

European immigrants assimilated successfully, economist says

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New research challenges conventional wisdom about immigrant assimilation during the bygone era of open borders and mass migration. Credit: Lewis Hine/Library of Congress

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an "open borders" United States absorbed millions of European immigrants in one of the largest mass migrations ever. New research by Stanford economist Ran Abramitzky challenges the perception that immigrants lagged behind native-born Americans in job pay and career growth.

European [immigrants](#) to America during the country's largest migration wave in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had earnings comparable to native-born Americans, contrary to the popular perception, according to new Stanford research.

"Our paper challenges conventional wisdom and prior research about immigrant assimilation during this period," said Ran Abramitzky, an associate professor of economics at Stanford and author of the research paper in the *Journal of Political Economy*.

Abramitzky and his colleagues found the average immigrant in that period did not face a substantial "earnings penalty" – lower pay than native-born workers – upon their arrival.

"The initial earnings penalty is overstated," said Abramitzky.

He said the conventional view is that the average European immigrants held substantially lower-paying jobs than native-born Americans upon first arrival and caught up with natives' earnings after spending some time in the United States. But that perception does not hold up to the facts, he said.

Abramitzky's co-authors include Leah Platt Boustan from the University of California, Los Angeles, and Katherine Eriksson from California Polytechnic State University.

The researchers examined records on 21,000 natives and immigrants from 16 European countries in U.S. Census Bureau data from 1900 to 1910 to 1920.

"Even when U.S. borders were open, the average immigrant who ended up settling in the United States over the long term held occupations that commanded pay similar to that of U.S. natives upon first arrival,"

Abramitzky said.

In that bygone era of "open borders," Abramitzky said, native-born Americans were concerned that immigrants were not assimilating properly into society – yet, on the whole, this concern appears to be unfounded. "Such concerns are echoed in today's debate over immigration policy," he added.

At the same time, Abramitzky said that immigrants from poorer countries started out with lower paid occupations relative to natives and did not manage to close this gap over time.

"This pattern casts doubt on the conventional view that, in the past, immigrants who arrived with few skills were able to invest in themselves and succeed in the U.S. economy within a single generation," Abramitzky and his colleagues wrote.

Age of migration

America took in more than 30 million immigrants during the Age of Mass Migration (1850-1913), a period when the country had open borders. By 1910, 22 percent of the U.S. labor force – and 38 percent of workers in non-southern cities – was foreign-born (compared with 17 percent today).

As the research showed, immigrants then were more likely than natives to settle in states with a high-paying mix of occupations. Location choice was an important strategy they used to achieve occupational parity with native-born Americans.

"This Age of Mass Migration not only is of interest in itself, as one of the largest migration waves in modern history, but also is informative about the process of immigrant assimilation in a world without migration

restrictions," Abramitzky said.

Over time, many of the immigrants came from the poorer regions of southern and eastern Europe.

Abramitzky pointed out that native-born Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were concerned about poverty in immigrant neighborhoods and low levels of education among children, many of whom left school early to work in industry.

Consequently, American political progressives championed a series of reforms, including U.S. child labor laws and compulsory schooling requirements.

Still, some natives believed that new arrivals would never fit into American society. And so, in 1924, Congress set a strict quota of 150,000 immigrant arrivals per year, with more slots allocated to immigrants from northern and western European countries than those from southern and eastern Europe.

But those early-20th-century fears of unassimilated immigrants were baseless, according to Abramitzky.

"Our results indicate that these concerns were unfounded: The average long-term immigrants in this era arrived with skills similar to those of natives and experienced identical rates of occupational upgrading over their life cycle," he wrote.

How does this lesson apply to today's immigration policy discussion? Should the numbers of immigrants and their countries of origin be limited and those with higher skills be given more entry slots?

Abramitzky said stereotyping immigrants has affected the political

nature of the contemporary debate.

"These successful outcomes suggest that migration restrictions are not always necessary to ensure strong migrants' performance in the labor market," he said.

More information: www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/675805

Provided by Stanford University

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