



Underemployment across immigrant generations [☆]

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Abstract

The employment circumstances of immigrants and their children constitute a key dimension along which immigrant adaptation to the U.S. can be evaluated. We describe and analyze employment adequacy—defined as underemployment—among first, second and third (or higher) immigrant generations. Analyzing CPS data for the decade spanning 1995–2004, we find support for the notion of successful economic assimilation. The prevalence of underemployment is decidedly higher among the first-generation compared to the second or third, while the latter two groups differ little in this regard. These gross comparisons, however, mask important variation within immigrant generations, including a particular disadvantage among foreign-born non-citizens.

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1. Introduction

The United States is often considered a nation of immigrants, and this notion is particularly true today. Roughly 9.1 million documented immigrants arrived in the United

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States during the 1990s, more than in any previous decade in the nation's history (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005), and it is estimated that another 200,000 to 300,000 immigrants enter the United States illegally each year (Smith and Edmonston, 1997). As of 2000, approximately 28.4 million people, or 10.4 percent of the U.S. population, were estimated to be foreign-born, a figure that climbs to roughly 55.9 million, or one-fifth of the U.S. population, when all those of "foreign stock" are counted (i.e., immigrants and their children). Roughly half of these newcomers are of Latin American origin—Mexico alone accounted for more than one-quarter of the foreign-born population in 2000—and another quarter are of Asian origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Immigrants, therefore, stand not only to have a profound influence on the growth and composition of the U.S. population in the coming century, but to have a profound influence on the U.S. economy as well. Indeed, the increasing influence of immigrants in the U.S. labor market is already evidenced by their role in the growth of the nation's labor force—between 1996 and 2000, nearly half the net increase in the U.S. labor force was accounted for by foreign-born workers—and changes in its composition—the relative share of foreign-born workers climbed from roughly 1 in 17 workers in 1960 to 1 in 8 in 2000 (Mosisa, 2002).

The substantial and steady immigrant flows in recent decades have provided renewed intensity to longstanding debates about the social and economic impact of immigrants. Since the mid-1960s, U.S. immigration policy has emphasized the twin goals of family unification and, to a lesser degree, occupational skills, one result being a decline in the human capital of immigrants relative to natives (Hagan, 2004; Smith and Edmonston, 1997). In an economic context in which job quality is increasingly bifurcated on the basis education and marketable skills, and in a policy context where welfare reform has swelled the ranks of low-wage workers and restricted access to assistance programs for legal non-citizens, important questions exist concerning the prospects for quality employment and economic mobility among immigrants (Hagan, 2004). These considerations are perhaps especially important given that, compared to natives, the economic well-being of immigrants is arguably more strongly affected by their employment circumstances. Assessments of "income packaging" among poor families, for example, indicate that earnings (versus Public Assistance and other sources) represent a greater share of immigrant than native family income (Jensen, 2001; Jensen and Chitose, 1997), and that secondary earners (workers other than family heads) are more important to the economic well-being of immigrant than native families (Jensen, 1991). Whether this most recent wave of immigration is to be perceived as a bane or blessing will depend not only on how immigrants themselves have fared, but ultimately on the circumstances of their children—the second generation. Therefore, the nature and quality of employment among immigrants and their children constitutes a key dimension along which immigrant adaptation to the U.S. economy and labor market can be evaluated. This paper addresses these concerns by describing and analyzing employment adequacy—defined as underemployment—among first, second and third (or higher) immigrant generations.

2. Examinations of immigrant generations

In recent years, immigration scholars have been keenly interested in the circumstances of the second generation (Farley and Alba, 2002; Gans, 1992; Oropesa and Landale, 1997; Perlman and Waldinger, 1997; Portes, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut and

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