FAMILY VERSUS INDIVIDUAL IMMIGRATION: A NEW ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of immigration of "family units" between 1990 and 2004. It concludes that additional data on the immigration of families is required.

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At the current juncture, almost all statistics that deal with immigrants are based on the characteristics of individuals. However, in many cases, immigration is a family-based decision. Since very little research has been conducted from the point of view of the immigrating family unit,[2] this article explores immigration from this perspective and attempts to identify some of the salient characteristics of these families.

Total annual immigration (landed from abroad)[3] averaged roughly 190,000 individuals in the mid-1990s, fell off to 150,000 in the late 1990s and climbed to 200,000 in the 2000s. After grouping these immigrants into family units, we find that the number of cases averaged roughly 90,000 in the mid-1990s, fell below 80,000 in the late 1990s and now averages roughly 100,000 a year.

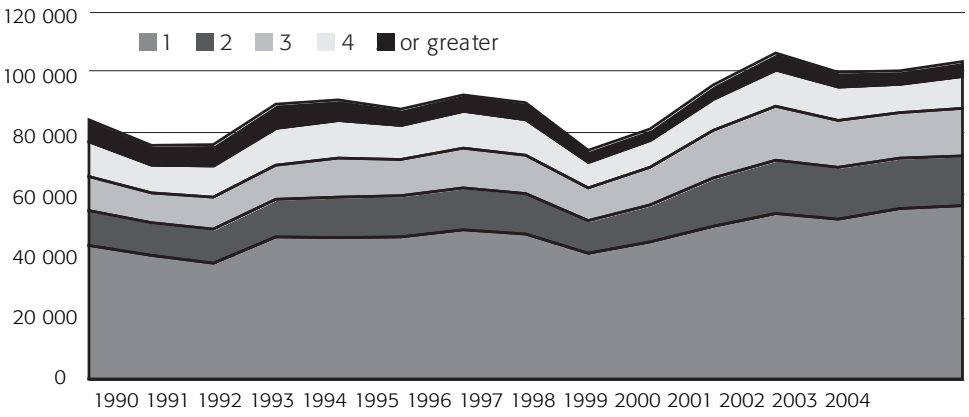
A quick calculation yields an average family unit (case) size of roughly two individuals during 1990–2004, with a trend toward declining case size over that time. Over 50% of all cases were one-person family units, 40% were two-, three- or four-person family units, and roughly 10% comprised five or more people.

Average number of people per family unit by major immigration category and selected years

Immigration category:	1990	1995	2000	2004
Spouse or fiancé	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.2
Son or daughter	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.0
Parents or grandparents	2.7	2.3	2.0	1.9
Skilled workers	2.6	2.4	2.3	2.4
Business	3.9	3.6	3.5	3.5
Refugees[1]	1.9	2.2	2.4	2.5
All immigrants	2.2	2.1	2.0	2.0

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Note: (1) Refugees include government assisted and privately sponsored refugees.

Total size of immigrating family units,1990–2004 Number of persons



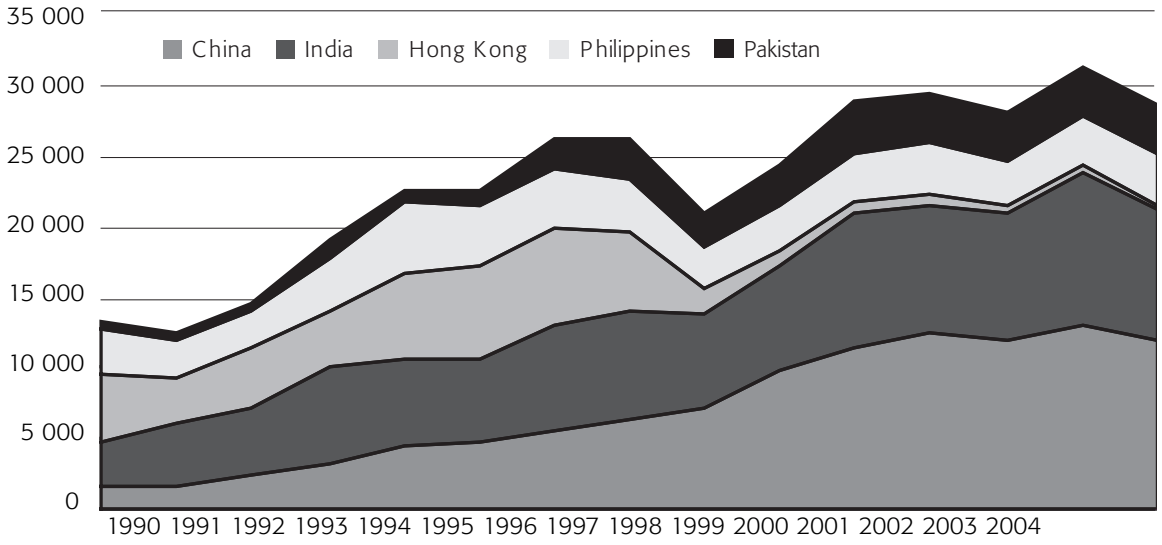
It might seem surprising that such a large proportion of all cases (56,000 in 2004) were one-person cases. However, it should be noted that the majority of these cases (34,000 in 2004) consisted of family class immigrants joining established members of their family in Canada. Under a family class sponsorship, the sponsored individual is counted as a separate family unit (a new case) despite the fact that the individual is sponsored by a relative in Canada. Taking this into account, the size of many such family units in Canada may, in fact, be underestimated.

The size of the immigrating family unit also varied significantly by category of immigration.[4] In 2004, skilled worker immigrants and refugees had an average family unit size of about 2.4 individuals. Business immigrants averaged 3.5 individuals per family unit. For family class immigrants, the size of the family unit varied from 1.0 individual in the case of sponsored children to 1.9 individuals for sponsored parents and grandparents (including accompanying dependants).

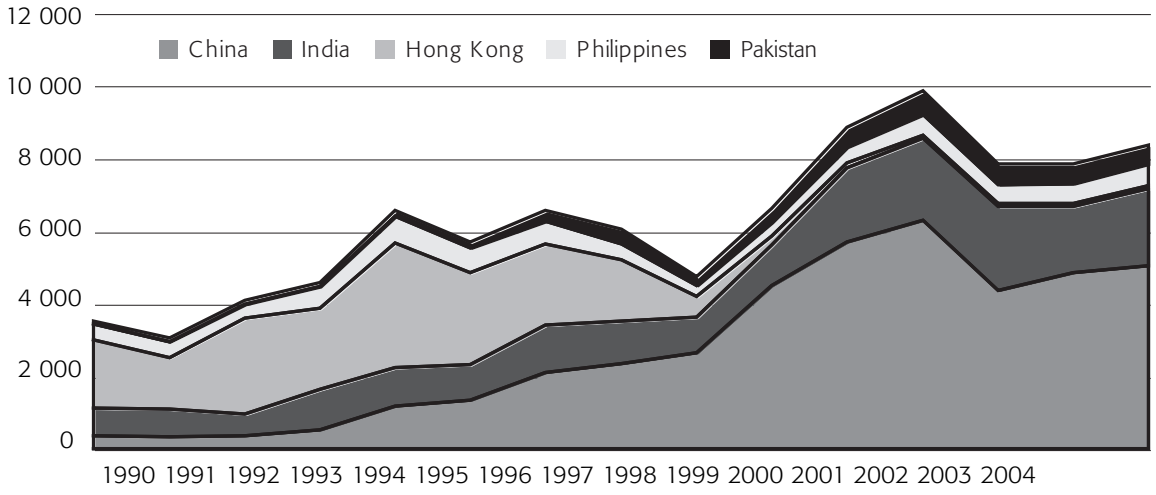
Impact of Policy and Source Country Shifts

Which factors might account for the changes in the size of families immigrating to Canada over time? Immigration policy changes during the late 1980s and early 1990s was one factor. One such change was the relaxation of admissibility criteria for dependent children in 1988, known as the "J88" regulations (subsequently rescinded in 1992). This regulation had the effect of increasing the family unit size. Under the J88 regulations, unmarried children of any age were allowed to enter Canada as sponsored immigrants or as accompanying family members (dependants). The impact of this policy is illustrated in the table above with larger average

Number of immigrating family units of one or two people
Selected countries, 1990–2004



Number of immigrating family units of three people
Selected countries, 1990–2004



family sizes in 1990 across many immigrant categories, most notably parents and grandparents.

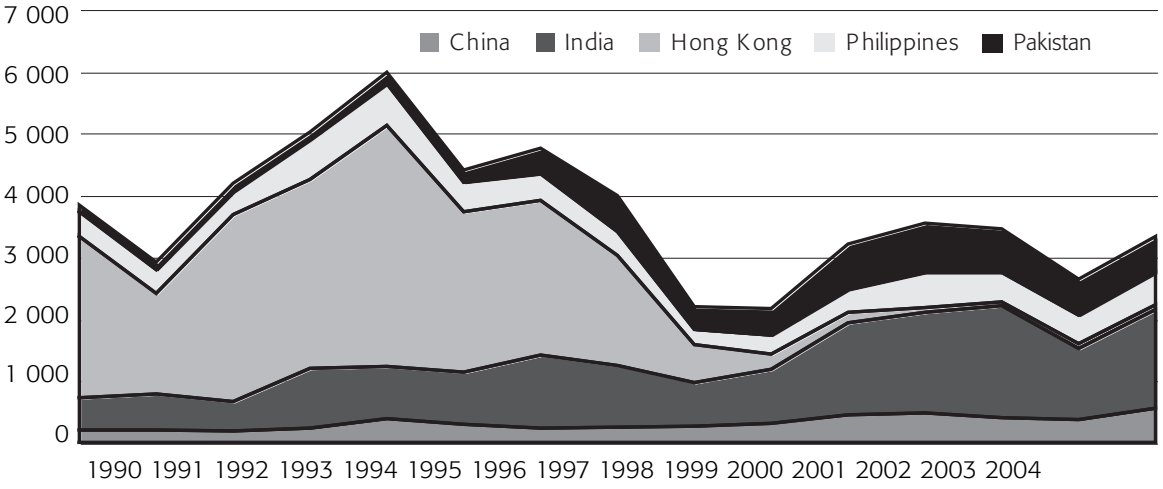
Shifts in the leading source countries for immigrants beginning in the early 1990s were another important factor that influenced family size. China is a good example. That country's share of overall immigration grew from about 4% in 1990 to 15% in 2004. Immigrating family units from China were generally small, reflecting Chinese birth restrictions that limited urban families to one child. Not surprisingly, China accounted for the highest proportion of one- to three-person family units immigrating to Canada in 2004, but was well down the list of top source countries for family units of four people or more. The size of the family unit, therefore, does not necessarily mirror the size of flows from that country.

During the same period, immigration from some source countries with larger average family sizes decreased. Hong Kong, one such example, accounted for less than 1% of all immigrants to Canada in 2004, compared to 14% in 1990. At the outset of the period, the average family size from Hong Kong was relatively large.

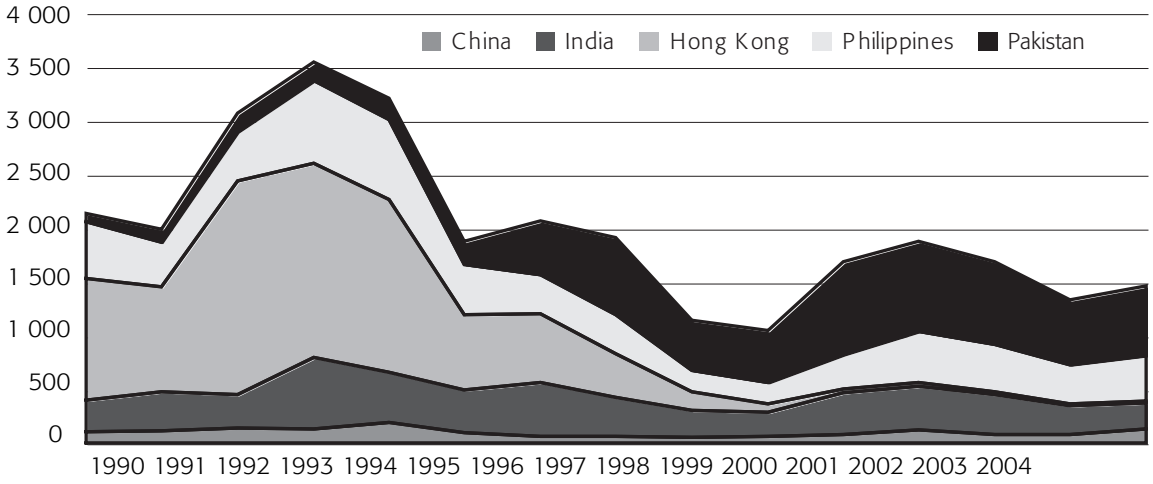
For key source countries since 1990, the figures below show the number of family units by size: one or two people, three, four, and five or more people. They indicate that in the case of some source countries, such as India and the Philippines, family units tend to maintain their proportional representation across all sizes. Immigrants born in Pakistan, however, tend to be over-represented in the larger family units particularly over the last ten years. On the other hand, Chinese immigrants have a tendency toward smaller family units.

While this article provides a cursory description of the family units that immigrate to Canada by year, the statistics raise some important points for discussion. Should we know more about the family situation of immigrants? Further investigation of the socio demographic characteristics of the immigrating family

Number of immigrating family units of four people
Selected countries, 1990–2004



Number of immigrating family units of five or more people
Selected countries, 1990–2004



unit is possible with this type of analysis and would enhance our understanding of these characteristics. The information gleaned might prove to be very useful for a number of settlement and integration services (such as those dealing with housing, social services and health care) that should be geared more toward the immigrating family unit than the individual.

Notes

[1] The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Citizenship and Immigration Canada or the Government of Canada.

[2] For the purposes of this article, family units were made by grouping all individuals with the same case identifier from Citizenship and Immigration administrative landing records.

[3] Only immigrants and refugees landed from abroad are included. This excludes refugees landed in Canada (asylum seekers) and some other landings from within the country.

[4] Immigration class is based on the category of the principal applicant.

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