

research snapshot

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Language Use Affects How Much an Immigrant Earns

What is this research about?

Over the past few years, the gap in earnings between recent immigrants to Canada and native-born Canadians has grown substantially. Some researchers argue that education can help to close this gap. They note that immigrants with more schooling earn better wages than immigrants with less schooling. Others, however, suggest that factors like an immigrant's identity and sense of attachment to his or her new home may have an impact, as well. Immigrants who are less 'ethnic' in their attitudes and behaviours – those who see themselves as 'Canadian' and who take part in the 'mainstream' social life of Canada – may do better in the job market than those who still observe the customs of their home country and do not speak English. Also, job-seeking immigrants with 'social capital' – those newcomers who have access to social networks in their communities – may fare better than immigrants with fewer connections. But there is little research on how one's ethnic identity, cultural practices, and social networks impact one's earnings after migration.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University studied the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS), which provides a rich and unique source of information on ethnic diversity in Canada. The researchers used the EDS to try to understand the factors that affect the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market.

What you need to know:

Recent immigrants tend to have good educations. However, their language use and the amount of time that they have spent in Canada can have an impact on their earnings.

Forty-thousand respondents originally replied to the EDS. The researchers, however, studied only those immigrants who arrived in Canada after 1981 and were employed full-time, year-round.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that when it comes to wages, immigrants who have not spent much time in Canada are at a severe disadvantage compared to native-born Canadians. Immigrant wages, however, seem to increase with time. The researchers also found that immigrants with good educations have an advantage in the job market. But recent immigrants tend to be more highly educated than native-born Canadians. In other words, the wage gap between immigrants and native-born Canadians does not appear to be the result of a lack of education.

Surprisingly, immigrants' attitudes toward Canada do not appear to have an impact on their income. That is, immigrants who embrace Canada and identify as 'Canadian' do not necessarily do better on the job market than those who maintain an 'ethnic' identity. Instead, it is not so much attitudes as behaviors

that isolate immigrants from mainstream Canadian society. Language use, for example, has a major impact on an immigrant's earnings. Immigrants who are not proficient in their host country's language, such as English, do not do as well in the job market as immigrants who can speak the language well.

How can you use this research?

Despite what earlier research suggests, policymakers should focus less on education as a way to close the earnings gap between immigrants and non-immigrants. Rather, policies aimed at improving wages for immigrants need to recognize sociodemographic and identity-related factors – like time spent in the new country and language use.

About the Researchers

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