

The Life Course of the New Immigrant Middle Class: Boom or Bust?

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Abstract

Little of the migration literature focuses on highly skilled migrants as it is usually assumed that they have few problems in integration. However, the recent economic crisis had a profound effect on their job perspectives, possibly altering their life course trajectory. Using the New Immigrant Survey, we develop a life course model of highly skilled immigrants, based on age, education, family status, region of origin, race and type of entry (visa). We will use cluster analysis to determine whether education is the main factor that influences migrants' level of integration and/or if other factors play an important role, and see general patterns of the life course trajectory in this group, followed by additional analysis on various socioeconomic characteristics. As the second round of interviews from the NIS occurred between June 2007 – December 2009, we are able to capture the effects of the economic crisis as well.

Extended abstract

Education plays a significant role in shaping the immigrants' experience and life course in the United States. The modes of entry, degree of assimilation or integration, demographic dynamics, income, and family structure, are all tied to the level of education the immigrant comes with or achieves in the US. As studies have shown (Borjas 1992; Borjas 1994), the educational differences between immigrant groups tend to affect not only the first generation immigrants, but also their children and grandchildren. Also, although the level of education plays a role in determining the type of job and income an immigrant would achieve, foreign education does not bring the same rewards as the US education (Zheng and Xie 2004).

If we compare the educational achievement of immigrants with that of native born US citizens, we see that immigrants fall into the extremes of the distribution. On the one hand, only 11 % of US native born did in 2010 not have a high school degree, while 31.7 % of foreign born are in this group (Grieco et al. 2012). On the other hand, two in five life scientists, one in four astronomers, and one in five doctors in the USA, in the year 2000, were foreign born (Kaushal and Fix 2006). The educational distribution of foreign is very much dependent on the region of birth: 60 % of those born in Mexico do not have a high school diploma, while only 12.1 % of African born is in this situation; 48.5 % of Asian born living in the USA have at least a bachelor degree, while only 11.2 % of those born in Latin America was in this group in 2010 (Grieco et al. 2012).

US immigration policy changed dramatically during the 20th century from no policy to one based on ethnic quotas and then to the current one, which gives aliens four different channels to settle down as permanent residents: family connections, employment, diversity program and refugee status. While the ethnicity is overemphasized in the literature on immigration, the immigration channels are relatively

under-researched. The way immigrants get admitted into the US is tied up with other demographic characteristics and it is a good predictor for how the life of the immigrant will unfold (Jasso et al., 2000). For example, those admitted based on family connections (family-sponsored immigration), have a lower than average level of education, and settle down close to their family, most often in ethnic enclaves. Immigrant communities, or 'ethnic enclaves', are mostly constituted by the low educated immigrants and even though the ethnic homogeneity of these communities is most often discussed, there is also a class/education homogeneity that keeps people in the enclave because of the lack of opportunities outside. Those who immigrate based on employment, on the other hand, have higher than average level of education (in comparison with the US citizens) and go where their jobs are, no matter whether or not there are any co-ethnics there. Their occupation, not their ethnicity, has an important effect on their friendship networks and plays an important role in defining their identity. Rather than 'Chinese' 'Mexican', 'Indian' or 'Hungarian', an immigrant who is a physician most probably defines him/herself as 'physician' and has contacts within the group of physicians, not necessarily within his/her ethnic group.

On one hand, the highly educated immigrants melt easier into the new society: they have a good knowledge of English (many of them study in the US before getting a job) and they do not stay attached to any ethnic groups. On the other hand, there is a significant literature arguing that the educated immigrants keep a transnational profile, by keeping in touch with the country of origin. Africans, for example – the highest educated group of immigrants in the US (Butcher, 1994) – tend to separate themselves from the African-Americans by emphasizing their African origins in the education of their off-springs (Lieberson & Waters, 1988).

In this paper we focus on highly skilled immigrants defined as those who have at least a bachelor degree (Irendale, 2001) that are typically seen as getting easily integrated into the host country society. On the one hand, highly educated immigrants do come with high human capital (English knowledge and professional skills), and melt easier into the new society. On the other hand, there is a significant literature arguing that the educated immigrants keep a transnational profile, by keeping in touch with the country of origin. Africans, for example – the highest educated group of immigrants in the US (Butcher, 1994) – tend to separate themselves from the African-Americans by emphasizing their African origins in the education of their off-springs (Lieberson & Waters, 1988). This research will investigate how the life course of these immigrants develop (in comparison to the low educated ones) in the new country. In this respect, our study is a pioneer effort to apply the life course perspective on this specific group.

The life course perspective as a methodology has emerged as a unique way to look at major life transformation (Giele and Elder, 1998). It is often used in studies about aging and general life history, but its application for immigration studies is limited. At the same time, immigration is obviously one of the major transformative events in one's life. When we talk about the immigration of highly skilled professionals, this transformative event is placed in the context of migration decisions involving a significant number of choices, seldom restrained by other considerations than family and long term career. Thus, we are able to study the mechanisms of migration decisions largely apart from external pressures or intervening obstacles limiting choices.

The New Immigrant Survey (NIS) is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of legal US immigrants and their children. The samples are built using administrative records, compiled by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), of immigrants newly admitted to permanent residence.

The NIS sampling design includes two samples, an Adult Sample and a Child Sample. So far, there are two rounds of data available:

- Round 1, fielded in 2003 and 2004, where the Adult Sample has 8,573 completed interviews and the Child Sample yielded 810 interviews with sponsor-parents of the sampled child.
- Round 2, fielded in 2007-2009.

As a first step, we did some preliminary analyses using the data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics for various educational and racial and ethnic groups for US population age 25 and above (see Table 1 and 2). Foreign born and native born populations differ in their ethnic and racial composition, and this in turn influences the labor force outcomes of each of these groups. In order to control for differences in racial/ethnic composition, we compared the rates of unemployment of foreign and native born within each of the four main racial and ethnic groups. The following notations have been used: W- White Non-Hispanics, B- Black Non-Hispanics, H- Hispanics, A- Asian Non-Hispanic, FB – foreign born, NB – native born and combinations of these (for example, WFB stands for White Non-Hispanic Foreign Born).

These statistics show that within all four largest racial and ethnic groups in the US, foreign born with a college and above are all doing worse than the native born with the same level of education both before and after 2008. Among those with a college degree or above, foreign born Blacks have the worst labor force outcomes. Even during economic recession, the rates of unemployment for native born with a college degree remain relatively low in comparison to other educational groups and about half of what foreign born with the same level of education experience. At the other end of the educational scale, foreign born White (Non-Hispanic), Blacks (Non-Hispanic) and Hispanics without a high school diploma are doing better than the native born with the same level of education. Asian native born, regardless of education, are doing better than those who are foreign born.

While the tables present an easy to understand picture of what happens with the rate of unemployment in the US, factors that lead to such results are more difficult to understand. First, a person can enter unemployment from two different states: 1) from 'out of the labor force' (because s/he is a recent graduate or s/he spent a long time outside of the job market); 2) from 'employed'. Somebody is leaving unemployment because: 1) s/he finds a job; or 2) no longer looks for a job. At any point in time, the number of unemployed people is the result of these four dynamic processes.

Table 1. Evolution of the unemployment rate in the US for people with less than HS diploma

	WFB	WNB	BFB	BNB	AFB	ANB	HFB	HNB
2002	5.6	7.7	10.6	14.1	8.4	8.8	7.1	10.1
2003	6	7.7	12.5	14.1	9.7	8.8	7.7	10.2
2004	6.4	7.8	10.1	16.5	6.1	4.2	7.0	9.4
2005	5.6	7.2	7.5	15.7	5.9	2.8	5.6	8.4
2006	5.3	6.6	8.6	13.8	3.9	3.4	5.0	7.9
2007	4.3	7.5	8.4	13.1	3.0	2.9	5.3	9.4
2008	8.1	8.3	7.9	16.0	6.8	2.9	7.7	10.4
2009	10.7	14.6	15.7	22.6	7.9	7.4	13.0	16.9
2010	8.0	15.5	17.4	24.5	11.2	8.3	12.1	18.5

source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Table 2. Evolution of the unemployment rate in the US for people with BS/BA and higher

	WFB	WNB	BFB	BNB	AFB	ANB	HFB	HNB
2002	4.5	2.5	4.6	4.1	3.9	4	4.3	2.7
2003	4.2	2.7	6.6	3.9	4.7	3	4.4	3.8
2004	3.7	2.4	5.0	4.1	3.0	2.5	4.0	3.1
2005	3.1	2.0	3.6	3.4	3.2	2.4	2.9	2.9
2006	2.5	1.9	3.0	2.7	2.1	1.9	2.4	2.1
2007	2.7	1.8	3.0	2.9	2.1	3.0	2.9	1.9
2008	3.5	2.3	4.1	3.9	2.7	3.1	3.7	3.2
2009	6.4	4.0	8.5	7.0	5.8	4.7	7.1	4.7
2010	6.4	4.0	8.5	7.0	5.8	4.7	7.1	4.7

source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

The process is even more complicated when foreign born are involved. A higher rate of unemployment for a group of foreign born might be the result of a large number of them entering the country at a certain point in time. It takes time for most new immigrants to get adjusted, so if there are many of them in comparison to how many are already in the country, they might have a strong influence on the rate of unemployment for their particular group. Illegal immigrants are generally concentrated among those who are low educated therefore these data show that being illegal is not a significant factor in preventing one from having a job. The fact that among those without a high school diploma, immigrants are doing far better (in terms of unemployment rate) than the natives, while it is the other way around among those with bachelor degrees and above might show that while employers prefer to hire immigrants at low levels of education, they definitely prefer natives when it comes to skilled jobs. This could prove to be an argument for immigration policies that allow more skilled immigrants as they do not hurt natives' probability of being employed.

In the next steps, we will use the NIS Round 1 and Round 2 to compare the highly skilled and low skilled life courses before and during/after the 2008 economic crisis. The plan is to run a cluster analysis to identify groups of respondents with respect to their age, family status and education before and after the immigration event, creating the proxy for life course paths centering around the event of immigration. The clusters will then be cross-referenced with other characteristics, such as country of origin or academic field. Finally, we use cluster membership to predict how their life will develop in their new host country. This is a new research is actually based on a collaboration stemming from a PAA session on highly skilled immigrants at the 2014 meeting.

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