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THE ADVANTAGES OF FAMILY-BASED IMMIGRATION

Since the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, legal immigration to the United States has been based primarily on the family ties or the work skills of prospective immigrants. Under the provisions of [current immigration law](#), the family-based immigration category allows U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs), or “green card” holders, to bring certain family members to the United States. There are 480,000 family-based visas available every year. Family-based immigrants are admitted to the U.S. either as *immediate relatives* of U.S. citizens or through the *family preference system*.

The contributions of family-based immigrants to the U.S. economy, local communities, and the national fabric are manifold. They account for a significant portion of domestic economic growth, contribute to the well-being of the current and future labor force, play a key role in business development and community improvement, and are among the most upwardly mobile segments of the labor force. This fact sheet provides an overview of the economic and social advantages associated with family-based immigration. In particular, it highlights the direct benefits resulting from the participation of family-based immigrants in the labor force, their contributions to the community, and the key—yet often underestimated—value of the unpaid care work provided by immigrant women.

1. Families are crucial to the social and economic incorporation of newcomers.

Because of the overall lack of explicit public policies for the integration of new immigrants,¹ families and ethnic communities have traditionally acted, together with the workplace, as powerful integrating institutions. In particular, ethnic communities and families operate as sources of critical resources for newcomers, including opportunities for employment, access to credit, and different kinds of support.² In other words, when newcomers arrive on a family-based visa, they have resources readily available to help them navigate the system and become employed or start their own businesses.

2. Family-based immigration has a positive impact on business development and community improvement.

Family ties facilitate the formation of immigrant communities which, in turn, offer a fertile environment for the development of businesses. In this regard, “case-study evidence finds that extended immigrant families and close-knit immigrant communities ease the economic assimilation of new immigrants and promote investment in U.S. human capital as well as the formation of businesses.”³

Many of the most outstanding high technology firms have been created by foreign-born entrepreneurs. In Silicon Valley, icon of high-tech innovation, more than half of new companies were started by immigrants,⁴ many of whom came to the country on family-

based visas. As Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) [asserted](#) during a House Judiciary Committee hearing, "I often say I am glad that Google is in Mountain View rather than Moscow. Like eBay, Intel and Yahoo!, Google was founded by an immigrant. But it's worth noting that none of the founders of these companies came to the U.S. because of their skills."

Because they recognize the value that immigrant families may have in the revitalization of rundown neighborhoods, local governments in several cities—including [Baltimore](#), [Boston](#), [Detroit](#), and [Dayton](#)—have launched programs designed to attract immigrants and promote their economic potential. In fact, so called “ethnic neighborhoods” (e.g., Little Italy, Chinatown) have long been used in revitalization strategies in most major American cities.⁵

3. Immigrants who come to the country on a family-based visa tend to move up the socio-economic ladder.

The initial differences in earnings between family-based and employment-based immigrants tend to narrow dramatically over time. Despite concerns about the supposedly lower productivity of kinship-based immigrants in the U.S. labor market, it has been shown that “nonoccupation-based immigration, most of which is family-based, is associated with lower entry earnings but higher earnings growth than occupation-based immigration. The higher estimated earnings growth is sufficient for nonoccupation-based immigrants to catch up with occupationally admitted immigrants after eleven to eighteen years in the United States.”⁶

New immigrants—the majority of whom enter the United States on family visas—have become *the most upwardly mobile of American workers*. This is explained by their high rates of post-immigration human capital investment.⁷ This benefits not only immigrants, but also the economy at large.

4. Brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens who immigrate under the family fourth-preference visa category⁸ tend to experience high rates of self-employment and high earnings growth.

Empirical research on the economic benefits of immigrants admitted as siblings of U.S. citizens has shown that there are not only humanitarian, but economic reasons to keep this category.⁹ In particular, fourth-preference admissions are positively associated with immigrant self-employment. Immigrants who are admitted as siblings of U.S. citizens tend also to have higher initial earnings than family-admitted immigrants in general. In addition, immigrant groups¹⁰ with higher fourth-preference admissions appear to experience higher earnings growth over time. These results further suggest that any proposal to remove the sibling admission category would be counter-productive.

5. Family admissions are critical for the “care economy,” which is fundamental for the well-being of household members, helps sustain the current and future workforce, and facilitates women’s labor force participation.

- Unpaid health and child care provided in the household largely by immigrant women contribute to the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of

household members. Those contributions are instrumental not only to individual well-being, but also to the human development of the country.

- Because unpaid household and community activities are performed outside the market, they are largely invisible in economic statistics. Groups such as the Pan American Health Organization and the International Labour Organization have highlighted the importance of recognizing the role of unpaid work in the household and the community.¹¹
- Immigrant women who perform their work in the domestic sphere help sustain the current workforce, raise the future workforce, care for the elderly and sick, and play a critical role in household well-being. Their contributions to the economy are, therefore, not only immediate, but will be felt in the future.¹²
- The economic value of unpaid work performed by immigrants represents a very large portion of the gross domestic product. In particular, “the statistics on time use in different countries suggest that unpaid work contributes to well-being, human capacity building, and long-term economic growth, while accounting for the highest number of working hours, which may represent over 50 percent of the gross domestic product.”¹³
- Immigrant women’s participation in the labor force is facilitated by the presence in the home of other relatives.¹⁴ In other words, when other family members (such as parents or siblings) can take care of everyday household needs, women are more likely to participate in the labor market. Family-admitted immigrants who can provide care for the children or the elderly at home are, therefore, a valuable asset for women who work for a salary.

Moving away from the false “brain versus blood” dichotomy

Family and skill-based immigration should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. In fact, if a less family-friendly admission policy were to be adopted, the United States might become less attractive to highly skilled immigrants, who also have families. As economist Harriet Duleep has noted:

“Family visas are...an important complement to high-skilled visas; skilled immigrants have families too. In considering which country to move to, will an emigrating scientist be more likely to move to a country where his family members, including siblings, parents, and adult children, can also live, or to a country where only certain family members are welcome? Would Einstein have continued to live in the U.S. had he not been able to bring over his sister Maja? A family-friendly policy may be one reason the U.S. has been able to attract immigrants with stellar qualifications.”¹⁵

The concept of family reunification is deeply rooted in American values. However, the positive implications of family-based immigration are not only humanitarian, but also economic.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Aaron Terrazas, [*The Economic Integration of Immigrants in the United States: Long- and Short-Term Perspectives*](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, July 2011).
- ² Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).
- ³ Harriet Orcutt Duleep and Mark Regets, "Family Unification, Siblings and Skills," in Harriet Duleep and Phanindra Wunnava, eds., *Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Individual Skills, Family Ties, and Group Identities* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996).
- ⁴ Darrell M. West, [*Creating a "Brain Gain" for U.S. Employers: The Role of Immigration*](#), Brookings Policy Brief No. 178 (Washington, DC: Brookings, January 2011).
- ⁵ Larry Ford, Florinda Klevisser, and Francesca Carli, "Ethnic Neighborhoods and Urban Revitalization: Can Europe Use the American Model?" *The Geographical Review* 98, no. 1 (2008): 82-102.
- ⁶ Harriet Duleep and Mark Regets, "Admission Criteria and Immigrant Earnings Profiles," *International Migration Review* 30, no. 2 (1996): 571.
- ⁷ Harriett Duleep, [*U.S. Immigration Policy at a Crossroads*](#), IZA Discussion Paper no. 7136 (Bonn: IZA, January 2013).
- ⁸ Family-based immigrants are admitted to the U.S. either as *immediate relatives* of U.S. citizens or through the [family preference system](#). Brothers and sisters of U.S. citizens can apply for immigrant visas under the fourth preference category.
- ⁹ Harriet Orcutt Duleep and Mark Regets, "Family Unification, Siblings and Skills," in Harriet Duleep and Phanindra Wunnava, eds., *Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Individual Skills, Family Ties, and Group Identities* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996).
- ¹⁰ Each group analyzed is made up of immigrants who share the same year -of -entry and country -of -origin.
- ¹¹ Pan American Health Organization, [*The Invisible Economy and Gender Inequalities. The Importance of Measuring and Valuing Unpaid Work*](#) (Washington, DC: PAHO, 2010); Rania Antonopoulos, [*The unpaid care work-paid work connection*](#), ILO Working Paper 86 (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2009).
- ¹² Elsa Gómez Gómez, "The Valuation of Unpaid Work: A Key Strategy for Gender Equality Policy," in Pan American Health Organization, [*The Invisible Economy and Gender Inequalities. The Importance of Measuring and Valuing Unpaid Work*](#) (Washington, DC: PAHO, 2010), pp. 3-18.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹⁴ Harriet Duleep and Seth Sanders, "The Decision to Work by Married Immigrant Women," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 46, no. 4 (1993): 677-690.
- ¹⁵ Harriet Duleep, [*U.S. Immigration Policy at a Crossroads*](#), IZA Discussion Paper no. 7136 (Bonn: IZA, January 2013), p. 23.