

UNSKILLED EUROPEAN MIGRANTS FOUND SUCCESS IN AMERICA: Lessons from the age of mass migration a century ago

In the early twentieth century, a period when Europeans could migrate freely to the US, men from poor families were most likely to make the trans-Atlantic journey. Those who settled permanently in the US were as economically successful on average as were the native born.

These are the central findings of research to be presented to the NORFACE migration conference at University College London this week. The study is based on the historical census records of over 25,000 men who crossed the Atlantic.

Professor **Leah Boustan**, one of the authors, believes that comparisons between immigration in the past and the present are illuminating. She says:

‘Current immigrants to the US tend to be wealthier and better educated than those who stay in sending countries for a few reasons. First, government selection policies favour higher-skilled immigrants.

‘In addition, the high costs of immigrating illegally may prevent the poor from moving in greater numbers. Immigrants in the past faced neither of these barriers.’

‘The immigration debates of the last century were just as intense as today. Many argued that the immigrants did not contribute to the US economy and called for strict immigration quotas, which were eventually passed.

‘Our results indicate that these concerns were unfounded: the average immigrant was just as successful as the average native.’

But Professor Boustan cautions that immigrants from some countries did better than others:

‘For example, immigrants from the United Kingdom found good jobs while immigrants from Portugal or Norway remained in lower-paid occupations even after many years in the US.

‘This finding is less optimistic, suggesting that immigrants that start out behind do not catch up over time.’

The study links Norwegian-born men from their childhood families in the 1865 Norwegian census to their adulthood in either the US or Norway in 1900. The authors find that men from poorer families, especially those whose fathers owned no land, were the most likely to migrate, as were men who could not expect to inherit family land because they were low in the birth order or had many brothers.

The authors then follow immigrants from 16 European sending countries in the US labour market over two decades. They find that these long-term immigrants held similar occupations to US natives on first arrival and moved up the occupational ladder at the same rate. These results contrast with the conventional wisdom that immigrants started out behind natives but caught up over time.

The 'age of mass migration' from Europe to the New World (1850-1913) was one of the largest migration episodes in human history. In this period, the US maintained an open border for European migrants, allowing the immigration process to be observed in the absence of government constraints.

This study uses original panel data on trans-Atlantic migrants to pose three related questions: were migrants who settled in the US in the late nineteenth century positively or negatively selected from the European population? What was the economic return to this migration? And how did these new migrants fare in the US labour market?

The researchers find that men with poorer economic prospects in the source country were more likely to migrate, including men whose fathers had no assets or men who were unlikely to inherit family land.

Yet on arrival in the US (and conditional on staying for more than a few years), the typical immigrant did not face a large initial occupational penalty relative to natives and moved up the occupational ladder at the same rate as the native born.

ENDS

'Selection and Assimilation in the Age of Mass Migration' by Leah Boustan, Ran Abramitzky and Katherine Eriksson

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<http://www.nber.org/reporter/2013number1/boustan.html>