

Column: Immigration is a driver, not a drain on the economy

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The fate of more than 800,000 Dreamers — young immigrants with degrees or in school who were brought to the U.S. as children — has grown more complicated over the past few weeks by President Donald Trump's calls to drastically alter U.S. immigration policy. Having already reduced the number of refugees resettled by the U.S. to the lowest levels since presidents were given the authority to set the annual number in The Refugee Act of 1980, Trump has called for vast changes to America's family reunification policies (or "chain migration" as the President likes to call it), as well as the diversity lottery program.

President Trump and other critics of U.S. policy argue that while the intentions of family reunification and diversity lottery programs may be admirable and just, America can't afford them. But the opposite is true. America is the richest, most prosperous and most powerful nation on earth because it embraces freedom and opportunity and is a beacon of hope across the globe.

A few months ago the Department of Health and Human Services, in response to a March 6, 2017 memorandum from Trump asking the federal government to estimate the long-term costs of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, concluded that from 2005-2014, refugees brought in \$63 billion more revenue to federal, state, and local governments than they cost. Sergey Brin, the co-founder of Google, was brought to the U.S. as a refugee for humanitarian reasons, and went on to help create one of the world's most important companies. Research by the New American Economy finds that refugee families pay more in taxes than they cost within eight years of arriving. Their incomes grow rapidly as they integrate — tripling within the first 25 years. In fact, refugee household earnings are on par with average Americans (\$54,164 per year) within about 15 years after their arrival and reach an average of \$67,000 per year, surpassing average American household incomes by more than 20%, 25 years after arrival.

This past October, Global Detroit released a report with the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy that conservatively estimates total annual economic impact of refugee resettlement in Metro Detroit to be between \$229.6 million and \$295.3 million in new spending. An additional 1,798 to 2,311 new jobs can be attributed, in 2016 alone, to the economic activity stemming from the more than 21,000 refugees in resettled into Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne Counties between 2007-2016. Cities like Southfield — which resettled 4,500

refugees over the last decade —experienced significant economic growth, while violent crime fell 77.1% during this period.

Family reunification and the diversity lottery are critical drivers of our economic growth. Recent research by the Cato Institute — usually the antithesis of bleeding-heart liberalism — notes that family reunification and diversity lottery migrants to the U.S. “are generally much better educated than U.S.-born Americans,” noting that “Diversity and family-sponsored immigrants were 62% more likely than U.S.-born natives to have graduated college.” The Cato Institute research estimates that 47% of such arrivals in 2015 held a four-year college degree, compared to 29% of the U.S.-born population across the country and approximately 24% of the U.S.-born population living in Michigan.⁷

The Cato Institute research documents that diversity and family reunification programs provided 2.5 times the number of new immigrants with a college degree arriving in 2015 than all the work-based visas that year.⁸

Family reunification policies help U.S. citizens and permanent residents to bring their families together to share in the pursuit of the American Dream. Recipients of family reunification visas, “tend to have larger support networks and advantages – social capital – that facilitate their labor market incorporation and provide other benefits for integration,” as noted by 2015 roundtable held at Georgetown University.

Most of us need not look farther than our own families’ ”chain migration” stories to see this point. My paternal grandfather Morris Tobocman worked with his brother Jacob Tobocman to start a business. My maternal grandfather, Wilfred Williams, relied on his siblings to help send him to the University of Michigan’s College of Engineering, and paused his own studies at one point, to provide financial support Jacob Tobocman to send his brother Herman to college. Both went on to become successful entrepreneurs in manufacturing, creating companies that employed hundreds.

The diversity lottery helps America build strong human bonds with countries across the globe, fostering a strong web of transnational ties that support American ideals and foreign policy objectives. The program requires applicants to possess at least a high school diploma and includes an expensive application fee that often restricts access to the most productive and affluent.

The notion that America’s immigration policies — including its refugee, family reunification, and diversity visa — need to be overhauled because we can’t afford them is ludicrous. These programs are foundational to the American Dream. Freedom is a core principle driving our economy. And no country has done a better job of imbuing freedom into its economy than America.

Let’s not allow political rhetoric to destroy that legacy.