



OPINION

Myth-Busting Florida Report Sheds New Light On Latino Immigration

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The idea that the United States is a nation of immigrants has been repeated so often that today it is a cliché.

Though it is uncertain when the Americas were first populated (estimates range from 35,000 years ago to 14,000, according to Jared Diamond in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*), archaeologists and anthropologists agree that North and South America were the last continents to be inhabited. Thus, it can be safely said that we Americans are all immigrants.

The first of today's United States to host permanent immigrants was the peninsula now known as Florida. Following Ponce De Leon's first exploration in April, 1513, of the wild land he named *Pascua Florida*, meaning Feast of Flowers (Easter) in Spanish, the Spaniards first established a colony at Pensacola, which quickly failed.

The first permanent European settlement, San Agustín (later Saint Augustine) did not appear until 1565. The city was founded [by the Spanish admiral Pedro Menéndez de Aviles](#) on September 8, 1565. Menéndez first sighted land on August 28, the feast day of Augustine of Hippo, and consequently named the settlement San Agustín; 20 years before the first English settlement at Roanoke Island, in the Virginia Colony (today's North Carolina). Thus, it can be said that the first immigrant state is Florida.

This early tradition of immigration continues today. Florida is one of the top-ranking states in its rate of immigration and in the assimilation of its immigrant population, offering us an early glimpse into the impact and effects of immigration today, both legal and illegal, on the United States as a whole.

According to a report released this week by Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, and published in [The Miami Herald](#), foreign born residents make up nearly a quarter of Florida's workforce, and "also receive less public assistance and government healthcare benefits than their native-born neighbors..."

Produced by FIU's Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, the report sheds new light on the impact of the immigrant population on the state, according to Emily Eisenhauer, one of its authors. The report uses data obtained from the US Census Bureau, and includes figures on both legal and illegal immigrants. The USCB estimates that Florida's illegal population is somewhere between 850,000 and 1,000,000. The state's total population currently is approximately [18,100,000](#).

Contrary to popular myths about immigrants, the study found that "Immigrants contribute significantly to state and federal coffers but receive fewer government benefits than native-born individuals. Immigrants, legal and illegal, receive on average \$1,619 per capita in public assistance like Social Security, food stamps and welfare, while non-immigrants average \$2,217 annually.

The imbalance goes up when Medicare and Medicaid are factored in: Immigrants get \$3,256 in health benefits on average, compared to nonimmigrants, who average \$3,873.42. Some reasons for the gap, said Eisenhauer: Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for some programs, and others may have difficulty obtaining social services."

The largest single group of Florida immigrants, as everyone knows, is Cuban: 21%. But the fastest *growing* immigrant population in Florida (as it is throughout the USA) is the Mexicans, increasing by nearly 50% between 2000 and 2005, the period of the study.

As a point of comparison, in 2005 (the last year for data), according to the [Migration Policy Institute](#), the foreign-born populations of California, New York, Florida, and Texas, the four states with the largest such groups, were, respectively: 27.2%, 21.4%, 18.5%, and 15.9% of their total populations.

What are the implications of these findings for the rest of the United States? In a [press release](#) dated June of 2006, the American Political Science Association notes, "The fight...over who is an American, and what constitutes 'American-ness,' is and has been an ongoing one for virtually the entire history of the United States."

The Quincy, Massachusetts [Patriot Ledger](#) notes in an editorial, "The percentage of immigrants in the population is no larger than it was a hundred years ago but the demographic is vastly different. Most new immigrants, legal and illegal, are Spanish-speaking, hence the proliferation of Spanish-language signs across America, not just in Texas, Arizona and other border states."

This, of course, is one of the phenomena associated with the Latino immigration that most rankles the native-born folks. It also gives rise to the myth that these immigrants are not learning English as quickly as previous immigrant groups did. Yet, according to an article in [The Christian Science Monitor](#), "From New York City to Portland, Ore., immigrants' organizations and volunteer groups are facing intense demand from people desperate to learn the words that will help them win better jobs and decipher the customs and curiosities of American life."

The *Patriot Ledger* editorial concludes with, “As Americans, we are tolerant of other people’s heritage, religion and attitudes. And this country has always fostered the idea of celebrating different backgrounds within the American framework.

But we must emphasize those shared values - tolerance is one among many - that identify us as a nation and a society. To do otherwise is to invite a Balkanized nation characterized by feuding along nationalistic, ethnic or religious lines. That is not acceptable or sustainable.”

Good advice that we all would do well to heed, for the alternative is the ultimate dissolution of our society into internecine conflict at a time in our history when we have the greatest opportunities for the growth and maturation of our culture.

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After wasting nearly half his life in a career in airline administration, Clavos has finally found his niche as a self-employed used boat salesman in South Florida. He has lived abroad off and on since childhood. Clavos says he's fluent in Spanish, and can annoy waiters and cabdrivers in Portuguese, Italian and French as well. He and his wife are owned by two black cats and are avid boating enthusiasts.