

## **Immigration from 1965 to the Present**

The character of American immigration underwent a significant transformation with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. The legislation abolished the discriminatory quotas based on national origins that had favored northwestern Europeans and substituted a system based on family preference. Only 170,000 people would be allowed to enter from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 from the Western, but close relatives of individuals already in the United States would be exempt from these quotas. Thus, once immigrants became citizens, they could bring their relatives and reconstitute their families. This provision resulted in a much larger number of newcomers than legislators had imagined. Skilled workers and refugees stood in line after kin, but they also gained ready admittance.

Congress had anticipated that most immigrants would continue to be Europeans. But a general improvement in the European economy, worsening conditions in Latin America, the war in Vietnam, and the system of family preference resulted in a drastic shift. Newcomers from Asia and Latin America quickly began to outnumber Europeans, with 3 million of 4 million immigrants coming from those areas in the 1970s. Between 1951 and 1965, 53 percent of all immigrants came from Europe and only 6.6 percent from Asia. In the twelve-year period after 1966 Europeans represented only 24 percent of the total, and Asians, 28.4 percent. The Philippines, for instance, sent 6,093 people in 1965 and 41,300 in 1979. Legal Mexican immigrants totaled 37,969 in 1965 but over 92,367 in 1978, an amount that exceeded the annual Mexican quota of 20,000 because of the family preference rule.

Although there had always been some immigrants with strong educational and skill backgrounds, their numbers increased after 1965. Many urban professionals now immigrated to the United States with skills that were in demand. Between 1965 and 1974, 75,000 foreign-born physicians entered the country in response to an increased need for medical services resulting from the establishment of Medicare programs. After newspapers in Korea published discussions of the 1965 law, over 13,000 Korean medical professionals, a majority of them female nurses, entered the United States. Thousands of other Koreans also came and opened shops and small businesses in the cities. These immigrants were doing what immigrants to America had always done: entering niches in the economy abandoned by better-established residents. By 1977 over 4,500 Korean-Americans operated small businesses in southern California. Finally, skilled newcomers from Central and South America, especially El Salvador and Argentina, entered but had difficulties finding skilled work, and many returned home.

Not all immigrants after 1965 possessed skills or the inclination to become entrepreneurs. Large numbers of Arabs entered Detroit auto plants; Mexicans in southern California moved primarily into the service economy; but Haitian immigrants in southern Florida in the 1980s encountered more serious problems of adjustment. Fleeing poverty and political repression, these Haitians, most of them under thirty, were kept in government detention centers by Florida officials who feared they would become public charges. Even those who were free found it difficult to secure jobs with few relatives to help and little in the way of skills or education. By 1985 about one-third of Haitian men in southern Florida were jobless. To survive in a strange land, they were forced to rely heavily on female household members who could earn a minimal wage or secure some form of public assistance.

A sizable portion of the immigrants after 1965 were refugees - people with widely diverse skills and educational and cultural backgrounds. The largest refugee group, the Cubans, came in three stages. About 200,000, mostly well educated and middle class, fled the island after the assumption of power by Fidel Castro in 1959. A second, more socially diverse wave of over 360,000 came when they were allowed to leave the island in 1965. And finally about 130,000 - the "mariel group" - left when Castro let many working-class Cubans emigrate in 1980-1981. Some came to Florida in boats operated by relatives already in the United States. By 1980, Cuban-Americans made up the largest single nationality of the post-World War II refugee stream.

Indochina was the second major source of refugees after 1965. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the United States immediately accepted 130,000 Vietnamese. As communist power spread through Southeast Asia, sharply increased numbers of ethnic Chinese, Cambodians, and Laotians sought asylum in the United States as well. By 1985 over 700,000 Indochinese had entered the country, many of them resettled with the help of churches and other sponsoring agencies rather than relatives and friends. Although large numbers of Vietnamese possessed skills and strong educational backgrounds, many Cambodians and Laotians were peasants who could not enter the American economy as easily. By 1985 Indochinese refugees in southern California, where most of them settled, were 15 percent less likely to be employed than the population as a whole and were relying on low-wage jobs and public assistance to survive.

The largest immigrant group after 1965 came from Mexico, averaging over 60,000 a year in the 1970s. After Congress in 1964 eliminated the "bracero" program, which had allowed the hiring of temporary workers from Mexico, there was a large increase in the number of undocumented (illegal) workers migrating to Texas and California to enter manufacturing jobs. In the 1970s employment expanded by 645,000 jobs in Los Angeles County, and about one-third of those openings were filled by Mexicans. By 1980 nearly 1 million aliens from Mexico were apprehended annually by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. But the influx continued in large part because of the willingness of employers to ask the Mexicans no questions. In an attempt to stop this practice, the Immigration Reform Act of 1986 was passed. It imposed penalties on employers who hired illegal immigrants, but offered amnesty to those immigrants who had been in the United States continuously since 1982.

By the 1980s the pattern of immigrant adjustment was a mixed one. Those with skills, education, and family connections frequently did reasonably well. The median family income of Cubans was nearly 30 percent higher than that of other Latin-American immigrants because they entered the well-developed Cuban-American economy in southern Florida. Asian immigrants arriving between 1970 and 1980 earned incomes that nearly equaled those of the native-born. On the other hand, Mexican-Americans forced into unskilled jobs in the service sector of the economy earned mean family incomes well below those of Asians and native whites.