

**Tilden Bowditch**  
**April 22, 2013**  
**Pickett**  
**Poverty Capstone Final**

## **Expanding Immigrant Access to Welfare: A Moral Obligation**

### **Overview and Introduction**

Immigration reform has been a topic of hot political debate, especially since President Obama began pushing the issue as a priority when starting his second term. One of the biggest debates concerns offering a path to citizenship to those residing in the United States illegally. In January 2013, six different nationwide polls showed that 70 percent of participants said they supported options allowing illegal immigrants to remain in the country with some form of legal status. However, the American public seemed torn when the polls were reworded so the question included a streamlined path to citizenship.

This April, a bipartisan group of senators proposed a long-awaited bill for immigration reform that emphasized increased border security and a temporary agricultural worker program. This bill would potentially move many undocumented immigrants to legal or provisional immigrant status and some even to citizenship. Despite these potential changes to certain immigrant statuses, there was no mention of alterations to immigrant access to welfare assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, immigrants who arrive in the United States legally are prohibited from accessing certain welfare programs, namely Temporary Aid to Needy Families and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for the first five years of residency. After this “five year ban,” they must meet the same criteria as citizens in order to participate in

---

<sup>1</sup> Pearson, M. & Brumfield, B. (April 17, 2013). Senators formally file immigration bill. CNN. Available at [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com).

each program. Immigrants who arrive in the United States illegally have no access to federal benefits at all, relying mostly on charity and emergency health care services. The proposed reform, however, would move many of these illegal immigrants into a legal status that would enable them eventually to be on the welfare rolls, after the five-year waiting period.

In this paper, I argue that this waiting period should be eliminated for legal immigrants so they have access to federal assistance if and when they need it. The support for this argument is based on the theory that the United States has a moral obligation to provide relief to the global poor, which includes immigrants. I begin by providing a brief profile of the immigrant poor residing in the United States, including their rates of poverty and use of welfare as compared to those of citizens. This discussion focuses primarily on legal immigrants because almost all the data on undocumented immigrants, or those who arrived illegally, is estimated and the ethics of that situation requires its own paper. Then, I review several philosophers' arguments regarding the moral obligation of a liberal democratic state, one that values equality and liberty, to maintain open borders and provide assistance to the global poor.

Ultimately, I argue that the United States has a moral obligation as an affluent, liberal state to provide equal access to welfare for immigrants as for citizens. The current "five year ban" is a form of discrimination and by maintaining it, our government fails to provide for the basic needs of individuals during an extremely vulnerable time in their lives. Though expanding accessibility to welfare could cost trillions of dollars, the United States will be fulfilling its moral obligation to provide relief for global poverty by serving immigrants right here "at home." In addition, the country would also be upholding its

foundational value of “equality for all” and could benefit from the eventual prosperity of those being assisted. This benefit may come sooner through the immigrants’ work and economic contributions or in the future through their children, whose poverty will also be alleviated. However, welfare for immigrants must be tempered by the government’s primary obligation to its citizens, which may necessitate a cap in either time or amount for the welfare provided to immigrants.

## **A Profile of Immigrants Living in Poverty in the United States**

### **Rates of Poverty**

In the 2010 census, the United States population included almost 40 million legal immigrants, making up 13 percent of the country’s population (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Nearly half of these immigrants come from Latin American countries. About 19 percent of immigrants in the United States live below the official poverty line threshold, which is a before tax income of \$18,480 for a family of three with one child under the age of 18,<sup>3</sup> with the highest rates among those born in Latin America and Africa.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live and work in the United States, about 35 percent of who are in poverty and around 75 percent are near poor, defined as having income under 200 percent of the poverty threshold.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Greico, E., Acosta, Y., de la Cruz, P, Gryn, T, Larsen, L, Trevelyan, E. & Walters, N. (May 2010). *The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010, American Community Survey Reports*. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, (2012). *Poverty thresholds by size of family and number of children*, Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/methods/definitions.html>

<sup>4</sup> Greico et al., 21

<sup>5</sup> Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) (2011). *Immigrants in the United States: A profile of America’s foreign-born population*. Retrieved from <http://cis.org/node/3877>

Immigrants are almost twice as likely as natives to be poor.<sup>6</sup> As Figure 2 shows, nationally, 22.3 percent of immigrants and their children under age 18 who were not born in the United States are in poverty compared to 13.2 percent of natives and their children. In addition, at least 47 percent of immigrant families are near poor, compared to 31.4 percent of native families.<sup>7</sup> Though the differences between immigrant and native poverty rates aren't staggering, what is important is that while immigrants do have higher poverty rates, they also have less access to federal resources to alleviate the burden of poverty. In addition, certain obstacles such as language barriers and social prejudices make daily life for the immigrant all the more difficult.

Poverty among immigrants has been a pervasive issue for decades, despite their overall willingness to work, as demonstrated in their labor force participation rates.

Immigrants had a higher work participation rate than natives did, with 68 percent of immigrants aged 16 and older in the labor force, compared to 64 percent of the native population aged 16 and older.<sup>8</sup> However, immigrants are less likely than citizens to be high school graduates.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the low-education, low-skill trend among immigrants today, most working immigrants have lower paying service-related jobs, with few in management or “white collar” positions. Immigrant workers from Latin America are the least likely of all region-of-birth groups to work in management, business, science and arts occupations, but the most likely to work in service occupations. More specifically, those from Mexico were the least likely to work in management positions

---

<sup>6</sup> *Immigrants in the United States: A profile of America's foreign-born population*, 4

<sup>7</sup> *Immigrants in the United States*, 4

<sup>8</sup> *Greico et al.*, 17

<sup>9</sup> *Greico et al.*, 3

with only 9 percent in these occupations, compared to 37 percent of native workers and 29 percent of immigrant workers.<sup>10</sup>

Surprisingly, the difference between average and median incomes of native-born households compared to those of immigrant households was found to be not very significant in a study by the Center for Immigration Studies in 2011.<sup>11</sup> Immigrants have lower household incomes, but only by a difference of around \$5,000 nationally for the average household income and \$7,000 for median household income. A significant difference between these two groups, though, is the number of persons in a household. Natives, who consistently had higher incomes across the board, averaged 2.4 persons per household. Immigrants, on the other hand, averaged 3.1 persons per household. From this data, it can be concluded that immigrants generally have lower incomes per household than natives do and more individuals in their household, giving a clearer perspective on the makeup of an immigrant family.<sup>12</sup>

### **Immigrant welfare use**

Statistics show that a higher percentage of immigrants use major welfare programs than citizens do. Nationally, immigrants comprise 36.7 percent and citizens comprise just 22.5 percent of any major welfare program use. (In terms of cost to taxpayers, use of Medicaid by immigrants and their dependent children is the most problematic of welfare programs because it costs more than the combined total of subsidized housing and food and cash assistance.) Census data from 2009, the year another economic crisis hit the United States, showed that more immigrant households

---

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 18

<sup>11</sup> *Immigrants in the United States*

<sup>12</sup> *Immigrants in the United States*

used at least one major welfare program than their native-born counterparts. Specifically, 57 percent of households headed by an immigrant (documented and undocumented) with children (under 18) used at least one welfare program, compared to 39 percent for native households with children in 2009 (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> Food assistance was the top program used overall, with Medicaid coming in as the second most widely used. Though critics tend to argue against welfare programs as an incentive for the poor not to work, data shows this is not the reason immigrant welfare use is high. At least 95 percent of immigrant households with children had at least one worker in 2009; however, low education levels among immigrants limit job opportunities to low-skill, low-wage positions leaving more than half of working immigrants relying on welfare benefits to supplement their income, as I mentioned earlier.<sup>14</sup>

These numbers indicate only a portion of immigrant poverty and need. Since the 1990s, many major welfare programs restricted eligibility criteria, requiring immigrants to live in the United States for at least five years before having access to benefits, as opposed to having access to them right away, thus reducing the cost of welfare expenditures. In addition, the 11 million undocumented immigrants residing, and working, in the country do not impose a cost on taxpayers through these programs because they are ineligible to receive federal benefits. They can, however, access some welfare programs, like SNAP and some Medicaid, through their children who were born in the United States and, thus, are citizens.

---

<sup>13</sup> Camarota, Stephen. (2011, April). Welfare use by immigrant households with children: a look at cash, Medicaid, housing and food programs. *Center for Immigration Studies*, Retrieved from <http://cis.org/immigrant-welfare-use-2011>

<sup>14</sup> Camarota

### **1996 Welfare Reform: Restricting Immigrants' Welfare Access**

The most current immigration eligibility restrictions came about in 1996 when President Clinton's administration reformed the welfare system through implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Clinton ran with a presidential campaign slogan that he was going to "change welfare as we know it" and declared a "war on welfare," echoing President Lyndon Johnson's popular call for a "war on poverty" in 1964. The Clinton administration's goal was to reduce poverty rates by enforcing work requirements for federal aid recipients. In addition to restricting welfare to United States citizens, they also tightened welfare eligibility for non-citizens. These immigrant-related restrictions follow behind a history of other restrictions in the United States, especially during the Colonial era, designed to minimize the costs imposed by the potential immigration of "public charges," or those who rely on the federal government for support.<sup>15</sup>

The new legislation had two key provisions regarding non-citizens. The first concerned immigrants who arrived in the country before August 22, 1996, kicking them off the Social Security and food stamp rolls within a year. It was thought this provision might serve as an incentive for these immigrants to return to their native countries. The second provision required immigrants who came to the country after August 22, 1996, to reside legally in the United States for at least five years before being eligible to qualify for means-tested, federally funded assistance, including TANF, Medicaid, SNAP, and Social Security, unless he or she became a citizen before the five years was up. This

---

<sup>15</sup> Borjas, G. (March 2002). The impact of welfare reform on immigrant welfare use. Center for Immigration Studies. Retrieved from [www.cis.org](http://www.cis.org), 8

waiting period, also called the “five-year ban,” was hoped to discourage the immigration of potential public charges.<sup>16</sup>

Another major provision of the 1996 law was that it authorized state distribution of welfare benefits through block grants, a large amount of money given by the national government to the state government with only general regulations for how it should be spent. This structure gave state and local governments the authority to provide alternative cash or food assistance to immigrants who were blocked from TANF or SNAP under the five-year ban. As a result, a total of 15 states, including some large immigrant states such as California and Illinois, created substitute programs for newly arrived legal immigrants. This demonstrated a state initiative to meet the needs of immigrants who couldn’t access federal assistance programs, showing that there was in fact a need, but the government was failing to meet it directly.

Congress eventually loosened immigrant restrictions on Food Stamp, SSI and TANF eligibility in 1997 and 1998 before passing the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, making these programs more accessible for certain legal immigrants, such as the elderly, veterans or active members of the military.<sup>17</sup> For the majority of immigrants, though, the five-year ban continues to be maintained.

The profile of the United States immigrant population at the start of this paper is important to keep in mind, especially in light of the 1996 welfare reform restrictions, as I move into the philosophical debate regarding whether or not the United States is obligated to extend full welfare benefits to immigrants, both documented and undocumented. Central to this debate is the discussion of whether the United States has

---

<sup>16</sup> Borjas 7

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, R. (2007). PRWORA's immigrant provisions. *Office of Legislative Research*. Accessed March 15, 2013 from <http://www.cga.ct.gov/>



the moral right to restrict immigration or even go so far as to close its borders to potential immigrants. By maintaining open borders and admitting immigrants, the United States takes on responsibility for their well-being and must therefore provide access to federal assistance. Thus, the country has an obligation and responsibility to alleviate immigrant poverty by providing aid to those who need it. I will present the arguments of several prominent philosophers and political theorists before providing a critical response relating to the current political situation surrounding immigration reform.

### **Ethical debate: Morally can we restrict immigration or close our borders?**

There are a variety of important, though difficult, questions that arise when discussing immigration including what obligations a rich country incurs when it actively recruits skilled workers from a poor state, and whether there are any limitations on the selection criteria a country may use in deciding among applicants for immigration.<sup>18</sup> The key question underlying all of these, though, is whether or not liberal states have the moral right to exclude potential immigrants.

Historically, philosophers argued that liberal states are free to restrict immigration at their discretion, with few exceptions. Recently, though, contemporary liberal egalitarians have begun to challenge this view with two lines of argument. The first maintains that immigration restrictions are inconsistent with “basic liberal egalitarian values, like freedom and moral equality.” The second argument states that affluent,

---

<sup>18</sup> Wellman, C. Zalta, E. (ed.), (2012). Immigration. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/immigration>.

liberal democratic societies are morally obligated to admit immigrants as a partial response to global injustices, like poverty and human rights violations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Immigration restrictions go against “basic liberal egalitarian values”**

Within the first line of argument, political theorist Joseph Carens presents two major themes: the concept of migration as a basic human right and the idea that restricting immigration would violate the liberal value of moral equality. Carens argues that there is little justification for restricting immigration.<sup>20</sup> Using John Rawls’ “veil of ignorance” in his approach, Carens maintains that freedom of movement should be considered a basic human right and as such, liberal states have an obligation to maintain open borders.<sup>21</sup> Rawls’ “veil of ignorance” refers to a hypothetical approach to deciding just distribution of resources, rights and positions.<sup>22</sup> The theory goes that an individual is presented with a situation, not knowing her own capabilities, position in society, intelligence, strength, and the like in the scenario. She must then decide the principles of justice, not knowing whether she will be the weakest, lowest position or in the stronger, top social category. Therefore, if someone were going to decide whether or not the freedom of movement was a basic human right, they would consider the situation from the perspective that they might be in the weakest, least powerful social position. From this argument comes the reasoning that just as there is freedom to move within a state or

---

<sup>19</sup> Wilcox, S. (2009). The open borders debate on immigration. *Philosophy Compass*.

<sup>20</sup> Carens, J. (1987). Aliens and citizens: The case for open borders. *The Review of Politics*, 49(2) 251-273. Published by Cambridge University Press, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407506>, 252.

<sup>21</sup> Wilcox 4

<sup>22</sup> Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*. Retrieved from [http://www2.econ.iastate.edu/classes/econ362/hallam/readings/rawl\\_justice.pdf](http://www2.econ.iastate.edu/classes/econ362/hallam/readings/rawl_justice.pdf).

among states, there should be free movement across international borders, giving every person the freedom to live as and where he or she chooses.

I contest this argument on the grounds that freedom of mobility is not a basic human right in the same sense that food and shelter are basic human rights. I agree with Carens that freedom of mobility should be equally distributed to all people and, with the “veil of ignorance,” immigration restrictions would be restrictive of people’s plans for their lives. Still, though, I think he overstates this freedom, giving it more weight than it warrants. For example, all people may have the equal opportunity for migration, but not necessarily equal capability of actually moving due to financial or personal reasons. On the other hand, food and shelter are two basic human rights that, whether or not a person has the capability of obtaining them, should be available to every human, thus creating the obligation of the nation-state to provide these items if the person lacks the capability of obtaining them independently. I cannot go so far as to argue that the government should fund my right to mobility if I were incapable, thus I see it as a lesser degree of a human right.

Another core liberalist belief that Carens strongly supports is the idea of the moral equality of all persons. On the surface, this core value is immediately counter to the idea of restricted immigration or closed borders. Within the context of a nation-state, liberalism condemns inequalities in treatment by political institutions. Restricting would-be immigrants from crossing the border, or even restricting immigrant access to social benefits through welfare programs, would no doubt fall under this condemnation. Carens maintains that keeping individuals within the boundaries of the nation where they were born, not by their own personal choice, is a form of discrimination on grounds as equally

abhorrent as gender or race. It follows, he argues, that citizenship status is not an appropriate basis for distributing rights and social positions.

I disagree with this argument, because I think there is a distinct difference between the relationship a citizen has with a country's political institution and the relationship an immigrant has with it. For example, citizens contribute to the strength and prosperity of their nation's political institutions and in return, the institutions protect and serve the citizens. In addition, citizens in a democratic society have the power to alter the institution through voting and the institution responds to the citizens' votes. In this way, the relationship is mutually beneficial, but also mutually responsible. Immigrants are not held to the responsibility of civic duty or voting and the political institution is not inherently responsible for the immigrant. However, despite this distinction, an affluent liberal state like the United States, which has abundant resources and maintains influence and power as a first world country, has a moral obligation to provide aid to immigrants who are in need just as it has an obligation to aid in alleviating global poverty.

Nation-states have a primary obligation to meet the basic needs of its citizens and a secondary obligation to meet the needs of immigrants and extend foreign aid. Michael Blake makes this distinction as the would-be immigrant is not subject to the laws of the particular nation-state, but seeks to become subject to them, while the citizen is inherently subject to all laws of the nation-state.<sup>23</sup> The would-be immigrant and the citizen, therefore, have distinct relationships to the political society in question and the question needing to be addressed is who shall be admitted to this political society in the

---

<sup>23</sup> Blake, M. (2003). Immigration. A companion to applied ethics. Blackwell Publishing: 224-237. (226).

first place? Ultimately, Blake makes the argument that moral equality and political equality are not inherently linked in the context of immigration. Carens' argument fails to make this distinction as he relies solely on the liberalist view that these two realms of equality are inseparable. I agree with Carens that every human being is morally equal, regardless of race, gender, or even nationality, and should therefore be treated as such with equal access to basic human rights. However, I find Blake's distinction between moral equality and political equality critical because the relationship that citizens have with their political institutions require a primary obligation to meet the citizens' needs before immigrants' needs.

In the current political debate, as in past debates whenever the issue of immigration arises, American citizens will often make the argument that immigrants are taking what rightfully belongs to citizens: jobs, housing, social benefits, etc. This citizen-argument has substantial truth behind it as each nation-state has an obligation to meet the needs of its own citizens first. There is a distinct relationship the citizen has to its political institution, both through contribution and loyalty. A nation's political institution has a primary responsibility to meet the basic needs of its citizens and the citizens in turn vote, work, and pledge loyalty to that institution, among other duties. Thus, the United States has a primary obligation to provide assistance to its citizens first and foremost, just as every immigrants' home nation has an obligation to provide for their basic needs. If these nations are unable to meet these needs adequately, more affluent nations then have an obligation to step in whether through contributing resources or aiding the political or economic structure of those countries.

### **Moral obligation to admit immigrants to assuage global injustices**

The second line of contemporary liberal theory concerns the obligation to aid the global poor, another important consideration for current immigration policy reforms.

Thomas Pogge, a Rawlsian philosophy professor at Columbia University, makes the argument that affluent liberal states are contributors to global poverty and must therefore act to alleviate poverty in other countries. Referring to centuries of abuses such as slavery and imperialism, Pogge states: “By seeing the problem of poverty merely in terms of assistance, we overlook that our enormous economic advantage is deeply tainted by how it accumulated over the course of *one* historical process that has devastated the societies and cultures of four continents.”<sup>24</sup> In response, I contend that though that historical process is behind us, the poverty it created persists, and as a result, affluent states with abundant resources have a duty to rectify past- and current- abuses.

The current global economic order plays an important role in the persistence of poverty, according to Pogge. He supports this argument with statistics showing that 15.6 percent of humankind living in the “high-income economies” have 81 percent of global income while the other 84.4 percent of humankind share the remaining 19 percent.<sup>25</sup> Obviously, global income distribution is highly uneven, with most of the world’s wealth concentrated in a few countries (Figure 4).<sup>26</sup> As a result, I maintain that those affluent countries with abundant resources have a moral obligation to assist those in poor

---

<sup>24</sup> Pogge, T. (2003). ‘Assisting’ the global poor. Seminar, Princeton University. Retrieved from [http://www.princeton.edu/rpds/seminars/pdfs/pogge\\_assistingpoor.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/rpds/seminars/pdfs/pogge_assistingpoor.pdf), 6

<sup>25</sup> Pogge, 5

<sup>26</sup> Sachs, J., & Malaney, P. (2002, February 7). The economic and social burden of malaria. Figure 2: Global distribution of per capita GDP. *Nature*. 415, 680-685. Retrieved from [http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v415/n6872/fig\\_tab/415680a\\_F2.html](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v415/n6872/fig_tab/415680a_F2.html)

countries, including when they migrate to an affluent country, through distribution of resources to meet basic human needs.

Additionally, if the global economic order plays such a major role in the persistence of poverty worldwide and “if our governments, acting in our name, are influential in shaping and upholding this order,” then the deprivation of the distant needy might necessitate not simply positive action, but also negative duties to not cause harm.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the United States has an obligation not only to assuage global poverty, but also to avoid causing harm that might perpetuate this issue.

I would consider temporary guest worker programs like those utilized during the World War I and II eras, which were followed quickly by mass deportations, as failing to avoid causing harm. These programs incentivized poor Latin American workers to provide cheap labor in the United States, letting them settle into life in one of the most affluent countries in the world with a very wide safety net, and then forcing them to leave as soon as they were no longer needed. Unfortunately, it seems we are continuing the cycle through the new immigration reform proposal, which includes a temporary agricultural worker program.

There are several reasons why this type of program seems more harmful than good, perpetuating a cycle of global poverty and the affluence of powerful economies. The proposed worker program inevitably breaks up families- albeit temporary- as workers, especially from Latin America, leave their families to work for months and years at a time for minimum wage in the United States. In addition, the programs incentivize immigrants to leave their own countries, where they would contribute to their own economies, thus taking away from those poor nations’ economic growth. Lastly, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Pogge, 6

programs basically exploit cheap labor and taunt poor workers by letting them live in a country with abundant resources and a wide safety net, only to be thrown out again when they are no longer needed. As a result, the United States is failing to avoid causing direct harm by dangling an intentionally unreachable carrot in front of these temporary workers.

Regardless of the obligation to avoid causing harm, the United States also has an obligation as an affluent country to mitigate global poverty. Pogge would argue this should be done, not just as a hand out, but as directly as possible, implying an argument for open borders. “As affluent people and countries, we surely have positive moral duties to assist persons mired in life-threatening poverty whom we can help at little cost,” he states. As I mentioned previously, each nation-state has a primary obligation to serve its own citizens before meeting the needs of non-citizens, whether in the nation or

elsewhere. I believe that when one nation fails to meet the needs of its own citizens, such as food, healthcare, housing and opportunities for work, then it is the affluent nations’

responsibility to step in as a duty to aid the global poor. The fact that millions of immigrants are moving to the United States and the majority of them seek work and better education for their children demonstrates a lack of these opportunities in their own countries. Thus, it would appear the United States has to assume the responsibility to aid these poor immigrants.

A major limitation to this discussion of immigration, according to Blake, is that there are not enough philosophical minds examining the issue of immigration.<sup>28</sup> I would add to that claim that there is a severe lack of philosophical discussion regarding social benefits in relation to immigration, particularly considering the obligations an affluent

---

<sup>28</sup> Blake, 36



liberal society has, not just to the extremely poor and destitute, but to those just below the poverty line who work hard and yet don't have equal access to the benefits of the country in which they're residing.

### **Welfare and Global Responsibility Attitudes towards Immigrants**

The United States has a long history of immigrants making their home in the "land of opportunity," where a man can work hard and find success. Along with this history came waves of changing national sentiment towards immigrants, often coinciding with the nation's economic prosperity or decline at the time. For example, in the 1920s the Great Depression led to a sharp decline in the economy and a corresponding increase in United States citizens wanting to decrease immigration. Today, both political parties have strong opinions regarding immigration reform and whether or not immigration should be restricted or a path to citizenship should be streamlined and extended.

In March 2013, the Senate voted down a bill that would prohibit immigrants who gained legal status from accessing health care such as Medicaid or Obamacare. The bill's sponsor, Republican Senator Jeff Sessions from Alabama, said the vote put current immigration reform in jeopardy. "The core legal and economic principle of immigration is that those seeking admission to a new country must be self-sufficient and contribute to the economic health of the nation," Sessions said in a statement, as reported by The Daily Caller. "But, for years, the federal government has failed to enforce this law." He said the principle is even more urgent when considering those who have entered the country illegally. However, I agree with the Senate's decision not to pass the bill because denying

healthcare access to immigrants fails to fulfill the country's moral obligation to provide for the global poor.

The two sides in the current public debate about immigrants, both legal and illegal, can be divided into "restrictionists" and "admissionists."<sup>29</sup> Restrictionists argue that unauthorized immigrants violate United States laws and depress wages; therefore, the first priority of any twenty-first century immigration reform should be reducing illegal migration. Admissionists argue that unauthorized immigrants fill essential jobs and, as a nation of immigrants, the United States should be willing to legalize needed authorized workers.<sup>30</sup>

This debate about whether or not illegal immigrants should be granted a path to legalized citizenship is significant in part because extending citizenship to the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States would also grant them access to welfare programs, causing increased expenditures. The other side of the argument would state that this expansion would also provide increased profit for the federal government through taxation of and production by these new citizen workers. This is a relevant issue as the Obama administration wades through the muddy waters of immigration (and inevitably welfare) reform.

Conservative thinker Robert Rector speaks to this issue in his article "Importing Poverty: Immigration and Poverty in the United States," as he argues that the United States is importing poverty by admitting such an abundant number of low-skill, low-education immigrants. Rector calls for immigration reform that would incentivize the migration of high-skilled, high-educated individuals and restrict entry access of low-

---

<sup>29</sup> Martin, P. (1949). *Importing poverty?: Immigration and the changing face of rural America*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 166.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, 166

skilled, low-educated individuals. Though this kind of restriction seems counter to Pogge's arguments of moral equality and freedom of migration, Rector provides a sound argument should the focus turn to reducing poverty numbers in the United States.

His numbers, in particular, support the view that the current immigration system should be further altered to make the admission of low-skill, uneducated immigrants even less likely than it already is. To support this view, Rector cites the National Academy of Sciences' estimation that each immigrant without a high school degree might cost taxpayers, on average, \$89,000 over the course of his or her lifetime. As such, the roughly six million legal immigrants without a high school diploma will cost around a half-trillion dollars over their lifetimes.<sup>31</sup> However, Rector fails to discuss immigrant contributions to the economy or the potential contributions their children will make in the future. Regardless, the fact that the United States has more financial resources than most countries in the world, it therefore has a moral obligation to alleviate global poverty. In this way, my argument is justifiable that the United States has a moral obligation to provide greater access to federal assistance for immigrants lawfully residing in the country, who may be considered the "global poor."

### **Welfare Expansion as a Possible Incentive for Increased Immigration**

One other issue that arises with the proposal to extend citizenship to documented immigrants and legalization to undocumented immigrants. While this is a direct and efficient action addressing a complicated situation, there is no doubt this policy reform will serve as an incentive for increased immigration, especially from nearby Latin American countries. Already, would-be immigrants are turning themselves into the

---

<sup>31</sup> Rector

federal border patrol, thinking there's a good chance they'll get amnesty as part of the coming potential overhaul to the nation's immigration system, according to an article in Fox News Latino.<sup>32</sup> For many, though, this is a false hope, especially because no reform has passed in Congress yet.

Still, this article, like many others, serves as proof that any extension, whether in legalization or welfare benefits, will serve as an incentive for increased immigration. As a result, there must be strict immigration restrictions in place to avoid massive migration into this country should the proposed reforms pass. This will not violate Pogge's moral equality assessment, but rather preserve the existing political institution, as well as maintain citizens' rights and privileges, which the nation is primarily obligated to protect.

### **Poverty Measure Change Strengthens Need to Expand Immigrant Welfare Access**

The current official poverty measure fails to capture the true depth of poverty in the country, and specifically of immigrants. The current measure only takes into account a household's pre-tax income and doesn't include necessary expenditures, such as transportation to work, food expenses or childcare. These expenditures may leave a low-income family's budget little to no room for accidents and day-to-day needs like clothing and self-care items. As a result, there are more impoverished citizen and immigrant households than the numbers mentioned in the earlier introduction suggest. Two alternative measures of poverty, proposed by researchers at the University of Albany,

---

<sup>32</sup> Ortiz, I. (2013, April 5). Border crossers volunteer to be arrested hoping to benefit from immigration reform. *Fox News Latino*. Retrieved from <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2013/04/05/border-crossers-volunteer-to-be-arrested-hoping-to-benefit-from-immigration/>

account for these pressures on a family's budget, especially impacting the impoverished or near-poor families in the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Alternative budget proposals consider a more realistic measure of a family's income by taking into account these expenditures, showing a much higher rate of poverty than suggested by the official measure. For example, the "Baseline Basic Budget Poverty" measure takes into account costs of housing, food, transportation and federal income and payroll taxes. With this measure, one in five children or 21.3 percent of children in the United States are poor, compared to the one in 7 or 14.8 percent considered poor according to the official measure.<sup>34</sup> As a result, the number of children in impoverished immigrant households is much higher than the census shows.

The second alternative measure, the "Baseline Basic Budget Poverty Plus," takes into account these costs in addition to formal childcare and early education. The study showed that children in immigrant families tend to live in states showing large gaps in the two measures. These gaps are especially wide when the costs of childcare and early education are taken into account.<sup>35</sup> Considering these alternative measures provides a more realistic view of poverty in the United States, demonstrating a need for greater federal assistance through the welfare system than what is currently provided. As a result, the United States should provide more assistance to immigrant families based on the fact that there is greater need than the official poverty measure shows.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hernandez, D., Denton, N., and Macartney, S. (2009). Children in immigrant families – the U.S. and 50 states: economic need beyond the official poverty measure. " *Child trends & the center for social and demographic analysis*. University of Albany, SUNY: Research Brief Surveys.

<sup>34</sup> Hernandez et al.

<sup>35</sup> Hernandez et al.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I contend that the United States does have an obligation, as an affluent liberal state, to provide assistance to the immigrant poor. Restricting welfare benefits for the first five years of residence potentially harms immigrants during an extremely vulnerable time. Providing equal access to welfare benefits – the same as citizens enjoy – with a lifetime limit so as not to create or perpetuate dependency would be the best way to aid the global poor here at home. Following this argument, one could assert that the United States has an obligation to maintain open borders, as Pogge and Carens suggest, in order to provide aid and opportunity to those in need of it. However, I believe the federal government has a primary obligation to American citizens first and foremost. As such, restricting immigration would be morally acceptable were it necessary to provide for the basic needs and interests of the nation's citizens.

In an ideal world, the United States could work with the governments of these countries from which it receives the majority of its immigrants in an effort to improve the political structures that currently exist there. However, that deserves an entirely separate conversation regarding the issue of paternalism. I will close by saying that the United States is a country built by immigrants and one that is known worldwide to be a “melting pot” of cultures and a place where hard work can lead to success for any person, no matter their status. The country's moral obligation to the global poor justifies providing federal assistance to immigrants residing lawfully in the United States. Taking that obligation a step further, the country should expand immigrant access to welfare by eliminating the five-year waiting period so immigrants can have help if and when they

need it. However, some limitations must be necessary due to finite resources, which the nation is primarily obligated to provide for its citizens.

Washington and Lee University

## Figures

### 1. Figure 1: Population by Nativity Status and Citizenship: 2010, Immigration in the United States, CIS, 2

Table 1.

#### Population by Nativity Status and Citizenship: 2010

(Numbers in thousands. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))

Nativity and citizenship	Population <sup>1</sup>	Margin of error <sup>2</sup> (±)	Percent	Margin of error <sup>2</sup> (±)
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>309,350</b>	<b>(X)</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>(X)</b>
Native .....	269,394	115	87.1	—
Foreign born .....	39,956	115	12.9	—
Naturalized citizen .....	17,476	82	5.6	—
Noncitizen .....	22,480	120	7.3	—

(X) Not applicable.

— Represents or rounds to zero.

<sup>1</sup> Population as of July 1, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimates, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010.

### 2. Figure 2: Poverty and Near Poverty by State, Immigration in the United States, CIS, 4

Table 30. Poverty and Near Poverty by State (thousands)

State	In Poverty				In or Near Poverty <sup>1</sup>			
	Immigrants and Their Children <sup>2</sup>		Natives and Their Children <sup>3</sup>		Immigrants and Their Children <sup>2</sup>		Natives and Their Children <sup>3</sup>	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Arizona	37.2%	506	15.4%	805	59.3%	807	33.1%	1,736
North Carolina	28.6%	247	16.0%	1,346	58.4%	505	33.3%	2,803
Minnesota	28.5%	134	9.0%	425	48.4%	228	23.2%	1,097
Texas	28.4%	1,599	14.8%	2,850	58.4%	3,286	34.3%	6,611
Georgia	24.6%	294	17.7%	1,512	49.8%	595	36.7%	3,133
Colorado	24.3%	146	10.6%	469	48.2%	289	24.4%	1,077
California	22.0%	2,998	12.3%	2,860	48.9%	6,663	28.4%	6,639
Illinois	22.0%	492	11.9%	1,261	47.7%	1,067	29.9%	3,163
New York	21.7%	1,135	13.7%	1,916	44.9%	2,351	28.5%	3,985
Florida	21.1%	878	13.6%	1,941	45.1%	1,872	32.0%	4,576
Nevada	20.1%	133	12.9%	255	46.9%	311	30.4%	599
Washington	19.5%	234	9.9%	544	40.6%	489	25.9%	1,425
Massachusetts	16.5%	191	9.5%	519	39.7%	460	23.1%	1,263
Maryland	13.4%	145	9.5%	437	34.9%	378	22.3%	1,029
New Jersey	13.3%	319	8.8%	549	34.3%	824	21.1%	1,319
Virginia	11.2%	115	10.6%	716	29.0%	298	25.1%	1,690
<b>Nation</b>	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>11,412</b>	<b>13.2%</b>	<b>33,462</b>	<b>47.4%</b>	<b>24,254</b>	<b>30.7%</b>	<b>77,774</b>

Source: Center for Immigration Studies analysis of March 2010-11 Current Population Survey (CPS) public-use files. Official government poverty statistics do not include unrelated individuals under age 15 (mostly foster children) and they are therefore not included in this table.

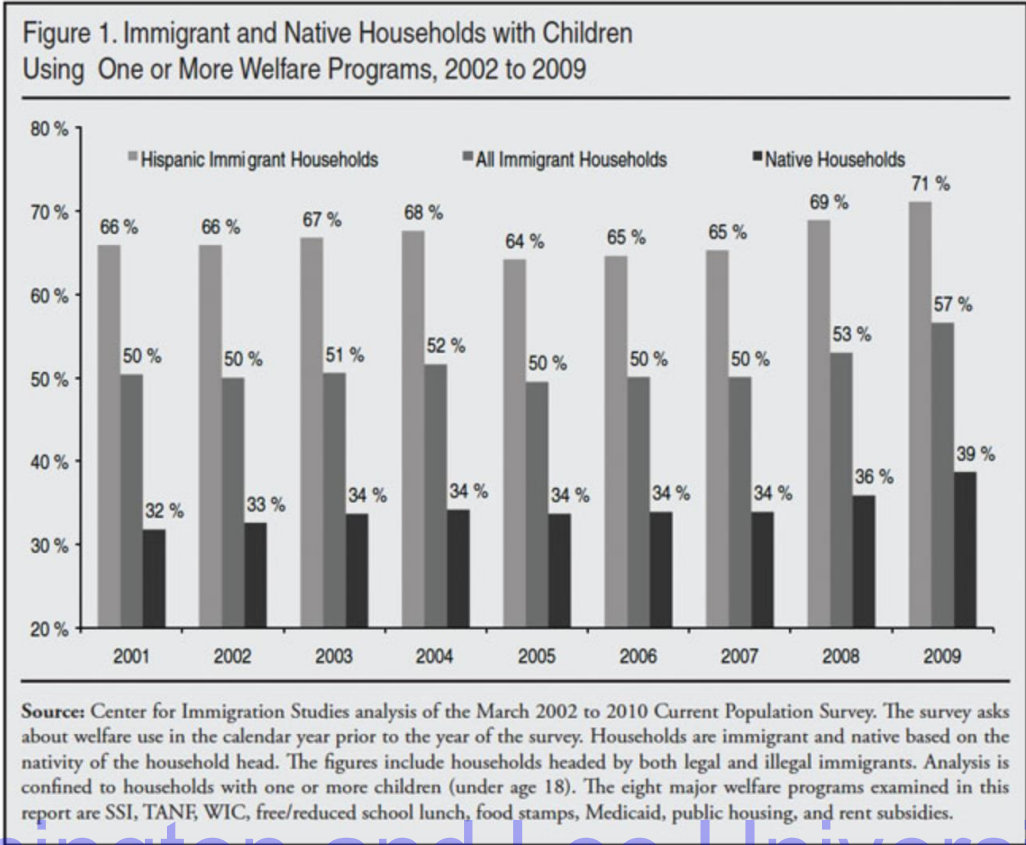
<sup>1</sup> In or near poverty is defined as income under 200 percent of the poverty threshold.

<sup>2</sup> Includes all children under age 18 of immigrant fathers, including those born in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Excludes the U.S.-born children under age 18 of immigrant fathers.

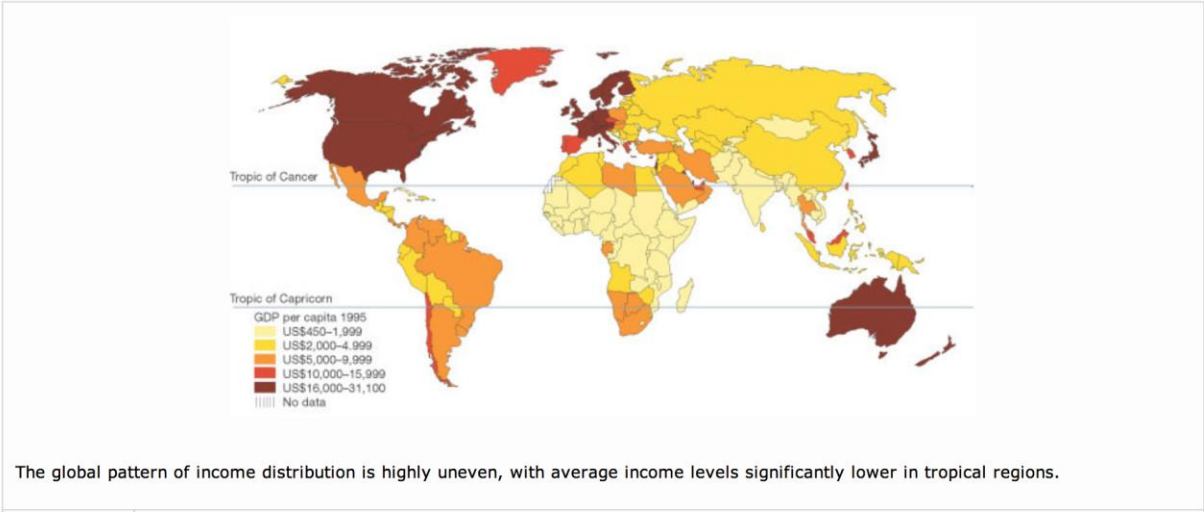
### 3. Figure 3: Immigrant and Native Households Using One or More Welfare Programs from 2002 to 2009, CIS,





Washington and Lee University

**4. Figure 4: Global Income Distribution, Sachs & Malaney**



## References

- Blake, M. (2003). Immigration. *A Companion to Applied Ethics*. Blackwell Publishing: 224-237.
- Borjas, G. (March 2002). The impact of welfare reform on immigrant welfare use. Center for Immigration Studies. Retrieved from [www.cis.org](http://www.cis.org)
- Camarota, Stephen. (2011, April). Welfare use by immigrant households with children: a look at cash, Medicaid, housing and food programs. *Center for Immigration Studies*, Retrieved from <http://cis.org/immigrant-welfare-use-2011>
- Carens, J. (1987). Aliens and citizens: The case for open borders. *The Review of Politics*, 49(2) 251-273. Published by Cambridge University Press, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407506>.
- Cohen, R. (2007). PRWORA's immigrant provisions. *Office of Legislative Research*. Accessed March 15, 2013 from <http://www.cga.ct.gov/>
- Greico, E., Acosta, Y., de la Cruz, P, Gryn, T, Larsen, L, Trevelyan, E. & Walters, N. (May 2010). "The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010, American Community Survey Reports." U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>
- Hernandez, D., Denton, N., and Macartney, S. (2009). "Children in immigrant families – the U.S. and 50 states: economic need beyond the official poverty measure." *Child trends*

*& the center for social and demographic analysis*. University of Albany, SUNY:  
Research Brief Surveys.

Immigrants in the United States: A profile of America's foreign-born population. Center for  
Immigration Studies. <http://cis.org/node/3877>

Martin, P. (1949). *Importing poverty?: Immigration and the changing face of rural America*.  
New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 166.

Office of the Press Secretary. (2013, January 29). Fixing our broken immigration system so  
everyone plays by the rules. *The White House*. Press release.

Ortiz, I. (2013, April 5). Border crossers volunteer to be arrested hoping to benefit from  
immigration reform. *Fox News Latino*. Retrieved from  
[http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2013/04/05/border-crossers-volunteer-to-be-  
arrested-hoping-to-benefit-from-immigration/](http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2013/04/05/border-crossers-volunteer-to-be-arrested-hoping-to-benefit-from-immigration/)

Parker, A. & Greenhouse, S. (2013, March 30). Labor and business reach deal on  
immigration issue. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>.

Pearson, M. & Brumfield, B. (2013, April 17). Senators formally file immigration bill. *CNN*.  
Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/17/politics/immigration-bill/index.html>.

Pogge, T. (2003). 'Assisting' the global poor. Seminar, Princeton University. Retrieved from  
[http://www.princeton.edu/rpds/seminars/pdfs/pogge\\_assistingpoor.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/rpds/seminars/pdfs/pogge_assistingpoor.pdf).

Preston, J. (2013, April 4). Path to citizenship divides congress and, polls show, confuses country. *New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/us/politics/in-immigration-reform-path-to-citizenship-divides-and-confuses.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/us/politics/in-immigration-reform-path-to-citizenship-divides-and-confuses.html?_r=0)

Rector, Robert. "Importing poverty: immigration and poverty in the United States: A book of charts." The Heritage Foundation Special Reports. Last modified October 25, 2006. Accessed March 1, 2013 from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/10/importing-poverty-immigration-and-poverty-in-the-united-states-a-book-of-charts>

Sachs, J., & Malaney, P. (2002, February 7). The economic and social burden of malaria.

Figure 2: Global distribution of per capita GDP. *Nature*. 415, 680-685. Retrieved

from [http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v415/n6872/fig\\_tab/415680a\\_F2.html](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v415/n6872/fig_tab/415680a_F2.html)

Wellman, C. Zalta, E. (ed.), (2012). Immigration. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/immigration>.

Wilcox, S. (2009). The open borders debate on immigration. *Philosophy Compass*.