Immigration: Getting the Facts

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Immigration to the United States, a force already posing major challenges to society, is almost certain to increase even further. As the nation debates the issue of immigrants—how they affect society and the economy and how best to absorb them—participants at every level need more information. Is immigration a positive force? Who bears its costs? How much of the resulting stress can local communities absorb? Ultimately, America must determine what public policies, if any, can assist its newest residents in their effort to become successful members of the larger community.

Current data sources simply don’t answer these questions. Researchers and policymakers cannot rely on case studies, convenience-sample surveys, and indirect estimates; they need entirely new data. To provide the statistical confidence needed for important policy decisions, the new data must be gathered from a large number of immigrants. To shed light on the diverse populations now entering the United States, they must be drawn from several different ethnic and regional groups. And to describe the complex, long-term process of adaptation that immigrant families go through—a process that almost certainly includes major changes in social service needs and economic contributions—the data should include several years over time. Data like these can finally provide reliable guidance for immigration policy. The most effective way of collecting them is a new national survey of immigrants.

Such an effort is likely to be difficult and expensive. It will raise many challenges in design and implementation and, indeed, some question of feasibility. In this issue paper we briefly outline

- The forces challenging immigration policy.
- The reasons that new data are needed.
- The feasibility of obtaining those data.
- Key considerations for the survey’s design.
- Suggested procedures for implementation.

Expanding Immigration Flows

Immigration has reemerged as a major challenge for U.S. social policy. During the past decade, changes in immigration law expanded the number of government-sanctioned immigrants allowed to enter and stay in the United States. In addition, undocumented immigration appears to have continued unabated, despite laws against hiring undocumented workers. These flows will probably expand through the rest of this decade. Pressures from Eastern Europe, territories formerly part of the Soviet Union, and other areas experiencing regional conflicts encourage the U.S. government to admit more refugees each year. And despite the current recession, the United States continues to be an attractive destination; immigrants motivated by family unification or political and ethnic violence are seldom discouraged by U.S. economic conditions.

Recent immigration is already having substantial effects on the nation’s demographic makeup. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of foreign-born residents in

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the United States increased by 8.7 million. For some areas, the impact has been proportionately greater. In Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dallas, Houston, and Miami, foreign-born residents now make up between a fifth and a third of the total population. And numbers alone underestimate the impact; recent flows have brought the most diverse group of immigrants since the early 1900s—many of them with relatively low levels of education—sharply increasing the challenge to schools and other agencies that must communicate in dozens of languages and with differing levels of sophistication.6

Growing Public Impact

This wave of immigrants poses challenges at every level of government. Given the growing proportions of Latinos and Asians in the U.S. population, for example, and given increasing regional economic integration (e.g., the North American Free Trade Agreement), should national policymakers negotiate new agreements on regional labor markets and immigration flows? At the state and local levels, resource and equity concerns are more immediate. High concentrations of immigrants—who work for relatively low wages and who compete for jobs and public benefits—stress local jurisdictions and the social fabric of the community.7 On the other hand, they may fill low-wage and difficult jobs that few natives want. Immigrants’ concentration in urban centers and their relatively high fertility rates add to concerns over the future of American cities, especially because it is the federal government that controls immigrant flow—not the localities most sharply affected.

In the resulting policy debates, immigration elicits intensely emotional responses. Especially in times of recession, tensions surrounding the issue have resulted in hostility and occasional violence or civic unrest. The nation has sometimes even effectively closed its doors to newcomers.8 On the other hand, in a nation created and re-created by waves of immigrants, there is a strong belief that newcomers’ talents, energy, and hope for a better life reinforce the American dream, actually enriching our economic and cultural lives.

Complex Policy Questions

Facing difficult questions in this highly emotional context, policymakers are handicapped because so little is actually known about today’s immigrants and their costs and contributions to American society. The United States does not collect the information needed to guide immigration policy, or even to measure its consequences.9,10 Policymakers need to make fundamental decisions: How much additional immigration and what types of immigrants should be encouraged? How many immigrants can the nation productively absorb? Should government help them adjust to life in the United States? If so, how? How should immigration concerns affect foreign policy? To make these decisions they need answers to some basic questions:

- Is this new and sizable wave of immigration a positive force for this country’s economic and cultural development? Do immigrants create jobs for others, or displace native workers?
- Do immigrants use public support strictly to get on their feet, or do they become dependent upon it?
- How do kinship networks operate in family reunification—a major goal of U.S. policy—and what does this imply about future demand for immigration?
- How do immigrants move into better-paying, more stable jobs? What factors—vocational training, formal education, learning English, personal contacts, or changing immigration status—should policies emphasize?
- Are immigrants becoming culturally and economically integrated into mainstream America?
- How do immigrants invest in education and other skills? Do they help meet critical labor shortages (a key goal of current policy)?
- What economic burden does immigration create, and how is it shared among government, immigrants, and others? How much immigration can local communities absorb?

The Need for Better Data

Unfortunately, the data now collected cannot adequately answer these basic questions. To guide immigration policy, analysts and decisionmakers need survey data with two key characteristics.

First, the data must cover a large sample of immigrants. Immigrants from different countries often use services, pursue education, and adapt to their new environment in sharply different ways. Thus, a city dealing with waves of Central American immigration may need very different policies from one whose largest immigrant group is from China or Southeast Asia. But large, general surveys often fail to support such comparisons because the sample sizes of specific immigrant groups are too small. Samples are also too small for comparisons among U.S. regions. Surveys that focus on immigrants, on the other hand, are generally local efforts concentrated on a single country-of-origin group; again, group or regional comparisons are impossible.

Second, the data must reflect changes over time. Questions about how immigrants affect society are
intrinsically dynamic. They need data on three types of changes: cohort effects (differences between waves of immigrants entering the United States at different periods), individual changes (changes over time experienced by each immigrant), and generational changes (differences between immigrants and their offspring). The few existing efforts that sample enough immigrants to be useful are either one-time surveys (which obviously cannot describe change over time) or conducted so infrequently that important changes are essentially ignored and causal relationships cannot be identified.

**Practical Problems**

In addition to these fundamental shortcomings of design, the surveys most often used to analyze immigration face two procedural problems. One is simply language. Many national databases that have been major sources of information about immigrants have not used appropriately translated survey instruments for respondents with limited English ability. On-the-spot translations by interviewers or household members are inadequate for assuring comparability of data across language groups—or even within them. The absence of translated survey instruments may also result in samples that underrepresent those who do not speak English.

The second procedural problem lies in collecting data specific to immigrants and immigration policy. Most current surveys are intended to answer other research and policy questions. So they seldom, for example, distinguish documented from undocumented immigrants. Yet immigrants’ legal status affects behavior and eligibility for various government programs for both immigrants and their employers. In California, for example, immigrant women are eligible for prenatal care regardless of their legal status, yet many of them do not use this service. Because programs extending prenatal care to the undocumented ultimately save local and state governments health-care dollars, it is vital to encourage their use. But without data that distinguish documented from undocumented immigrants, policymakers can’t tell whether public programs are having their intended effects.

**Compromise Solutions**

To see the combined effect of these shortcomings in design and procedure, consider the major efforts that immigration analyses are now forced to rely on:

The decennial census, which provides the data most commonly used to describe immigrants, actually identifies immigrants by country of birth. This misclassifies citizens born abroad and provides no information about legal immigration status. The census also provides only a snapshot of the population every ten years, rather than the connected series of data over time that is needed to understand the dynamic process by which immigrants adapt. Although census data provide a limited capacity to compare foreign-born groups by the number of years they have lived in the United States, they do not allow researchers to examine the individual and family dynamics that are critical for answering such basic questions as how immigrants move into better jobs. Finally, the census does not cover immigrants who have returned to their home countries. Data about such individuals can indicate which support services are effective and which are not. They can also help develop a consensus about whether and when interventions are needed.

**The Current Population Survey** (CPS) has been used to estimate immigrants’ labor force participation and family income. But because so few immigrants are included in each survey, analysts must combine information for several different years. Combined with some of the flaws noted for census data, this makes CPS data largely inadequate for understanding the adaptation process.

**National sample survey efforts**, such as the General Social Surveys, the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Participation, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and High School and Beyond, often collect data on useful topics, but they rarely include enough immigrants for meaningful analysis. The Survey of Income and Program Participation, the Survey of Income and Education (SIE), and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics also suffer from inadequate numbers of immigrants in their samples.

**A Pilot Survey**

Existing data sets cannot guide immigration policy. Although their collection efforts could conceivably be changed to provide more useful data on immigrants, an entirely new survey—designed specifically to give policymakers the information they need—would be more effective. Such an effort is clearly the best way to obtain data on large samples of immigrants at several points in time. It would also be a very effective way of addressing the problems of language and immigrant-specific data present in most current surveys.

Some have argued, however, that a large-scale survey of immigrants—particularly one that seeks to describe changes over time—may not be feasible. And indeed, such an effort would pose special problems, such as identifying immigrant households, overcoming language barriers, and obtaining adequate response rates. To see whether these problems can in fact be addressed, we undertook a pilot study: the Los Angeles
Community Survey (LACS), conducted in 1991, covering Salvadorans and Filipinos. These populations are especially interesting because they are expected to grow in the long term, include recent arrivals as well as long-time residents, and have not been extensively studied. The survey itself focused on immigration status, employment experiences, service use and needs, tax contributions, economic transfers among family members (including those back in the home country), language ability and use, and educational expectations and achievements.

Our pilot effort faced many of the same challenges that a national survey would confront, though on a smaller scale: recruiting and training bilingual staff, identifying neighborhoods where populations of interest are concentrated, developing and testing culturally appropriate instruments, identifying individuals who qualify for the sample (which we accomplished using a short, separately administered screener), and locating the same respondents again for a second interview (in our case, this was the main survey, which we administered two to three months after the screener).

Encouraging Results

There are, of course, real differences in size, duration, and cost between our pilot study and a national survey. Even so, the LACS demonstrates that a survey designed specifically to provide useful data on immigrant families and their adaptation processes, though challenging and expensive—LACS costs totaled $545 per completed interview—is indeed feasible. Our pilot study, for example:

- Obtained useful information for targeting high-concentration sample areas beginning with eleven-year-old census data. (The 1990 census data were not yet available.)
- Successfully recruited and trained bilingual survey staff.
- Enlisted the cooperation of Filipino and Salvadoran respondents at acceptable rates. (Our refusal rates—5 percent for the Salvadoran sample and 8 percent for the Filipino sample—are comparable to those commonly obtained on personal interviews in urban settings.)
- Elicited responses to sensitive questions, including immigration status, that are critical for developing and assessing policy. (Item nonresponse was comparable to general population surveys, even on sensitive questions, and under 5 percent for most items. Interviewers felt that respondents were remarkably honest in reporting immigration status.)

Success under these conditions strongly implies that a larger national effort is feasible.

Design Considerations

If such a national effort is mounted, what should it look like? Although many concerns would have to be considered in designing such an effort, we believe that special attention should be paid to four key aspects.

Describing Change over Time

The survey should track the experience of immigrants in the United States over time, analyzing effects on the people themselves as well as on their host communities. This requires either a panel survey (interviewing the same individuals at two or more different points) or repeated cross sections (interviewing a new set of individuals every time).

Analytic Tradeoffs. Each method offers unique advantages. Studying the changes that individuals experience requires a panel design. Likewise, changes across generations are best studied when information on different generations is collected within the same families. In practice, these advantages are substantial. For example, cross-sectional surveys might seem to show rising income levels for a cohort, even if this simply reflected the retirement or death of older members and the higher wages of younger members in successive examination. A panel study can reveal the difference. Repeated cross sections, on the other hand, may be more useful for studying the changes that take place in a city or neighborhood; since each new set of respondents can represent a random sample of the area surveyed, this design can better detect, say, an influx of new immigrant groups.

Cost Considerations. Panel surveys are often more difficult and expensive. Although the expense of constructing the sample (identifying areas where immigrants are concentrated, finding immigrant households, and persuading individuals to take part) is all in the first survey round, all later rounds involve tracking: finding the first-round respondents so they can be interviewed for later rounds. For some immigrant populations, highly mobile and less likely to be reached by telephone for follow-ups, tracking is a major concern. Migrant workers, the undocumented, and those leaving the country may be particularly hard to retain. The LACS found very high mobility among certain populations; in the two to three months between our screener and main interview, only 2 percent of the Filipino sample moved, but 11 percent of the Salvadorans did. Respondents were willing to give potential contact information but did not use specially
designed postcards to indicate their new location when they moved.

**Proposed Approach.** We believe that for a national survey of immigrants, designers should seriously consider a panel component, either as a separate new study or in conjunction with one of the current panel surveys. Despite the difficulties, panel data can best answer many of the most important policy questions. They can directly estimate effects that have been restricted to indirect estimation in the past, such as how long immigrant households depend on public support, enabling policymakers to base decisions on real trends unfolding in local communities. But given the high mobility of many immigrant groups, a national effort should also include successive cross sections, both to avoid the biases created when respondents drop out of the sample and to allow study of changes in specific areas as new populations enter.

**Choosing Target Areas**

Because immigrants represent only a small share of the total population, assembling a sample by randomly selecting households nationwide and then administering the questionnaire only to immigrants would be extremely expensive. Targeting areas of immigrant concentration focuses resources and increases survey efficiency. Surveying cities where immigrants are concentrated is also the best way to understand the true impact of immigration. Nationally, the social effects of immigration are likely to be small; locally, they can be much more dramatic, depending on the size and composition of the local community and the concentration of immigrants there. For a national effort, the choice of what types of cities to survey, and which particular cities, must take these factors into account.

**Selecting Populations to Study**

Any survey of immigrants requires a basic decision: should we sample from all foreign-born residents or only from certain immigrant communities? Focusing on a few carefully chosen groups permits larger subsamples from each country of origin—and allows for useful comparisons. But which groups to survey? Several factors must be considered. Survey designers might choose one group whose migration was motivated primarily by economic forces and another composed largely of political refugees, and compare the two. Language group should also influence the choice. For example, because we conducted the LACS in Spanish, we could have interviewed people from a number of different countries in Latin America. Our Tagalog questionnaire, in contrast, was usable only with Filipino immigrants. A new immigrant survey should probably include a Spanish-language sample and several Asian-language groups. One of the criteria we used to select study populations was the likelihood of additional large-scale immigration to the Los Angeles region. We believe that a national effort should focus on a small number of immigrant groups, chosen to reduce costs and increase policy-relevant findings.

**Overcoming Language Barriers**

Recent interest by the National Institutes of Health in translating English survey items and scales to other languages highlights the validity concerns raised by working with limited-English populations. To yield valid information, the survey instrument must be linguistically and culturally appropriate for the communities under study. Translations, for example, must account not just for the language but for the level of formality used by the specific population. Our experience in translating the LACS English questionnaire into Spanish and Tagalog suggests that bilingual members of the interview team (and, ideally, bilingual field supervisors and researchers) are invaluable in the early stages to identify measurement problems that arise in translating key constructs into different languages. Survey designers must attend not only to what is asked, but also to the equivalence of response categories across languages. We also believe that the different-language questionnaires should be developed simultaneously, not sequentially, so that all the issues of language and cultural variations can be dealt with at once. Making decisions about the constructs to measure without considering how easy or difficult it will be to express them in the various languages can prove frustrating and costly.

**Vital Procedures**

Beyond major design features, our experience with LACS emphasized the importance of four specific procedures in conducting a survey of immigrants.

First, if at all possible, use bilingual field staff from the community being studied. This pays dividends at every stage. In preparing for LACS interviews, for instance, we discovered that the preliminary list of housing units was incomplete; it did not include hidden housing units such as unofficially converted garage apartments. This list, though recent, had been completed by someone unfamiliar with the neighborhoods and who spoke only English. A relisting by familiar, bilingual interviewers brought these hidden housing units into our sample. Interviewers from the communities were also comfortable working in the
immigrant neighborhoods and persistent in their efforts to locate and interview sample members. Perhaps most important, such interviewers can increase survey participation—a vital gain, since nonparticipation could seriously bias what can be learned from immigrant surveys. Cultural norms or an inability to speak English well may inhibit some groups or individuals (e.g., wives) from responding. Linguistic and cultural sensitivity, along with thorough training, can help overcome these barriers. In our pilot, all Salvadoran respondents completed the interview in Spanish. And though 60 percent of the Filipino interviews were conducted in English, interviewers often used Tagalog at first to establish a positive rapport. For a longer-term effort, maintaining the staff to conduct follow-ups and track respondents would provide continuity for respondents and the project.

Second, develop data-collection methods that protect confidentiality—and increase response to sensitive questions. Any immigrant survey should pay special attention to establishing trust between interviewers and participants, as well as assuring privacy and confidentiality. A federal confidentiality certificate guaranteeing protection of the survey information and the respondent’s identity may prove helpful. For the LACS, clustering the sample and interviewers in a few target neighborhoods facilitated efforts to persuade families to participate. Our training emphasized how interviewers should respond when asked about the confidentiality and uses of the survey data. Staff also found that saving the most sensitive questions until close to the end of the interview allowed a strong rapport to develop, making response more likely. Finally, procedures that visibly protect the respondent’s privacy also seemed to help. In asking about current immigration status, for example, LACS interviewers handed respondents a card listing potential responses, each identified by a number, and asked for the number that corresponded to their current immigration status. All respondents answered the question. About 24 percent of the Salvadoran and 3 percent of Filipino respondents acknowledged currently being undocumented immigrants; all Salvadoran respondents who indicated that they were currently temporary-protected-status immigrants also acknowledged that they entered the country as undocumented immigrants. Thus, 90 percent of our Salvadoran sample reported their entry immigration status as undocumented.

Third, adapt questions and procedures to the special characteristics of immigrant populations. In obtaining useful responses, honesty and clarity are not the only concerns; respondents must also have the information needed to answer accurately. LACS included several questions about the family’s current expenses that had higher-than-average missing data, presumably because the respondents did not know the exact amounts requested—and we had not given them the option of providing a range. In general, many respondents had difficulty with questions that asked about the entire household (e.g., family income, use of public services); the respondents were generally comfortable providing answers about their own personal experiences but seemed a less reliable source of information about the entire family. Immigrants tend to live in large families, and their households often include extended family members. Obtaining information about the entire household may require interviewing more than one respondent.

Finally, invest in training and supervision for survey staff. In the LACS, the staff’s performance exceeded our expectations and is largely responsible for the survey’s success. Drawing from the Los Angeles metropolitan area, we were able to recruit three dozen well-educated, bilingual interviewers; smaller communities may have to use less-educated staff. No matter how large the community, however, finding bilingual staff who already have survey experience will prove difficult. This lack of experience can have a noticeable impact on the content and structure of interviewer training programs and the level of field supervision required. The LACS, for example, used as much training time for the five-minute screener as for the one-hour main interview, because we had to spend considerable time both teaching interviewers how to introduce the survey and allaying their own and respondents’ concerns about it. We also discovered some interviewer cheating that, if not for strict validation procedures, could have compromised the sample. As with any survey, a random percentage of each interviewer’s work should be validated by supervisors soon after the interview, and any problems should be carefully investigated.

Conclusions

A new study of the type we propose would require a great deal of time, money, and expertise. Major investments are required in the personnel, advanced planning, and surveillance needed to conduct a survey in immigrant neighborhoods. Bilingual interviewers and immigrant respondents require considerable time to complete interview tasks with which other populations may already be familiar. Addressing ethical concerns about privacy and confidentiality may require more time than is often taken in the course of current survey research efforts; so may allowing for culturally appropriate behavior. As a result of these factors, LACS
interviewers spent close to four hours per completed case to locate respondents and conduct a one-hour interview. This does not include the time for interviewer training or field supervision.

A rough cost estimate based on our experience in Los Angeles suggests that preparing and conducting the initial interview for a survey of 9,000 immigrants in nine sites across the country would cost about $6 million. (This assumes that the survey would be conducted in six high-density and three low-density urban areas, focusing on selected groups of immigrants in each location.) Costs for subsequent years would vary considerably. For a panel survey, they would depend mainly on tracking effort: how much time would be spent locating respondents who had moved since the last interview. For a cross-sectional design, screening costs—driven by the difficulty of identifying each new qualifying household—would be the key variable. In any event, survey costs would be substantial. But they would surely be low compared to the potential costs that immigration may impose, or even to the costs of programs intended to address immigration issues.

For policymakers seeking to understand the effects of immigration on society, even the most extensive survey is no panacea. The issues are so complex, and the concerns and relationships so varied, that no single effort can resolve them all. But at every level, the public debate does need new data. Understanding the social effects of immigration means understanding how immigrants adapt to life in the United States. Only a large, specially designed survey can provide this understanding. By directly examining the changes and adjustments in the adaptation process, a new survey can give policymakers the facts they need to face the challenges of unprecedented immigration.

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This issue paper draws on the forthcoming report Surveying Immigrant Communities: Salvadorans and Filipinos in Los Angeles, RAND, MR-247-FF. Jennifer Hawes-Dawson and Barbara Levitan made important contributions to that report.

Notes

12 L. Greenwell, J. DaVanzo, and R. B. Valdez, unpublished RAND research on socioeconomic attainment and social ties among Salvadoran and Filipino immigrants in Los Angeles.