

Immigration among Latin-American countries fails to improve income

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Although immigration to the United States from Latin American countries, particularly Mexico, has captured much public attention, immigrants who move between countries in Latin America have more difficulty than those moving to the United States.

Donald Bogue, professor emeritus in sociology and a distinguished scholar of [demography](#), has found that unlike immigrants to the [United States](#), immigrants between nations in Latin America frequently do not improve their lives by moving.

A popular theory on immigration contends that immigrants are self-selected achievers who move to another country and improve their economic status after a few years of residency. While that story is largely true for people moving from developing to developed [countries](#), migration between developing nations is quite different, Bogue contends.

"When we shift our focus from the developed world to the less-[developed nations](#), the migration context changes and many generalizations made from the viewpoint of industrialized nations no longer are valid," Bogue writes in the recently published monograph, *The Economic Adjustment of Immigrants to Twelve Nations of Latin America and Comparison with United States*. It is posted on the [Social Science Research](#) Network webpage.

His work has led him to draw new conclusions to shape new theories of immigration. "Instead of envisioning a typical immigrant who follows a single economic adjustment path, this research hypothesizes three strata of migrants between developing countries," Bogue said.

Those three different motivators for migrations include: lower-skilled people who are pushed into an adjacent country by poverty, social unrest or lack of employment opportunities; people of intermediate skill level who decide to leave

because of bleak prospects at home; and people with specialized skills who are recruited or admitted to receiving countries and are helping modernize those countries.

Bogue's work is among the first to compare immigration between Latin American countries with that of immigration to the United States. Although 41 percent of the world's immigration is among developing countries, little research has been done in the area because of a lack of data.

The task is possible in Latin America because most of them collect census information. Bogue used data collected by IPUMS International at the University of Minnesota to learn about the education level, employment status and length of residency in 12 countries in the region.

Among his findings:

- Immigrants to the United States from Latin America improve their economic status after five years of residency and move from below poverty-level wages to slightly above poverty-level wages. The economic status of people moving between Latin American countries does not improve.
- The United States has the highest level of immigration by far, with immigrants comprising 12 percent of the population. Latin American immigrants make up about half of the U.S. immigrants. In contrast, many Latin American countries, which have strong laws to limit immigration, have populations that are one percent foreign-born.
- People from Latin American countries who return home after being migrants to another developing country frequently come back to better jobs because they have higher levels of education and may have gone to college abroad. In contrast, migrants returning to

Mexico from the United States experience a decline in their [economic status](#).

The reasons for the differences are due to economic opportunity and birth rates, Bogue said. Latin American countries frequently have higher birth rates than developed countries and fewer economic opportunities, so foreign [immigrants](#) frequently compete with native-born citizens for relatively few economic opportunities, Bogue explained.

Provided by University of Chicago

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