



The State of Opportunity in America

Immigrants and Opportunity

America's fabric is woven with the stories, experiences, and cultures of generations of immigrants. As it has in the past, the "Land of Opportunity" continues to draw people from all walks of life in search of a better future. Many Americans would likely be surprised to learn that immigration to the United States is no greater today than it was at earlier points in the nation's history. Between 1901 and 1925, 17.2 million immigrants were admitted to the United States, a record number at the time. Similarly, 17.1 million immigrants were admitted between 1971 and 1995.¹ The impact of immigration on the U.S. population was greater in the early 1900s, however, when the immigration rate—11.1 per 1,000 native-born residents—was more than two and a half times higher than contemporary immigration rates.² Perhaps more significantly, the face of immigration has changed. In the early part of the last century, immigrants were overwhelmingly from European nations. Since the 1980s, almost 90 percent of immigrants have come from Central and South America and Asia, while only one in ten are from Europe.³

Equality

True opportunity requires that we all have equal access to the benefits, burdens, and responsibilities of our society regardless of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or other aspects of what we look like or where we come from. Ensuring equal opportunity means not only ending overt and intentional discrimination, but also rooting out subconscious bias and reforming systems that unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. It requires proactive efforts to remake our institutions in ways that ensure fairness and inclusion.

- **National Origin Discrimination.** Between 1992 and 2003, nearly **8,500** complaints were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) on the basis of national origin discrimination. The number of national origin discrimination complaints filed with the EEOC by women increased 29% during this period.⁴

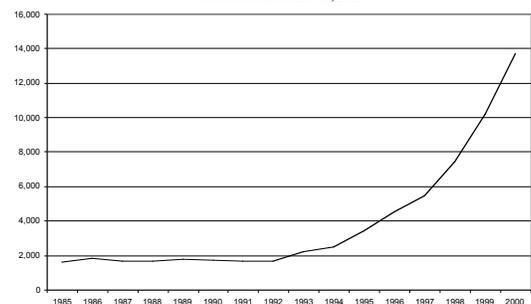
Redemption

Over the last two decades, the scope of the criminal justice system has been expanded as a means of social control. But this expansion has had a dampening effect on opportunity. Opportunity is threatened by high rates of incarceration and the disproportionate impact of the

criminal justice system on low-income communities of color.

- **Incarceration.** Changes in federal sentencing policies in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, stiffened immigration violation penalties, expanded the types of crimes that are considered aggravated felonies, and increased the likelihood of sentencing offenders to prison. These policies also increased enforcement and prosecutions.

Figure 1
Number of Immigration Offenders Serving Time in Federal Prisons,
1985-2000
Source: Scalia and Lintras, 2002



- Between 1985 and 2000 the number of immigration offenders serving federal prison sentences **increased almost ninefold**, from 1,600 to **13,700**. The average time served by these prisoners

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increased from 4 months in 1985 to 21 months in 2000.⁵

- Immigration violators were not likely to be repeat offenders. Only 13% of immigration violators were returned to federal prison within three years of their release.⁶

Community

Americans have long adhered to a strong belief in individualism and self-reliance. But this ethic is accompanied by a conviction that we share responsibility for each other and our communities, just as we are responsible for ourselves. We recognize that the strength of our people and our nation depends on the vibrancy and cohesiveness of our diverse communities. But in some measures of community, many Americans remain segregated and divided from the mainstream.

- *Immigrant Integration.* Immigrant integration programs are important to assist newcomers with basic needs such as health care and English-language classes, and to establish themselves in their new communities. But no national immigrant integration policy exists. And despite the fact that federal funding for adult basic education and English classes increased by almost 50% between 1992 and 2000, funding has not kept pace with the growing demand for English-language and civic education programs.⁷
- Recent federal and state policy developments have limited opportunity for many immigrants. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and other legislation barred many documented and

undocumented immigrants from federal programs such as Food Stamps, Social Security, student loans, and other benefits. And state referenda such as California's Proposition 187, which sought to bar undocumented children from attending public schools, have contributed to a growing trend of anti-immigrant legislation, even though some of these policies have been successfully challenged and blocked in federal courts.⁸

Security

Americans believe that we are all entitled to a basic level of education, economic well-being, health care, and other protections necessary to human dignity. Without this security, it is impossible to access society's other rights and responsibilities or to enjoy full opportunity. Moreover, international human rights commitments—many of which were initiated by the United States—obligate our nation to ensure basic levels of healthcare, housing, and income security.

- *Poverty and Citizenship Status.* In 2003 non-citizens were twice as likely as naturalized citizens to live in poverty, although this gap has narrowed significantly since 1993, when the rate of poverty among non-citizens was nearly three times that among naturalized citizens.⁹
- *Access to Health Care.* **More than 11 million** immigrants lacked health insurance in 2003, contributing to one-quarter of the U.S. uninsured. Foreign-born people are 2.5 times more likely than the native-born to lack health insurance, a gap that remains unchanged since 1993.¹⁰

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Without a renewed national commitment and concrete policy changes to reverse these negative trends, the promise of opportunity for all is at great risk for this and future generations. Fulfilling the promise of opportunity for all will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century. It will require bold leadership from our government, civic, and business leaders, creative and effective solutions, and the sustained political will of the American people. Fortunately, however, a significant body of pragmatic policies has proven effective in expanding opportunity in concrete and measurable ways. The State of Opportunity report recommends six types of policy approaches:

- Regularly assess the impact of public policies on opportunity;
- Modernize safety net programs that help people meet their basic needs, starting with equitable and affordable healthcare for all Americans;
- Build Americans' skills to adapt to a globalizing economy, evolving technology, and an increasingly diverse population;
- Renew a commitment to human rights in the United States;
- Prioritize crime prevention and rehabilitation over increased incarceration; and
- Protect voting rights and promote political participation.

¹ M. Zhou, "Immigration and the Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity," *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences, Vol. 1*, eds. N. Smelzer, W.J. Wilson, and F. Mitchell (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2001).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ National Partnership for Women and Families, *Women at Work: Looking Behind the Numbers, 40 Years After the Civil Rights Act of 1964*, July 2004, www.nationalpartnership.org (22 October 2005).

⁵ J. Scalia and M.F.X. Lintras, "Immigration Offenders in the Federal Criminal Justice System, 2000," Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, August 2002).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Carnegie Corporation, *The House We All Live In: A Report on Immigrant Civic Integration* (New York: The Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005, Historical Poverty Tables, Table 23.

¹⁰ Employee Benefit Research Institute, "The Impact of Immigration on Health Insurance Coverage in the United States," *Employee Benefit Research Institute Notes*, 26, no. 6 (2005).