

Wall Street Journal: Immigrants Are Still Fitting In

By Miriam Jordan

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The stalemate in Congress over fixing the nation's broken immigration system and a spate of state laws to curb illegal immigration might suggest the U.S. is doing a poor job of integrating newcomers.

New studies by scholars from both liberal and conservative think tanks conclude that members of the great wave of contemporary immigration, who flocked here in the 1990s, are integrating into U.S. society at a healthy clip and are more assimilated than their brethren in other countries.

The U.S. today is home to 40 million foreign-born residents, the most ever, a number that includes people here illegally after sneaking across the border and those with legal status, who hold a green card or are citizens.

How quickly immigrants assimilate—reflected in indicators such as homeownership, learning English and achieving U.S. citizenship—shapes how Americans perceive them and has implications for the economy, from the job market and government budgets to school classrooms and hospital emergency rooms.

"Assimilation is the process of erasing differences between immigrants and natives over time," says Duke University economist Jacob Vigdor, an adjunct fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute who studies immigrant integration. "These differences are eroding just as rapidly now as they have historically."

In a study to be released this week, titled "Assimilation Tomorrow," demographers Dowell Myers and John Pitkin of the University of Southern California track advances made by immigrants 20 years of age and older who arrived in the 1990s, based on the patterns of earlier waves who had been here a comparable amount of time and factoring in the recession.

The authors conclude that that decade's arrivals, who hail mainly from Latin America and Asia, made consistent progress toward social and economic integration, until the recent recession.

"After 2006, they were bumped down a little bit but not back to the level of 2000," says Mr. Myers, whose research was conducted in partnership with the liberal Center for American Progress and funded by the MacArthur Foundation. "We assume they will resume the upward trajectory when the recession comes to an end."

Not surprisingly, the research found that the longer immigrants are here, the more assimilated they become.

Messrs. Myers and Pitkin, analyzing data from the Census Bureau, found homeownership is achieved by most immigrants within a couple of decades in the U.S. Just 24% of all immigrants who arrived in the 1990s owned a home in 2000. That figure will reach 72% by 2030, according to the authors' projections.

"Homeownership reflects the value immigrants place on achieving the American dream and the fact that they pool money and buy lower-priced real estate to achieve that dream," says Mr. Myers.

By 2030, 70% of all immigrants will speak English well and 87% will be living above the government-defined poverty line, the authors predict. Mr. Vigdor of the Manhattan Institute found similarly positive trends for immigrants in his research. His latest study, a comparative analysis released earlier this year, concludes that immigrants in the U.S. are more assimilated than in most European countries, and only less assimilated than those in Canada and Portugal.

Homeownership rate among immigrants in the U.S. dwarfs that of immigrants in Italy by 20 percentage points. The employment rate of U.S. immigrants exceeds that of those in the Netherlands by 13 percentage points. Immigrants here also are more likely to be naturalized citizens than those in many European countries.

To be sure, immigrants from Asia and developed countries tend to integrate into U.S. society more quickly than those from Mexico and Central America, who are more likely to arrive with limited skills, education and knowledge of English.

"In addition to these disadvantages, if you come from where there is no such thing as a junior college or manufacturing, you have a less clear idea of what opportunity looks like when you come to the United States," says Mr. Vigdor.

Other factors, such as immigration status, also affect integration. The U.S. has 11 million undocumented immigrants, the majority of them Hispanics. "In 1910, there was no such thing as an illegal immigrant. The nation had an open-borders policy. There were no obstacles to becoming a U.S. citizen, only time," says Mr. Vigdor.

So if assimilation is occurring for immigrants of all groups, albeit at varying speeds, why don't Americans necessarily see it? One reason, scholars say, is that people's perceptions are shaped by the immigrants in their midst.

In states like Alabama and South Carolina, where the Hispanic population has swelled in just the past 15 years, natives are more likely to fall prey to the "Peter Pan principle," says Mr. Myers. "They think immigrants are frozen in their status as newcomers and stuck where they are." In fact, he says, they haven't been in the U.S. long enough to make significant advances toward assimilation. The two states are among those that recently passed laws to crack down on illegal immigrants.

"If you look at Texas and California, Hispanics have higher success rates because the proportion of newcomers is lower," says Mr. Myers. "They have had more time to assimilate."

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