

## **‘He was the rock from which we all started’: Nobel Prize winner David Card influenced how we think about immigration and jobs**

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David Card, a UC Berkeley economist, was one of three recipients of the Nobel prize for economic sciences

Ten years after the Mariel Boatlift brought more than 125,000 Cuban immigrants to Florida, an economist named David Card wrote on the immigrant influx and its impact on Miami's labor market.

Card determined there was "virtually no effect" on wages and jobless rates of the city's less skilled workers. Three years after those conclusions, Card's work on immigration -- as well as other research on hot button topics like minimum wage -- have landed him the honors of a 2021 Nobel Prize in economics.

"His studies from the early 1990s challenged conventional wisdom, leading to new analyses and additional insights," the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences said. The other award recipients were Joshua Angrist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Guido Imbens at Stanford University.

It's often difficult to see the immediate implications of research, Card said in a press conference held hours after learning he was one of three people receiving the prominent prize.

Big-picture questions

But for some who focus on big-picture questions of immigration and economic competitiveness, the impact of Card's research is clear to see, even as the debate over immigration reform continues.

"He was the rock from which we all started," according to Jeremy Robbins, executive director of New American Economy. The organization -- founded 11 years ago by Michael Bloomberg, the

data-driven former New York City mayor -- focuses on the ways to grow local economies that meld immigration reform and access for people coming to America.

Immigrants or their children founded 40% of Fortune 500 companies, according to New American Economy's first report.

When New American Economy works with local leaders in places where new immigrants are arriving, Robbins said they start with scrutiny of the facts on the ground. "The first thing we always do, we show who is there, where they work. In the same insight of David Card, you have to show with data what impact immigrants are having in the communities where they are living."

Card's impact has been "enormous," according to Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "He really does show the cost of immigration has been systemically exaggerated over the year and decades."

But still, immigration debates continue -- and Nowrasteh says that's because "people don't know or care about what the actual research says and they rely on stereotypes or anecdotes." There are other academic methods to show larger immigrant impacts on wages, but Nowrasteh says Card's formulas and approaches set the real standard.

"People seem to want to choose the message that confirm their opinion," he said.

Card's academic recognition on immigration topics stems back to the Mariel Boatlift, which unfolded between April 1980 and October 1980. Fidel Castro allowed Cubans who wanted to flee his repressive Communist regime to exit via the port of Mariel. Approximately 125,000 people fled.

The events were just the type of "natural experiments" Card searched for. In a 1990 paper for the *Industrial and Labor Review*, he said Miami's labor force jumped 7%, but the growth showed "virtually no effect on the wage rates of less-skilled non-Cuban workers."

Card observed Miami's job market had been absorbing immigrants with unskilled labor from Cuba, Nicaragua and elsewhere long before the boatlift and the local economy was "well suited" for the situation with its textile and apparel industries.

Other data-driven studies followed, hitting on the money angle of immigration and challenging the idea that immigrants cut into the job prospects of other people already situated in a labor market.

He's focused on other labor-market topics, including the effect on gender preferences in job listings.

At Monday's press conference, Card said his research and the research of fellow economists are one part in complex issues. "The kinds of knowledge we can bring are not necessarily the whole story," he said.

However, Card said, it would be helpful if lawmakers could evaluate evidence on topics like minimum wage levels and immigration policies from a "scientific view" and not from "an ideological view" -- but he's "not particularly optimistic."

Last month, the Senate's parliamentarian, a non-partisan role, said Democrats could not include a pathway to citizenship in their reconciliation bill geared toward improving the social safety net. At the time, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said leaders would be holding future meetings with the parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough.

Like Card, Nowrasteh doesn't sound optimistic that change on immigration laws will come quickly from Washington D.C. "The debate isn't about facts any more," said Nowrasteh. "It's about a bunch feelings. That is something statistics can't explain."