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International Migrants in—U.S. Residents Out

Many Pittsburgh area leaders blame the local economy's lackluster performance on the dearth of international immigrants. They cite studies showing international immigrants flock to areas with significant economic growth to make the case for a regional plan to recruit immigrants. But in doing so they ignore the fact that growing economies tend to attract migrants, both domestic and international. They also neglect the negative impact heavy international immigration can have on an area.

For example, recent U.S. Census data show that many of the nation's largest counties experiencing high levels of international migrants also have high rates of U.S. residents exiting the area. Case in point: from April 2000 through July 2006, Cook County, Illinois, home county of Chicago gained more than 274,000 immigrants —about 5 percent of its 2000 population. At the same time however, it saw a net exodus of 602,000 U.S. residents or 11 percent of its population. Thus, Cook County has experienced net out-migration of its citizens at an annual pace of over 100,000 per year thus far this decade.

The following table shows this pattern repeating in many of the nation's largest counties.

County/City	Net International Migration	Net Internal Migration (U.S. citizens)	2000 Population	International as a Percentage of 2000 Population	Internal as a Percentage of 2000 Population
Suffolk/Boston	53,865	-120,223	689,807	7.8	-17.4
Hudson/Jersey City	60,520	-93,223	608,975	9.9	-15.3
Queens/New York	223,529	-339,588	2,229,379	10	-15.2
San Francisco	55,105	-101,397	776,733	7.1	-13.1
Denver	43,748	-68,595	554,636	7.9	-12.4
Cook/Chicago	274,026	-601,808	5,376,741	5.1	-11.2
Bronx/New York	85,005	-148,409	1,332,650	6.4	-11.1
Dallas	180,158	-228,566	2,218,899	8.1	-10.3
Philadelphia	37,187	-133,861	1,517,550	2.5	-8.8
Middlesex/Boston	66,138	-112,742	1,465,396	4.5	-7.7
Fulton/Atlanta	35,880	-49,586	816,006	4.4	-6.1
<i>Allegheny/Pittsburgh</i>	<i>13,954</i>	<i>-59,172</i>	<i>1,281,666</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>-4.6</i>

While many lament the slow pace of international migrants coming into Allegheny County—just 14,000 from 2000 until 2006—the county has lost substantially fewer residents to net out-migration (59,000 or 4.6 percent of population) than other major counties such as San Francisco or Philadelphia.

The experience of Queens County, NY, Dallas County, TX, and Denver, CO among others exhibit the same pattern, i.e., hefty inflows, in numbers and in percentages, of foreigners is more than offset by even larger outflows of U.S. residents. And the pattern has existed for some time. For instance, during the decade of the 1990s, Cook County had a net loss of 713,000 internal migrants while gaining 302,000 international migrants.

Is there a lesson here? Is there a cause and effect and if so, in which direction is it running? Why are so many U.S. citizens abandoning the home counties of so many large cities all across the country? Could it be that the heavy influx of international migrants are changing the culture, ambience or economic environment of the city to such an extent that many residents feel they have to find another place to live? Or conversely, is the heavy outflow of U.S. citizens creating a vacuum into which international migrants are being pulled?

Whether international migrants are driving away U.S. residents or domestic out-migration creates a void that is being filled by international immigrants, one thing is certain: The demographic landscape of many large counties and cities is being dramatically altered. Since 2000, of all immigrants moving in to the United States, half—more than 4 million—are illegal. Many residents who can afford to leave are opting to do so and are being replaced in large part by lower-educated, lower-income international migrants who will put an increasing burden on local governments in terms of social services use, education, law enforcement, and medical care.

Moreover, most new immigrants are not well educated as reflected in the fact that 35 percent of those immigrating since 1990 lack a high school diploma. They tend to be poorer and require government assistance. The percentage of immigrant households, legal or illegal, using public assistance has risen every year since the reforms of 1996. Studies show that nearly 23 percent of immigrant-led households use some form of government assistance, while less than 15 percent of native-led households do so.

Current immigration policy of the United States is not occupation based, as it is in other countries. Here it is heavily driven by family unification. As a result, every legal international immigrant entering the U.S. is allowed to bring over immediate family, including spouse, children, parents, and siblings. Even if the primary immigrant entered on an H-class or professional visa, it is likely their household members are not as educated and thus could end up relying on some form of government assistance.

Immigrant households also tend to have more children, consuming relatively more educational services. As education expenditures continue to climb, school districts or state governments are forced to raise taxes, further adding to the incentives for residents to move away.

In sum, international immigrants are not the panacea some local leaders portray them to be. Studies show that low skill immigrants consume far more public services than they contribute in tax revenues and are a net drain on the public purse. A strategy of attracting international immigrants is not the answer to Pittsburgh's economic woes. Instead area leaders should strive to improve the economic climate by reducing taxes, eliminating burdensome government mandates, creating a less hostile labor climate and abandoning the top down, government driven, subsidy laden economic development schemes. When these business friendly measures are instituted, natural entrepreneurial forces will grow the economy, keeping area residents and work force in the region.

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