

Review of “The Immigrant Success Story”

Immigration



Review of The American Immigration Council’s Special Report, “The Immigrant Success Story: How Family-Based Immigrants Thrive in America,” by Harriet Duleep, Ph.D, Mark Regets, Ph.D. and Guillermo Cantor, Ph.D.¹

This report explores the family-based immigration system’s influence on upward economic mobility for immigrants as their earnings grow over time. It argues that family-based immigration is important to the “adaptation, integration and well-being of immigrants” and that although initial earnings may be low for new family-based immigrants, their high rate of investment on human capital leads to increased earnings the longer they reside in the U.S. This report also highlights the influence of sibling family-reunification on both increased earnings and entrepreneurship.

In addition to the report’s findings on family-based immigration, it also discusses more broadly the history of immigration changes and the potential threats to this process of admissions. As the narrative shifts in favor of a merit-based system, it inadvertently overlooks the economic growth which family-based immigration generates over a protracted period of time.

Report Findings

Before reviewing the report’s findings, it is important to note that the U.S immigration system is largely based on family reunification. In 2016, 68 percent of individuals receiving Lawful Permanent Resident status did so through family-based immigration.

By analyzing three cohorts of immigrants over a 10-year span (between decennial censuses), Duleep et al. identified a trend in increased earnings. The immigrant cohort that entered the U.S. between 1965 to 1970 experienced an increase in overall earnings by 1980. New immigrants of this cohort began with making only 65 percent of what a comparable native-born worker earned in 1970. However, after 10 years (in 1980), the report showed them making 85 percent of comparable earnings.

Immigrant’s initial earnings compared to native-born workers dropped with the cohorts of immigrants entering the U.S between 1975-1980 and 1985-1990. In 1980 the initial earnings dropped to 50 percent and in 1990 it dropped again to 41 percent. However, their overall comparable earnings after a 10-year span remained at 84 and 85 percent.

This shows that while the initial earnings for immigrants may be lower than they were historically this is a narrow portrayal of immigrants’ economic growth. Duleep et al. argue that looking at family-based immigration over a longer period of time is necessary to accurately assess the overall economic impact.

Furthermore, the findings show that there is a 10 percent increase in earnings growth when siblings enter the U.S. through family-based immigration. Family-based immigration, particularly for siblings, provides an opportunity for family businesses. There is also a higher rate of investment in human capital such as education and training among immigrants who entered the U.S.

¹<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrant-success-story>

through family-based immigration. Whereas employment-based immigrants come to the U.S. engaged in a specific employment opportunity and are less likely to invest in human capital.

A Changing Narrative Threatens Family-Based Immigration

The 1965 Immigration Act removed the restrictive national origin quotas and implemented a family-based immigration system. Although the current immigration system remains predominantly family-based, immigration policy experts, economists, and politicians have shifted the narrative to merit-based or skills-based admissions. Yet, this debate ignores the importance of family-based immigration in relation to skills-based. Highly-skilled immigrants are more likely to move if family members are also allowed to. It should also be noted that highly-skilled workers often sponsor highly-skilled or educated family members.

The authors state, “Policies hostile to family-based immigrants risk not only losing out on these sources of flexibility and innovation, but also risk damaging the country’s ability to recruit employment-based migrants.” This prioritization of a merit-based system only looks to fill the immediate labor market and ignores the impact of family-based immigration on its unique influence on the U.S. economy.

Note: This is not legal advice; it is intended to provide information of general interest about current legal issues.



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