

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

Coming to Texas

By Steve H. Murdock

Sometimes controversial demographic questions receive substantial attention in the media but cannot be easily answered. Two recent highly visible issues illustrate this.

Victims of Hurricane Katrina were dispersed throughout the United States. Redevelopment of New Orleans will require an extended time, so how many people who came to Texas from Louisiana as a result of the hurricane will settle here permanently? How will such settlement affect Texas demographic patterns?

Similarly, immigration — particularly undocumented immigration — receives extensive coverage. Groups across the country are seeking to alter national and state policies related to both undocumented and documented immigration. So is immigration good or bad for the United States?

Storm Surge

Estimates of the number of persons who came to Texas in the aftermath of Katrina vary widely, from 250,000 to 500,000. As of October 2005, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had registered more than 147,000 heads of households who fled the storm and are now in Texas. When asked by reporters and others, those who were staying in shelters indicated they were unlikely to go back to New Orleans.

Several facts should inform any attempt to address questions about how extensive the impacts are likely to be on Texas. First, estimates do vary widely, and there are no adequately verified counts of how many hurricane victims came to Texas. The number of shelter residents is known, but how many people stayed with relatives or friends or in commercial hotels and other locations is not.

Second, although many evacuees indicated they would not return to Louisiana, most were queried immediately after experiencing the trauma of the hurricane. At

that time, there were no resettlement programs in place. Many property owners will have to return to Louisiana to obtain funds to rebuild and will be hesitant to leave their home equity behind.

More importantly, even if significant numbers of Katrina evacuees stay, they will be unlikely to markedly change Texas demographic trends. Texas' population increased by approximately 385,000 persons per year from April 1, 2000, to July 1, 2004. This was an increase of more than 1.6 million people, bringing the total population to 22.5 million. Supposing that 250,000 evacuees came to Texas and half stay, the total impact would be to increase the state's total population by about 0.6 percent. That increase of 125,000 would be roughly equivalent to only four months of Texas' average annual level of population growth since 2000.

Finally, given that even the most conservative of current projections for Texas project an increase of at least 12.5 million between 2004 and 2040, growth resulting from the hurricane would account for only a 1 percent increase in total projected population growth. Such an increase is clearly consequential but

hardly overwhelming relative to major demographic patterns in the state. Some local areas may be significantly impacted, but Texas demography is unlikely to be substantially altered by this level of demographic change.

Immigration Battlelines

Immigration is neither always good nor always bad. In fact, it is sometimes both. Those who oppose immigration cite the current high levels of undocumented immigration. They suggest that immigrants are taking jobs needed by native-born Americans and overwhelming service structures in the United States, and that the fiscal costs to provide services to them far exceed the benefits.

Some believe the growth of undocumented immigration is a major security risk in the post 9-11 era. The most vociferous critics even claim that immigration is at levels that will forever change American culture.

Those less alarmed by current levels of immigration point out that the United States is a country of immigrants. They note that previous waves of immigrants (Germans, Irish and Italians, for example) have been assimilated over time and point out that many industries in the United States are heavily dependent on immigrant labor.

Reliable data support both views. Immigration is at levels unprecedented since the early twentieth century, and undocumented immigration appears to account for almost half of the total U.S. immigration. The Pew Hispanic Center's estimates, which are widely accepted, suggest that the undocumented population was about 10.3 million in 2004 with about 1.4 million living in Texas.

Overall levels of immigration have ebbed and flowed in recent periods, ranging from about 1.1 million per year in the early 1990s to about 1.5 million in 1999 and 2000 and then declining to 1.1 to 1.2 million by 2003. The flow of undocumented immigrants appears to have stayed at relatively high levels during the entire period. However, the percent of immigrants in the total U.S. population is no higher than at other historic periods of high immigration, and the percentage of foreign-born residents made up of groups (Mexicans, for example) is similar to that of the Irish and other groups at earlier periods in our history.

Neutral State Impact

Undocumented immigrants tend to have lower levels of education and are often employed in lower wage jobs in specific industries, thus creating stereotypes. But they also tend to live in families, and males are more likely to be employed than indigenous male residents of the United States. These immigrants tend to pay social security and income tax and are less likely to use many federal and state services than native-born residents. Overall it appears that

their impact on government is more positive than negative at the national level, relatively neutral at the state level and more negative than positive at the local level because of the effects on education and health care.

Studies of the extent to which undocumented immigrants may be taking the jobs of native-born Americans show mixed results. An analysis by Northeastern University at the end of the 1990s suggested that roughly half the jobs created in the expansion of the U.S. economy in the 1990s were taken by immigrants, and that without immigrants it would have been difficult to have maintained the expansion.

Undocumented immigrants appear to be key components of some occupations. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that in 2004, 27 percent of drywall-ceiling tile installers, 21 percent of roofers, 20 percent of painters, 26 percent of grounds maintenance workers, 25 percent of butchers and other workers in



KATRINA EVACUEES PACKED THE FLOOR of the Astrodome following the storm (first page). How many will settle permanently in Texas remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the effects of immigration — both documented and undocumented — on the state continue to be debated.

meat packing plants, 22 percent of maids, 24 percent of dishwashers, 22 percent of cement finishers and 20 percent of all construction laborers in the United States were undocumented.

Do these data provide proof that immigration is always bad or always good? Clearly they do not. That is because the conflict over the questions surrounding immigration is rooted not in demography but in ideology and other factors that are outside the domain of the demographer.

It is evident that additional information is needed regarding the impact of hurricane evacuees in Texas and about immigration. Demography can contextualize and refute clearly erroneous assumptions, but it cannot answer all questions. In fact, demography may not even rank among the most important determinants in setting key national policies. 🇺🇸

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