



## Immigration Myth Buster: Poor Immigrants Use Less Welfare

By: Eric Giunta April 19, 2013

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### Welfare Recipients

One of the arguments frequently put forward for limiting immigration, both legal and illegal, is that immigrants are a drain on the American economy, and especially on the welfare state. But there's just one problem with that claim: It just isn't so.

That's the conclusion of a study by two George Washington University (GWU) researchers, whose findings were recently published by the Cato Institute, a conservative-libertarian think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C.

The working paper, titled "The Use of Public Assistance Benefits by Citizens and Non-Citizen Immigrants in the United States," reveals that while immigrants do indeed avail themselves of numerous welfare benefits, they do so at a far less rate than native-born Americans. And those immigrants who do receive welfare typically receive less than their native-born counterparts.

### Figure 1 Chart

Among the findings by GWU professors Leighton Ku and Brian Bruen:

– More than 25 percent of native-born Americans and naturalized citizens in poverty receive Medicaid, but only about 20 percent of noncitizens do so. Sixty-five percent of poor citizen children receive health insurance through Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), while about 49 percent of noncitizen children do so.

– On average, native-born adults have about \$1,000 more Medicaid expenditures than their immigrant counterparts; native-born children have about \$500 more expenditures than immigrant children.

– Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are utilized by 33 percent of native citizens, 25 percent of naturalized citizens, and 29 percent of noncitizens. About 51 percent of poor citizen children in citizen households receive SNAP, compared to about 33 percent noncitizen children and about 42 percent of citizen children in noncitizen-headed families.

– The average annual SNAP benefits per household member are about one-fifth lower for noncitizens than native adults or citizen children with citizen parents.

#### Figure 4 Chart

– Supplemental Security Income (SSI) receipt is higher for native and naturalized citizens than noncitizen immigrants. Children in households with noncitizen family members are less likely to be in households receiving cash assistance or SSI than citizen children living in full-citizen households.

#### Figure 7 Chart

– Average annual cash assistance and SSI benefits for the native-born, naturalized, and noncitizens are similar; but the value of these benefits per household member is lowest for children living in noncitizen households.

#### Figure 9 Chart

Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, tells Sunshine State News that Florida's immigrants probably receive slightly more welfare benefits than immigrants nationally, because of the unique dynamic surrounding Cuban immigration.

“Florida's a destination for a lot of Cuban refugees, but American law allows these refugees [from Cuba's communist dictatorship] to get a lot of these means-tested welfare programs very soon after they arrive,” he explains. “Now, in the long run Cubans tend to leave these programs behind. They're very entrepreneurial, they seek education, and they achieve economically at an incredibly high rate.”

While undocumented immigrants and other noncitizens are generally not eligible for these welfare programs -- lawful permanent residents are eligible for federal benefits after five years, though some states provide them earlier -- Nowrasteh says there are other reasons why these statistical trends also hold for immigrants who have been naturalized.

“There's a persistent behavior that's still left over from when [these immigrants] were undocumented on their green card; in the academic literature this is referred to as the 'chilling effect,'" he explains.

“I also think the type of people who decide to emigrate to the U.S. and leave their countries and cultures behind are also more independent and hard-working than other people in their economic situations,” he theorizes. “Many Latin Americans view welfare as being something that's shameful and that lazy people do when they refuse to work and take care of their families, and refusing to take care of your family is an embarrassing thing in a lot of the countries where these immigrants typically come from.”

Asked to respond to popular perceptions that Latin Americans come from socialist or socialist-leaning countries, and bring those political and social habits to the United States, Nowrasteh says this is a misconception stemming from many Americans' confusion of the welfare state with socialism.

“A lot of people confuse the welfare state we have in the U.S. with socialism, but they are very distinct economic realities,” he insists. “You do have state-dominated economies in a lot of these [Latin American] countries, but that does not mean there's a large social safety net, where you can sit around lazily and not work for long periods of time.”

Nowrasteh concedes that immigrants, both documented and undocumented, receive other state benefits, like public education and free treatment in federally-funded emergency rooms, but says these benefits are exploited by native-born Americans as well, and point to a deeper need to reform the welfare system, not to close the country off to immigrants.

“If that is really our concern, then the reform path is clear: Reform these programs and cut them across the board for everybody, and fix the welfare state; we shouldn't hurt our American labor markets and wall

ourselves off from the rest of the world,” he insists. “It's much easier to build walls around the welfare state than to build a wall around the country.”