

CHAPTER 5

The Impact of Racism on U.S. Immigration Past and Present

Words of Wisdom

A broken immigration system means broken families and broken lives.”

— Jose Antonio Vargas

The history of migration and immigration in the United States is one of the dominant forces shaping our experience of race today. While immigration for “white” Europeans has, for the most part, led to a smooth welcome into dominant society, immigrants who are people of color face a more difficult path to acceptance, much less belonging, in our nation. It is common to refer to the United States as a nation of immigrants, but the reality is that immigrants in our nation have been scapegoated, exploited for cheap labor, and treated as second-class citizens for hundreds of years.

The inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric embraced by President Trump’s campaign was in many ways an echo of campaigns against various immigrant groups throughout history. In this chapter, you will learn about the numerous times our nation chose fear and hatred of immigrants over welcome and acceptance. Unfortunately, this has been a cycle that repeats itself time and time again.

Studying the history of immigration in the United States, as well as the laws and customs that changed over decades, illustrates how the concept of “whiteness” has been manipulated to serve those in power. Moreover, a survey of history demonstrates how “white” is less a racial identity, and instead more a privileged legal and economic status that needed to be protected and restricted to the few.

The History of U.S. Immigration in the 1800s

Our nation’s very first immigration law passed in 1790, creating a process to grant naturalized citizenship to immigrants who had lived in the United States for at least two years. The more restrictive requirement, however, was only “free white persons” qualified (*for all intents and purposes, person meant “man”). This also excluded Native Americans, indentured servants, and both enslaved and free Black people from access to citizenship. In 1795, Congress amended the law to increase the minimum residency requirement to five years, which remains today.¹ From then on, the nation continued to grow and receive immigrants looking to start their lives in the United States.

Throughout the 19th century, immigrants arrived in the United States from all over the world, particularly Northern and Western Europe and East Asia. Millions of individuals and families from Ireland and Germany arrived on the East Coast and settled in the East and Midwest. On the West Coast, Chinese immigrants arrived to work “first to work in the gold mines, but also to take agricultural jobs, and factory work” in the mid-1800s.²

Meanwhile, much of the land that currently makes up the southwestern U.S. still belonged to Mexico, making the residents there Mexican citizens or residents. In the 1840s and 1850s, due to President James Polk and the federal government’s actions, wars and treaties moved the border south. As a result, these families never “crossed the border,” the border crossed them. The **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** in 1848 (following the U.S.-Mexico war) won much of the Southwest for the United States, including California, Texas, parts of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Nevada. Six years later, in 1854, the Gadsden Purchase brought what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico into the United States.³

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History cont.

The provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo included safety and protection of: land ownership, language, and culture for Mexicans living in that territory, as well as access to U.S. citizenship. After the treaty was signed, however, many of those promises were broken, and it was difficult for U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry to access their right to citizenship and retain their land. During this time, many Mexican and U.S. citizens freely traveled between the two countries for work and had friends and family on both sides of the border.

Near the end of the 1800s, the welcoming of Chinese immigrants to California abruptly stopped as fear grew that Chinese immigrants were taking over jobs and posed “a threat to society.” Congress passed several laws to exclude Chinese immigrants from the country and society. In 1882, Congress passed the first of three **Chinese Exclusion Acts**, banning additional Chinese immigration. It was not until 1943 when China and the United States became allies during World War II that the exclusion laws were finally repealed.⁴

Anti-Immigrant Policies in the Early 1900s

Immigration to the U.S. from all over the world continued into the 1900s, but two factors led to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment across the country. First, European immigration shifted away from Protestant, Western European countries and increasingly came from Russia, Austria, and Italy, bringing a significant portion of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. Second, the Great Depression caused terrible damage to the economy and wages in the United States.

In response to the first development, Congress passed the National Origins Act in 1924 establishing a quota system to limit the number of immigrants entering the United States. In order to reduce the number of these “less-desirable” Italian, Eastern European, or Jewish immigrants, the law deliberately based the new quotas on census data from 1890, more than 20 years earlier when the majority of immigrants in the U.S. were white Protestants from Northern and Western Europe.⁵

A few years later, during the Great Depression, those in power turned against Mexican immigrants, blaming them for the nation’s economic troubles. President Herbert Hoover led a wide-ranging campaign with the slogan “American Jobs for Real Americans.” White people across the country supported this campaign, as there was near-universal consensus among white people that the category “real Americans” excluded Mexican immigrants. State and local governments not only in the Southwest, but all across the country, conducted the “**Mexican Repatriation**” efforts of the 1930s with support and funding from the federal government. The various agencies involved did not keep consistent records, but historians estimate that around 1 million, if not more, people of Mexican descent were forcibly deported.

The various deportation efforts failed to limit the euphemistically named “repatriation” to Mexican immigrants, and included many U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. Some research says that as many as 60% of those sent “home” to Mexico in the 1930s were U.S. citizens: U.S.-born children of Mexican-descent who had never before traveled south of the border.⁶ Thousands of people of Mexican descent were deported from Los Angeles, where local agencies conducted raids on the Mexican community and other parts of the Southwest. In the Midwest also, Mexican immigrants were removed from jobs and deported, all to make the factory jobs they held “available for white people.” Major companies, includ-

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The hypocrisy of using the term “real Americans” to deport people of Mexican descent:

The United States of America is not the only geographic location with “America” in its name. Indeed, the continents of North and South America have an arguably stronger claim to the term. Many people from Central and South America consider themselves “American” and find it problematic when people of the United States refer to themselves as American to indicate their nationality instead of respecting the name of the continent. We at NETWORK often write out “people of the United States” to avoid the incongruity of calling some people “American” but not extending the term to others who also fit that category. In the case of forced deportations of Mexicans who are also residents of “the Americas,” the irony is doubly cruel.

Read more at Affinity Magazine:

<http://affinitymagazine.us/2016/11/02/reminder-the-united-states-is-not-america/>

[us/2016/11/02/reminder-the-united-states-is-not-america/](http://affinitymagazine.us/2016/11/02/reminder-the-united-states-is-not-america/)

Anti-Immigrant Policies cont.

ing Ford, U.S. Steel, and the Southern Pacific Railroad, colluded with the government by laying off thousands of Mexican workers.⁷

In 1935 a similar repatriation effort was instituted for Filipino immigrants after the Tydings-McDuffie Act set a plan for the Philippines to become an independent country. The Act also instituted a new immigration quota of only 50 Filipino immigrants per year. (Previously, when the Philippines was a United States colony, the U.S. government classified Filipino immigrants as “nationals” and immigration to the U.S. was unrestricted.) Facing much less coercion than the Mexican repatriation efforts, only about 2,000 immigrants voluntarily chose to return to the Philippines.⁸

Other policies, outside of immigration policy negatively affected the lives of immigrants and people of color. The Wagner Act of 1935, previously mentioned as a contributor to the racial wealth and income gap, excluded farm workers and domestic workers, many of whom were Latinx or Asian immigrants, as well as Black workers. This policy harmed Black workers and immigrant workers by prohibiting them from receiving the benefits of organizing and creating unions. Additionally, other policies that contributed to the racial wealth gap also disproportionately affected immigrant communities and the descendants of immigrants, including the National Housing Act, the Federal-Highway Act, subprime loans, and the war on drugs.

A Nation that Welcomes Immigrant Labor, But Not Immigrants

A noticeable pattern emerges throughout our nation’s history of immigration: when the economy needs immigrant labor, restrictions decline and immigrants are welcomed into the country. However, if circumstances change and immigrant labor is no longer needed, the U.S. position on immigration shifts to restriction, deportations, and xenophobic rhetoric.

Immigration to the East and West coasts was welcomed throughout the first century of the United States’ existence as it provided laborers and settlers to populate the vast states and territories contained in our new nation. During World War II, there was once again a labor shortage and immigrants were needed to fill the gap. In 1942, the “**Bracero**” program was created. Temporary workers were welcomed in, mainly from Mexico but also Barbados, the Bahamas, Canada, and Jamaica, to work in agriculture. Workers through this program were not eligible for permanent residency in the United States, and working conditions were awful for immigrants. These temporary workers were paid very little and their children were not allowed to attend public schools. Farmers used the program long after the war ended because farmworkers were not allowed to form unions or organize, allowing employers to pay their workers as little as they wanted. Congress ended the program in 1964, though other forms of temporary worker visas continue to this day.⁹

Finally, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, Congress passed immigration legislation ending the old quota system in 1965. The **Immigration and Naturalization Act** replaced the previous quota system with “a preference system based on immigrants’ family relationships with U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents and, to a lesser degree, their skills.”¹⁰ The framework of an immigration system laid out in this law is still the basis of our immigration system today. This 1965 immigration law did much to remedy the shortcomings of the racist quota system and usher in immigration based on family unification. However, our laws are still woefully outdated.

Challenges Facing Immigrants Today

Just by glancing at the front page of nearly any newspaper, it is clear that our current system fails to meet today's immigration reality. Despite the fact that the majority of visas are granted to family members of citizens and legal permanent residents, even those with family connections experience unreasonable wait times to immigrate to the United States. Immigrants from the four countries with the longest wait times (Mexico, India, China and the Philippines) can face wait times of more than 20 years depending on family relationships, employment status and other factors.

The issue of wait times is separate from the current crisis of asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border. Violence and instability in Central American countries, including Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, cause many to leave their homes without the time or resources to immigrate through family or employment-based immigration channels. Instead, they are making the difficult journey to the U.S.-Mexico border and presenting themselves to border officials as asylum-seekers. It is legal under U.S. and international law for families and individuals seeking asylum to come into the United States for a determination of eligibility. The Trump administration's recent policies to indiscriminately close the border or require asylum seekers to remain in Mexico contradicts our laws and puts people into very dangerous situations, which have led to deaths of migrants at the border.

While the majority of immigrants have legal residency in the United States or have become naturalized citizens, immigrants who are undocumented in the United States experience significant challenges to provide for themselves and their families. Undocumented individuals face uncertainty in every aspect of their lives and endure barriers to employment, healthcare, and other necessities. While the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans) programs proposed by the Obama administration raised hope of security for some undocumented individuals, those hopes were never fully realized. The Supreme Court declared that DAPA was unconstitutional and it never went into effect, while DACA has faced legal challenges and attacks from the Trump administration over the past few years.

Meanwhile, immigration enforcement in the United States has been responsible for cruelly separating immigrant families through detention and deportation. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, also known as "ICE" was created in 2003, as part of the national response to the September 11 attacks. Throughout President Obama's two terms, ICE conducted more than 2 million immigrant removals, more than any other president until that time. Now, President Trump's administration has implemented changes to ICE tactics, upping the number of raids and deportations and made them crueler. Under the Obama Administration, undocumented immigrants in "high-priority categories," including gang members, people with felony convictions, and those who posed security threats were prioritized for deportation while law-abiding undocumented immigrants, especially long-time residents and relatives of U.S.-citizens were mostly exempt from deportation. It is now common for people who have lived in the U.S. for decades and parents of U.S.-citizen children to be separated from their families and deported.

The origin of this cruel immigration enforcement system was the 2003 decision to create ICE and move immigration under the purview of the new Department of Homeland Security. This shift was one of the factors that shaped a more critical view of immigrants and immigration and criminalized undocumented immigrants for the first time. This was

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Words of Wisdom

...no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land"

— Warsan Shire, "Home"

Challenges cont.

a marked difference than in the past when immigration had been overseen by the Department of Labor and immigrants were seen as positive contributors to our nation and economy.

Since the beginning of the Trump administration, verbal attacks against immigrants from other countries have frequently been broadcast from President Trump and other members of his administration. Whether disparaging the countries many immigrants come from, or arguing in favor of the Muslim ban, messages degrading immigrants who are people of color are coming from our nation's highest office. Overall, the majority of people in the United States disagree and believe that immigration is a good thing, and less than a quarter, only 24%, of people supported cutting immigration. A survey by the Pew Research Center showed that "since 2001, the share of Americans who favor increased legal immigration into the U.S. has risen 22 percentage points (from 10% to 32%), while the share who support a decrease has declined 29 points (from 53% to 24%)." ¹¹

For more than a decade, Congress has talked about passing comprehensive immigration reform with no legislative success. It is past time for our immigration system to reflect and respond to the current realities of immigration in our world.

A Personal Encounter with Racism against Immigrants

At NETWORK, we are proud have immigrants and the descendants of immigrants in our Spirit-filled network of activists. We advocate for policies that welcome immigrants and fulfil our faith teaching to "love our neighbor" and support for family unity, as well as understanding and appreciation of immigrant communities.

Because there have not been any reasonable updates to our immigration system over the past decades, today, our system is broken. Millions of individuals face the struggle of being undocumented in the United States. Many undocumented people have lived in the United States for years, and have spouses, children, and extended family here. Approximately 16 million people in the U.S. live in mixed-status homes, and our nation's policies are not keeping up with that reality.¹² Instead, they punish the children and family members of undocumented immigrants, even if those family members are U.S. citizens themselves.

One such family, members of our Spirit-filled network, lives in Ohio. When Adriana (names changed for protection) went to the DMV to get her drivers' permit, she was unable to do so because of her mother's undocumented status. Not only that, but Adriana, who was born in the United States, was accused of faking her birth certificate, social security card, and other documents. Their story was chronicled by reporters from the local paper.

Read the full account, through Adriana's eyes, here:

<https://www.wcpo.com/longform/living-in-the-shadows-part-1>

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12. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2017/03/16/428335/keeping-families-together/>

Take Action

Advocate with NETWORK for just immigration policies that honor the dignity of immigrants and the importance of family unity. Visit www.networklobby.org/immigration for the latest updates and ways to advocate.

We Pray

Oramos, por un mundo sin violencia, por los que no tienen voz, oramos por que se respete la dignidad de las mujeres, para que los niños puedan compartir una comida digna con sus padres.

Oramos por los trabajadores del campo, para que sean tratados como seres humanos, para que puedan tener un sueldo justo, oramos por los que luchan cada día en la campaña por Comida Justa, por los aliados que marchan junto a los trabajadores y exigen justicia.

Oremos por aquellos que con su fe, creyeron en la voz de los trabajadores y sin dudarlo nos apoyaron, y nos vieron como hermanos y seres humanos, y siguen luchando para que las corporaciones tomen responsabilidad y respetar a los trabajadores.

Oramos por los líderes de fe conscientes, que con su fe nos dan esperanza a los trabajadores y juntos construir un mundo de justicia e igualdad, estamos agradecidos por su apoyo, y ayudarnos a mantener viva la fe, celebramos juntos las victoria que hemos tenido, y hemos creado el Programa de Comida Justa, la cual nos da a los trabajadores la oportunidad de reportar los abusos que antes enfrentábamos, que las mujeres por primera vez, no tenemos que cargar con el peso de la violencia sobre nuestras espaldas.

Seguimos orando para que la expansión del modelo del programa llegue a más trabajadores, ya que es una solución a los abusos que los trabajadores enfrentan diariamente.

Oramos para que la explotación laboral no siga afectando a las personas de color, a los migrantes, ni a los seres humanos en general, oramos para que la desigualdad no siga existiendo.

Oramos para que los que dirigen las corporaciones no tengan un corazón lleno de avaricia, y sean más tolerantes con la humanidad, que tengan conciencia y puedan ver como sus malas decisiones afectan a sus semejantes, a sus hermanos en Dios, que somos los trabajadores.

Amén.

Translated in English on next page

We pray for a world without violence and for those whose voices are not heard. We pray for the respect of the dignity of women. We pray that children can share a dignified meal with their parents.

We pray for farmworkers: that they be treated as human beings, that they receive a just wage. We pray for those who fight every day in the Campaign for Fair Food, for the allies who march together with farmworkers and demand justice.

Let us pray for those who, with their faith, believed in the voice of farmworkers and without doubting it, supported us. Let us pray for those who saw us as siblings and fellow human beings, and who keep pushing for corporations to take responsibility and respect farmworkers.

We pray for the conscious faith leaders, who with their faith give us hope as farmworkers that we can build a world of justice and equality. We are grateful for their support and the way they help us keep our faith alive. Together we celebrate the victories we've won. We celebrate the Fair Food Program, which gives us as farmworkers the opportunity to report abuses that we faced for years. For the first time, women don't have to carry the burden of violence on our backs.

We also pray for the expansion of the program to reach more workers, as a solution to the abuses workers face daily.

We pray that labor exploitation no longer affects people of color, migrants, or human beings in general. We pray that inequality no longer exists.

We pray that those leading corporations do not have hearts full of greed and that they are more tolerant of humanity, that they have a conscience and they can see how their bad decisions affect others, their siblings in God, who are the workers.

Amen.

Written by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers Women's Group

Reflection Questions

1. Which parts of the history of immigration in the United States were unfamiliar to you, if any? Had you been told a different story?
2. Do your ancestors have an immigration story? How is it similar or different to the history you read here?
3. How did "whiteness" shape the trajectory of different groups of immigrants in the United States?
4. Do you hear anti-immigrant rhetoric in your daily life? What argument against immigration is repeated most? Mindful of the "big picture" of the history of immigration in the United States, how could you respond?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Read

- “How a shifting definition of ‘white’ helped shape U.S. immigration policy”
September 16, 2017

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/white-u-s-immigration-policy>

This article from PBS illustrates how tactics used by government officials to separate people by perceived “whiteness” has changed our notion of what it means to be white, and what that looks like for our immigration policies.

- “America’s Forgotten History of Illegal Deportations”
March 6, 2017

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/americas-brutal-forgotten-history-of-illegal-deportations/517971/>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the U.S. government conducted unconstitutional raids and deportations against Mexican immigrants, known as “Mexican repatriation.” This Atlantic article gives insight into that history, and what it means for immigration policy today.

Watch

- Infographic on the History of U.S. Immigration
July 4, 2017

<https://kathleenkoyal.com/2017/07/04/usimmigration/>

This infographic from Kathleen Koyal traces the history of immigration policy in the U.S., starting with colonialization and ending in the present day.

Listen

- “Fresh Air: America’s Forgotten History of Mexican-American ‘Repatriation’”
September 10, 2015

<https://www.npr.org/2015/09/10/439114563/americas-forgotten-history-of-mexican-american-repatriation>

This episode of NPR’s Fresh Air delves into the history surrounding Mexican “repatriation” — returning people to their native country. The impetus for these mass deportations was fear and racism, and the episode explains it in the context of 1920s and 1930s history.