

NRC Committee Blasts Immigration Statistics

Congress has been complaining for years about immigration statistics; now a National Research Council panel* has called for a thorough overhaul of the system.

Contracted for by the Justice Department in 1982, the report characterizes immigration as the "Cinderella" of the federal statistical system, existing "in an atmosphere of almost total neglect." Data collection is described as tardy, inefficient, and incomplete, and its inadequacies are seen as a major obstacle to passage of immigration legislation. (Congress has been working on various versions of the Simpson-Mazzoli bill, which was narrowly defeated last year, since 1978.) For example, there are no published figures available beyond 1981, and statistics offer few clues on such basic questions as whether immigrants are aggravating unemployment or overburdening social welfare programs.

Information on illegal aliens is murky, with population estimates of between 2.3 and 20 million. The report suggests a range of 2 to 4 million and adds "there is no evidence to support the view that the illegal population has grown rapidly since 1980."

Immigration information is collected by 11 separate organizations in almost every Cabinet-level agency, but coordination is grievously lacking according to the report. The committee comes down especially hard on the INS which, it says, in addition to being understaffed, demonstrates a failure to grasp the importance of having timely and high-quality data.

The panel, chaired by Burton H. Singer of Columbia University, recommended among other things:

- A 5-year study of new immigrants to supply baseline information on their adjustment to the labor market; social mobility and income; and use of educational and health facilities and social programs.
- The collection of data on emigration, which does not now exist.
- A new division of immigration statistics in the INS.

*"Immigration Statistics, A Story of Neglect," available for \$23.95 from the National Academy Press, 2100 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20418.

- Much better oversight by the Office of Management and Budget to ensure coordination of information-gathering, timely publication, and adherence to standards.

- An annual report on immigration from the Attorney General to the President and Congress.

The report acknowledges that immigration is "an intensely emotional issue" and that "the history of the use of statistics in setting immigration policy is not a happy one." Nonetheless, "without major changes in direction from the top policy-making levels . . . the immigration statistics system will never produce . . . statistics that permit rational decision making concerning immigration policy."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Fresh Data on Stale Air

A long-running debate over the severity of indoor air pollution in the United States, which has suffered from a lack of solid data, may be advanced by recent test results. A study sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicates that air pollution in the home can be greater than pollution outside.

The findings are sure to provide ammunition to the few members of Congress who have pressed EPA to spend more money on indoor air pollution research. The Office of Management and Budget under the Reagan Administration has sought to eliminate funds for research on indoor air pollution, but Congress has appropriated about \$2 million a year.

The study, conducted over a 5-year period by Research Triangle Institute, monitored about 350 people in Bayonne and Elizabeth, New Jersey. The team of researchers, led by Edo D. Pellizzari, measured the residents' total exposure at home, outdoors, and at work to 20 different chemicals. They found that the concentrations of 11 of these were higher in their homes than outside based on monitoring at night. All 11 chemicals, which included the common solvents, trichloroethane and tetrachloroethylene, and several common petrochemical compounds usually found in gasoline and paint, had "much higher nighttime [indoor] concentrations than nighttime

outdoor concentrations, often 10 times higher," according to an interim report of the study. Pellizzari noted that the team also conducted a small study of 25 people in Devils Lake, North Dakota, a rural area where the air is very clean, and found that the concentrations of indoor air pollutants were about the same as in New Jersey houses.

It is important to note, however, that even though the indoor concentrations were relatively high compared to those outdoor, they were still far below federal limits on workplace exposure for the same chemicals. Bernard Goldstein, head of EPA's Office of Research and Development, said that the findings, which have been reported at professional meetings, but not published as yet, confirm recent studies by other countries.

Goldstein said that acute exposure to the levels of pollutants found were not hazardous to human health, but their significance over the long term is unclear. "The study didn't look at potential health effects, so we don't really know what the levels [from chronic exposure] mean," he said. The study also did not pinpoint the exact sources of the contaminants.

The primary aim of the study was to develop better equipment and methods to monitor an individual's exposure throughout the day and measure a person's actual uptake of the pollutants, which Goldstein and Pellizzari say was achieved. For example, the technique to measure benzene in the body is a thousand times more sensitive than previous methods. He said, "We could tell if you filled your gas tank that day," because the technique can now measure levels down to 2 parts per billion. In addition, the researchers developed portable monitoring equipment, which is now about the size of paperback book and can be worn by the participant.

He stressed that even though air pollution can be worse in the home than outside, it is important to take into account total exposure. From a regulatory standpoint, that approach probably makes sense too. If total exposure proves to be a health problem, the federal government would probably have an easier time placing limits on outdoor air pollution. Goldstein said, "I don't know of any Administration that wants to regulate the home."—MARJORIE SUN