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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
Issue Brief – Final Draft
November 30, 2010

Issue Brief: Immigration and Socioeconomic Status

Key Words

Assimilation, Economic Opportunity, Ethnic Community, Immigration, Societal Integration, Socioeconomic Status.

Description

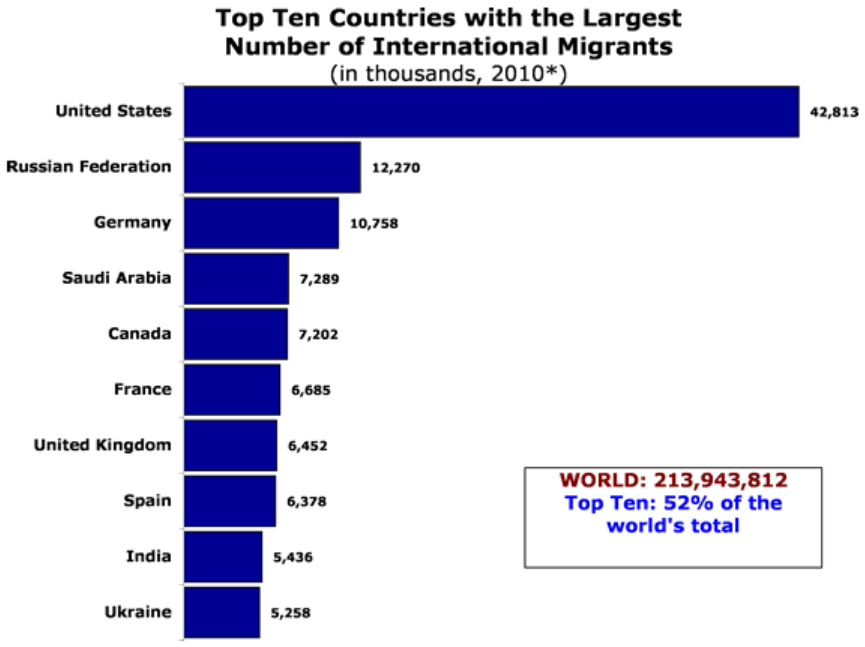
This issue brief discusses the influence of socioeconomic status on immigrants to the U.S., including factors regarding the motivation for immigration, class stratification, discrepancies in integration, and patterns of socioeconomic segregation.

Key Points

- As the leading destination for immigrants, the U.S. is uniquely challenged in regard to assimilating groups with widely varying socioeconomic foundations into the population.
- Socioeconomic improvement is an influential motivation for immigration, but education and skill level, including English language ability, are key determinants of immigrant economic opportunity, and therefore socioeconomic status.
- While an increasing percentage of the U.S. population is foreign-born, the changed demographics of immigrant groups can contribute to assimilation difficulties.
- Immigration policy is at times skewed toward those with higher skill levels, which increases complexity in addressing both legal and illegal immigrants with fewer skills and their affects on socioeconomic status of unskilled native-born workers.
- Labor and social policies that encourage assimilation can effectively counter both socioeconomic isolation and marginalization along ethnic or racial lines.

Issue Brief

Immigration continues to have a profound effect on the balance, mixture, and distribution of racial and ethnic populations in the United States, with 12.7% of the population now foreign-born versus only 4.7% in 1970. By far the world's leading destination with over 20% of international migration, the U.S. consequently faces greater societal challenges of integration and assimilation, particularly given its founding democratic principles and current immigration policies. With the country's history of struggles for equality along both class and racial lines, disparate levels of prior economic opportunity and education interact with ethnic and racial factors as determinants of the socioeconomic prospects of immigrants and their degree of participation in their new country.



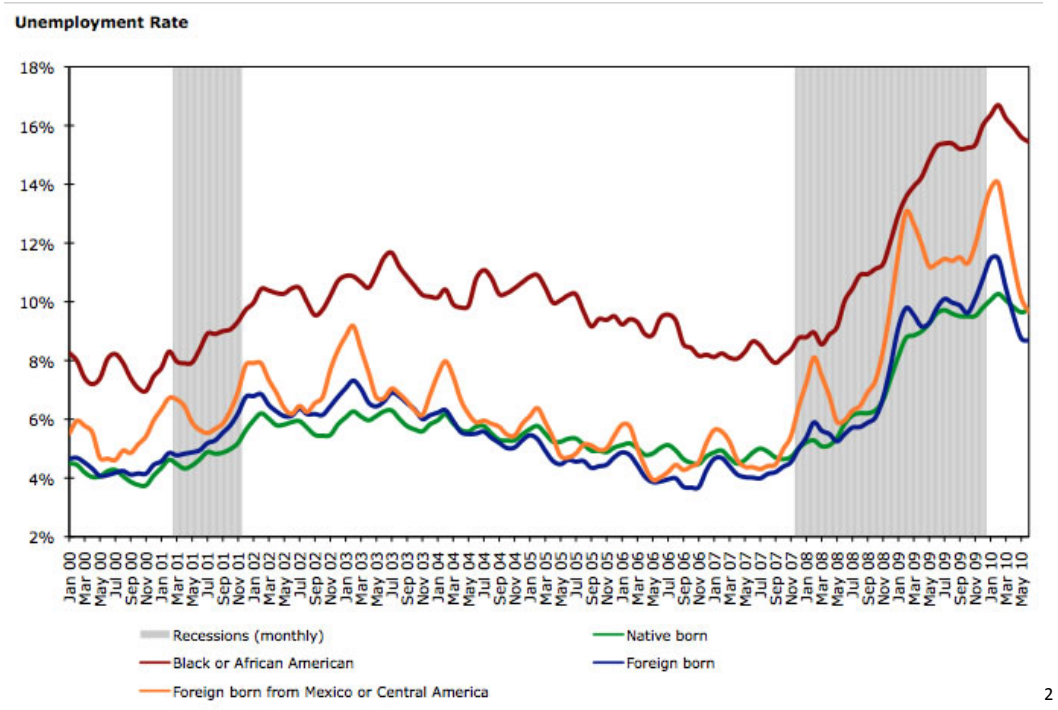
[1]

Social and economic factors are motivations behind much of the immigration to the U.S., including those pulled by opportunity or pushed by economic disadvantage in their homeland. These differing dynamics influencing immigrant motives result in a disparity of beginnings, as new arrivals

[1] Migration Policy Institute. 2007. http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/charts/6.1.shtml

settle into society across the socioeconomic spectrum. Racial and ethnic group dynamics, along with country of origin, all play a role. Differing socioeconomic statuses can contribute to segregation of immigrants when they first arrive in the United States, which can result in some degree of class stratification from which it is difficult to emerge and progress. However, this apparently applies to some groups more than others. For instance, "class" and socioeconomic status issues play a much larger explanatory role in social patterns for Latino immigrants than for most Asians.

A key indicator of an immigrant's immediate socioeconomic level is education and skill, including English language capability. While employers recruit those with valuable education and training, those



Unemployment Rates by Selected Demographic Characteristics, January 2000 to June 2010

[2]Migration Policy Institute. 2010. http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/laborforce. 4.shtml Notes: The foreign-born population includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, certain legal non-immigrants (refugees and persons on student or work visas), and persons illegally residing in the United States.

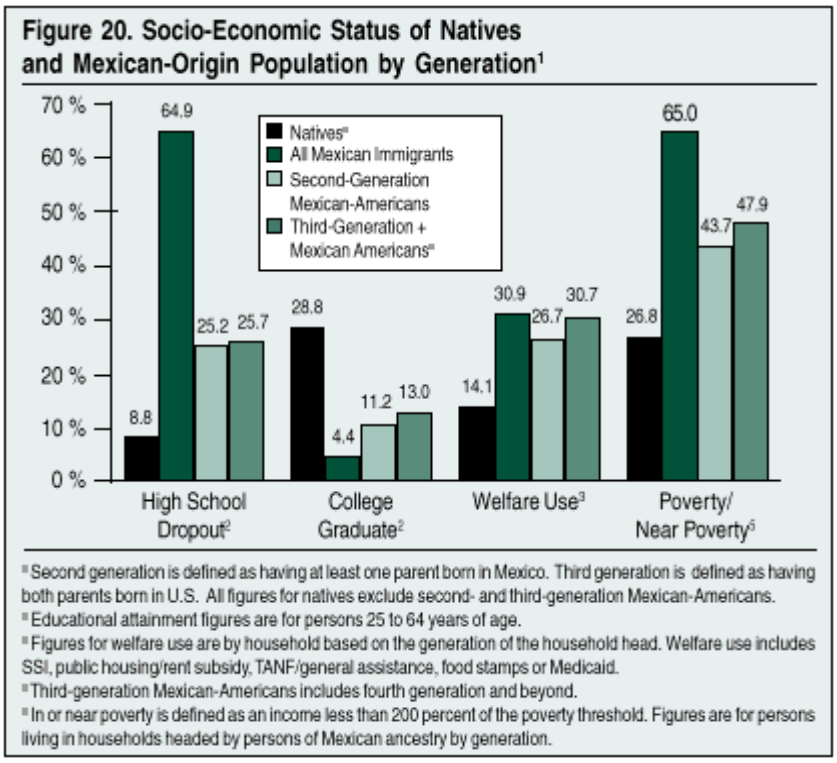
seeking to raise their subsistence minimum face difficult competition for jobs. It takes time to acquire skills important to an American employer, therefore those with education often find themselves higher on the socioeconomic spectrum than those with little or no training. This can explain disparities between groups such as Latinos and Asians, since the latter are often relatively more educated when they arrive. Language appears to be a key factor in terms of both employment prospects and overall socioeconomic status, therefore those who speak little or no English are at an increased, and long-term, disadvantage. Additionally, changes in the philosophies which influence government policy initiatives may result in conflicting effects. An example of this is the difference between today's bilingual emphases in education compared to restrictions on learning German for an earlier generation of immigrants.

Due to differing attributes, current patterns of immigration may actually contribute to integration difficulties, thereby perpetuating lower socioeconomic status. "The relative lack of ethnic diversity…may greatly reduce the incentives for assimilation" by allowing the development of "separate enclave economies and social structures".[3] Whereas Mexican-Americans alone now make up almost 30 percent of the immigrant population, Germans and Italians together comprised only 24 percent of the foreign-born population 80 years ago. But ethnic and racial differences can also dictate difficulties in changing one's relative socioeconomic position. While many white ethnic immigrants, such as the Irish, gradually improved in terms of group status, other ethnicities, including Africans, East Indians, and Latinos, may find overcoming race an added difficulty in climbing the socioeconomic ladder. Government immigration policies can also have a long-term effect, as exemplified by the consequences of employment restrictions on green card holders and illegal immigrants.

Because of U.S. schooling, English knowledge, and increasing familiarity with the employment culture, socioeconomic status has traditionally progressed from one generation of immigrants to the

[3] Francis, David R. Economic Progress of Immigrants

next, with correspondingly increased levels of assimilation. This pattern may be changing, however, with negative consequences for later generations. Studies indicate that poorer immigrant groups, such as



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Hispanics, tend to remain more tightly coherent and isolated, and are therefore assimilated less quickly. This potentially diminishes the socioeconomic advantages that have typically existed for 2nd and 3rd generation populations, which could lead to economic, social and political consequences for these groups. It would seem profitable for the U.S. to encourage intergenerational progress, thereby limiting the importance of immigrant ethnicity in establishing socioeconomic outcomes.

The challenges of origin and skill diversity to immigrant socioeconomic opportunity reveal that access is often divided along group lines, and that participation and economic success depends somewhat on lingual, educational, and cultural assimilation. But obstacles to an equal balance through rising economic opportunity include Americans' concerns for their own socioeconomic status. Workers are often hostile to immigrants who, particularly in unskilled labor markets, are often characterized as a

[4] http://www.cis.org/articles/2001/mexico/generations.html

threat to available jobs. Immigrants on average receive more of the government's limited resources than native-born Americans, a number which includes few illegal aliens. Although arguably the most

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desperate group, few "illegals" apply for fear of being discovered. The complexity of achieving a positive minimum status for all immigrants indicates the wide differences in circumstances that draw these individuals to America.

WORD COUNT: 789

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[5] http://bearspace.baylor.edu/Charles_Kemp/www/March%20061.jpg

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