

NATIVITY DIFFERENTIALS IN PUBLIC ASSISTANCE RECEIPT:

A RESEARCH NOTE*

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Abstract

The rise in the number of immigrants since 1960, and especially in the higher shares from less developed countries has raised concerns that immigrants use welfare benefits more than natives. Using both descriptive tabulations and TOBIT regression methods, we analyze immigrant-native differentials in public assistance receipt based on 1980 U.S. Census data. Our OLS results show that immigrants received neither more nor less welfare income in 1979 than did otherwise comparable natives. Tobit models revealed that black and Hispanic immigrant families received lower welfare payments than their native counterparts.

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A RESEARCH NOTE

Since the late-1960s, the United States has been experiencing its third great wave of immigration which, unlike earlier waves, has been dominated by individuals from Third World countries (Bouvier, 1981). This "new immigration" has rekindled old debates regarding the economic impact of immigrants (cf., Cafferty, et al., 1982; Glazer, 1985; Borjas and Tienda, 1987). One basic debate revolves around the assertion that immigrants are more prone than natives to receive welfare payments, and that they pose a considerable burden on cash assistance programs both because of increasing numbers and because of the higher levels of need. While these assertions find support among the general public and legislators (cf., New York Times/CBS News Poll, July 1, 1986),¹ they have received relatively little attention by researchers. The paucity of hard data has been accommodated by a reliance on anecdotal evidence to substantiate claims that receipt of welfare income by immigrants is widespread.

Public opinions about the welfare utilization patterns of immigrants notwithstanding, the available scientific evidence does not support claims that the foreign born are more likely than natives to receive welfare benefits. For example, Julian Simon (1984) concluded that in the aggregate,

immigrants contribute more to public coffers via taxes and other contributions than they take from them in the form of social expenditures of all types, including transfer payments. Regarding the assertion that immigrants are welfare prone, two separate studies (Blau, 1984; Tienda and Jensen, 1986) based on nationally representative census data found that net of individual and household characteristics which determine eligibility for welfare benefits, immigrants were significantly less likely than (statistically) similar natives to receive transfer payments.

Although the standardized effect of foreign birth on the likelihood of welfare receipt is strongly negative, particularly among recent arrivals, the aggregate rate of welfare receipt is marginally higher for immigrants compared to natives. This is because the most recent immigrants -- those who arrived since 1970 -- are less skilled compared to those who arrived between 1950 and 1970 (Borjas and Tienda, 1987). It is conceivable, therefore, that the financial burden on U.S. taxpayers posed by recent immigrants exceeds that of natives. Unfortunately, fewer studies have examined the effects of nativity status on the amount of welfare income received. Blau's (1984) study, which is an exception, estimated (OLS) total transfer payments received by the subset of recipients conditional upon receipt. She provided some evidence that immigrants generally received less welfare and social insurance income than otherwise comparable natives, but the exclusion of nonrecipients introduces a potential bias in her analyses.

In this note we analyze the amount and determinants of public assistance payments received by all families. Public assistance income -- our dependent variable -- refers to receipt of income from the following programs during the calendar year (1979) prior to the census: AFDC, old age assistance, general assistance, aid to the blind and aid to the permanently and totally disabled

(U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). We extend Blau's (1984) work in a number of ways. First, rather than assume that the effects of race and national origin are additive, we disaggregate our sample by race/ethnicity and estimate separate models for whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians. Second, as a complement to the OLS models for the sub-sample of welfare participants, we estimate models of welfare receipt for the total sample using Tobit analysis. The Tobit model, which is "a hybrid of probit analysis and multiple regression" (Tobin, 1958), is appropriate for analysis of highly truncated continuous dependent variables such as welfare payments. Finally, our use of more recent data than Blau allows us to examine Southeast Asian refugees as a special case of welfare participation.

THE DATA

Our analysis is based on an extract from the 5 percent A-sample of the 1980 Census of Population and Housing (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). The size of the A-sample permits detailed analyses of relatively small minority populations, such as Hispanics and Asians. Our unit of analysis is the family, which is defined as persons residing in the same household who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption. We exclude persons who resided in institutions and other group quarters, as well as individuals living in family households who were not related to the enumerated householder. By definition families contain more than one person, thus we exclude residents of one-person households.

The 47,421 families included in our analysis come from housing units sampled differently according to the ethnicity and nativity of their members. In the presentation to follow, all descriptive statistics are weighted in accordance with their sampling rate. However, to ensure reliable tests of

statistical significance, multivariate analyses were based on unweighted parameters.²

The immigrant versus native designation of families was based on the characteristics of the head and/or the spouse, if present. Rather than adopt a restrictive definition of immigrant families, requiring that both spouses or only the head be foreign born, we classified as immigrant families those in which either spouse (or both) was born abroad. While this more inclusive definition could exaggerate the extent of utilization of transfer programs among the foreign born (see rationale in Simon, 1984), it also provides the upper bounds of such utilization, and thus seemed most suitable for our purposes.

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE UTILIZATION: A COMPARISON OF NATIVES AND IMMIGRANTS

Table 1 provides baseline information about differences between native and immigrant families in the propensity to use public assistance, and in mean welfare payments among recipients. The idea that immigrants are welfare prone finds mixed support in the data, as this generalization applies only to Asian and Hispanic families. Moreover, in neither instance does the greater participation among immigrants exceed that for natives by more than five percentage points.

(Table 1 About Here)

Table 1 reveals substantially higher levels of welfare reciprocity by spouse-absent and minority families. Welfare utilization rates of spouse-absent families were roughly 4 times those observed among married-couple families. Asians stand as an exception, with welfare participation rates of spouse-absent families only 2.5 times higher than

married couples. These findings are in accord with the higher levels of economic deprivation and disadvantaged labor market position of single heads (see Tienda and Glass, 1985).

With respect to differences in mean annual public assistance payments, Table 1 shows small nativity differentials in average welfare payments among families headed by married couples, although black and white immigrant families received slightly larger average payments than their native-born counterparts. This is puzzling in the case of blacks since black immigrant families have lower poverty rates than their native counterparts (Tienda and Jensen, 1986b) and are positively selected among the pool of immigrants from Third World countries (Bach and Tienda, 1984). Average payment levels received by spouse-absent families are patterned differently from those of married couples in two ways. First, among the single-parent families, immigrants of all groups (except whites) received larger benefits than their native counterparts, and second, the differential payment levels between natives and immigrants tended to be somewhat larger than comparable differentials among married couples.

On balance, these aggregate statistics lend support to the belief that immigrants burden the welfare system more than natives, but this generalization largely applies to Hispanic and Asian spouse-absent families, and white and black married couples. One possible explanation for the higher welfare use by immigrants are the higher benefit levels available in the states where immigrants are concentrated (e.g., New York, Illinois, California). Another equally important possibility has to do with compositional differences in those characteristics which determine eligibility for program benefits among race and ethnic groups, and between native and immigrant families. The following section addresses these possibilities.

MULTIVARIATE MODELS OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE RECEIPT

We estimate models which assume that total public assistance receipt is determined by a set of individual, family and contextual variables enumerated in Table 2. These factors operate primarily through their influence on eligibility and need for cash assistance. Controlling for these variables allows us to consider the unique effect of nativity status on welfare payments. In the interest of brevity, we refer the reader to other work for a thorough discussion of the conceptual framework of these models (Blau, 1984; Tienda and Jensen, 1986).³

(Table 2 About Here)

The dependent variable is the amount of public assistance income received by any family member, not strictly amounts received by the head. Our analyses use two different forms of the dependent variable, depending on whether OLS or Tobit is used as the estimation technique, as indicated in the operation description provided in Table 2.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The first way we analyze whether immigrants pose a greater burden on the welfare system than do natives is by analyzing the determinants of welfare payments conditioned upon receipt. Table 3 shows the OLS regression estimates of amount of family public assistance received in 1979. Most variables behaved as expected. Not surprisingly, the strongest predictor of total welfare income for each group was the number of recipients in the household. Every additional recipient increased the family's average payment from \$1,706 to \$2,076, depending on race and national origin. Also, families with more children received higher average payments, other things equal, than did families with fewer children.

For present purposes it is noteworthy that immigrant status has no significant effect on amount received for any group. That is, among public assistance households of all races or national origins, those headed by an immigrant received no more or less welfare income than (statistically) similar native families. In fact, other things equal, among black and Asian families the presence of a non-head immigrant recipient lowered their average payments by \$900 and \$750, respectively. Although statistically significant, the effect of state benefit level on average payments received was substantively trivial, ranging from \$2 to \$6 on an average annual basis.

(Table 3 About Here)

To the extent that the subset of recipients is not randomly distributed with respect to those characteristics which determine eligibility for and the likelihood of receiving transfer income, the parameter estimates based on OLS are biased (Green, 1981). Therefore, we re-estimated our models using Tobit to obviate this problem, and to verify the robustness of the OLS results.

The Tobit model assumes that all families have some probability of receiving public assistance income. Tobit regression permits us to estimate total public assistance receipt while acknowledging that families cannot receive a negative amount of public assistance, i.e., that most cases are at zero. Tobit improves on the estimation of the sheer propensity to receive welfare by examining the variance in receipt among welfare participants, and it improves on the above OLS approach by allowing for the analysis of the entire sample. These results appear in Table 4.

Since such a large majority of families received no public assistance income in 1979, most of the "action" takes place between the receipt of \$0 and \$1 or more. For this reason, the Tobit estimates closely mirror logit results based on the likelihood of receipt (Tienda and Jensen, 1986). That is, black

and Hispanic immigrant families use less public assistance than their native-born counterparts, other things equal. Among white families, the effect of immigrant status is likewise negative, but insignificant. Finally, while the estimate is on the margin of significance, Asian immigrant families appear to use more public assistance income than otherwise comparable natives. This effect reflects the presence of a large contingent of Indochinese refugees who were granted public assistance as part of their resettlement assistance (GAO, 1979). The negative effects of immigrant status for blacks and Hispanics should help to dispel the myth that immigrants (particularly those from Latin American countries) have a penchant for welfare and pose a drain on already overburdened public assistance resources.

CONCLUSION

In this research note we have addressed the question of whether immigrants to the United States disproportionately burden welfare programs when compared to natives. Like the more general issue of the net economic impact of immigration, this topic has been debated in the absence of much empirical evidence. Many who advocate tightening existing immigration laws assert that immigrants have a penchant for welfare utilization and take more from the public coffers than they contribute through taxes. Others rely on evidence of high rates of labor force participation to argue that immigrants pay taxes and prefer work over welfare. Not having been socialized in environments where welfare is an acceptable alternative to work, immigrants from Third World countries arrive in the United States expecting to work, and in search of better economic opportunities (North, 1982; Simon, 1984; Portes and Bach, 1985: Chapter 3).

Our baseline data (Table 1) revealed no alarming differences between natives and immigrants either in the propensity to receive public assistance, or in average annual payments among the subset of recipients. Moreover, some of the differences that did obtain (particularly among blacks), pointed in the direction of greater welfare utilization among natives, rather than immigrants.

We employed two statistical techniques to estimate models of total family public assistance payments in 1979 using data from the 1980 U.S. Census. Included in the models were numerous individual, household, and regional characteristics that affect need and eligibility for public assistance. Four OLS regression models were estimated for white, black, Hispanic and Asian welfare recipients (Table 3). They showed that immigrants received neither more nor less welfare income in 1979 than otherwise comparable natives. Moreover, once the effect of number of recipients in the family household was controlled, the presence of non-head immigrant recipients was negative and significant for blacks and Asians.

Tobit models estimated for all white, black, Hispanic and Asian families revealed that black and Hispanic immigrant families received lower welfare payments on an average annual basis, than their (statistically) similar native counterparts. Much of this reflects that fact that black and Hispanic immigrant families were far less likely to receive any public assistance income compared to natives. The effect of nativity on total receipt also was negative for white families, but statistically insignificant. Finally, the Tobit results showed that Asian immigrant families received more welfare income than otherwise comparable natives. This result parallels their greater rates of welfare utilization, documented elsewhere (Tienda and Jensen, 1986). The latter factor is largely due to the considerable presence of Indochinese

refugees among all Asian immigrants in 1980. Their greater use of welfare was almost ensured under refugee assistance programs (Bach, 1985; GAO, 1979).

On balance these results cast considerable doubt on the argument that immigrants are welfare prone and unduly burden the welfare system. If anything, we show the opposite; immigrants appear to be slightly less of an economic burden on public assistance programs than natives, once determinants of need and eligibility are controlled. Even our baseline data, which do not adjust for compositional differences between native and immigrant families, show no alarming gaps between immigrant and native welfare utilization. Thus, the assumption that immigrants burden social service resources should not be used to guide efforts at crafting new immigration legislation. Rather, future research which examined the tax contributions of both natives and immigrants would provide badly needed information about the economic consequences of the new immigration.

Notes

1. The most recent example is the recently enacted legislation, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Individuals who are granted amnesty also are prohibited from applying for and receiving transfer income for a period of 5 years following the regularization of their legal status.

2. Our sample sizes are sufficiently large that estimated parameters were virtually identical using weighted and unweighted data.

3. Means and standard deviations for the entire sample and the subset of recipients are not presented in the interest of brevity, but are available upon request from the authors.

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Table 1

RECEIPT OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (PA) INCOME IN 1979 BY FAMILIES
ACCORDING TO NATIVITY AND RACE/ETHNICITY OF THE HEADS

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
<u>Married Couples</u>				
Proportion of participation in PA income				
Native	4.1	12.3	9.0	3.3
(N)	(38,509)	(3,273)	(1,092)	(146)
Immigrant	3.7	6.3	10.1	8.0
(N)	(3,153)	(192)	(1,340)	(485)
All	4.1	11.9	9.6	6.9
Average amount received, given participation				
Native	\$2,292	\$2,525	\$2,988	\$3,055
(N)	(1,589)	(402)	(98)	(5)
Immigrant	2,903	2,957	2,993	3,098
(N)	(116)	(12)	(135)	(388)
All	2,334	2,538	2,991	3,093
<u>Spouse Absent</u>				
Proportion of participation in PA income				
Native	17.3	41.3	35.7	14.8
(N)	(6,249)	(2,501)	(378)	(35)
Immigrant	13.6	20.1	38.3	18.7
(N)	(331)	(74)	(413)	(76)
All	17.1	40.7	37.1	17.5
Average amount received, given participation				
Native	\$2,820	\$2,794	\$2,932	\$2,775
(N)	(1,079)	(1,032)	(135)	(5)
Immigrant	2,556	2,862	3,577	3,133
(N)	(45)	(15)	(158)	(14)
All	2,809	2,795	3,281	3,038

Note: All N's are weighted and reported in thousands.

Table 2

DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES USED IN ANALYSIS

Variable	Description
<u>Individual Characteristics</u>	
Age of Head	
30-64 years	Head aged 30-64, coded 1
65+ years	Head aged 65 or older, coded 1
20-29 years	Head aged 20-29, coded 0
Head's education	Years of schooling completed by head
Head's English proficiency	Ordinal measure indicating head's ability to understand and speak English well; higher values indicate greater proficiency
Head's ethnicity	
Mexican	If Mexican head, coded 1
Puerto Rican	If Puerto Rican head, coded 1
Other Hispanic	If other Hispanic head, coded 0
Japanese/Filipino/Indian	If Japanese, Filipino, or Asian Indian head, coded 1
Vietnamese/Other	If Vietnamese/other head, coded 1
Korean/Chinese	If Korean or Chinese head, coded 0
<u>Family Characteristics</u>	
Headship status	
Single male	If single male, coded 1
Single female	If single female, coded 1
Couple	If couple, coded 0
Immigrant family	If either the head, spouse, or both are foreign born, coded 1; else, coded 0
Number of persons $\geq$ 65	Number of persons $\geq$ 65
Number of persons < 18	Number of persons < 18
Other income	Total nonsalary, nontransfer income, in thousands of dollars
Economic dependency ratio	Ratio of number of household workers to persons aged 18 to 64 plus one
Extended family	If one or more adult relative of head other than spouse present, coded 1; else, coded 0.
<u>Locational Characteristics</u>	
Area wage rate	Average wage rate for SMSA or remainder state areal units
Area unemployment rate	Unemployment rate for SMSA or remainder state areal units
Area percent immigrant	Percent foreign born in SMSA or remainder state areal units
State benefit level	1979 State Need Standard for family of 4 (1 needy adult and 3 children)
<u>Dependent Variable</u>	
Total public assistance income received in 1979	Total dollars of public assistance income received in 1979 by any family member, coded 1 through highest (OLS models) or 0 through highest (Tobit models).

Table 3

MODEL OF TOTAL PUBLIC ASSISTANCE RECEIVED BY RECIPIENT FAMILIES
IN 1979: UNSTANDARDIZED OLS REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS FOR
WHITE, BLACK, HISPANIC, AND ASIAN RECIPIENTS

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
<u>Individual Characteristics</u>				
Age of Head				
30-64 years	5.6 (.00)	-89.2 (-.02)	327.7** (.07)	-490.0 (-.09)
65+ years	-95.4 (-.02)	-182.1 (-.03)	369.5 (.05)	-519.2 (-.08)
Head's Education	-12.6 (-.02)	-19.6 (-.03)	45.7** (.08)	-4.4 (-.01)
Head's English Proficiency	-109.7 (-.03)	93.4 (.01)	-56.8 (-.03)	86.3 (.03)
Head's Ethnicity				
Mexican			16.9 (.00)	
Puerto Rican			419.3** (.07)	
Japanese/Filipino/Indian				100.0 (.02)
Vietnamese/other				-223.5 (-.04)
<u>Family Characteristics</u>				
Headship Status				
Single male	675.3* (.07)	-162.6 (-.02)	99.3 (.01)	443.2 (.05)
Single female	391.2** (.09)	79.1 (.02)	174.8 (.04)	242.4 (.04)
Immigrant Family	36.0 (.01)	39.7 (.01)	-73.2 (-.01)	195.7 (.03)
Number of Persons ≥ 65	340.3* (.09)	167.7 (.03)	-72.8 (-.01)	491.0* (.12)
Number of Persons < 18	222.0** (.15)	221.8** (.17)	251.7** (.17)	266.8** (.18)
Other Income	-4.9 (-.02)	37.5* (.04)	-22.9 (-.02)	-8.5 (-.01)
Economic Dependency Ratio	-477.5* (-.07)	-651.1** (-.08)	-994.0** (-.12)	-1221.1** (-.15)
Extended Family	-482.4** (-.10)	-214.7 (-.04)	122.9 (.02)	-21.6 (-.08)
Number of Public Assistance Recipients	1705.6** (.31)	1779.7** (.35)	1966.4** (.38)	2076.2** (.40)
Presence of Nonhead Immigrant Recipient	-212.3 (-.03)	-913.3** (-.08)	-63.2 (-.01)	-755.1** (-.14)
<u>Locational Characteristics</u>				
Area Wage Rate	145.0 (.07)	18.6 (.01)	109.6 (.04)	184.0 (.06)
Area Unemployment Rate	-3597.7 (-.04)	2333.9 (.02)	-743.6 (-.01)	2964.0 (.02)
Area Percent Immigrant	-0.4 (-.00)	8.1 (.03)	2.9 (.01)	13.8 (.04)
State Benefit Level	2.2** (.12)	5.7** (.32)	3.9** (.22)	3.4** (.14)
Constant	-554.9	-1912.7	-2322.2	-2758.7
Adjusted R ²	.16	.28	.27	.22
(N)	(1070)	(1850)	(2003)	(626)

* Significant at $\leq .05$, two-tailed.

**Significant at $\leq .01$, two-tailed.

Table 4

MODEL OF TOTAL PUBLIC ASSISTANCE RECEIVED BY ALL FAMILIES IN 1979:
TOBIT COEFFICIENTS FOR WHITE, BLACK, HISPANIC AND ASIAN FAMILIES
(T-Statistics in Parentheses)

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
<u>Individual Characteristics</u>				
Age of Head				
30-64 years	-.349 (-.487)	-6.644 (-2.153)	-2.292 (-.429)	-12.084 (-1.672)
65+ years	-14.809 (-1.440)	-1.712 (-.367)	12.356 (1.309)	11.074 (1.079)
Head's Education, in Years	-2.691 (-2.835)	-2.352 (-5.944)	-1.676 (-2.666)	-1.881 (-2.949)
Head's English Proficiency	6.128 (1.062)	4.112 (.707)	-6.332 (-2.416)	-1.543 (-.436)
Head's Ethnicity				
Mexican			-8.759 (-1.588)	
Puerto Rican			14.395 (2.043)	
Japanese/Filipino/Indian				3.034 (.490)
Vietnamese/other				22.817 (2.824)
<u>Family Characteristics</u>				
Headship Status				
Single male	-11.699 (-.861)	10.513 (2.168)	2.386 (.241)	14.342 (1.445)
Single female	38.666 (3.744)	28.938 (10.092)	31.144 (5.851)	24.271 (3.400)
Immigrant Family ^a	-4.531 (-.892)	-17.614 (-4.932)	-26.590 (-4.558)	14.073 (1.919)
Number of Persons $\geq 65^b$	17.777 (2.429)	13.369 (3.184)	23.952 (3.453)	25.327 (4.110)
Number of Persons < 18	4.419 (2.070)	7.380 (8.737)	6.645 (4.570)	6.768 (3.347)
Other Income	.064 (.236)	-.105 (-.242)	-.717 (-.928)	-1.251 (-1.671)
Economic Dependency Ratio	-35.486 (-2.969)	-44.670 (-9.787)	-51.204 (-5.682)	-53.429 (-5.026)
Extended Family	17.902 (2.173)	13.177 (4.134)	19.376 (3.174)	25.075 (3.653)
<u>Locational Characteristics</u>				
Area Wage Rate	.097 (.035)	.759 (.452)	-.104 (-.031)	-4.548 (-1.188)
Area Unemployment Rate	-36.409 (-.323)	134.460 (1.845)	30.767 (.227)	-125.557 (-.790)
Area Percent Immigrant	.707 (2.103)	.292 (1.570)	.137 (.555)	.735 (1.841)
State Benefit Level	.012 (.527)	.050 (3.414)	.046 (2.001)	.021 (.741)
Constant	-63.838 (-1.749)	-56.202 (-2.158)	-20.296 (-.790)	-29.555 (-.885)
Degrees of Freedom	1816	1946	1267	1833
-2 (log likelihood χ^2)	1749.88	4969.60	2402.80	2247.00
(N)	(1833)	(1963)	(1286)	(1852)

^aIf either head or both were foreign born.

^bExcludes the head.

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