

Census Shenanigans

How the Census Bureau understates the population and poverty impacts of immigration

by Linda Thom

The U.S. Census Bureau, in August 1995, released a short report entitled, *The Foreign-Born Population: 1994*. It is helpful to compare this report with other data available on the Internet (www.census.gov) such as child poverty statistics. The poverty rate figures for immigrants are skewed because the impoverished children born in the United States to immigrants do not show up in the immigrant category. Instead they are counted in the native-born category.

No Census Bureau data in print or available electronically give the numbers of U.S. citizen children living in households with foreign-born parents. This aberration prohibits the understanding of the poverty and population impacts resulting from immigration. This is a significant problem since the foreign-born have very high fertility rates after they arrive here.

Table 1 U.S. Childhood Poverty (Numbers in thousands)			
Age of Children	All Children	Native Born	All Immigrants Under 18
Under 5	5,367	5,221	146
5 to 15	9,065	8,372	692
16 to 17	1,295	1,137	159
Total poor children	15,727	14,730	997
Total above poverty	53,564	52,109	1,457
Total pop. under 18	69,291	66,838	2,454
Poverty Rate	23%	22%	41%

Child poverty data illustrate the distortion caused by not including citizen children. Table 1 shows child poverty data from the 1994 Current Population Report available electronically from the Census Bureau.

Linda Thom is a former budget analyst in the office of the (Santa Barbara, CA) county administrator.

The poverty rate for foreign-born children is 41% as compared to a 22% poverty rate for native-born children. Looking at the absolute number of poor children one could believe that the 41% poverty rate for foreign-born children is not a problem because there are so few of them. There

***"The Census Bureau
has systematically understated
the impact of immigration
by shifting U.S. citizen children
of immigrants into the totals
for native-born families."***

are only 146,000 foreign-born children under five years old living in the United States. No problem, right? Wrong. Any children who were born in the United States to foreign parents are not included in these numbers. The Census Bureau has systematically understated the impact of immigration by shifting the U.S. citizen children of immigrants into the totals for native-born families.

Almost half (46%) the nation's immigrants are of Hispanic origin with the majority originating from Mexico. In California, the fertility of foreign-born women is double that of native women and Hispanic, foreign-born women have over four children per woman (California Dept. of Finance, Heim and Austin). Moreover, the lower the educational attainment of the mothers, the higher their fertility rates.

To further demonstrate other distortions caused by Census Bureau practices, Table 2 summarizes poverty data from the 1990 Census (United States Summary, Table 5, Income and Poverty Status of

Hispanic Origin Groups, Mexican Origin).

The 51,977 native-born, Mexican origin poor families have 467,717 children under 5 years or 9 children under 5 years per family according to the Census data; whereas, the foreign-born, Mexican-

Table 2 Poverty Status of Mexican Origin Children Under 5 Years			
	All Persons	Native Born	Foreign Born
Poor families w/ children under 5	104,461	51,977	52,484
Related poor children under 5	513,242	467,717	45,525
Average children under 5 per family	4.91	9	0.87

origin poor families have .87 children per family. Something is wrong — it is quite impossible for families to have an average of nine children under five years of age. Obviously, the native-born children of foreign families have been shifted to the native-born families. Further, if there is at least 1 child under 5 in the 52,484 foreign-born, poor families, how could there be only 45,525 “related” poor children under 5 in foreign families or an average of less than 1 per family?

The Census Bureau makes it even more difficult to sort out because the children under 5 are not specifically listed. One must subtract the children aged 5 through 17 from all children under 18 to arrive at the number of children under 5. Further, the children are enumerated under native-born or foreign-born families and labeled “related” children. But to whom are they “related”? The U.S.-citizen children living in foreign families are not “related” to U.S. families but that is where the Census Bureau has included them.

Of course, many U.S. citizen children are older than 5. The number of U.S. citizen children of immigrant parents is immense. Table 3 shows the births to native-born and foreign-born women in California (California Dept. of Health).

Between 1989 and 1994, just six years, foreign-born women have given birth to over 1.5 million

children in California. Presumably these children live in immigrant families with their foreign-born siblings who have a 41% poverty rate. This is one state's births in six years. The national numbers must be staggering but the public will never know because the Census Bureau does not publish them, provide them electronically, or appear to keep any records on them.

Devastating Impacts for California Infrastructure

The impacts are significant. Whether the children are poor or not, they will go to school — and California has the most over-crowded classrooms in the nation. Between 1989 and 1996, California has spent an additional \$6 billion on K-12 public schools to try to keep pace with the increased enrollment. In this period, 7 out of 10 of the added

Table 3 Annual Births in California by Birthplace of Mother			
	Total Annual Births	Foreign-born Mothers	U.S.-Born Mothers
1989	569,308	215,726	353,582
1990	611,666	250,315	361,351
1991	609,228	261,158	348,070
1992	600,838	266,830	334,008
1993	584,483	261,673	322,810
1994	567,034	251,869	315,165
Total	3,542,557	1,507,571	2,034,986
Avg/year	590,426	251,262	339,164

students did not speak English (California Dept. of Education). Poor or not, these children take baths, flush toilets, have their clothes washed, generate trash and do all the ordinary things other kids do. They grow up and have children of their nor the nation needs any more people. When the Census Bureau reports that 1 of every 4 people in California is an immigrant, that does not begin to reveal the enormity of the problem.

The American people need to know how many citizen children there are and how poor they are, but the folks at the Census Bureau will probably continue their current practices in the next census in the year 2000 because so few people know the truth. Most of those who know the truth work for the Census Bureau and they aren't telling. □

What Immigration Can Cost

As experienced at the community level

by **B. Meredith Burke**

That art can make a political statement is one of its strengths. Photographic images can be particularly potent, whether evoking love, community, work, or war.

Once they impart more than the essential artist identification, the captions accompanying a formal art exhibit may also become political commentary. A case in point is the caption to the final image in "A Nation of Strangers," currently at the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco.

The untitled work by American Leonard Freed shows a group of Hmong refugees in Wausau, Wisconsin in 1994. The caption, by Arthur Ollman, director of San Diego's Museum of Photographic Arts and co-curator of the show, informs us:

As immigrants have settled principally in large inner cities, they have filled neighborhoods often left nearly

empty by white flight. ... They also have revitalized the schools in such neighborhoods, with the influx of new students and the attendant \$5,000 or more in state funds that are spent annually on each student. In smaller communities, a sudden influx of immigrants can present many problems. This Hmong community is in a small Midwestern city that is having difficulty accommodating a large number of new arrivals.

"Having difficulty" is a deceptive understatement of the Wausau dilemma, initiated by its townsfolk generously supporting a few dozen refugees in 1978. A thriving city of about 35,000 with a diverse, well-paying economic base, it was the most ethnically homogeneous city in the country in the 1980 census — 99 percent white; descendants of Germans, Poles, and New England Yankees. It had no abandoned urban core or emptied schools, just well-tended, safe, generally middle-class residential areas. No one foresaw that by April, 1994, Wausau would be the subject of an *Atlantic Monthly* article about one of the swiftest and most massive peacetime demographic transformations.

Among post-1965 newcomers, the Hmong are arguably the furthest removed from industrial culture. In their home country they lived isolated in the

mountains, lacked a written language and had the early and high rates of childbearing necessary for perpetuating a society in which barely half those born survive to puberty and many women die in childbirth.

In an industrial society these reproductive patterns lead to families with eight or 10 children (a fivefold increase per generation). Without marketable skills but with many dependents,

"No one foresaw that by April 1994, Wausau would be the subject of an Atlantic Monthly article about one of the swiftest and most massive peacetime demographic transformations."

Hmong adults move permanently onto the welfare rolls. In December 1995, 72 percent of the Hmong in Marathon County (where Wausau is by far the largest municipality) received welfare vs. 4.7 percent for non-Hmong residents. Alternatively, Hmong are 3.9 percent of the county's population and 39 percent of its welfare of fall,

B. Meredith Burke, Ph.D., an economist and demographer, researches and writes on California fertility and population changes. This article was published in the February 26, 1996 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle and is reprinted by permission.