

# DIFFERENT TAKES



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## 10 Reasons to Rethink the Immigration-Overpopulation Connection

by Priscilla Huang

**Editors' Note:** Priscilla Huang, policy and programs director for the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, examines the past and present rhetoric of the U.S. anti-immigrant movement, which, she argues, unfairly paints immigrants as conniving, resource-gobbling drains on the economy and environment. She debunks these ideas by giving readers ten reasons to rethink the immigration-overpopulation connection.

— Co-editors Elizabeth Barajas-Roman & Betsy Hartmann

Immigrant scapegoating is not new, especially during times of economic crisis. By drawing an arbitrary distinction between “deserving” citizen populations and “undeserving” immigrant ones, it’s easy to accuse immigrants of wasting precious taxpayer dollars, overloading our health care and education systems and depleting our natural resources. Thus, when President Obama announced his domestic policy priorities—economic recovery, health care reform, climate change and immigration reform—it became clear that immigrants, and immigrant women in particular, have their lives and bodies at stake in these policy debates. Progressives must prevent immigration restrictionists and population control proponents from capitalizing on mainstream concerns about the economy and the environment to further their own xenophobic and anti-feminist agenda. An examination of the history and rhetoric of the nativist anti-immigrant movement reveals that scapegoating provides a convenient cover for curtailing U.S. population growth within communities of color and controlling the reproductive autonomy of all women.

**1 The movement to restrict immigration has eugenic origins and continues to be driven by nativist beliefs.**

Restrictions on U.S. immigration originated with the Page Law of 1875, a law that severely inhibited the entry of women from China seeking to join their laborer husbands in the U.S. The late 19th century also marked

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the beginning of the infamous eugenics movement which sought to limit childbearing by socially “unfit” and deviant women through coercive family planning policies. Immigrant women, poor women, and women of color were among those considered unfit for motherhood, and subject to forced sterilization and involuntary confinement.

The early 1900s saw the birth of the U.S. conservation movement, which infused calls for wildlife protection with anti-immigrant rhetoric. Viewed as foreign “invaders,” immigrants were cast as a major threat to the natural balance of the environment. These views were exacerbated in the late 1960s when the Sierra Club published *The Population Bomb* and a number of organizations emerged to address so-called overpopulation concerns. Today, the anti-immigrant movement maintains connections with eugenics proponents and is led by men with known ties with white supremacist groups.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 “Anchor babies” are a myth.

An “anchor baby” is a term used by immigration restrictionists to describe the U.S.-born children of immigrant women. Proponents of this myth believe that immigrant women are financially driven to give birth to children within U.S. borders in order to reap the public services and privileges available to citizens, which include the ability to sponsor, (i.e. “anchor”), the immigration of family members.

In reality, although immigration rates have increased since 1996—the last time that Congress imposed a set of restrictions that severely curtailed immigrant eligibility for public benefits—enrollment and participation rates in Medicaid, SCHIP and the Food Stamp Program have declined among non-citizens since that year.<sup>2</sup>

## 3 Immigrant women do not strain U.S. public benefits.

The accusation that immigrant women enter the U.S. to give birth and take advantage of taxpayer money is unfounded. Undocumented immigrants (i.e. non-citizens who overstay their visas or enter the U.S. unauthorized) have never been eligible for most public benefit programs; less than one percent of households headed by an undocumented immigrant receive cash assistance, compared to five percent of U.S.-born households.<sup>3</sup> In addition, utilization rates for Medicaid and cash-assistance programs are lower even among eligible immigrants than they are for their

citizen counterparts. This is especially true in “mixed-status” households—where citizen children live with at least one non-citizen parent. Despite being eligible for public benefit programs, children in mixed-status families are two times less likely than children with citizen parents to be enrolled in such programs.<sup>4</sup>

## 4 Chain Migration Doesn’t Exist.

“Chain Migration” is another derogatory term used by immigration opponents to promote a xenophobic agenda. The phrase mischaracterizes the slow-moving and complicated mechanism for sponsoring individual family members through the U.S. family-based immigration system as one that allows large groups of immediate and extended family members to enter the U.S. in a short amount of time.

Current bureaucratic backlogs to the family-based immigration system make it impossible for chain migration to be true. Currently, spouses, children, parents and siblings of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents must wait up to 22 years before they can enter the country and reunite with their loved one. In fact, studies have determined that on average, a new immigrant will sponsor just 1.2 dependents in his or her lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Thus, findings such as the General Accounting Office’s (GAO) report that “massive chain migration is generally not occurring” are not surprising.

## 5 Immigration opponents care less about the numbers, and more about limiting who has access to U.S. citizenship.

In response to baseless fears of anchor babies and chain migration, conservative lawmakers have repeatedly introduced legislation that would dramatically change the American tradition of birthright citizenship. U.S. citizenship laws confer automatic citizenship status to persons born on U.S. soil.<sup>6</sup> However, nativist organizations have spent the last two decades lobbying members of Congress to narrow the applicability of birthright citizenship to the children of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, and exclude millions of non-citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Restricting birthright citizenship has gained such popularity among conservative circles that even 2008 Republican presidential candidates Ron Paul and Mitt Romney voiced their support for ending birthright citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Yet Paul, Romney and other critics have been silent about the practical and legal consequences of creating a class of U.S.-born “alien” children. If

implemented, it seems undeniable that eliminating this right would create an underclass of U.S. born children who are “aliens” in their own homeland—neither immigrant nor citizen, and devoid of a national identity. In essence, ending birthright citizenship would create a new classification that would only apply to the children of immigrant women, who are mostly women of color. Moreover, it is an outcome that would put the U.S. hundreds of years back to the slave era, when the status of one’s birthmother determined one’s status as a slave or a free man.

## **6 Overpopulation stereotypes target immigrant women of color.**

When overpopulation alarmists call for reductions in immigration, they characterize immigrant women as “immoral” and producers of “anchor babies” to bolster their arguments.<sup>9</sup> These accusations compound existing racialized gender stereotypes about women of color as sexually promiscuous “over-breeders” who become pregnant and have children as a means to receive government handouts. Such images repackage the public villification of low-income African-American women in the 1990s who were scrutinized for their child-bearing practices and accused of welfare fraud, and redirect them at Latina, Asian and African immigrant women.

## **7 Race-based population double standards exist within the U.S.**

Although much has been made of the higher-than-average birth rates of Asian and Latina immigrant women, little has been mentioned of the high birth rates of Mormons and evangelical Protestants. In 2006, Utah, which has a population that is over 70 percent Mormon and 8 percent foreign-born, reported the highest birth rate in the country. Likewise, white fundamentalist Protestants who are part of a growing pro-natalist “Quiverfull” movement, are producing families that often have six or more children.<sup>10</sup> Adherents believe that having large families fulfill God’s command to be “fruitful and multiply,” and that the Quiverfull movement represents a strategy for avoiding “race suicide” and building up their political power.

## **8 Homeland security dismantles households.**

When immigration agents in Ohio arrested Saida Umazor in 2007, they found her nursing her 9-month-old

baby. The child, born in the U.S., was plucked from her arms and placed with social workers. Stories like Saida’s were common between 2002 and 2006, during which Immigration and Customs Enforcement engaged in large-scale worksite raids that traumatized communities and yielded few prosecutions of abusive employers.<sup>11</sup> According to a report by the Urban Institute that examined three factory raids in Greeley, Colo.; Grand Island, Neb.; and New Bedford, Mass., the 912 adults arrested in the raids had 506 children among them, three-quarters of whom were under 10 years old. About 340 of those children were born in the U.S.. Post-9/11, immigration enforcement practices rapidly increased in size, scope and severity under the banner of national security yet with minimal assessment or determination of actual terrorist threat. Worksite and home raids, expedited deportation proceedings, English-only laws, and burdensome documentation requirements have created ripple effects of fear in immigrant communities nation-wide.

## **9 Those who seek to restrict immigrant birthrates also seek to restrict reproductive justice.**

Anti-immigrant politicians claim that the legalization of abortion in the U.S. is partly to blame for the country’s “illegal” immigration problem.<sup>12</sup> As former House majority leader Tom DeLay explained, “If we had those 40 million children that were killed over the last 30 years [by abortion], we wouldn’t need the illegal immigrants to fill the jobs that they are doing today.”<sup>13</sup> While immigration restrictionists and anti-choice lawmakers may seem like strange bed-fellows, they both have a common interest: controlling the ability for immigrant women to make reproductive decisions about their lives. Thus, DeLay’s comment and others like his reveal that nativism is a strong unifying theme. This is evidenced by the fact that lawmakers who cast anti-immigrant votes also have a pattern of voting against pro-choice measures.<sup>14</sup>

## **10 Blaming immigrants for overpopulation misrepresents the reality of consumerism and racism.**

The anti-immigration movement exploits legitimate concerns about the environment and the U.S. economy with baseless finger-pointing against immigrants. While it’s true that immigration contributes to U.S. population growth, the relationship between

population growth and environmental destruction is shaped by how we use our resources, not by the number of people who use them. It's easy to blame immigrants, particularly immigrant women of reproductive age, for the declines in our current U.S. economy and environment. But these concerns are misplaced.

## Conclusion

To achieve economic and environmental sustainability, there does not have to be a reduction in immigrant births or a rollback of public benefits. Rather, we must all do our part in reducing unnecessary consumption, and immigrant women and their families come out of the shadows and integrate into U.S. society free of fear, exploitation and discrimination.

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## About the Author

**Priscilla Huang** is NAPAWF's Policy and Programs Director, where she oversees their reproductive justice, anti-trafficking and emerging immigrant rights programs. She is a lifelong social justice activist and has worked for various women's rights organizations. Priscilla was a Georgetown Women's Law and Public Policy fellow, and the recipient of Choice USA's 2007 "Courting Justice" Generation Award. She holds a law degree from American University, Washington College of Law, where she was a Public Interest/Public Service Scholar.

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## Notes

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