

Leila Rodriguez
Pennsylvania State University
Department of Anthropology
Population Research Institute
409 Carpenter Building
University Park, PA 16802
Email: leilar@pop.psu.edu
Phone: +1.814.863.8255

Undocumented to Naturalized: how legal status affects immigrant employment histories

This paper analyzes the effect of legal status on employment transitions among Nicaraguan immigrants in the United States. A 2002 survey estimates that 11% of Nicaraguan households have at least one member living abroad (Vargas 2005). In the United States, Nicaraguans represent 10% of all Central American immigrants, but in the areas where they settle they represent a much larger sector of the population (Davy 2006).

Job turnover has potentially beneficial or harmful consequences for workers. While people assumedly change jobs to improve their earnings, frequent job changes can lead to loss of tenure-related benefits and wage increases (Hom and Griffeth 1995). For immigrants, turnover can also be indicative of how they adjust economically and socially to their new societies, and their impact on a society's economic growth (Green 1999). A meta-analysis conducted in 1995 revealed that men and women quit their jobs at similar rates; that kinship responsibility, particularly number of children, improve retention; and that increasing numbers of relatives in the community accelerate organizational exits (Hom and Griffeth 1995).

Theories of job turnover abound. Most place job satisfaction as the immediate precursor to a job change. Other explanatory variables analyzed include an organization's ability to pay and motivate its members; an individual's access to information about alternative employment; an individual's expectations about specific jobs; and numerous structural variables relating to the opportunity structure.

A subset of job turnover studies addresses immigrants. Results suggest that immigrants are occupationally more mobile than the native-born population, although this declines with lower levels of human capital (Green 1999), that unauthorized migrants are more likely to be selected into low-wage farm labor (Taylor 1992), that immigrants over time move out of informal ethnic economies which leads to higher earnings (Nee, et al. 1994), and that recently-arrived women move into the light manufacturing sector and remain there (Myers and Cranford 1998).

Three important factors have been largely left out of the turnover literature. First, individuals are often embedded in households and families which can interfere at multiple points in the job turnover process. Job dissatisfaction might, for example, interact with family obligations (such as the birth of a child) that will nevertheless retain an individual at an undesired job. Likewise, access to information about alternative jobs can be increased by extended family members. This coincides with the new economics of labor migration theories, which place migration decisions in the larger group the migrant is embedded in, particularly the household (Massey et al).

Second, specific considerations arise in the study of immigrant employee transitions. Immigrants operate between at least two different opportunity structures during their lifetimes, that of their native country and that of the society they migrate to, sometimes returning to their home country or engaging in circular migration. Furthermore, their official legal status in the host society will have an effect on the jobs they can transition to and their rates of transition to them.

Third, it is theoretically relevant to know not just how many employment transitions occur over a specified period of time, but also the duration of each job before a transition occurred. Because the time at a particular job can affect the benefits it accrues the worker, it is crucial to understand what factors determine how long a person remains in the same job. While some studies have used survival analysis techniques to study job transitions, most use limited panel data.

The data for this study come from the Latin American Migration Project (LAMP) Nicaraguan sample. It has the crucial advantage of providing a complete migration and employment history for all heads of households (and spouses if applicable) from birth until time of survey. Additionally, it has information on the first and last migration of every other household member, and information on the migration experience of extended family members. Besides the employment history, data is available on the means by which the job was acquired, salary, benefits, taxes withheld, and race of employer, among many others. Specifically, two questions will be answered:

1. What is the effect of type of entry visa on the first rate of employment transition and job being transitioned to?
2. How do subsequent changes in legal status affect rates of transition and types of jobs being transitioned to?

The data show 162 household heads with migration experience to the U.S. Of those, 85 first entered the country with a tourist visa, 57 without documents or with falsified ones, 10 had legal residency, 4 were refugees, and 3 came as temporary workers. By the time of survey, 77 had their condition legalized, and 19 obtained citizenship. The migrants sampled spent a total of 7,834 person-years in the U.S., and underwent 1,102 job transitions. Expected results include lower rates of transitioning while immigrants are undocumented, given the smaller number of potential employers. As migration statuses are legalized, transitions are expected to increase, as well as the diversity of jobs being transitioned to.

References cited:

Davy, Megan

2006 The Central American Foreign Born in the United States. Migration Information Source

<http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=385#5>.

Green, David A.

1999 Immigrant Occupational Attainment: Assimilation and Mobility over Time. *Journal of Labor Economics* 17(1):49-79.

Hom, Peter W., and Rodger W. Griffeth

1995 Employee Turnover. Cincinnati: South-Western College Publishing.

Massey, Douglas, Joaquín Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino and J. Edward Taylor

1998 *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Myers, Dowell, and Cynthia J. Cranford

1998 Temporal Differentiation in the Occupational Mobility of Immigrant and Native-Born Latina Workers. *American Sociological Review* 63:68-93.

Nee, Victor, Jimmy M. Sanders, and Scott Sernau

1994 Job Transitions in an Immigrant Metropolis: Ethnic Boundaries and the Mixed Economy. *American Sociological Review* 59:849-872.

Taylor, J. Edward

1992 Earnings and Mobility of Legal and Illegal Immigrant Workers in Agriculture. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 74(4):889-896.

Vargas, Juan Carlos

2005 Nicaragüenses en Costa Rica y Estados Unidos: datos de etnoencuestas. *Población y Salud en Mesoamérica*. 2(2):2