

Love, not money, inspires immigrants to become U.S. citizens

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Love, more than money, inspires legal immigrants to go through the naturalization process to become American citizens, according to new research from UC Irvine.

Naturalization rates increased after the 1996 Welfare Reform Act restricted many benefits only to citizens, causing speculation that the promise of welfare benefits was inspiring immigrants to become full-fledged citizens. But results of a study by demographers Susan K. Brown and Frank D. Bean show a much stronger connection between the extent of a community's welcoming attitude toward immigrants and the rate of naturalization.

“Legal immigrants are twice as likely to naturalize when they live in states with a warm, welcoming attitude toward immigrants,” said Brown, assistant professor of sociology. The researchers, using data from the General Social Survey, considered attitudes “welcoming” in areas where locals believe immigrants are hardworking and beneficial, and where they tend to oppose English-only policies.

The study appears in the current issue of *Social Forces* and was co-authored by Jennifer Van Hook, associate professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University.

“There’s no doubt that welfare reform has contributed to increased rates of naturalization – it added value and salience to citizenship,” said Bean, Chancellor’s Professor of sociology and economics and director of the

Center for Research on Immigration, Population and Public Policy. “But when we look at all the different forces influencing immigrants to naturalize, money doesn’t seem to be the major factor – it’s whether the state puts out its welcome mat.”

The most favorable attitude toward immigrants was reported in Arizona, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, and immigrants in those areas were more likely to naturalize. Bean noted that greater welfare benefits available in a particular state did not cause significantly more immigrants to naturalize in that state, which runs counter to the idea that money is the driving force behind the rise in naturalization rates.

Nearly 1 million people obtain legal permanent residence in the U.S. each year – more than double the number of new illegals who come.

“Unlike Canada, the U.S. does not have a settlement assistance policy to help legal residents ease into their new life,” said Bean. “This may be one of the reasons Canada’s naturalization rates are so much higher than those in the U.S.”

The researchers’ next step in this work is to investigate what happens after immigrants have been on welfare, and whether welfare impacts their ability to establish and maintain financial stability in the U.S.

For this study, the sociologists used General Social Survey data, which is part of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Science Research, as well as data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Program Dynamics, which is a longitudinal, demographic survey of the economic, household and social characteristics of a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population over time.

Source: UC Irvine

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