

Our Environment

Context for Strategic Planning



An important aspect of the strategic planning process is to gain an awareness and understanding of the environment in which we operate. One of the greatest challenges to strategic planning at USCIS is the ability to forecast accurately the demand for our services. This variable affects both the nature of our workload and fee revenue. World events and the global economy affect our international migration projections, while U.S. economic and political conditions influence domestic interests in immigration, which in turn fuel shifts in federal immigration policy. In assessing our environment, two broad categories of influences emerge as opportunities and challenges for USCIS.

Globalization and its many facets, and the changing demographics of the United States due to immigration are factors that USCIS must consider in long-term mission planning.

Globalization

Globalization affects the economy, demographics, civil society, and security of the United States. An effective and secure immigration system is basic to balancing the challenges and opportunities globalization presents. The United States must recognize it is a highly coveted destination for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and continue to honor its tradition as a nation that values family reunification, promotes economic opportunities, and offers a safe haven to those in need.

For USCIS, this means weighing carefully security and humanitarian concerns and obligations, while also maintaining efficient and effective day-to-day operations so the benefits of immigration can be realized. USCIS is at the forefront of meeting the demand for immigration services, and must be prepared to adapt to changing environments and unpredictable and fluctuating volumes of applications over time.

In the face of the globalization that is transforming our world and as we seek to honor our common civic values and history as a land of opportunity and economic strength, the United States must be prepared to meet internal and external security threats. Events unfolding continents away

may fundamentally impact our basic security. Political conflict, catastrophic infectious diseases, and other natural or man-made disasters can create a climate that facilitates terrorism and persecution, and fuels mass migration both legal and illegal – we must be ever vigilant in the battle against efforts to misuse our immigration system. Catastrophic events within the United States, both natural and man-made, may also fundamentally affect our security. This potential requires effective preparation and mitigation responses to ensure uninterrupted performance of USCIS mission essential functions.

The ability to respond to globalization's many challenges and opportunities requires a wide range of productive partnerships. Integrating immigration, national security, and globalization requires interagency and multilateral coordination of U.S. diplomatic, military, intelligence and law enforcement efforts, and a capacity to act, adapt and react quickly.

USCIS must work effectively not only as a component of DHS, but also with other federal agencies, state and local governments, the private and independent sectors, and other countries. Understanding and influencing public policies relevant to a changing society is a critical task for USCIS and the federal government as a whole. USCIS must be part of broad-based efforts to define and implement an integrated agenda that offers effective long-term solutions to immigration-related issues.

Challenges

- Individuals and organizations intent on harming the United States have become increasingly sophisticated in their methods of gaining illegal entry to this country. USCIS recognizes the need to reduce minimize and mitigate the risks naturally inherent in any immigration system. Necessary background checks should be completed effectively and efficiently, working with our partner agencies to achieve optimal immigration security processes.
- USCIS workload is unpredictable and determined largely by factors beyond our control, including manmade or natural catastrophes around the world. Given this basic challenge, we must develop resilience to ensure timely responses while maintaining the integrity of the adjudicative process.
- A wide variety of motivations create the potential for some individuals to attempt to exploit our immigration system for nefarious purposes. Detecting identity and benefit fraud requires astute policies and procedures along with immediate access to accurate, verifiable data. USCIS is striving to improve our verification tools and interfaces with law enforcement agencies and other public and private entities authorized to verify immigration status, while safeguarding the privacy of individuals.

Opportunities

- Technological advances make possible and economically viable an expanded use of biometric data for identity verification. In partnership with the US-VISIT biometric screening program, we are implementing steps to improve identity management and authentication by ensuring that individuals who may pose a security risk to our country are identified in a timely manner for appropriate action.
- Intra and inter departmental cooperation, part of the purpose of establishing DHS, allows new opportunities for effective mission enhancement. We are in the process of creating a more efficient system for background checks that includes coordination with other agencies to improve the screening process and ensure that only eligible individuals are granted benefits.
- We recognize that a shared sense of civic commitment and understanding of civic values among immigrant populations could help promote and maintain the common good and strengthen our nation. This increased focus on fostering a sense of civic values and rights and responsibilities can reduce risks posed through potential radicalization of segments of the population who may otherwise feel alienated.
- We recognize the significant and ongoing global demand for the opportunities the United States provides to immigrants. To accommodate this demand, we are striving to become a proactive provider of immigration services by using standardized processes and modern technology to facilitate the work of immigration officers and to ensure consistency of adjudicative decisions.

Changing Demographics

The United States has a long history of welcoming immigrants from across the globe. Through the years, there have been ebbs and flows in immigration levels, with some eras described as “great waves” of immigration. Currently, the United States is again experiencing high levels of immigration. Increasing immigration affects the population, demographics, and economy of the United States. It also requires a coordinated federal, state, local, and community-based response to settlement and integration issues. Increases in immigration directly impact workload for USCIS, because of our responsibility for the management of immigration and citizenship benefits.

Immigration is a major contributor to the population growth of the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, it took only 39 years – from 1967 to 2006 – for the United States population to increase by an estimated additional 100 million people with legal immigrants and their offspring constituting a major portion of this increase.¹ The U.S. Census Bureau estimates the share of the U.S. population that is foreign-born rose from 5 percent to 12 percent between 1967 and 2006.² Over the last ten years, the United States has welcomed an average of 900,000 new legal immigrants each year.³ Undocumented immigrants, who enter the country illegally, or enter legally but overstay their visa, also contribute to population increases.



Today's immigrants represent more than 180 different countries of origin.⁴ In recent years, immigrants from Latin America and Asia have significantly outnumbered immigrants from Europe, who were the predominant group in the past. For example in 1960, the leading country of origin for the foreign born was Italy, and in 2006 that country was Mexico.⁵ Along with increasing numbers and diversity, immigrant settlement patterns are changing. Past immigrants tended to settle in major urban areas in California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois.⁶ In addition to these areas, new immigrants are now relocating in record numbers to non-traditional immigrant receiving communities in states such as Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah.⁷ Through all of these changes, the United States must work to ensure its tradition as a civil and cohesive society that honors the rights of all individuals and fosters an understanding and appreciation for the common civic principles outlined in our country's founding documents.

Policymakers will need to consider the dynamics of immigration as they reexamine existing programs and design new programs. Although the regulation of immigration to the United States is the responsibility of the federal government, state and local governments and the private sector play a fundamental role in the social, economic, and civic integration of immigrants. Along with our partners, USCIS will be at the forefront of defining solutions and implementing changes in the immigration system.

Challenges

- The phenomenon of immigration is complex and multifaceted. It affects everyone in the United States in both obvious and subtle ways. Assessing impacts and selecting policy options are different even among experts. The current immigration debate is vulnerable to exploitation of this complexity and the potential for misunderstanding our immigration system. We at USCIS strive to do our part to provide useful information to educate the public and policy makers about the complexities of the immigration system in a manner that addresses their issues and concerns.
- As we adopt greater use of technology to improve efficiency, service, and security, we are aware that these changes affect our customers directly as well. Some customers may lack the computer skills and literacy to interact with the agency. We understand that the modernization of our benefits system should not result in an undue burden on applicants and that the support should be available where required.
- There is a lack of public consensus on the ideal U.S. citizenship characteristics. We recognize that a sound integration program, based on our common civic principles and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, is a cornerstone that could limit the potential of marginalization, “balkanization”, and possible radicalization of segments of immigrant populations.

Opportunities

- While the primary focus of the USCIS mission is the granting of benefits to allow non-citizens to stay in the United States, we recognize that their presence and status is a matter of mission interest to many other public and private organizations. We are in the process of reengineering E-Verify, previously named the Basic Pilot Employment Eligibility Verification System, to improve the accuracy and availability of immigrant status information for employment verification purposes.
- The recent nexus of economic, homeland, and national security interests has provided a foundation upon which USCIS is engaged in an unprecedented re-engineering of the way it carries out its mission. We are seeking to modernize and transform our business processes and to ensure our staff have access to the information, technology, templates and procedures they need to make accurate and timely decisions and to communicate in a consistent manner with our customers even in times of increased workload.
- USCIS leadership recognizes that the complexity of the immigration mission, the importance of that mission to the country, and the modernization of its business processes all demand a highly talented and dedicated workforce. USCIS is committed to recruiting and investing in employees to create and sustain the capability necessary to carry out its mission. We are creating an operational and organizational structure to support the workforce of the future USCIS, with an emphasis on training, leadership development, and integrity.

End Notes for Our Environment: Context for Strategic Planning Section

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Facts for Features, Special Edition, 300 Million, 8/9/06, p 1
2. U.S. Census Bureau, Facts for Features, Special Edition, 300 Million, 8/9/06, p 2
3. DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, p 5, Table 1
4. DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, p 28, Table 10
5. U.S. Census Bureau, Facts for Features, Special Edition, 300 Million, 8/9/06, p 2
6. DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics , p 16, Table 4
7. The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways, The Living Census Series, The Brookings Institution, February 2004, p 5