

Dispelling the Myth: “Chain Migration”

What is “Chain Migration”?

“Chain migration” is a pejorative term used to describe the *legal migration* pattern of family members who have an established linkage from their country of origin to their destination. The process, called family-based immigration, allows U.S. citizens to petition for their immediate relatives who are not subject to numerical limitations. These include:

- Spouses
- Children
- Parents

United States Citizens can also petition for the following family members, who are subject to a quota or numerical limitation:

- Unmarried adult sons and daughters
- Married sons and daughters
- Brothers and Sisters

Lawful permanent residents on the other hand, can only petition for the following, all of whom are subject to numerical limitations:

- Spouses and minor children
- Unmarried sons and daughters

The beneficiaries of these petitions enter as lawful permanent residents and must wait five years before they can become naturalized citizens. With the exception of immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, there are extended waiting periods for entry due to the unavailability of visa numbers for most of the family-based categories.

The demand for family-based visas exceeds the supply; each family preference category is backlogged. For example, according to the Visa Bulletin issued by the Department of State for May 2007, Mexican spouses and minor children of lawful permanent residents have a current estimated wait of 6 ½ years. The siblings of U.S. citizens from the Philippines must wait over 22 years for a visa to become available.

Neither U.S. citizens nor lawful permanent residents (nor any other person) can file for the following relatives under current law:

- Aunts and uncles
- Nieces and nephews
- Grandchild for grandparent
- Cousins

The Myths Behind “Chain Migration”

Family-based immigration, which is designed to unify families, has many benefits in the social and economic advancement of our country. Ultimately, the negative myths of “chain migration” can be dispelled by looking at the facts.

Myth Number One: “Chain Migration” is a “never-ending and ever-growing chain.”

Fact:

- U.S. immigration policy limits the number of family members who can immigrate each year by category of family member and by country. This per country quota does not apply to extended family members such as cousins, aunts or uncles, and nephews and nieces.
- Under the current immigration system visas are issued in a controlled, albeit lengthy, process which results in an orderly system. Each family member entering must be sponsored by a U.S. citizen or resident who must file an affidavit of support proving that they have the income and resources to support the immigrating family member.

Myth Number Two: The system of “chain migration” is largely responsible for immigration numbers “skyrocketing.”

Fact:

- Congress placed an annual ceiling of 226,000 on the number of immigrants who are allowed entry into the United States under the family preference system.
- Immigrants **cannot** immigrate to the United States once the quota is reached for each preference category. An equal number of visas are allocated to each country, regardless of their proximity to the United States. For example, Mexico gets the same number of family based visas as does Monaco, the second smallest country in the world with a total population of 32,000.

Myth Number Three: “Chain Migration” provides an incentive for backlogged family members to enter the U.S. illegally or overstay because they feel they will eventually be able to get a green card.

Fact:

- “Chain Migration” is about **legal** immigration. Family members come to the U.S. to join their families. There is no rationale to eliminate the option of waiting for those who choose to wait. Restricting or eliminating family-based immigration avenues will actually provide a greater incentive for immigrants to enter the country illegally.

Myth Number Four: “Chain Migration” is a “flawed system that adds to our nation’s financial problems by letting in unskilled and uneducated people.”

Fact:

- Typical legal immigrants already have a higher skill level than the typical native U.S. citizen.

- The *New Immigrant Study*, which examines only legal immigrants, finds that, “The median years of schooling for the legal immigrants, 13 years, is a full one year higher than that of the U.S. native born.”¹
- The Pew Hispanic Center reports: “By 2004, all groups of legal immigrants in the country for less than 10 years are more likely to have a college degree than natives . . .”²

Myth Number Five: “Chain Migration” adds to our nation’s poverty level because family-based immigrants have the lowest earning potential on average.

Fact:

- The Pew Hispanic Center reports that the average family income for a naturalized U.S. citizen in the country more than 10 years in 2003 was more than \$10,000 a year higher than a native (\$56,500 vs. \$45,900).³
- The gap in earnings between new immigrants and natives largely disappears after 10 years in the United States, with immigrant wage growth faster than the native (6.7 percent vs. 4.4 percent).⁴ [*May 1999 American Economic Review, economists Harriet Duleep, then a senior research associate at the Urban Institute, and Mark Regets, a senior analyst at the National Science Foundation*]
- Immigrants and their children bring long-term economic benefits to the United States.⁵ Families tend to pool their resources to start businesses, purchase homes, and send children to college. Family members help tend to younger children while their relatives work essential jobs.
- Brothers and sisters provide support and care for each other’s families. In turn, they provide a benefit to the society by allowing their sibling(s) to find jobs and achieve the “American dream.” Long term separation from family members is stressful and manifests itself in both emotional and physical health problems to both petitioners and beneficiaries.
- The typical immigrant and his or her children pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in local, state, and federal benefits over their lifetime.⁶

¹ New Immigrant Survey (1998); Stuart Anderson, “Muddles Masses,” *Reason*, February 2000.

² Jeffrey S. Passel, *Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics*, Pew Hispanic Center, June 14, 2005, p. 24. Passel points out that this is the case “notwithstanding the continued over-representation of legal immigrants at low levels of education.”

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⁴ Anderson, “Muddles Masses.”

⁵ *A Fiscal Portrait of the Newest Americans*, by Stephen Moore, Cato Institute, 1998. According to a study conducted by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (NRC), immigrants indirectly raise the incomes of U.S.-born workers by, as a conservative estimate, at least \$10 billion each year. This occurs just by the immigrant’s payment of taxes and increasing the general productivity of the economy. This study did not include the impact of immigrant-owned businesses or the impact of highly skilled immigrants on overall productivity.

⁶ National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences

- When family members are unified in the U.S., earnings remain within the confines of our borders. Therefore, keeping families intact actually increases product consumption and benefits the economy.

Myth Number Six: “Chain Migration” is bad for America

Fact:

- Chain migration “merely describes what has happened through the history of America – some family members come to America and succeed and then sponsor other family members.”⁷
- The term “Chain Migration” is a catch phrase used by restrictionists to promote a xenophobic agenda. This type of assault on core family values, and on the family unit itself, fuels the xenophobia that is being spread across the United States by these anti-immigration organizations. It is based on a poor understanding of the law and on numbers that cannot be substantiated in fact.
- Families are at the core of who we are as a nation.
- The long wait in some family categories simply means that Congress has not raised the numerical limits to meet the demand.

Conclusion

The United States has always depended on immigrants to strengthen our economic resources, enhance the cultural melting pot, broaden our worldview, and bolster democracy. The social and economic benefits of family-based immigration are plentiful and provide stability to families. Because of the immeasurable value added to our communities by immigrants with existing family ties, we cannot pit the benefits of family-based immigration against the seemingly more quantifiable benefits of employment-based or merit-based immigration. Ultimately, expanding or maintaining the current family-based immigration system is of utmost importance.

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⁷ National Foundation for American Policy, *Analysis of Draft Proposal on Immigration*, NFAP Policy Brief, April 2007