

# Returning home during historical Age of Mass Migration

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Today's conversation about immigration and the role of immigrants in America is not so different from the conversations that took place more than 100 years ago, when European immigrants settled in cities and on farms in the United States.

That's why Stanford economist Ran Abramitzky and his colleagues spent the past decade analyzing data on immigrants in the United States between 1850 and 1913, which was the time of the country's largest wave of migration.

His latest research explores return migrants, those who eventually chose to come back to Europe, and how they fared when they got home. The study focuses on migrants from Norway – made possible by the availability of comprehensive new data on their activities. The research compares return migrants to both Norwegian immigrants who chose to stay in the U.S. and to the Norwegian population that never moved abroad.

The researchers found that Norwegian immigrants who returned home in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were more likely to have held lower-skilled occupations, compared with both Norwegians who never moved and those who stayed in the United States. But upon returning to Norway, the return migrants held higher-paying occupations than Norwegians who never moved.

The findings are contrary to the popular belief that return migration

mostly resulted from bad shocks, such as an illness or unemployment, said Ran Abramitzky, an associate professor of economics at Stanford and co-author of the recently published article in the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*. Instead, it appears that return migrants already hailed from poorer backgrounds before their move.

"Moving permanently to the New World was one strategy that poor European immigrants used to achieve economic success," Abramitzky said of his joint work with Leah Boustan of Princeton University and Katherine Eriksson of the University of California, Davis. "This research suggests that temporary movement to the United States in order to accumulate savings and invest in the home country was another option available to the poor."

## **Reasons for return migration**

The study on return migrants is the latest piece in Abramitzky's larger research project, which he began with his co-authors about 10 years ago, on immigration in the U.S. between 1850 and 1913.

About 30 million Europeans immigrated during the period, which scholars call the Age of Mass Migration, as America maintained open, largely unrestricted borders for European migrants until about 1914. By 1910, 22 percent of the country's labor force was foreign-born, compared to 17 percent of today's working population.

The same period also saw a high rate of return migration. One in three immigrants returned to their home country.

To learn which immigrants moved back and how they fared economically, Abramitzky and his colleagues needed comprehensive data on immigrants from a single country.

"It is challenging to study these types of questions because systematic data on return migrants are not typically collected," Abramitzky said.

But Norway, which experienced a high rate of out-migration during this period, was a unique case. The country's 1910 census asked respondents whether they spent some time in the United States, and, if so, the dates of their arrival and departure, last state of residence and last occupation held.

Because Norway recently released digital versions of those census datasets, Abramitzky and his research team chose to focus on the Scandinavian country, conducting an unprecedented analysis of individual data on return migrants to Europe during that period.

Abramitzky, Boustan and Eriksson linked the American and Norwegian census data sets to compare Norwegian migrants still living in the U.S. in 1910 with Norwegian immigrants who returned after a couple of years – as well as to Norwegians who stayed in Norway throughout this period.

The data showed that immigrants who held low-paid occupations or who came from rural parts of Norway were more likely to come back after moving to America. Once back home, the return migrants held higher-paid occupations than the Norwegians who never moved, despite hailing from poorer backgrounds.

That return migrants climbed to a higher rung on the occupational ladder may have been the result of savings accrued in the U.S., according to the researchers. Many return migrants worked as farmers, often in their town of birth. When these men – who had started out as poor farm laborers – returned to Norway, they were more likely than the non-movers to purchase and work on their own farms, a more lucrative profession made possible by the increased land they were able to buy with their savings.

These temporary moves might have been necessary, the researchers wrote, because it was difficult to borrow money in Norway, which was not as advanced financially as the U.S.

## Immigration then and now

During the Age of Mass Migration, politicians and the public raised questions about immigrants that are similar to those discussed today. Can immigrants successfully integrate into America's society and economy? Or do they remain isolated long after they settle?

Abramitzky's past work on immigrants from 16 sending European countries provides some clues. A 2014 study showed that European immigrants arrived in the U.S. with occupations comparable to native-born Americans, and his 2016 research on cultural assimilation documented that immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century chose less foreign names for their sons and daughters as they spent more time in the United States.

Abramitzky and his collaborators are now working on a book on their years of research on immigration during that period, which may offer lessons for today's migration policy debate.

"If we want to know how today's newcomers will fare, we can find important clues by examining what happened to those who arrived on our shores during the greatest surge of immigration in U.S. history," Abramitzky said. "Comparing our findings with contemporary studies can illuminate the effect of modern immigration policy on migrant selection and migrant assimilation."

**More information:** Ran Abramitzky et al. To the New World and Back Again: Return Migrants in the Age of Mass Migration, *ILR Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0019793917726981](https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793917726981)

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