

Heaven's Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy

By George J. Borjas

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The U.S. took in more than a million immigrants per year in the late 1990s, more than at any other time in history. For humanitarian and many other reasons, this may be good news. But as George Borjas shows in *Heaven's Door*, it's decidedly mixed news for the American economy--and positively bad news for the country's poorest citizens. Widely regarded as the country's leading immigration economist, Borjas presents the most comprehensive, accessible, and up-to-date account yet of the economic impact of recent immigration on America. He reveals that the benefits of immigration have been greatly exaggerated and that, if we allow immigration to continue unabated and unmodified, we are supporting an astonishing transfer of wealth from the poorest people in the country, who are disproportionately minorities, to the richest.

In the course of the book, Borjas carefully analyzes immigrants' skills, national origins, welfare use, economic mobility, and impact on the labor market, and he makes groundbreaking use of new data to trace current trends in ethnic segregation. He also evaluates the implications of the evidence for the type of immigration policy the that U.S. should pursue. Some of his findings are dramatic:

Despite estimates that range into hundreds of billions of dollars, net annual gains from immigration are only about $8 billion.

In dragging down wages, immigration currently shifts about $160 billion per year from workers to employers and users of immigrants' services.

Immigrants today are less skilled than their predecessors, more likely to re-quire public assistance, and far more likely to have children who remain in poor, segregated communities.

Borjas considers the moral arguments against restricting immigration and writes eloquently about his own past as an immigrant from Cuba. But he concludes that in the current economic climate--which is less conducive to mass immigration of unskilled labor than past eras--it would be fair and wise to return immigration to the levels of the 1970s (roughly 500,000 per year) and institute policies to favor more skilled immigrants.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Many political activists will quickly label *Heaven's Door*, by Harvard economist George Borjas, a vicious attack on America's generous immigration policy. They will have a point: Borjas believes the current level and composition of immigration to the United States does not advance--and arguably harms--American economic and national interests. But they will also miss a very careful argument that neatly places Borjas between the extremes of open-borders advocates and full-scale restrictionists. Borjas, himself an immigrant from Cuba, would cut admissions by about one-third and radically redesign the way in which people gain entry, changing the present system from emphasizing family ties to favoring skills. He bases this reasoning on a series of observations, which he examines in great detail: immigrant earnings lag behind native earnings, there is a clear (and troubling) link between national origin and economic performance, immigration hurts the economic opportunities of poor Americans, and so on. Some readers will think Borjas accentuates the negative; in describing how immigrant skill levels have declined relative to natives, for instance, he downplays the fact that they have risen in an absolute sense. Yet this is an uncommonly clear-headed book on a subject that rouses fiery passions. A country that still considers itself a "nation of immigrants"--and wants to remain one--can't afford to ignore it. --*John J. Miller*

From Library Journal
Borjas is the leading American economist conducting research and writing about immigration policy today. A Cuban refugee who greatly benefited from the political privileges and economic opportunities associated with living in the United States, he provides a comprehensive account of the economic impact of immigration on this country. In framing his argument that U.S. immigration policy needs to be changed, he considers the skills of the immigrants, their national origin, the impact on the labor market, the costs and benefits associated with immigration, welfare use, economic mobility, ethnic segregation, and the need for cultural and economic assimilation. He highlights his discussion by pointing out that the key issues to be addressed are how many immigrants should be admitted to the United States each year and what skills they should have. A marvelous read that should be useful in both academic and public libraries.ANorman B. Hutcherson, Kern Cty. Lib., Bakersfield, CA
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From Booklist
A flush economy has reduced tension about immigration, but the issue may well be raised in the presidential race. So this thorough analysis of immigration patterns by a respected, if controversial, public policy professor from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government may be a timely acquisition. Borjas may be best known for the argument that recent decades' entrants are less skilled than their predecessors; other scholars question Borjas' interpretation of census and other data. In *Heaven's Door*, the author, himself a Cuban immigrant, urges that "facts" about immigration are not useful in making policy; we must decide what we want our policy to achieve before we can decide *how many* and *what kind* of immigrants should be admitted. To set a baseline, Borjas assumes the goal should be improving Americans' economic welfare, in terms of both standard of living and avoiding increased internal inequality. This goal suggests we should reduce annual quotas and give preference to immigrants with high skill levels. One need not agree with this solution to find Borjas' analysis enlightening. *Mary Carroll*

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