

Prejudice against darker skin continues to depress wages for legal immigrants: Study

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Legal immigrants with darker skin are paid up to 25 percent less than otherwise comparable lighter-skinned immigrants, a wage penalty that widened significantly four years after these immigrants first received

permanent legal status, according to new research by Vanderbilt economist Joni Hersch.

Hersch, Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Law and Economics and co-director of the Ph.D. program in Law and Economics at Vanderbilt Law School, specializes in [employment discrimination](#). Her paper, "Colorism Against Legal Immigrants to the United States," was recently published in *American Behavioral Scientist*.

Color is distinct from race, ethnicity

While skin [color](#) is closely related to race, ethnicity and national origin, it can vary dramatically within each of those categories. It also cuts across levels of educational attainment and work experience.

Hersch controlled for these and many other factors that influence earnings, including education, [family background](#), work history and English-language proficiency, which enabled her to isolate the [wage penalty](#) attributable solely to skin color.

A widening gap

This study followed up on Hersch's 2008 study published in the *Journal of Labor Economics*, which provided the first estimates of the wage penalty faced by new legal immigrants to the United States with darker skin. In her new study, she sought to understand whether that penalty diminished with more time in the United States, once immigrants had additional time to assimilate into the economy.

Hersch's studies used data from the New Immigrant Survey, a longitudinal survey that first surveyed immigrants who attained legal permanent status in 2003, and then followed up with them four years

later. The NIS collected extremely detailed data on a wide range of subjects to create a comprehensive picture of each person's background, demographics and present circumstances. Crucially, it also recorded the immigrants' skin color, using a standardized 10-point scale.

"The data is so rich that I was able to also take into account whether the disparity would have arisen in the United States or because their country of origin has a bias against darker [skin color](#), and account for that," Hersch said.

In her initial study, Hersch determined that, during their first year in the United States as a legal permanent resident, the darkest-skinned members of an otherwise similar group of immigrants earned 17 percent less than the lightest-skinned members of that cohort.

Now she's found that when these immigrants were re-interviewed four years later, the disparity had actually widened to 25 percent. While immigrants' wages generally catch up to native-born Americans' as they settle in and become better acclimated to their new home, the NIS revealed that this was not the case for those with darker [skin](#).

Hersch said that it is difficult to ascribe this effect to anything other than discrimination, as she was able to control for virtually every other meaningful mitigating factor. "The link to rising anti-[immigrant](#) sentiment expressed in some quarters seems clear," she said.

Implications for the future

Because color is so closely related to race and national origin, specific charges of colorism only account for a small percentage of cases filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, but those numbers are rising rapidly—and Hersch anticipates that they will continue to do so. "The changing demographics of the U.S. population

indicates that there are more color differences without a clear racial distinction," she said. "So I think we're leading to the opportunity for even more people to make use of their rights under Title VII to file a lawsuit based on color discrimination."

Furthermore, she said, because color discrimination is often closely linked to discrimination against national origin, these findings will provide additional support for those claims as well.

More information: Joni Hersch. Colorism Against Legal Immigrants to the United States, *American Behavioral Scientist* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0002764218810758](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218810758)

Joni Hersch. Profiling the New Immigrant Worker: The Effects of Skin Color and Height, *Journal of Labor Economics* (2008). [DOI: 10.1086/587428](https://doi.org/10.1086/587428)

Provided by Vanderbilt University

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