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Immigrants Come to America to Work

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A Supreme Court ruling on Monday allows the Trump administration to start denying green cards to immigrants who might become economic burdens on society. The justices said nothing about the merits of any policy change, but that doesn't mean the rest of us can't assess them. So do most immigrants come here to work or to go on the dole?

One way to answer that question is to look at where migrants settle after arriving here. If they are coming for Medicaid and food stamps, you might expect them to head to states with the most generous benefits, such as New York and California. Yet according to a Brookings Institution analysis of census data, between 2010 and 2018 the five states with the fastest-growing foreign-born populations were North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Delaware and Iowa. New York ranks near the top in the nation in Medicaid spending per beneficiary, and South Dakota is at the bottom end. Nevertheless, the immigrant population in New York grew by just 3.5% during this period, while South Dakota's rose by 58.2%.

Another way to get at what draws immigrants to the U.S. is to look at their employment numbers. In 2018 the percentage of U.S. workers born outside the country reached its highest level since 1996, yet their unemployment rate was 3.5%, versus 4% for the native-born. And the labor participation rate for immigrants was slightly higher than the rate for workers born here, 65.7% to 62.3%. A common fear is that immigrants are displacing U.S. workers, but the U.S. is experiencing record low unemployment and there are still over a million more job openings in the country than there are people looking for work.

In addition to concerns about illegal border crossings, the White House is worried that too many poor migrants are entering the country lawfully and will overburden social programs. President Trump says he wants to attract foreign nationals who are higher-educated and less likely to turn to public assistance. To some extent, this is already happening, as you would expect in a country with relatively flexible labor markets. And as the needs of businesses and the economy at large have changed, so has the type of migrant seeking to build a new life here.

The Journal reported last year that "an increasing share of immigrants are coming to the U.S. from China and India, countries whose immigrants tend to have higher levels of education than those from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America." Hispanics still account for the largest percentage of the foreign-born workforce, at 47.7%, but the "size of their share has shrunk" from more than 50% in 2009. "Meanwhile, Asians account for more than a quarter of the foreign-born labor force, up from 22.3% in 2009."

It's true that immigrants are more likely to be poor. But among poor people in the U.S., it turns out that immigrants aren't the drain on public services that the administration is making them out to be. In 2018, the libertarian Cato Institute published a study on immigrants and welfare, and the upshot is that the native-born make use of means-tested welfare and entitlement programs at significantly higher rates than their foreign-born counterparts.

“Overall, immigrants are less likely to consume welfare benefits and, when they do, they generally consume a lower dollar value of benefits than native born Americans,” according to Cato. “The per capita cost of providing welfare to immigrants is substantially less than the per capita cost of providing welfare to native-born Americans.” The study found that poor immigrants “are less likely than natives to use every welfare program with the exception of Medicaid, where they are 0.4 percent more likely to use it.” Immigrant children also were less likely than native children to make use of means-tested welfare programs and the least likely to use Medicaid.

Since the colonial era, America has taken into consideration the economic status of immigrants when deciding whom to admit (or deport) and should continue to do so. And as the political left pushes proposals that would effectively erase the border, disband immigration enforcement agencies, and expand the welfare state on a scale not seen since Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the president's concerns are understandable. At the same time, we ought not overstate the problem or pretend that immigrants rather than the native-born drive the costs of these social programs any more than they drive our violent-crime rates. Both problems, by and large, are homegrown.

The assumption that people who arrive poor will stay that way is ahistorical. Immigrants are self-selecting. The poorest of the poor can't afford the trip, and the ones who do come tend to be more motivated and less risk-averse than nonimmigrants. Class-warfare liberals have been insisting in recent years that social mobility in American is now a “myth.” I'll believe that when people no longer want to come here.