

Immigrants can contribute more than mere numbers

Chester Smolski

The job advertisement might read like this: *Wanted — married couple to operate a market in a neighborhood subject to arson and robbery. Hours 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, with no vacations. Must know various languages to serve customers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Benefits include satisfaction of knowing you are meeting needs of immigrants, poor and elderly in neighborhood and, maybe, earn enough money to pay for children's education. Investment of \$60,000 required.*

Few, if any, native Americans would apply for such a job, yet these were the grueling working conditions of an immigrant couple with two children who operated a market in Providence for the past two years before they were burned out. Their experience should remind us of the tenacity of new arrivals to this country to achieve their dreams and the difficult surroundings in which they find themselves. For example, in this neighborhood, fire insurance premiums on their market had doubled in two years and became prohibitive, with the result that none of the \$60,000 loss was covered by insurance.

The Fire Department reported that the blaze was of suspicious origin — a major problem in low-income neighborhoods and of increasing concern throughout the state. Over the past six years in Rhode Island, arson accounted for an average annual property loss of \$2.2 million and 10 percent of all fires, while fires of a suspicious nature accounted for an additional \$2.5 million and 20 percent of all fires. What is not revealed by these figures is the extent of human suffering: the pain, sorrow and, sometimes, loss of life. There was no such loss at this particular fire, but there must have been a disintegrating of the dream of a better life.

There is considerable misunderstanding about the role of immigrants in our economy. Some native Americans are fearful that new arrivals will take jobs away from local people or that immigrants will go on the dole and be a drain on the economy. Actually, immigrants will take work that native Americans will not do themselves, including those in markets and jewelry factories and office cleaning at night. Often the language spoken on these jobs is Spanish, which reflects the wave of immigration from Latin America that has now swelled this population to approximately 10 percent in Providence and six percent in the nation, and making Spanish the nation's second major language.

Recent immigrants will do the menial jobs, but from these entry-level occupations, as a group they move rapidly up the economic ladder. In fact, research has indicated that "immigrants work harder and go farther than native Ameri-

cans." A study recently completed for the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy by a University of Illinois economics professor, who used 1976 census data on 150,000 families, concluded that the average immigrant family catches up with the average American family's income in about 10 years. In a separate study by a Yale University economist, who used the same data, the conclusion reached was that the children of immigrants have a hard time in their early years in school, but make up for it later and ultimately get more years of schooling than children of native Americans.

The impact of this new wave of immigration is felt in certain cities, often in deteriorating neighborhoods, for here are the job opportunities, available housing and social services that help new arrivals adjust to another culture. However, in some cities, immigrants may place a strain on local economies because of their large numbers.

Last year, for example, almost 95,000 of 127,000 refugees from Cuba and Haiti settled in the Miami area and increased an already large Hispanic community. The more than one-half million Cubans, in addition to other Spanish-speaking arrivals from the Caribbean, Central and South America, have pushed the population of Greater Miami from the six percent Spanish-speaking of pre-Castro days to the present 41 percent. Of interest, the Census Bureau recorded no Cubans or Haitians arriving in Rhode Island last year between April 1 and October 1 — the time of the exodus from those two nations.

In addition to the legally allowed 290,000 immigrants per year, plus relatives of United States citizens, certain occupational groups and others that bring an average of more than 30,000 new arrivals each month to this nation, are the millions of illegal immigrants in the country, the majority of whom are found in California, Texas and Florida and more than one-half of whom come from Mexico. Illegal immigration is still a problem that seeks resolution.

Whether these recent arrivals are here legally or not, they come for jobs, freedom and the promise of a better life. Whether it is this pull or the push from their own countries of despotic rulers or the lack of economic opportunity, the arrivals of this generation as well as generations past have demonstrated that they are willing to work, want a better life for their children and give us the strength, diversity and cultural richness which characterize this nation.

The business setback to the immigrant couple in Providence should cause us to ponder the vital role that new arrivals have in our city, state and nation, and the difficulties they endure to make their special contribution to our society.

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