

Workers and Welfare Beneficiaries

A realistic portrait of immigrants in the United States

THE EDITORS

Listening to the debate in the U.S. today, we hear two seemingly inconsistent characterizations of immigrants. In one story, immigrants come to do work—any work at all, no matter how laborious—to make a better life for their families. In the other story, immigrants are heavy users of welfare who rely on American taxpayers to feed, house, and provide medical care for their children. Which story is closer to reality? Although partisans on both sides have sometimes been loath to admit it, *both stories are true*.

Welfare and work go together in modern America, which is something made clear by a recent report from the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). Entitled “Welfare Use by Immigrant and Native Households,” the CIS report shows that a remarkable 51 percent of households headed by immigrants used some form of welfare in 2012, versus 30 percent for native households. Even with at least one worker present, immigrant households still use welfare at the same 51 percent rate, while the native rate goes down by only 3 percentage points to 28 percent.

How could this be? Many Americans think of welfare as a payment in lieu of working. Cash payments for non-workers are indeed part of our welfare system, primarily in the form of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI); but most welfare programs providing food, housing, and medical care are based on income and family size—not employment status.

For example, 41 percent of working immigrant households were on Medicaid in 2012. The primary eligibility factor for Medicaid is poverty, with special categories for pregnancy, disability, etc. Work is not a disqualification. Similarly, 19 percent of working immigrant households were on food stamps, and 12 percent were on the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. Low-income working households can and do participate in these programs despite generating earned income.

If these welfare use rates still seem surprisingly high, that is because they are more accurate than previous estimates. Earlier studies of immigrant welfare were based on the March Current Population Survey

(CPS), a Census dataset designed primarily to measure labor market outcomes. Because the March CPS asks respondents about their welfare use over the whole previous calendar year, substantial undercount of welfare use is inevitable.

The CIS report instead draws from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a Census product specifically designed to measure welfare use. Because the SIPP asks the same households about their welfare use on a monthly basis, undercount is substantially reduced. For example, the CPS indicates that 39 percent of immigrant households and 24 percent of native households used welfare in 2012. The comparable SIPP estimates, as mentioned above, are 51 percent for immigrants and 30 percent for natives.

The one drawback to using the SIPP is its complexity. Partially because of that complexity, and partially because of the explosiveness of the results, CIS took the extra step of having all of its SIPP calculations double-checked by an independent statistical firm called Decision Demographics. Readers see this reassuring note on the report’s first page: “Decision Demographics has verified the methodology and findings reported in the tables and figures of this report.” Of course, that did not stop open-borders advocates from making baseless accusations that the report is “full of errors.” When confronted with irrefutable data that one does not like, a tried-and-true public relations method is to simply prevaricate until the media stop paying attention. That appears to be the method employed by CIS’s opponents.

One of the stranger claims made by those opponents is that immigrants use less welfare than natives *of comparable skill*. First of all, this is not true at the household level. As the CIS report indicates, 76 percent of households headed by an immigrant without a high school degree used welfare in 2012, versus 59 percent of households headed by a high school dropout native. Even if the claim were true, however, it would be irrelevant. When low-skill immigrants make heavy use of the welfare system, it would be little consolation to the American taxpayer that immigrants are not using welfare quite as much as the least skilled natives. The obvious response is that we should design

an immigration system that selects for people who are highly unlikely to use welfare, not merely settle for the not-as-bad-as-it-could-be option that we are supposedly getting now.

One reason that immigrant households do in fact use welfare at higher rates than comparably educated native households is that immigrants tend to have more children. Having children is a major driver of welfare usage for immigrants and natives alike. For example, 76 percent of immigrant-headed households with children used welfare in 2012, along with 52 percent of native households with children. Some children in immigrant-headed households were born in the U.S., which has led critics of the report to suggest that CIS is inflating the immigrant category with native welfare use. But it makes little sense to exclude U.S.-born children of immigrants. After all, an immigrant who comes to the U.S. and subsequently has children requiring public

assistance has clearly placed a burden on American taxpayers.

The truth is that immigrants are neither the up-by-the-bootstraps individualists nor the lazy mooches caricatured by each side of the immigration debate. Immigrants come to the U.S. to work, but they also consume means-tested benefits at high rates. That welfare consumption is a direct result of their relatively low levels of education paired with their relatively large families. Whether a person was born in Kansas or Guatemala, having a low-paying job with a lot of mouths to feed is bound to lead to high levels of welfare use in modern America. Placing special legal restrictions on immigrant welfare use has proven to be difficult, especially because so many of the benefits are consumed by the U.S.-born children of immigrants. As long as we have both a welfare state and low-skill immigration, then immigrant welfare use will be high. ■

Immigration Transforms New York City into a Tower of Babel

By WAYNE LUTTON

According to the United States Census Bureau, more than 192 languages are spoken in the New York City greater metropolitan area. The Bronx has become a special nesting place for West Africans, who are now demanding that tax-payers provide them with interpreters to aid them as they apply for public assistance, including housing applications and public education.

Akide Kodjo, a community organizer for African Communities Together, told the *New York Times*, “People are arriving [from Africa] with language barriers, and as they come and have children in school, we still have language barriers everywhere.” Added Alane Bibang, an interpreter from Gabon working in NYC with African Communities Together, “There are so many people in need of the services by the city, but they don’t have the knowledge of how to access them.”

Census data compiled by Queens College reveals that nearly 46,000 West Africans now live in the Bronx. The rise in the number of West Africans living in NYC “is forcing the body politic to deal with the African leadership,” charged Afua Atta-Mensah, director of litigation for the Urban Justice Center, a legal advocacy group.

Under current law, any institution that receives federal funding is required to provide interpreter services. St. Barnabas Hospital, in the Bronx, is swamped with West Africans demanding health services. The hospital administration has been conducting “diversity days” to acquaint doctors with African cultural norms that may affect public health. Hospitals throughout NYC are connected with a language bank to access live interpreters of more than 2,000 languages at all hours. But, as the *NYT* reported, gaps remain. Linguists estimate that more than 800 languages are spoken in West Africa.

How does the United States benefit by the importation of people who are a burden to their new country of residence? Were Americans asked if they would like to become home to foreigners who would be making new economic and political demands? We need to ask our public officials: Just what is the purpose of current immigration policies? ■

Source: Liz Robbins, “Influx of West Africans in the Bronx Spurs Demand for Interpreters,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2015.