in Alabama, until recently. Thanks to the 2006 American Community Survey, we are now able to provide high-quality estimates. Unlike the previous years, the 2006 ACS included individuals in both households and group quarters, thereby providing information on the entire population.

According to the 2006 data released by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, there are about 130,049 foreign-born residents in Alabama, or 2.8 percent of the state population. At the national level, the foreign-born population represented 12.5 percent of the total population.

The "foreign-born" are defined as people who live in the United States but who were not citizens at birth. As such, the term foreign-born is used to indicate those who are United States citizens by naturalization, as well as legal and illegal aliens.

In comparison, Alabama ranks 33rd among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in terms of the size of its foreign-born population, and 44th in terms of percent of the foreign-born population. However, the size of the foreign-born population in the state of Alabama has increased very quickly during the past 10 years.

In 1990, the foreign-born represented only 1.1 percent of the total Alabama population, and that figure jumped to 2 percent in 2000. In fact, most immigrants now living in Alabama entered the United States in or after 2000. Today, Alabama ranks sixth in the nation in terms of percent change in foreign-born population between 2000 and 2006.

Who are these foreign-born people and what parts of the world do they come from? The largest proportion of foreign-born individuals living in Alabama came from Latin America (47.7 percent) and Asia (30.3 percent). The rest came from Europe (13.3 percent), Africa (5.1 percent), and

elsewhere (3.6 percent). As for national origin, most of these immigrants were born in Mexico (30.1 percent), India (6 percent), and Vietnam (4.9 percent).

According to the 2006 ACS data, 40,583, or 31.2 percent, of the foreign-born people living in Alabama were United States citizens. This is slightly lower than the 36.7 percent reported in 2000. This difference is due in part to the slower naturalization process as a result of increased security screening, and an increase in the number of immigrants applying for citizenship. It can also be due to increased numbers of undocumented aliens.

The majority of Alabama immigrants are male (52.6 percent). This is somewhat similar to the sex composition of native-born Alabamians (51.6 percent males). The foreign-born population is largely composed of working-age adults. More than half (57 percent) are 25-54 years old.

Compared to the native-born population, the foreign-born people are mostly young adults, with the largest concentration in the age-group 18-24 accounting for nearly 5 percent of the state's population.

As for racial composition, the majority of the foreign-born living in Alabama reported their race as white alone (49 percent). Only 8.2 percent identified themselves as black or African American alone. At the national level, white alone makes up 45.3 percent of the immigrant population; black or African American alone account for 7.8 percent. Keep in mind that there are white immigrants from Africa, Europe, and elsewhere.

In terms of ethnicity, Hispanics or Latinos outnumber other immigrant groups, representing 44 percent of the foreign-born population in Alabama. Yet, among native-born Alabamians, only a very small proportion is Hispanic or Latino (1.2 percent).

Compared to native Alabamians, the foreign-born who reside in Alabama live in larger households and are more likely to be married. The average household size of the foreign-born population is 3.4 persons among those who owned their homes and 3.1 persons among renters. Among the native-born, the corresponding figures are 2.6 and 2.3 persons, respectively, for homeowners and renters.

Although we know now about the size and some of the characteristics of the foreign-born population in Alabama, there are still important unanswered questions.

For example, what are the health and socioeconomic conditions of these immigrants? What kind of contributions do they make to the local, state, and national economy? What are some of the key cultural aspects associated with immigration? How many of these immigrants are here illegally?

Answers to such questions require advanced demographic analyses, the kind of research we perform at the Center for Demographic Research at Auburn University at Montgomery.

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