

Base immigration policies on data

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In recent years, immigration has become one of the heated topics in the United States. Arguing that the federal government does not do enough to enforce immigration laws, some states decided to take the matter into their own hands.

The most famous case has been the Arizona's Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act. Since then, several other states have followed, including Alabama. The fundamental questions from a demographic perspective are: Who are these immigrants? How many are there? How many of them are here illegally, unauthorized, or undocumented?

To answer these questions, the Center for Demographic Research is analyzing data to determine the number of immigrants in Alabama. What follows are some highlights from that study. But first we should define immigration, in order to understand the meaning behind unauthorized immigration.

Immigration is a complex phenomenon both from a legal point of view and from the conceptual definition of the term itself. For example, there are so many terms used to refer to immigrants.

In general, demographers use the term immigrant for any foreign born person who has not been granted citizenship in the country of residence. Normally, visitors or tourists are not immigrants. However, some visitors or students on various types of visas may overstay and become illegal immigrants.

There are two main categories of immigrants. The first category includes legal or documented immigrants, or those with proper documentation from the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. This category includes both people who have been granted permanent residence in the United States (green card holders), as well as those with temporary statuses (e.g., asylees and refugees). To make the situation even more complex, some legal immigrants are not authorized to work in the United States.

The second category of immigrants includes individuals who do not have proper documentation. People in this category are commonly referred to as undocumented or illegal immigrants. How many people actually fall in this category? Using various advanced statistical methods, demographers are able to determine the number of undocumented immigrants.

As of 2010, there were about 120,000 undocumented immigrants in Alabama. This number represents about 2.5 percent of the state population. As with any statistical estimate, there is a margin of error attached to that figure. Nonetheless, we are 95

percent confident that the actual number of undocumented immigrants in Alabama is somewhere between 75,000 and 160,000.

Compared to the United States, Alabama has a smaller proportion of undocumented immigrants (2.5 percent for Alabama versus 3.6 percent for U.S.). In terms of labor force, undocumented immigrants account for 4.2 percent of our state's labor force. That figure is higher than those estimated for Mississippi (2.9 percent) and Tennessee (3.1 percent), but lower than Florida (6.6 percent) and Georgia (7 percent). The estimated labor force shared by undocumented immigrants at the national level is 5.2 percent, again higher than the corresponding Alabama figure.

According to data from the American Community Survey, more than half (56.8 percent) of foreign-born people living in Alabama in 2010 were from Latin America, followed by Asia (25.9 percent), Europe (11 percent) and Africa (3.8 percent). These figures are similar to what is observed at the national level. More than half (53.1 percent) of the foreign-born populations in the United States are from Latin America, followed by Asia (28.2 percent), Europe (12.1 percent) and Africa (4 percent).

Detailed information from the American Community Survey, analyzed by the Migration Policy Institute, shows that of the foreign-born people in Alabama, 50.1 percent reported their race/ethnicity as white, 6.2 percent as black or African American, 23.7 percent as Asian and 17.4 percent as some other race; 1.2 percent reported having two or more races.

At the national level, 48.9 percent of the foreign born reported their race as white, 8.2 percent as black or African American, 23.9 percent as Asian, and 16.8 percent as some other race; 1.6 percent reported having two or more races.

The best way to deal with immigration issues is to understand the concept of geographic mobility and to use good data to make informed decisions. Some questions that need to be considered are: How do these people get here? How do legally admitted aliens become undocumented immigrants? What are the factors of immigration to the United States and to specific states such as Alabama?

At this time of globalization, people will continue to move beyond national boundaries. Therefore, nations need to develop appropriate population policies that promote socio-economic development, but also respect human dignity.

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