

## **Perverse Effects?: The Impact of “Anti-Immigrant” Legislation on Naturalization Rates of Refugees versus Other Immigrants**

Kelly J. Jefferys, Department of Homeland Security  
Stephanie Willis, Department of Homeland Security  
Bryan Baker, Department of Homeland Security

The 1990s saw the proposal and enactment of several pieces of legislation widely considered to be “anti-immigrant” in sentiment. One such piece of legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), more commonly known as welfare reform, limited refugee eligibility for federal assistance programs to seven years from the date of arrival. In order to maintain eligibility for benefits, refugees must naturalize before the end of the seven year time period. All other immigrant groups (with few exceptions) became ineligible for benefits. Analysis on the implications of the welfare reform act suggested that it would give current immigrants a stronger incentive to naturalize considering the prospect of losing SSI, Medicaid, and food stamp eligibility (Espenshade, Baraka and Huber, 1997). It is now widely accepted that PRWORA as well as other “anti-immigrant” legislation including the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) and proposition 187 in California affected overall increases in naturalization rates from the mid-1990s to the present.

Refugees are distinctly different from other immigrant groups in naturalization behavior and use of public benefits. Historically, the cumulative naturalization rate of refugees has been significantly higher than other immigrant groups. Additionally, the above referenced welfare reform (PRWORA) affected refugees differently than other immigrant groups and research has shown that the affected refugee population was more reliant on social services than all other immigrant groups (Bean, Van Hook and Glick, 1996-97). Cross-sectional data examined by Borjas (2002) also showed a strong positive correlation between the proportion of an immigrant group that received welfare benefits before 1996 and proportion naturalized.

This paper will improve upon prior literature by further examining the potential reasons for the higher naturalization rates of refugees, using actual cohorts of immigrants between acquisition of legal permanent resident status and naturalization. Previous literature was limited to Census data and did not follow actual cohorts with specific naturalization dates. Statelessness has typically been cited as an explanation for refugee naturalization behavior, but this study will dig further by examining the effects of other factors including change in cohort composition (country/region of origin) and greater responsiveness to the “anti-immigrant” legislation of the 1990s. Analysis will test the hypothesis that welfare reform and other 1990s legislation had a different effect on the naturalization behaviors of refugees than other immigrant groups.

***Data:***

Data on legal permanent residents and naturalizations were taken from applications maintained in the Computer Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS) of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the Department of Homeland Security. These records include data on age, gender, category of admission, country of origin, year of entry, and year naturalized, if applicable. Immigration and naturalization data for fiscal years 1985 through 2005 are matched based on alien number. Records will be restricted to those LPRs at least 18 years old at the time LPR status was obtained, to exclude children who may have derived citizenship from their parents.

***Methodology:***

This paper will examine the relationship between cumulative naturalization rates and duration in legal permanent resident (LPR) status for the 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995 cohorts of refugees and non-refugees. Lifetime naturalization rates and naturalization rates within 10 years of obtaining LPR status will also be presented for the 1980-1995 cohorts of refugees and non-refugees. Logistic

regression will be used to model the effects of refugee status and several demographic variables on the probability of naturalizing within 10 years of obtaining LPR status for the 1980 versus 1995 cohorts.

**References:**

- Bean, Frank D., Jennifer W. Van Hook, and Jennifer E. Glick. 1996-97. "Public assistance use by immigrants: What can the U.S. Census tell us?" *Focus*, 18(2): 41-46.
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- Espenshade, Thomas J., Jessica L. Baraka, and Gregory A. Huber. 1997. "Implications of the 1996 Welfare and Immigration Reform Acts for US Immigration," *Population and Development Review*, 23(4): 769-801.