



Do host country education and language training help recent immigrants exit poverty?

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in host country-specific skills, quantitative assessments of the economic benefit of host country education and training for immigrants are limited. This study addresses this gap by evaluating the impacts of host country formal education and language training on the exit from family poverty among recently arrived immigrant adults. The bivariate probit model and propensity weighting approach are used to analyze data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada. Results suggest that while English/French language training is beneficial for low income recent immigrants in general, host country education benefits only highly educated recent arrivals. This study underscores the importance of considering immigrants' selectivity into host country education and training, as simple regression analysis can improperly estimate their true benefits.

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1. Introduction

Poverty among immigrants is common. Although it is often seen as an inevitable part of their migration experience, studies have examined the issue in Canada, Denmark, Spain, Sweden, and the US (Blume et al., 2007; Jensen, 1989; Muñoz de Bustillo and Antón, 2011; Kazemipur and Halli, 2001; Sullivan and Ziegert, 2008; Takei and Sakamoto, 2011). One reason for its prominence in the literature is the acknowledgment that because poverty is shared by all family members and may be transmitted to subsequent generations, it has significant implications for the integration of immigrant offspring (Corcoran, 2002; Newman and Lennon, 2004).

Previous research has identified factors associated with immigrant poverty or immigrant economic disadvantages, including those related to human capital, family structure, and race/ethnicity. One factor, deficiency in host country-specific resources, namely education and language skills, has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Boyd and Cao, 2009; Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009; Kwon et al., 2004; Zeng and Xie, 2004). However, little is known about what helps lift immigrants out of poverty. If they obtain education and language training upon arrival, can they exit poverty quickly? In this study, I address this question using data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), a nationally-representative survey of recently arrived immigrants. Given that recent cohorts of immigrants to Canada are notably highly educated, I also ask whether the benefit of host country education is conditional on the level of their pre-migration education.

While this study builds on previous studies on immigrant poverty and economic integration, it improves upon them in three ways. First, it focuses on the understudied issue of immigrant poverty exit, looking specifically at two post-migration factors, host country education and language training. While some existing work has analyzed immigrant poverty dynamics,

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including exits from and re-entries into poverty, it considers only time-constant pre-migration characteristics, such as region of origin, age at immigration, and foreign education (Fleury, 2007; Picot et al., 2008). Second, the study represents one of the few existing quantitative evaluations of the economic benefit of host country language training for adult immigrants (exceptions: Akresh, 2007; Delander et al., 2005; Renaud and Cayn, 2007). Although a rich body of qualitative research has explored the experiences of adult immigrants participating in specific language classes, quantitative assessments of language training using nationally-representative data are limited. Third, it makes a methodological contribution by carefully considering the possibility of selection into education and language training and its bias associated with observed and unobserved heterogeneity among low income immigrants. To this end, it uses two analytical innovations, the bivariate probit model and propensity weighting approach, to test and correct for selection bias.

2. Poverty and immigrants

Simply stated, immigrants are more vulnerable to poverty than the native born. For example, in the US, the poverty rate of immigrant households was 17% in 1999, 6% higher than their native-born counterparts (Sullivan and Ziegert, 2008).¹ In Canada, poverty levels of immigrants are also high; in 2005, 22% of immigrants of all ages were in poverty, compared to 14% of the Canadian born (Shields et al., 2011).²

Characteristics that correspond to the higher levels of poverty among immigrants include immigrant-specific factors, such as recency of arrival and limited proficiency in the host country language(s), as well as characteristics known to influence poverty in general, including lower education, disadvantageous family structure (e.g., lone parenthood), racial/ethnic minority status, and weaker labor market attachment (Kazemipur and Halli, 2001; Muñoz de Bustillo and Antón, 2011; Sullivan and Ziegert, 2008). However, factors contributing to the exit from poverty among immigrants remain underexplored.

There is extensive research on what helps the poor in general transition from poverty, including education and training, employment, and government support (Cellini et al., 2008; Worts et al., 2010). Arguably, these findings should be applicable to immigrants. While all could be important trigger events, this study focuses on education and training. As Newman's seminal qualitative research on working poor individuals in New York (1999, 2006) argues, one of the successful strategies for immigrants to move up should be investment in education and training.³

3. Host country language training and education for immigrants

Emerging research on country-specific skills and immigrant economic integration (Chiswick and Miller, 1995; Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009) argues that certain skills valued in the labor market are country-specific, such as knowledge of the official language, of business practices, and of norms and institutions of the host country, while other types of skills (e.g., health, ability, talent) are general and similarly valued across different contexts (Duleep and Regets, 2002; Friedberg, 2000).

Among the country-specific skills, host country education and language are considered to boost immigrant economic performance both directly and indirectly. Language skills directly affect economic performance by helping immigrants find jobs that match their pre-existing skills and allowing them to communicate effectively in the workplace (Chiswick and Miller, 2003). And they indirectly boost productivity by increasing the economic returns to human capital obtained abroad (e.g., education and work experience). Meanwhile, host country education directly improves economic performance, as it is often more compatible with skills required in the labor market than is foreign education (Friedberg, 2000). In addition, contacts with native-born colleagues in class may directly lead to job opportunities (Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009).

3.1. Host country language training

Admittedly, immigrants can gain host country language skills outside a language training program by interacting with friends, neighbors, and co-workers, as well as through the media (van Tubergen and Kalmijn, 2009). Yet because host country organizations, including school boards, postsecondary institutions, churches, and immigrant settlement organizations, systematically provide opportunities to acquire skills, they may contribute to immigrant economic integration (Adamuti-Trache, 2011; DeVoretz et al., 2000). As formal language training provides intense exposure to the host country language, immigrants taking classes may improve their language skills more quickly (Chiswick and Miller, 1995). In addition, it may help them acquire survival skills, such as reading and writing, greeting neighbors, and shopping for groceries, along with functional skills required to perform job searches and interviews, to understand workplace cultures, and to communicate with coworkers (Beeler and Murray, 2007). Language classes may be important meeting places where immigrant adults have their "first sustained contact with the new society" (Springer and Collins, 2008, p. 40). Finally, language training

¹ The researchers use the US official poverty line to calculate the poverty rates.

² The cited work uses Statistics Canada's Low Income Cutoffs (detailed in the Data and Methods section) as a poverty measure.

³ This has significance in post-welfare reform North America (McKernan and Ratcliffe, 2005); the effectiveness of welfare-to-work initiatives that weight employment over education and training has recently been questioned, as the working poor population is on the rise (Holzer, 2007; Shaw et al., 2006). Recent immigrants tend to benefit less from government transfers than the rest of the population partly due to the restrictive provision of financial support. This makes it difficult to conduct meaningful evaluation of government support for the poverty exit of recent immigrants using survey data.

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