

Sesno Reports: Press One for English

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Highlight: Audrey Singer, Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, discussed immigration in Washington, D.C.

Body

"**Press One for English**," the latest hour-long episode of the public affairs television show Sesno Reports, brings together policymakers, community leaders and citizens for a town hall meeting examining the trends and implication of immigration in the Washington, D.C. region.

Show participant Audrey Singer, visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, took your questions and comments.

"**Press One for English**" airs Thursday, June 3 at 8 p.m. ET on WETA. Sesno Reports is a public affairs series exploring issues, opportunities and challenges facing the National Capital Region and the nation. The series is hosted by Frank Sesno, veteran journalist, former CNN Washington bureau chief and GMU professor of public policy and communication.

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The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Audrey Singer: Hello all. The Washington region has emerged as a major immigrant gateway in the past 25 years. I'm glad to take your questions on this topic and on immigration issues more generally.

Ashburn, Va.: I'm very concerned about the comments made by the Maryland Governor Bob Ehrlich and his likewise colleague Donald Schaefer about the multiculturalism statements. My question is why isn't our TV media making a bigger indept coverage on these senseless comments? Those comments seem very prejudice and biased. It appears many immigrants I've spoke to in Maryland are not aware of their views.

Audrey Singer: I think there has been a considerable amount of **press** on this topic. It may take awhile for people to hear about it. The important issue is that we want to hear from our leaders comments that are supportive, tolerant

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and inclusive about immigrants and all people who live in the region. Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan and others has made some very helpful comments in this regard.

Washington, D.C.: Why are trends surrounding immigration different here in D.C. -- higher educational attainment, more integration into the local economy, as opposed to places like LA and Miami where most seem to end up in a bizzare, off-the-books existence?

Audrey Singer: The Washington metropolitan area is blessed with a stable, growing economy thanks largely to the federal government and associated industries located here. Immigrants fill jobs at all skill-levels in this kind of economy. Washington attracts the full range of immigrants here, whereas in LA and Miami, the market is saturated, and immigrants and native born alike have been leaving recently. We also get a lot of highly educated international types who work in international agencies.

Emporia, Kan.: It may not be "P C " but isn't any new immigrant to the US who doesn't become English fluent stay doomed to a permanent underclass "serf" or minimum level sector of the labor pool ?

Audrey Singer: I think most people, including immigrants, would agree that English language proficiency is the best way to get ahead in this country. But immigrants who come here as adults say it is often the hardest thing to do once they are here. There is a lot of hope for the children of immigrants who attend our schools, learn the language quickly and go on to lead productive lives.

Washington, D.C.: Just curious: when did this debate begin to focus so much on the "rights" of illegal immigrants, instead of the right (and obligation) of law enforcement to deport them#63; I for one don't really care if they get as little legal process as possible, because it's a bottom line issue. If they are here illegally, they must be sent home.

Audrey Singer: I think the growth of the illegal or undocumented population in recent years has made many people, including federal and local policymakers, business people, and advocates think long and hard about why so many people want to live here in "the shadows." If it were simply a matter of enforcing the border and keeping people out, we could focus efforts there. Despite the enormous sums of money we spend at the border trying to keep people out, there are other forces at work. Employers continue to recruit workers, often directly from abroad, regardless of legal status. Family unification drives many to come who may be in line for visas but are on a long waiting list for green cards. Students come here to be educated, and along the way find job opportunities, fall in love, start families, etc. These processes all contribute to why we have a growing undocumented immigrant population in the United States.

Lincoln, Mass.: How has the influx of immigrants over the past 10 to 20 years influenced growth on the outskirts of metropolitan areas? Some are claiming that immigrants are contributing to sprawl. What do you think about this idea?

Audrey Singer: There are now more immigrants living in suburban areas than in central cities. Some argue that as the suburbs have begun to look more like cities in terms of their population characteristics that this has made native-born whites fearful and they have continue to move further away from the core of urban areas. I don't know if we have proof on this topic yet, but there is plenty of speculation.

Randolph, N.J.: What impact will the growing immigrant population have on the politics in Maryland? Are the good ol'boys such as Gov. Ehrlich already feeling threatened?

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Audrey Singer: Maryland is an interesting state with regard to immigrants and the politics behind immigration there. Although the Gov. made the statements that he made, there are plenty of policies, particularly in the counties with large immigrant populations, that show that Maryland is doing a lot to assist immigrants in integrating into local communities. And Mayor O'Malley of Baltimore has recently opened up an office to welcome immigrants and help them make it in Baltimore.

Washington, D.C.: I watched the show, and had this impression: the panelists who want to see more enforcement of our immigration laws had facts and arguments on their side, while the folks who for whatever reason oppose our immigration laws relied almost entirely on cliches and platitudes about the United States being "a nation of immigrants". How do you think this debate can proceed when one side is so blinded by slogans that it can't actually formulate an argument or confront inconvenient facts#63;

Audrey Singer: I guess I would say that those in favor of continuing immigration and helping immigrants incorporate into American society recognize that immigrants are going to continue to come here and make contributions to US society and economy, so why not make it easier for people to succeed in this effort. They acknowledge that it not without conflict and resistance at times, and in localities, but that we can make it work better.

Seattle, Wash.: Can we expect immigration to help the U.S. cope with the forthcoming surge in seniors as baby boomers retire?

Audrey Singer: You bet. Immigrants, their children and grandchildren are and will be an important component of our labor force. Unlike Western European countries and Japan who are facing huge deficits in labor supply as their population greys, we are admitting immigrants at high enough level to stave this off for now. Who's going to take care of us when we are old? Who's going to fill the treasury in the decades to come?

Boston, Mass.: Our society today is not assimilating new immigrants as quickly as they are arriving. Why is that? Should we be concerned? And what does this mean for our future?

Audrey Singer: If we compare today's immigrants with historical trends, its difficult to know if contemporary immigrants will assimilate in the same way because enough time has not elapsed. In the first decade of the 20th century we admitted almost as many immigrants as we did in the 1990s. We are now several generations away from those Europeans who seem to have "melted" seamlessly into America. But America changed along the way, and it is very likely that the impact of this wave of immigrants largely from Latin America and Asia will also change America. It already has. Should we be concerned? In the grand scheme of concerns about where we are headed, I think we have bigger things to worry about.

Poolesville, Md.: Does the suburbanization of immigrants in this region mean that we have fewer "ethnic enclaves" than other regions where the immigrant population is more rooted in older, central city neighborhoods? If so, does that affect their ability or desire to incorporate more fully into the economy and society?

Audrey Singer: Washington's lack of historical immigration means there are really no residential enclave like NY's lower East Side, Chicago's Little Village. So immigrants arriving here are moving to suburbs that offer opportunities in terms of housing, jobs, schools etc. My research on immigration to the region shows that immigrants are not clustering by national origin, creating pretty heterogeneous neighborhoods.

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Atlanta, Ga.: It seems that more and more immigrants are arriving here with little or no skills. They act as a huge burden to U.S. taxpayers, since these people clearly take away more in services than they add. Why not be prudent and limit immigrants to those with a decent command of English and good skills, as Canada and some other European countries do?

Audrey Singer: Our admissions policy for legal permanent residents (green card holders) prioritizes the unification of families. Its been our prevailing ideology that we keep families together. While we do have provisions for employment and skills-based admissions, they account for a much smaller proportion of permanent entries. We have chosen to use temporary visas, such as H1-B's to admit the highly skilled for temporary periods of time. People have argued that we need this flexibility to keep up with ebbs and flows of labor demand.

Vienna, Va.: Isn't the continuing high level of immigration keeping wages down for lower-level jobs? With the continuing high turnover, what's the incentive for employers to ever raise pay rates? Who can live on minimum wage? Seems like we're going towards a permanent underclass here.

I read somewhere that we'd have a labor shortage if immigration declined significantly. As a workingman, I don't see what's wrong with a labor shortage!

Audrey Singer: My sympathies to the working man, but the reality is we have a Wal-Mart economy where wages are kept low to yield large profits for corporations and low prices for the rest of us.

Harrisburg, Pa.: Baltimore and other communities have encouraged and assisted immigrants to move into marginal neighborhoods, establish a stable community, and reverse the past spread of urban decline. Do you see this as a possibility in other cities, and what needs to be done to allow such efforts to be successful#63;

Audrey Singer: Really, what will revitalize declining communities in cities with dropping population is job opportunities. For Cleveland or Balitmore or Philadelphia to have success in their campaigns to attract immigrants, it should come with some economic development plan as well. Then the available housing and commercial stock that exists and is vacant can be utilized. I do think leadership that sends a symbolic welcoming message is important to this process too.

Washington, D.C.: Isn't the concern about immigrants not learning English a little paranoid? Every time I tune into the Spanish language channels (to watch football) there seem to be an awful lot of advertisements for English language tuition, audio cassette courses etc. Surely if they are beng advertised there must be a relatively large market for them and therefore a desire amongst immigrants to learn English?

Audrey Singer: English proficiency can be low in some communities and there is a large segment of the immigrant population with little formal education from their own country. That said, many of these people are working long hours and don't have much time to commit to English classes. There also is a shortage of local programs for adult language learners. Without a large infusion of federal or local grants to run English programs, many adult will falter. However, their committment to their children's English proficiency is high. Plus the children watch English-tv, go to public schools and otherwise keep up with American popular culture which has a huge assimilating effect.

Audrey Singer: Thanks to all who submitted questions, I unfortunately couldn't get to all of them. Immigration is changing metropolitan areas and neighborhoods in many areas--both established and new--across the country. Learn more about how immigration has changed Washington, D.C .and other metropolitan areas at www.brookings.edu/urban

Classification

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