

Helping the immigrants here to fit in

By DOWELL MYERS

LOS ANGELES —

The immigration crisis that has roiled American politics for decades has faded into history. Illegal immigration is shrinking to a trickle, if that, and will likely never return to the peak levels of 2000. Just as important, immigrants who arrived in the 1990s and settled here are assimilating in remarkable and unexpected ways.

Taken together, these developments, and the demographic future they foreshadow, require bold changes in our approach to both legal and illegal immigration. Put simply, we must shift from an immigration policy, with its emphasis on keeping newcomers out, to an immigrant policy, with an emphasis on encouraging migrants and their children to integrate into our social fabric. "Show me your papers" should be replaced with "Welcome to English class."

Restrictionists, including those driving much of the debate on the Republican primary trail, still talk as if nothing has changed. But the numbers are stark: The total number of immigrants, legal and illegal, arriving in the 2000s grew at half the rate of the 1990s, according to the Census Bureau.

The most startling evidence of the falloff is the effective disappearance of illegal border crossers from Mexico, with some experts estimating the net number of new Mexicans settling in the United States at zero. The size of the illegal-immigrant population peaked in 2007, with about 58 percent of it of Mexican origin, according to the Pew Hispanic Center; since 2008, that population has shrunk by roughly 200,000 a year. Illegal immigrants from Asia and other parts of the globe have similarly dwindled in numbers.

This new equilibrium is here to stay, in large part because Mexico's birthrate is plunging. In 1970 a Mexican woman, on average, gave birth to 6.8 babies, and when they entered their 20s, millions journeyed north for work. Today the country's birthrate — at 2.1 — is approaching that of the United States. That portends a shrinking pool of young adults to meet Mexico's future labor needs, and less competition for jobs at home.

If the number of immigrants is declining, what about that other nativist bugbear, assimilation? There's little doubt that immigrants'

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potential as economic contributors turns on their ability to assimilate. Fortunately, recent studies by John Pitkin, Julie Park and me show that immigrant parents and children, especially Latinos, are making extraordinary strides in assimilating.

Today, barely a third of adult immigrants have a high school diploma. But the children of Latino immigrants have always outperformed their parents in educational achievement. By 2030 we expect 80 percent of their children who arrived in the 1990s before age 10 to have completed high school and 18 percent to have a bachelor's degree.

But it is immigrants' success in becoming homeowners — often overlooked in immigration debates — that is the truest mark of their desire to adopt America as home. Consider Latinos. Among those in the wave of 1990s immigrants, just 20 percent owned a home in 2000. We expect that percentage to rise to 69 percent — and 74 percent for all immigrants — by 2030, well above the historical average for all Americans.

Who will be selling these homes to these immigrants? The 78 million native-born baby boomers looking to downsize as their children grow up and leave home. Fortunately for them, both immigrants and their children will be there to buy their homes, putting money into baby boomer pockets and helping to shore up future housing prices.

Indeed, with millions of people retiring every week, America's immigrants and their children are crucial to future economic growth: Economists forecast labor-force growth to drop below 1 percent later this decade because of retiring baby boomers.

Immigrants' extraordinary progress in assimilating would be faster if federal and state policies encouraged it. Unfortunately, they don't. This year, the Department of Homeland Security plans to spend a measly \$18 million — far less than one-tenth of 1 percent of its budget — on helping immigrants assimilate. Meanwhile, states with large immigrant populations are cutting the budgets of community and state colleges, precisely where immigrant students predominantly enroll.

How do we change course and begin treating immigrants as a vast, untapped human resource? The answer goes to the heart of shifting from an immigration policy to an immigrant policy.

For starters, the billions of dollars spent on border enforcement should be gradually redirected to replenishing and boosting the education budget, particularly the Pell grant program for low-income students. Some money could be channeled to nonprofits like ImmigrationWorks and Welcoming America, which are at the forefront of helping migrants assimilate.

Second, the departments of Labor, Commerce and Education need to play a greater role in immigration policy. Yes, as long as there remains a terrorist threat from abroad, the Department of Homeland Security should have an immigration component. But immigration policy is all about cultivating needed workers. That means helping immigrants and their children graduate from high school and college. It means that no migrant should have to stand in line for an English class. It means assistance in developing migrants' job skills to better compete in an increasingly information- and knowledge-based economy.

Thanks to our huge foreign-born population (12 percent of the total), America can remain the world's richest and most powerful nation for decades. Shaping an immigrant policy that focuses on developing the talents of our migrants and their children is the surest way to realize this goal.

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