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FUZZY MATH: The Anti-Immigration Arguments of NumbersUSA Don't Add Up

According to the anti-immigration group [NumbersUSA](#), immigration to the United States is all about arithmetic: immigration increases the U.S. population, and more people presumably means more pollution, more urban sprawl, more competition for jobs, and higher taxes for Americans who must shoulder the costs of “over-population.”¹ At first glance, this argument is attractive in its simplicity: less immigration, fewer people, a better environment, more jobs, lower taxes. However, as with so many simple arguments about complex topics, it is fundamentally flawed and misses the point. “Over-population” is not the primary cause of the environmental or economic woes facing the United States, so arbitrary restrictions on immigration will not create a cleaner environment or a healthier economy.

People and Pollution Are Not the Same

- NumbersUSA claims that “stabilizing” the U.S. population is essential to creating a cleaner environment. However, environmental destruction is not directly correlated with population size, even in countries with similar standards of living.
- According to the [World Resources Institute](#), the United States is home to 23% *fewer* people than the European nations of the EU-15, yet produced 70% *more* greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, as of 2000.²
- Environmental degradation is caused by a host of factors unrelated to population size, such as the degree to which a society depends upon polluting and non-renewable fossil fuels; utilizes pollution-reduction technologies; develops systems of mass transit to minimize individual automobile use; uses plastics and other non-biodegradable materials in manufacturing and packaging consumer goods; recycles potentially recyclable materials; and controls agricultural run-off into waterways.
- A few people can pollute a lot, or a lot of people can pollute a little, depending on the systems of production and consumption within a society. The problem is less about how many people are in the United States, and more about how the United States produces and consumes.

Population and Sprawl Are Not the Same

- NumbersUSA pretends that “urban sprawl” is driven primarily by population size, rather than the myriad [public-policy decisions](#) made over the course of decades about how to utilize land in the building of cities and suburbs.
- Immigration-fueled population growth had little to do with planning decisions made in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s to create enormous tracts of dispersed, suburban houses with two-car garages and no mass transit.³

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1331 G STREET, NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20005 • TEL: (202) 507-7500 • FAX: (202) 742-5619

www.immigrationpolicy.org

- Immigration can not be credibly blamed for the fact that urban planners long favored a development model which is environmentally and economically unsustainable in the modern world.

Immigrants More Than Pay Their Own Way

- NumbersUSA argues that immigration imposes a financial burden on U.S. taxpayers because most immigrants earn relatively low wages and therefore don't pay enough in taxes to cover the cost of the public benefits and services they receive.
- This argument is based on a narrow and misleading fiscal snapshot of how much the health and educational services utilized by immigrants *and their children*—even those born in the United States—“cost” in comparison to the taxes they pay at a single point in time. In reality, the income levels and tax contributions of immigrants tend to increase over time, and *all* children are “costly” when they are still in school and not yet working, tax-paying adults. A more accurate fiscal analysis would estimate how much immigrants and their children pay in taxes and utilize in public services *over their lifetimes*.⁴
- Even a lifetime fiscal accounting does not capture the many other economic contributions that workers—both immigrant and native-born—make through their consumer purchasing power and formation of new businesses, both of which increase the nation's economic output, create jobs, and provide federal, state, and local governments with additional revenue through sales, income, business, and property taxes.⁵
- Because it ignores the many economic contributions that workers make over their lifetimes, the one-year fiscal snapshot favored by NumbersUSA would also incorrectly portray the more than 32 million native-born Americans who live below the federal poverty line,⁶ as well as *nearly all native-born retirees*, as a net “burden” on U.S. taxpayers.

Immigrants Don't “Steal” Jobs

- NumbersUSA portrays immigrant workers as little more than job competition for native-born workers. In truth, most immigrants are not competing with most natives for the same jobs.
- Immigrants tend to have either very little education or a great deal of education, while most natives fall somewhere in the middle of the educational spectrum, which means they are filling different niches in the labor force. As a result, immigrants usually complement the native-born workforce—which increases the productivity, and therefore the wages, of natives.⁷
- A [2006 study](#) by economist Giovanni Peri of the University of California-Davis found that, between 1990 and 2004, the roughly 90% of native-born workers with at least a high-school diploma experienced wage *gains* because of immigration that ranged from 0.7% to 3.4%, depending on their level of education.⁸
- A [May 2009 report](#) by Rob Paral & Associates demonstrates that, even in the midst of the current economic recession, there is no correlation between the presence of immigrants in the labor market of a particular locale and the unemployment rate among native-born whites, blacks, Latinos, or Asians.⁹

- The reliance of the U.S. economy upon immigrant workers is unlikely to diminish in the coming decades given the seriousness of the “aging” crisis precipitated by the impending retirement of the Baby Boom generation.¹⁰
- A [2008 report](#) by demographer Dowell Myers of the University of Southern California estimates that the ratio of seniors (age 65 and older) to working-age adults (25 to 64) will increase by 67 percent between 2010 and 2030. Immigrants, who tend to be younger than natives, will be increasingly important as workers, taxpayers, and homebuyers.¹¹

Dispelling the Specter of “Chain Migration”

- NumbersUSA incorrectly portrays family-based immigration as an uncontrolled process of “chain migration” in which legal immigrants petitioning for family members back home will eventually bring hundreds of millions of new immigrants into the United States.
- In reality, numerical caps, per-country quotas, and lengthy waiting times make family-based immigration an extremely slow process. For instance, the unmarried son or daughter of a lawful permanent resident from Mexico faces an average wait time of [17 years](#) to come to the United States.¹² Family immigration also is limited to close relatives such as parents, spouses, children, and siblings.
- Historically, a new immigrant ultimately sponsors an average of [only 1.2](#) family members to come to the United States.¹³

For more information contact:
 Walter Ewing
wewing@ailf.org
 202-507-7507

Endnotes

¹ For an overview of NumbersUSA and its origins, see the Southern Poverty Law Center, [The Nativist Lobby: Three Faces of Intolerance](#) (Montgomery, AL: February 2009).

² [Climate Analysis Indicators Tool](#) (CAIT) Version 6.0 (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2009). The EU-15 countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

³ See the World Resources Institute’s [Center for Sustainable Transport](#).

⁴ James P. Smith and Barry Edmonston, eds., [The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration](#) (Washington, DC: National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences Press, 1997), p. 294.

⁵ See the Immigration Policy Center, [The Economic Impact of Immigration](#) (Washington, DC: American Immigration Law Foundation, November 2007; updated February 12, 2008).

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, [2007 American Community Survey](#).

⁷ Giovanni Peri, [Rethinking the Effects of Immigration on Wages: New Data and Analysis from 1990-2004](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, October 2006).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rob Paral & Associates, [Untying the Knot, Part II: Immigration and Native-Born Unemployment Across Racial/Ethnic Groups](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, May 2009).

¹⁰ Dowell Myers, [Thinking Ahead About Our Immigrant Future: New Trends and Mutual Benefits in Our Aging Society](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, January 2008).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² U.S. Department of State, [Visa Bulletin for June 2009](#).

¹³ B. Lindsay Lowell and Micah Bump, [Projecting Immigrant Visas: Report on an Experts Meeting](#) (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University, October 2006), p. 6.