

IRCA Legalized Immigrants: 20 Years Later

Nearly two decades have passed since the first of the 2.7 million illegal immigrants legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 obtained legal permanent resident (LPR) status. IRCA legalization immigrants generally had little formal schooling and limited job skills, leading to concerns about their ability to be economically self sufficient and integrate successfully into American society. Information regarding their subsequent achievements has major policy implications for future immigration reform efforts. Using the immigration and naturalization records of the Department of Homeland Security—one of the few sources of data on IRCA immigrants following legalization—this analysis presents information on the status upgrading of IRCA immigrants as reflected by naturalization and occupation change. Additionally, the IRCA population is survived to 2008, and selected demographic and economic characteristics are estimated using American Community Survey data to assess their current status relative to other immigrants.

Background

IRCA legalized immigrants consisted of two groups: aliens who had been unlawfully living in the United States since before January 1, 1982 (pre-1982 immigrants) and aliens employed in seasonal agricultural work for a minimum of 90 days in the year prior to May 1986 (Special Agricultural Workers or SAWs). A substantial amount of social, demographic, and economic information was collected on pre-1982 immigrants in two surveys—one at the time of their application for legalization and another five years later. The latter revealed a strong attachment to the labor market and determination to succeed.

Unfortunately, there has been no follow-up since of the pre-1982 legalized population and none ever of the SAW population except for their coverage in the annual National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) conducted for the U.S. Department of Labor. Since IRCA immigrants had relatively few years of schooling completed and were largely unskilled, concern has been raised about the degree to which they would become integrated and productive members of American society.

The naturalization records of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are one of the few sources of information on IRCA immigrants subsequent to acquisition of LPR status. Naturalization is an indicator of status upgrading insofar as U.S. citizens are accorded certain rights not available to non citizens. In addition, the naturalization record contains information on the immigrant's occupation at the time of application which, when compared with the occupation reported at the time LPR status was obtained, provides an indication of whether improvements in economic status occurred by the time U.S. citizenship was acquired.

Data/Method

Microdata from LPR and naturalization applications of the Department of Homeland Security are matched by alien (A-number) for all IRCA immigrants and non-IRCA immigrants who obtained LPR status during approximately the same time period (1989-1992). IRCA and non-IRCA immigrants are compared with respect to naturalization rates and occupational change (between acquisition of LPR status and U.S. citizenship). Variation by other characteristics including country of origin, age, and gender will also be displayed.

The analysis will also provide an illustration of how the IRCA population has fared relative to the total adult total foreign born and native born population. In order to do so, the IRCA population will be survived to 2008 using the same mortality and emigration assumptions used by DHS in its estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population. Selected demographic and economic characteristics of the IRCA population will then be estimated based on matched known characteristics with the foreign born population by citizenship status from the American Community Survey. Alternative estimation methodologies will be evaluated including hotdecking and probabilistic approaches.

A Few Preliminary Findings—from data through 2005:

IRCA immigrants appear to have been somewhat successful in upgrading their status as reflected by naturalization:

The overall naturalization rate of IRCA immigrants through 2005 was lower than that of non-IRCA immigrants who obtained LPR status during 1979-1982 (37% versus 59%), but this difference largely reflects the predominantly Mexican origins of IRCA immigrants. Naturalizations rates through 2005 for IRCA immigrants were only slightly lower than those for non-IRCA immigrants among Mexicans (31% vs. 36%) and non-Mexicans (58% vs. 62%), respectively.