

Evidence Shows Immigrants Come to Work, Not to Collect Welfare

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Some oppose immigration because they believe immigrant use of welfare demonstrates immigrants do not assimilate in America. Others argue the immigrant work ethic remains strong and that immigrants do not come here to get on the dole. Examining data and eligibility rules provides an answer as to who is right on this issue.

Welfare and immigration is a combustible topic. In many ways, the issue is less fiscal than emotional. Americans treat the concept of newcomers arriving in America and immediately receiving government handouts as akin to an in-law moving into their basement and refusing to look for a job. It's not so much the cost as the principle of the thing. The good news is there is little evidence that immigrants come to America to go on welfare, rather than to work, flee persecution or join family members in the United States.

To evaluate whether immigrants come here to be on the dole one has to examine several aspects of the issue. First, it is necessary to look at the eligibility rules for immigrants, which are complicated and were overhauled in 1996. Second, one should evaluate their level of workforce participation, since if immigrants are working, then they are not bursting the welfare rolls. And third, we should compare native and immigrant use of welfare programs. Similar benefit use rates would indicate immigrants are not becoming fiscal burdens on other residents of the country.

ELIGIBILITY RULES ARE TIGHT FOR ARRIVING IMMIGRANTS

Upon first arriving in the country, immigrants are generally

ineligible for federal means-tested benefits programs. With the exception of refugees, eligibility for programs usually requires immigrants to have been in the United States for 5 years or more in a lawful immigrant status.

In 1996, Congress changed the rules for immigrant benefit eligibility as part of a broader reform of the nation's welfare laws. The tighter regulations resulted in a decrease in immi-

grant welfare use. "There were substantial declines between 1994 and 1999 in legal immigrants' use of all major benefit programs: TANF or Temporary Assistance for Needy Children (down 60 percent), food stamps (down 48 percent), SSI (down 32 percent), and Medicaid (down 15 percent)," according to a 2003 report by the Urban Institute.¹

Even before the changes in the law, there was little support for the view that individual immigrants were more likely to be on welfare than natives.² One of the difficulties in measuring welfare use is that eligibil-

ity for some benefits are geared toward individuals and others are based on family, and families may live in households that go beyond two spouses and their children. If one labels a household as "using welfare" even when only one person in a house is receiving benefits, then it is likely to inflate the data on welfare use for immigrants, since the foreign-born tend to maintain larger households. On the other hand, such a calculation could capture data on a U.S. citizen child born to immigrant parents.

At the state level, eligibility rules differ and can be less restrictive than federal rules. Moreover, a child born in America is a U.S. citizen and can receive benefits if he or she meets a pro-

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gram’s eligibility criteria, regardless of a parent’s immigration status.

If immigrants have been seeking states with lenient benefit eligibility, then they’re not doing a good job. Author and *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer Jason Riley notes many states with recent large increases in their immigrant populations, such as Arkansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Utah and Georgia, are primarily states with low and below average social spending.³

Prior to the 1996 reforms, there was concern that non-citizen parents were making excessive use of SSI (Supplemental Security Income). With the exception of refugees and other “humanitarian immigrants,” veterans, active duty military and their families, and certain Native Americans born abroad, Congress enacted a complete ban on SSI for non-citizens who enter the United States after August 22, 1996.⁴ Lawful permanent residents with credit for 40 quarters of work history in the U.S. can receive SSI once they have been in “qualified” status for 5 years or more.

In 1995, 3.2 percent of non-citizens used SSI, compared to 1.3 percent in 2006. Similarly, Congress barred most non-citizens arriving after August 22, 1996, from using food stamps, although this was modified in 2002 to allow non-citizen children and certain other lawfully residing immigrants to use food stamps. In general, a sponsor of an immigrant can be “required to reimburse the government for any means-tested public benefit the alien has received,” notes attorney Susan Fortino-Brown.⁵

WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION RATES: IMMIGRANTS AND NATIVES

Immigrant men, ages 18 to 64, are more likely to work than native-born Americans. According to 2004 Census data analyzed by the Pew Hispanic Center, the labor force participation rate for legal immigrant males in that age group is 86 percent, compared to 83 percent for native-born males (see Table 1.) The rate is even higher—92 percent—for illegal immigrant males. Immigrant women are more likely to be married and have children,

according to Census data, and this leads to a lower labor force participation rate—64 percent for legal immigrant women vs. 73 percent for native-born women.⁶

**TABLE 1
ADULT MEN (18-64) LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE**

Nativity/Immigration Status	Labor Force Participation Rate (2004)
Illegal Immigrant	92 percent
Legal Immigrant	86 percent
Native	83 percent

Source: Jeffery S. Passel, *Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics*, (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, June 14, 2005), 25.

NATIVE VS. IMMIGRANT USE OF WELFARE

An analysis of Census data released by the House Ways and Means Committee indicate the proportion of natives, non-citizens and naturalized citizens who use AFDC/TANF (Aid to Families with Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance for Needy Children), Medicaid and food stamps is similar for the three groups. More important, the data show the vast majority of immigrants are not receiving these types of public benefits. Less than 1 percent of naturalized citizens and non-citizens in 2006 received benefits under TANF.⁷

The data tell the story:

- In 2006, 0.6 percent of natives used AFDC/TANF, compared to 0.3 percent of naturalized citizens and 0.7 percent for non-citizens.
- For Medicaid: 13.1 percent of natives used Medicaid, compared to 10.8 percent of naturalized citizens and 11.6 percent of non-citizens.
- For SSI, which most natives would not use because they are eligible for Social Security benefits, 1.6 percent of natives used SSI (Supplemental Security Income) in 2006, compared to 3.0 percent of naturalized citizens and 1.3 percent of non-citizens. (See Table 7.1.)
- And 7.7 percent of natives used the Food Stamp program, compared to 3.9 percent of naturalized citizens and 6.2 percent of non-citizens.

STUART ANDERSON, *Editor*

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TABLE 2
USE OF PUBLIC BENEFITS BY NATIVITY AND CITIZENSHIP (2006)

Program	Percent of Natives Using Benefit	Percent of Naturalized Citizens Using Benefit	Percent of Non-Citizens Using Benefit
AFDC/TANF	0.6%	0.3%	0.7%
SSI	1.6%	3.0%	1.3%
Medicaid	13.1%	10.8%	11.6%
Food Stamps	7.7%	3.9%	6.2%

Source: Stuart Anderson, *Immigration* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010), 196; House Ways and Means Committee, *2008 Green Book*, Appendix H, Table H-9 – Estimated Benefit Usage by Citizenship Categories: 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006.

CONCLUSION

Concerns about immigrant welfare use do not represent valid grounds for supporting reductions in legal immigration. Nor is it reasonable to oppose a better approach to

addressing illegal immigration, such as by instituting new temporary visa categories. Historically, immigrants have come to America not for a handout, but in search of opportunity. There is no reason to think this will change.

¹Walter A. Ewing, *Not Getting What They Paid For* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, June 2003), 1.

²In research for the Urban Institute in 1994, Rebecca L. Clark wrote, “Among immigrants, high rates of welfare use are limited to one group of immigrants—those who entered as refugees—and one type of welfare—SSI. For other types of welfare, immigrants who did not enter as refugees are no more likely to use welfare than natives.” From Rebecca L. Clark, “The Costs of Providing Public Assistance and Education to Immigrants” (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, May 1994), 18, as cited in Julian L. Simon, *Immigration, The Demographic and Economic Facts*, (Washington, DC: The Cato Institute and the National Immigration Forum, 1995), 35-36.

³Jason Riley, *Let Them In* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2008), 108.

⁴Thank you to Jonathan Blazer and Tanya Broder of the National Immigration Law Center for their assistance.

⁵Susan Fortino-Brown, “Family-Sponsored Immigration, in *Navigating the Fundamentals of Immigration Law: Guidance and Tips for Successful Practice, 2007-08 Edition*, ed., Grace E. Akers, (Washington, DC: American Immigration Lawyers Association, 2007), 326.

⁶Jeffery S. Passel, *Unauthorized Migrants: Numbers and Characteristics*, (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, June 14, 2005), 25.

⁷House Ways and Means Committee, *2008 Green Book*, Appendix H, Table H-9 – Estimated Benefit Usage by Citizenship Categories: 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006.