

Economic Assimilation of Asia-Pacific Immigrants in the United States Considering Various Pathways to Legal Immigration

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Emigrants from the Asia-Pacific countries immigrating in the United States are considered as the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. But majority of them do not enter the country for the first time when they arrive as “new” legal resident aliens. In this paper we have described the amount and kind of experience that immigrants from this region accumulated in the United States before they become permanent resident aliens. The descriptive studies reveal that standard residual method of measuring time spent in US can be expected to yield estimates that are systematically biased, leaving considerable unmeasured variation in the amount of nature of pre-green-card experiences in the United States.

Our main objective is to find out the level of assimilation of the migrants from the Asia-Pacific region in the United States in terms of income by assessing the degree to which statistical models may be biased by such unmeasured heterogeneity. A vast comparison has been done among the migrants from India, China and the other countries of Asia-Pacific region.

For the present study, we make use of a newly released data-source “New Immigrant Survey”. It is a multi-cohort progressive-retrospective panel study of new legal immigrants to the United States. The information has been drawn from Round-I of NIS’s fiscal year 2003 cohort, which includes completed interviews with 8,573 adult respondents. Among them 771 are from India, 469 are from China and 594 are from other East Asian, South Asian and the Pacific countries.

To assess how the omission of variables pertaining to prior US experience might affect the traditional statistical models of immigrant adaptation and assimilation, we estimated two wage regressions - the baseline model containing variables typically available; and, the expanded model incorporating various measures of pre-green-card experience in US. In each equation we regress the log of the respondent’s reported weekly earnings on selected demographic and employment characteristics, as well as measures of human and social capital, controlling for regions of origin and destination. The expanded equation includes dummy variables for each pathway as indicators of the degree and nature of the respondent’s prior US experience.

Results from the baseline model show that acquisition of human capital significantly raises the rate of remuneration among all the immigrants. But expanded model reveals that inclusion of information about pre-green-card experiences significantly increases the model’s explanatory power, producing an 20 percent increase in the proportion of variance - the apparent effect of education and nationality changed significantly, resulting in a change in the assimilation level mostly for China.

Thus our analysis suggests that traditional methods for measuring experience in US need to be updated and adapted to the realities of circular migration and the extensive movement back and forth that occur before legalization of the migrants from Asia-Pacific region, enabling social scientists to derive more valid and realistic models of Asia-Pacific migrants’ adaptation and assimilation in US.