Poster Summary for PAA 2008

Impact of Historical Events on Patterns in U.S. Immigration and Integration

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Background

Immigration to the United States is a phenomenon that comes with large amounts of data. Records of who comes, what their characteristics are, where they came from, and how the flows have changed over time offer a wealth of opportunity for data analysis. Since its formal inception in 1891, the Federal immigration program has kept records of who has been let into the country, who has been kept out or deported, who has naturalized and other information. However, the breadth of detail makes the information hard to compare and contrast in tabular form. This poster session provides a visual method of presenting large amounts of data through multi-color charts and graphs that allow a side-by-side comparison of a historical timeline of significant immigration milestones and important world events with the U.S. immigrant admission numbers, the number of naturalizations and the foreign-born stock from the decennial census reports.

The presentation is intended to demonstrate the impacts of immigration policy to novices while still providing insights to those with significant experience. The initial set of graphs is repeated for the four major world areas in U.S. immigration: Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa, for the time frames of most relevance to international migration stock and flows from those areas.

Comparison Over Time

The visual representation of the immigration data emphasizes the large fluctuation in immigration numbers over time. One expected, but interesting effect that can be seen in the charts is the way that different immigrant groups move through the different charts. When a significant number of immigrants from a particular country are admitted, the charts show that "spike" of people moving through the immigration system from admissions to naturalizations to foreign-born stock in the census data. In order to facilitate this comparison, data has been separated out within the larger regions of Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa into key nations with significant immigrant flow numbers.

Impact of Historical Events

Another interesting effect can be seen through the inclusion of the historical timeline. When major changes in immigration policy or world geopolitical stability occur, the effect can be seen on immigration numbers, naturalizations and foreign-born stock. Some events like the Irish Potato Famine or World War I and II show expected impacts;

however, other events show unexpected impacts on stock and flows, especially at the country level such as the impact of the World Wars on immigration from Mexico and Canada. There are also clear impacts because of more recent changes in immigration policy like the effects of imposition of national origin quotas in the 1920's and the legalization programs in the late 1980's and early 1990's. .

Limitations of the Data

As with any project comparing large amounts of data over long time-periods, there are concerns with data consistency and accuracy. The data collected by Federal agencies has varied in level of detail, countries have changed boundaries and names, and census data is segmented every 10 years providing a non-continuous data set. In addition, as immigration policy has changed over time, the categories or classes of admission have changed making it difficult to track comparable populations over time. Some periods of data are missing from certain datasets because of lack of reporting or changes in procedures requiring interpolation in order to show continuous graphs. These data limitations do not negate the observations that can be made from the charts, but they require notation in any conclusions that are drawn.

Conclusion

The charts in this poster session are an interesting way to present and compare existing data on immigration flow and stock over time. Although not new sets of data, the visual representation of the data in parallel with historical events allows a useful comparison that provides insight into the impact of U.S. immigration policy changes and world events on immigrant behavior. Notwithstanding the data limitations, the poster provides a unique perspective on how immigration to the United States responds to global events and how this affects the foreign-born population. Understanding the policy and underpinnings of international migration flows is critical to responsible demographic analysis and of significant benefit to PAA participants working in this area .