Does Immigration Fuel Haphazard Sprawl?

The specter of rapid population growth is often what motivates communities to fight irresponsible sprawl. But some groups have taken this reasoning to a new extreme, and are claiming that U.S. immigration policies are the cause of overdevelopment.

So is immigration fueling sprawl? SGA asked Professors Rolf Pendall of Cornell University and Reid Ewing of the University of Maryland to examine this issue. Their analysis of anti-immigration literature and data the nation’s largest metropolitan areas determined that the answer is no, and here’s why:

- **Anti-immigration groups equate harmful sprawl with all land development, which is both untrue and anti-growth.** Sprawl is a wasteful land use pattern that harms the environment, reduces economic efficiency, and has inequitable social impacts. But not all land development should be considered sprawl. (For a definition and sophisticated analysis of sprawl nationwide see, “Measuring Sprawl” at www.smartgrowthamerica.org) Many development projects have been built in accordance with smart growth principles, i.e. compact development that offers multiple affordable housing and transportation choices, and a minimum of environmental harms (for more info, see www.smartgrowthamerica.org/sghowto.html).

- **All metropolitan areas grew in physical size, regardless of whether they gained or lost population.** Metropolitan areas that did not add more people grew in land area by an average of 18 percent. This includes the 56 metro areas that lost population. According to Pendall and Ewing, *population growth can be blamed for less than one-third (31 percent) of the growth of land area during the last decade.* Other factors, such as the presence of state or local growth management laws, played a far more significant role.

- **Immigration accounted for less than half of the nation’s population growth between 2000 and 2002.** The Census Bureau estimates that natural increase (births minus deaths) contributed 3.7 million new residents to the U.S. population between April 2000 and July 2002, while international immigration contributed 3.28 million new residents.

- **Conclusion: Immigration is not a significant contributor to haphazard sprawl.**
Immigration’s Positive Effects on Urban Growth

Contrary to what anti-immigration groups contend, there is substantial evidence that immigration is revitalizing cities, a key goal of smarter growth:

- **Immigrants settle predominantly in the nation’s most compact urban areas**, where they inject new life and vitality into formerly declining or abandoned neighborhoods. The main "gateway" metropolitan areas—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Miami, and Washington, DC—are notably more compact than most other metropolitan areas in the United States. These metros also score fairly high on other indicators of compactness (for more information about how sprawl is measured, see www.smartgrowthamerica.org/sprawlindex/sprawlreport.html).

- **Metro areas with high foreign-born populations in 1990 lost less density** in the 1990s than those with low foreign-born populations. In a recent analysis published by the Brookings Institution, the percentage of foreign-born residents is the single most important factor in determining the degree to which metropolitan areas are sprawling (for more info, see Who Sprawls the Most? How Growth Patterns Differ Across the U.S., Fulton, et. al.).

**For More Information**
Professor Rolf Pendall, Associate Professor of City & Regional Planning, Cornell University. Phone: 607.255.5561. Email: rjp17@cornell.edu

Professor Reid Ewing, Associate Professor, National Center for Smart Growth Research & Education, University of Maryland. Phone: 954.786.1528. Email: rewing6269@aol.com.

David Goldberg, Communications Director, Smart Growth America, Washington, DC. Phone: 202.412.7930 or 404.370.1949. Email: dgoldberg@smartgrowthamerica.org.

Don Chen, Executive Director, Smart Growth America, Washington, DC. Phone: 202.207.3355. Email: dchen@smartgrowthamerica.org.