

# **Rejoinder to Daily, Ehrlich, and Ehrlich: Immigration and Population Policy in the United States**

Edward P. Lytwak  
*Carrying Capacity Network*

Albert A. Bartlett  
*University of Colorado*

Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Volume 16, Number 6, July 1995  
©1995 Human Sciences Press, Inc.

In the opening paragraph of their paper, "Population and Immigration Policy in the United States," Gretchen Daily, and Anne and Paul Ehrlich (Daily et al., this issue) set forth succinctly the problems that result from the large yearly increases in the population of the United States. In examining the policy options available to stop the population growth of the United States, they correctly point out that the several alternative paths for reaching zero population growth in the United States that were presented by Bartlett and Lytwak (1995) do not address the specifics of how to implement any of these paths. The intention of Bartlett and Lytwak was to examine the basic quantitative framework that involves the only four variables that can be manipulated in order to change the population growth rate, namely, births, deaths, immigration, and emigration.

Within the given framework, Daily et al. have elaborated some specific policy alternatives and assumptions that need to be examined carefully in the context of these four variables. Although Daily et al. are eloquent in elucidating the problems that arise in the United States because of rapid population growth, their central recommendation is evasive. Their most basic assertion is that "policies for controlling the U.S. population size and composition must be formulated in a global context and inevitably involve consideration of a difficult suite of ethical and practical issues." This assertion (which seems to dominate the United States' population policy as defined by the U.S. Department of State) contrasts sharply with an approach which argues that effectively stopping population growth in the United States is best achieved in a national context where our government has jurisdiction, and where the approach can be based on unique national characteristics such as the carrying capacity of our land, our economy, our environment, our culture and the dynamics of U.S. population growth.

Attempting to achieve a reduction in the growth of the population of the United States by addressing problems such as poverty, economic inequality and the low status of women in "the global context" is genuinely humane, but evasive. The suggestion that we focus attention on "the global context" diverts attention from the difficult choices and

hard decisions that are necessary to solve the problem of population growth in the United States which Daily et al. have implied is "unsustainable." While such diversion may currently be "politically correct," it only postpones the day of reckoning when these choices will be forced on our children; and because of the continuing rapid growth of our population, the policy options that will be available to our children at some later date will diminish with each year that we delay. In the United States today, we have the resources and the political stability needed to address our overpopulation problem. This may be the most that we can do and, possibly, close to being all that we should attempt. Indeed, analysis has suggested that massive foreign aid and economic development schemes, intended to help the people of other countries, have actually contributed to their population (Abernethy, 1994).

The large *per capita* resource consumption in the United States makes it especially urgent that we address our problems without delay, not only for the longterm benefits to all people that will come from a reduction in resource consumption, but also to demonstrate our recognition and willingness to act resolutely to solve our national problem. In so doing, the United States can serve as an example for the rest of the world.

In the United States today we have realistic options to stabilize our population in a manner that respects human rights. The challenge is to anticipate and avoid a situation such as that which arose in the People's Republic of China, where it was finally recognized that the large size of the population, the continuing rapid growth of the population, and the planned industrialization, with the associated increases in *per capita* rates of consumption of resources, would clearly push these rates of consumption beyond the carrying capacity of land. Because of the lateness in recognizing the problem, and because of the intractable consequences of population momentum, merely reducing the fertility rate to the replacement level (2.1 children per woman) would allow the population of China to grow for another 50 to 70 years (Bartlett & Lytwak, 1995). The most humane of the remaining options was to lower the fertility rate to one child per family in order to reduce China's population growth rate to zero as quickly as possible. The most direct way to do this was to restrict human freedoms by mandating no more than one child per family. The alternative was to take less effective action, and thus allow the population growth to continue, so that the necessary reduction in population would be achieved through famine and social chaos.

Daily et al. contend that immigration into the United States could only be "greatly slowed with expensive and draconian measures." In examining the costs and benefits of immigration, they fail to examine adequately the very significant costs associated with high levels of immigration into the United States, as documented by Huddle (1992a; 1992b; 1993; 1994a; 1994b; 1994c) and others.

Any assessment of the costs and benefits of immigration needs to be approached not only in the aggregate but also from the perspective of the parts. In particular, one needs to note that some individuals and groups benefit from immigration and others may not benefit at all. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1990) point out clearly a most important aspect of the trade-off between costs and benefits.

If the United States is going to avoid even more serious problems of overpopulation, its people are inevitably trapped in a zero-sum game; every immigrant admitted must be compensated for by a birth forgone (p.63).

Perhaps the greatest cost to the United States has been the extraordinary effect that immigration has had on population growth. One of the "bottom line recommendations" of Daily et al. is for the United States to have a "completed family size in the vicinity of 1.3 children." We support this position and

urge that steps be taken immediately toward achieving this goal. Fertility in the United States has been close to the replacement level (2.1) since the early 1970s, with a record low total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.7 in 1976. Due at least in part to immigration, the TFR has been steadily climbing since then and is almost at 2.1 in 1994. The noted demographer Leon Bouvier (Beck, 1991) did a computer projection which demonstrated that without immigration, the 1970 residents of the United States and their descendants would grow to a peak population of 247 million by the year 2030. Adding in the immigration since 1970, the population of the United States is already over 261 million in 1994. Projections by Ahlburg and Vaupel (1990) show that if present trends continue, the population of the United States could be as high as 385 million in 2020 and a staggering 553 million by 2050.

From a strictly financial standpoint (primarily that of the middle-class taxpayer) numerous studies on the local, state, and national levels indicate that immigration is an enormous financial and resource drain on all levels of government (Los Angeles County, 1992; New York, 1994; Florida, 1994; Rea & Parker, 1992; Huddle, 1993; Huddle, 1994a; Huddle, 1994b; Huddle, 1994c). A major comprehensive study on the net national costs of immigration into the United States was done recently by economist Donald Huddle of Rice University, who found that the 20.7 million legal immigrants that have arrived in the United States since 1970 have generated, in 1993 alone, public costs of \$44.18 billion beyond the taxes these immigrants paid (Huddle, 1994b). For the U.S. taxpayer, mass immigration has been a tremendous cost that contributes significantly to local and national budget deficits.

Other social costs cannot be quantified so easily, but are equally significant. Daily et al. fail to point out that mass immigration into the United States has produced definite winners and losers. Despite claims that immigration and population growth are a positive economic benefit, many key indicators are showing that while some immigrants and certain business interests are benefiting from continued high levels of population growth and immigration, the poor, minorities, and particularly the low-skilled U.S. citizens are not (Abernethy, 1993a; Huddle, 1992a; Huddle, 1992b). Almost three decades of mass immigration of low-skilled labor has combined with economic restructuring to create a massive surplus of unskilled labor, while at the opposite end of the educational spectrum, the United States has a surplus of Ph.D.s in science and engineering.

Recently released statistics from the U.S. Bureau of the Census indicate that *the number of people living below the poverty level is at an all time high*, with the total share of household income for the poorest 20% of our population dropping from 4.2% in 1968 to 3.6% in 1993. Yet Daily et al. contend that a benefit of immigration is the willingness of immigrants "to do jobs disdained by citizens." A report from a recent conference sponsored by the Urban Institute (1994) paints a different picture of these "jobs disdained by citizens":

Labor Force Reality. The economy might have jobs for the 2 to 3 million welfare recipients who may be required to work by a new round of welfare reform initiatives. But two decades of stagnant or falling wages among low- or unskilled workers will make it difficult, if not impossible, for welfare recipients to find jobs that pay enough to lift them out of poverty. These trends have particularly affected the earnings of black men and low-skilled individuals.

Focusing on black men, the report continues, "Of black men aged 25 to 34, 53 percent (up from about 30 percent in 1969) either do not work or do not earn enough in order to lift a family of four from poverty."

High levels of immigration of unskilled people has certainly been a major factor in the wage depression and displacement that has resulted in Americans not finding the work and wages that will allow them to lift themselves out of poverty. In describing the debate over Proposition 187 in California, Puente (1994) quotes a supporter of Prop. 187, Omar Bradley, mayor of the once largely black city of Compton, south of Los Angeles, "Illegal immigration has placed the African American in the position of having to compete for resources that are few and far between. Animosity and friction are the natural product."

The cultural costs of immigration reflect both problems associated with linguistic diversity in a society that was previously relatively homogeneous and the concentration of most immigrants in large enclaves. The tensions generated among ethnic and minority groups competing for jobs and housing has already sparked violent conflict in Los Angeles and Miami. America is increasingly becoming a nation divided culturally, linguistically, and economically (rich and poor), as the incentives for assimilation are diluted by many factors including the sheer numbers and the clustering of new immigrants (Schlesinger, 1992). In some areas of rapid population growth, such as California, the size and diversity of the population have created problems of scale that have overwhelmed the community infrastructures for educational advancement, criminal justice, medical care, welfare, and other social services.

While we could debate the exact degree by which mass migration of millions of low-skilled laborers has depressed wages and displaced American citizens, the reality that population growth never pays for itself is increasingly evident. Population growth is like a pyramid scheme; the benefits flow from those at the bottom up to the few at the top, but as the pyramid grows larger, those on the bottom have less and less chance of benefiting. So population growth might be said to be "trickle up economics" which works like "Robin Hood in reverse." The increasing disparity between the rich and poor, the falling real wages for most Americans, the common perception of a declining quality of life, the obvious signs of continued environmental degradation, the increasing social conflict, the overcrowding of our schools and the growing dissatisfaction with their educational quality, are all strong indicators of the fact that population growth, fueled by immigration, has not helped most Americans.

Proponents of mass immigration often refuse to acknowledge that there are limits to the educational resources, jobs, homes, and benefits that can be supplied by local communities. These limits are not generally recognized until after they have been exceeded, and after people have reacted with hostility and violence. If the United States chooses to continue the policy of allowing mass immigration, it must be done with a clear understanding of who will pay the costs and who will bear the consequences. The idea that "everyone benefits" from immigration is another part of the "nation of immigrants" mythology that must be carefully examined. Daily et al. recognize the needs for a limit on population size, but when they discuss immigration, they are reluctant to draw the line or to set criteria based on the ability of the United States to accommodate more population growth, or even to take proper care of the Americans who already are here.

Certainly the cost of limiting immigration would be significant, but by all estimates far smaller than the demonstrated financial, social, cultural, and environmental costs of continued high levels of immigration. The interest alone on the \$44.18 billion spent on immigration in 1993

(Huddle, 1994b) would provide sufficient funds to increase substantially the effectiveness of the U.S. Border Patrol.

Equally suspect is the suggestion that regaining control of the borders of the United States could not be done without resort to "draconian measures." Operation "Hold The Line" in El Paso, Texas is proof positive that border control can be done in a cost-effective, humane manner that works to the benefit of law-abiding citizens on both sides of the border (Martin, 1993). The idea that it would be necessary to build a "Berlin Wall" to control our southern border is an emotional "red herring." The border problems that presently exist are directly attributable to the fact that the U.S. Border Patrol is given an extremely difficult assignment with completely inadequate resources. If we have the resources to undertake "restoring democracy in Haiti," why is it thought to be impossible for us to control our own borders? Under the command of the United Nations, the United States is ready to send troops to trouble spots around the globe, so why is it impossible for the United States to stop an unarmed "invasion" across our own borders?

The assertion by Daily et al. that "Historically, disregard of the underlying causes of immigration has led to the spectacular failure of control measures," raises the question of just what period in history are they referring to? Restrictions on immigration between the 1925 and 1965 were effective, and the restrictions contributed greatly to the orderly assimilation of the third wave of immigrants, those who arrived between 1890 and 1925. Failure of more recent piecemeal "reforms" can be attributed to the "politicizing" of immigration for the benefit of special interests, and to the failure of the Congress to appropriate the resources needed to enforce the laws the Congress has enacted. Other countries, including the European democracies, have been able to respond to changing domestic conditions by effectively and humanely limiting immigration.

To say that our borders cannot be humanely or cost effectively controlled is to accept the fallacy that "migration pressures" are like a "hurricane" that cannot be stopped. To say that the United States cannot control its borders is to say that the United States is no longer a sovereign nation. Present failure to control the borders of the United States actually encourages people to leave their homes, families, and communities and to assume the risks involved in illegal border crossings. Those lucky enough to obtain a visa face the conflicts and uncertainties of life in the urban immigration ghettos of our large cities. Once effective control of the borders is attained, the word would spread, and those who were inclined to emigrate would more easily accept the necessity of living within limits and improving life in their own countries. Effective border control would itself be a significant factor in reducing migration pressure.

Another concern of Daily et al. is that limiting immigration and stopping population growth "inevitably involve consideration of a difficult suite of ethical and practical issues." This combination of the ethical and practical provides an excellent framework for an examination of the moral implications of these issues. In philosophical terms, this could be seen as a contradiction between intentions and consequences. The case of immigration policy is an example of good intentions that ultimately generate bad consequences. For example, family reunification was pursued with the best of intentions, but because this policy was implemented on such a large scale it has now become overwhelming. While the intention may be to help a few poor individuals in developing nations, the consequences of liberal immigration policies have been to put a tremendous burden on the people of many American cities. The opportunity to enter the United States has provided strong incentives to families abroad to have more children so that some can emigrate and then send money back to their

families. The opportunity for emigration provides a convenient excuse for denying the existence of limits.

Is it moral to close our borders to the suffering people who want to enter? If the answer is "No" then we have to acknowledge that perhaps one or more billion of the world's nearly six billion people would like to come to the United States. Should we admit all who want to come? What would be the result of adding one or several billion people to the quarter of a billion Americans now living in the United States? If one acknowledges that it is not practical to accept everyone who wishes to come, then we have to set numbers and establish criteria, which means that judgments must be made. Which should receive the higher priority, the needs of individuals who wish to enter, or the needs of the people of the United States, including the legal immigrants who are already here?

Daily et al. paint a realistic picture of the situation in their opening paragraph. "The environmental degradation [in the U.S.] caused directly and indirectly" by overpopulation "is a threat to the future health and wellbeing of all human beings, and cries out for remedial action." They suggest realistically that this present situation "is unsustainable." If our present overpopulation is "unsustainable" and is a threat to the health and wellbeing of Americans, how moral is it to welcome further population increases, either by an excess of births over deaths, or by immigration?

Perhaps the most significant contention of Daily et al. is that "Ultimately, the success of any policy to control the size and composition of the U.S. population will hinge upon alleviation of the underlying causes of overpopulation and mass migration." As long as the standards of living are different in different countries, there will be pressures causing people to want to migrate to countries with higher standards of living. Are we to accept the suggestion that the solution to the problem of immigration into the United States is for us to create an economically homogeneous global economy which removes the motivation for persons to migrate from one country to another? Is it realistic to imagine that an economically homogeneous global economy could be created? Would the economic level of such a homogeneous economy be at the level presently existing in the United States or at the level presently existing, say, in Somalia? Is such a homogeneous economy practical? How long would it take to achieve such a homogeneous global economy? To what size would the U.S. population grow if our present immigration policies were continued throughout the period of time needed to achieve this uniform global economy?

A real question is, how much more growth and development can the finite global environment stand. Goodland (1992) of the World Bank, has examined this question in "The Case that the World has Reached Limits: More Precisely that Current Throughput Growth in the Global Economy Cannot be Sustained." His article begins with an insightful quotation, "Mahatma Gandhi [when asked if, after independence, India would attain British standards of living, replied:] '. . . it took Britain half of the resources of the planet to achieve its prosperity; how many planets will a country like India require ... ?'"

This assertion that the United States cannot effectively limit its own population and control its own immigration policies independent of the global situation seems to be central to the arguments made by Daily et al. It is far from clear how a "determined campaign to improve conditions in poor countries" would "alleviate the

underlying causes of global overpopulation and mass migration." Abernethy (1993c; 199-1) indicates how perceived economic opportunity can lead to increased family size, so it is probable that an immediate effect of massive foreign aid and economic development programs to "alleviate the underlying causes of global overpopulation" could be an increase in fertility rates. While the global situation must be taken into account in the formulation of a national population policy, the global situation cannot be the governing principle in determining what kind of policies should be adopted within the United States. Successful control of America's demographic future, independent of what other nations choose to do or not to do, is clearly a prerogative of national sovereignty and within the capacity of the United States to attain, independent of global conditions.

The paper by Daily et al. contains much information that reinforces the strong case made by the Ehrlichs and many others that we should work energetically to reduce the population growth of the United States to zero as quickly as possible. Yet the paper presents this curious ambivalence in the form of suggestions that the problem of immigration into the United States is part of a global problem for which global solutions should be found.

For many, the strength of *concern* about overpopulation of an area increases with the distance to that area. They worry about global overpopulation, but ignore overpopulation in the United States. Nevertheless, our *ability* to deal with problems of overpopulation of an area is inversely related to the distance to the area. We can deal with our problems much more easily than we can deal with those in distant lands. It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the problem is "them" and not "us." In the end Daily et al. do recommend that "we try to restrict immigration further while doing three additional things." They recommend that the United States should seek to have an "average completed family size in the vicinity of 1.3 children," that we reduce wasteful consumption, and that we try to help improve conditions in poor nations. While these are all worthwhile goals, the latter two are best achieved by *first* stopping population growth in the United States and, so, *should not be mistaken for solutions* to our population problems. The policies recommended by Daily et al. are important, but if implemented, would not in themselves immediately produce zero growth of the population of the United States.

Ultimately, levels of immigration into the United States can be determined by the people of the United States. Ethically, it is the responsibility of Americans to ourselves, to our children, and to the rest of the world, to address the consequences of our own population growth and our large *per capita* consumption of resources by taking the steps necessary to stop the first and reduce the second. Practically, the cost of limiting immigration is a fraction of the annual costs of allowing immigration to continue at present levels. Morally, the United States has a primary obligation to the people, plants and animals that inhabit this country, an obligation that should be honored before we accept the responsibility of trying to solve the overpopulation problems of the other countries of the world.

## REFERENCES

- Abernethy, V. (1993a, October). Jobs, politics, and immigration. *Chronicles*, pp. 47-48.
- Abernethy, V. (1993b). Population Politics: *The Choices that Shape Our Future*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Abernethy, V. (1993c). The demographic transition revisited: Lessons for foreign aid and U.S. immigration policy. *Ecological Economics*, 8, 235-252.
- Abernethy, V. (1994, December). Optimism and overpopulation. *The Atlantic Monthly*, pp.84-91.
- Ahlburg, D.A. & Vaupel, J.W. (1990, November). Alternative projections of the U.S. population. *Demography*, 27(4), 639-647.
- Bartlett, A.A. & Lytwak, E.P. (1995). Zero growth of the population of the United States. *Population and Environment*, 16(5), 415-428
- Beck, R. (1991-92). Immigration: No. 1 in U.S.growth. *The Social Contract*, 11, (2), 106-108.
- Ehrlich, P.R. & Ehrlich, A.H. (1990). *The population explosion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Florida Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. Intergovernmental Affairs. (1994, March). *Unfair burden: Immigration's impact on Florida*. Tallahassee, Florida.
- Goodland, R. (1992). The case that the world has reached limits: More precisely that current throughput and global economy cannot be sustained. *Population and Environment*, 13, (3), 167-182.
- Huddle, D. (1992a). Immigration, jobs and wages: Misuses of econometrics. *NPG Forum*. Teaneck, NJ: Negative Population Growth.
- Huddle, D. (1992b). Immigration and jobs: The process of displacement. *NPG Forum*. Teaneck, NJ: Negative Population Growth.
- Huddle, D. (1993). *The net costs of immigration to California*. Washington, DC: Carrying Capacity Network.
- Huddle, D. (1994a). *The net costs of immigration to Texas*. Washington, DC: Carrying Capacity Network.
- Huddle, D. (1994b). *The net national costs of immigration in 1993*. Washington DC: Carrying Capacity Network.
- Huddle, D. (1994c). *The net costs of immigration to Florida*. Washington, DC: Carrying Capacity Network.
- Los Angeles County, Internal Services Department, Urban Research Section. Moreno-Evans, M. Project Director (1992). *Impact of undocumented persons and other immigrants on costs, revenues and services in Los Angeles County*. Los Angeles.
- Martin, J.L. (1993, December). Operation Blockade: A bullying tactic or a border control model? *Backgrounder*. Washington DC: Center for Immigration Studies.
- New York, Office of State Senator Frank Padavan (1994). *Our teeming shores: A legislative report on the impact of U.S. immigration policy on New York State*. Albany, NY. Puente, M. (1994, November 4). Prop. 187 heightens Black-Hispanic tensions. *USA Today*, p.A7.
- Rea, L.M. & Parker, R.A. (1992, August). *A fiscal impact analysis of undocumented immigrants residing in San Diego County*. San Diego: Rea and Parker Inc.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. (1992). *The disuniting of America: Reflections on a multicultural society*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Urban Institute (1994). *Self-sufficiency and the low-wage labor market: A reality check for welfare reform*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.