

# Educational gains by immigrants to US not as large as believed, study finds

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One narrative about immigration to the United States is that descendants of migrants achieve greater educational success than they would have in their native lands. But a new study finds that those gains, at least for many children and grandchildren of European immigrants, have not been as large as believed.

Studying [immigrants](#) from 10 European nations throughout the 20th century, researchers found that the [educational attainment](#) of many of their descendants was not significantly greater than what would have happened if their families had not migrated to the United States.

However, researchers did find substantial educational gains for descendants of immigrants from Poland and Italy. The smallest educational gains were found among descendants of immigrants from England and Germany.

The study, authored by James P. Smith of the RAND Corporation and Liam Delaney of the University of Stirling in Scotland, is being published in the winter 2015 edition of the Journal of Human Capital, a leading journal in its field.

"For most European countries, it's largely a myth that immigrants and their descendants achieve large gains in education levels by coming to the United States, compared to what would have happened if they had not come to America," said Smith, who is Distinguished Chair in Labor Markets and Demographic Studies at the RAND Corporation, a

nonprofit research organization.

The study examines the experiences of immigrants from England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway), Italy and Poland—countries that comprised more than 70 percent of European immigrants coming to the United States between 1850 and 1970. In general, these immigrants had more education than their peers who remained in their homelands.

Using census and other survey information collected in both the United States and the European countries, researchers were able to analyze the educational progress of European immigrants and their descendants over the course of several generations. Their experiences were compared to the educational attainment of similar generations of peers who remained in their homelands.

Researchers discovered there was considerable variation in the amount of schooling—which they characterize as "human capital"—that the European immigrants brought with them to the United States.

For example, among men born in the 19th century, average education was highest among the Scottish and English (about 8.5 years of schooling). Next were German immigrants (about 8 years of schooling) and immigrants from Ireland and Scandinavia (7.5 years of schooling). The European immigrants with the lowest amount of schooling on average were from Italy (about 4 years) and Poland (about 4.5 years).

Within immigrants from individual countries, there was considerable variation. Among immigrants from all countries studied, those in the top 10 percent of educational attainment had three times as much school as those in the bottom 10 percent. More than a quarter of the immigrants from Italy and Poland had no schooling.

Researchers suggest that the immigrants in the bottom quarter of the education distribution contributed to the negative stereotypes that developed in the United States about many of the immigrant groups studied, particularly those from Ireland, Italy and Poland.

Since education levels were rising quickly during the 20th century in many European countries, researchers say the children and grandchildren of migrants would certainly have had more education than their parents and grandparents if their ancestors had remained in their sending countries.

The study found the largest gains in educational attainment were among Italian immigrants. Among male children of Italian male migrants born between 1901 and 1905, the education gain made by the second-generation sons averaged 2.3 years of schooling beyond what they would have achieved in their homelands.

Over the course of the 20th century, the education gains for migrant families was reduced and even disappeared among some groups, according to researchers. For immigrants who came to the United States from England, Germany and Scandinavia during later decades of the 20th century, the decision to migrate to the United States actually led to a small net loss in their children's education, compared to what would have taken place if the migrants had remained at home.

"The gains were largest when education progress in the sending countries was slow," said Delaney, a professor of economics at the University of Stirling. "But even within countries, the gains in education among migrants to the United States have varied considerably over time."

An earlier study by Smith found that the educational gains experienced by the descendants of immigrants to the United States from Mexico were similar to the educational gains experienced by descendants from

Poland.

Researchers offer some caveats to their conclusions. First, the study only examines the number of years of immigrants' schooling. If schooling in the United States was of better quality than that offered in Europe, there may be greater economic gains for the progeny of immigrants.

In addition, if incomes in the United States were higher for workers with a given amount of schooling—particularly higher education—then migration may have had more advantage for European immigrants.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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