National Foundation for American Policy

November 25, 2025

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New Research: Family Immigrants Achieve Rapid Earnings Growth in America

Family Immigrants Are Less Likely to Use Public Assistance Income or Be Incarcerated Than U.S. Born

Arlington, Va. – Real earnings increased by 76% over 12 years for immigrants from countries where family sponsorship is the primary method of immigrating to the United States. This compared to real earnings growth of 23% for U.S.-born workers the same age during the same period, illustrating that family-based immigrants make significant economic progress and integrate into America, according to a new study from the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP), a nonpartisan research organization based in Arlington, VA. The research also finds that family immigrants have lower rates of incarceration and use of public assistance income than U.S.-born individuals of the same age, and that they increase their educational attainment and English proficiency over time in America.

"This study reinforces the importance of legal, family-based immigration and shows the critical economic contributions that immigrants bring to America," said Congresswoman Maria Elvira Salazar (R-FL). "By promoting family unity and reducing backlogs for legal immigration, the Dignity Act of 2025 (HR 4393) will help grow our economy, address the affordability crisis, and ensure our immigration policy continues to be a competitive advantage for the United States."

The study's author is Mark Regets, a labor economist and senior fellow at NFAP. Regets was an economist in the National Science Foundation's (NSF) National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, which produces NSF's biennial *Science and Engineering Indicators*. He earned a Ph.D. in economics from the State University of New York at Binghamton.

The study, "The Economic Advancement, Adaptation and Integration of Family Immigrants in America," can be found at https://nfap.com/.

The performance of family immigrants is consistent with the Immigrant Human Capital Investment model of rapid growth in earnings and their general situation in the United States proposed by Harriet Duleep and Mark Regets in 1999. Immigrants who do not come to America to fill specific jobs often start with lower earnings but experience rapid earnings growth as they adapt and increase their skills to meet the needs of the U.S. labor market. Their adaptability creates dynamism in the U.S. economy and benefits American consumers and employers by filling niches in the U.S. labor market.

Historically, immigrants have come to America accompanied by family members or to join relatives already settled in the United States. That has not changed substantially, and it is true even for highly educated immigrants. Sixty-two percent of immigrants with a bachelor's degree and 57% with a professional degree said family was an important reason when asked why they first came to the United States.

Most family immigration today consists of the Immediate Relatives of U.S. citizens—the spouses, children (under 21) and parents of American citizens. The family preference categories include the siblings, married and unmarried children (21 or older) of U.S. citizens and the spouses, children (under 21) and unmarried adult children of lawful permanent residents (green card holders).

The Immediate Relatives of U.S. citizens can enter the United States without numerical quotas, provided they pass appropriate background checks. The family preference categories are subject to numerical and per-country quotas, resulting in long wait times for individuals from several countries. There were approximately 3.8 million people on the family-sponsored preference waiting list as of November 2023, according to the State Department. As of November 2025, only applicants whose sponsors filed before July 2001 were eligible to enter from Mexico as the married son or daughter of a U.S. citizen. Only applicants who filed before January 2008 were eligible to enter from the Philippines as the sibling of a U.S. citizen.

To conduct the research, NFAP examined American Community Survey data and identified countries whose family admissions accounted for 75% or more of their legal immigration to the United States between 2005 and 2009. This methodology, while useful, could underestimate certain characteristics, such as earnings and educational levels, by excluding countries like India that have a substantial flow of individuals entering through employment-based immigrant categories. NFAP did not include India because family admissions accounted for only 55% of its legal immigration flow to America between 2005 and 2009. However, given that siblings, for example, typically have similar educational levels, one would expect the brothers and sisters of Indians who enter as family immigrants to have characteristics similar to those of Indians who enter as employment-based immigrants. Indeed, 87% of the 2005 to 2009 entry cohort from India had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 18% for those from high family admissions countries.

The countries included in this NFAP analysis as high family admissions countries, in alphabetical order, are Antigua-Barbuda, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belize/British Honduras, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Costa Rica, Czechia, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Jordan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Syria, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Vietnam and Yemen.

Among the key findings:

- On average, real, inflation-adjusted earnings for family immigrants arriving between 2005 and 2009 increased by 76% over 12 years compared to 23% for U.S.-born workers the same age during the same period. Haitians have relatively low earnings after entry but experienced earnings growth of 154% from 2009-11 to 2021-23. During the same period, the predominantly family immigrants from Pakistan increased their earnings by 175%, and immigrants from Vietnam experienced a 101% increase.

- On average, family immigrants have higher labor force participation rates than U.S.-born workers of the same age: 78.1% for all high family admissions countries vs. 76.5% for U.S.-born workers in the same age range in 2021 to 2023. More significantly, while, on average, the labor force participation rate rose by 3.8% over 12 years for family immigrants arriving between 2005 and 2009, it declined by 7.6% for U.S.-born workers in the same age range over the same period.

- Family immigrants from several individual countries have very high labor force participation rates. The labor force participation rates in 2021 to 2023 reached 90% for Haitians, 87% for Jamaicans, 86% for Filipinos and 82% for family immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Peru and Ecuador—all much higher than the rate for U.S.-born workers.

- On average, the number of individuals from high family admissions countries who attain a bachelor's degree or higher increased by more than 25% over 12 years, indicating that family immigrants integrate and pursue higher levels of education to maximize their economic potential. Approximately 18% of family immigrants had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2009-11, but that rose to 23% by 2021-2023. Examining individual countries is instructive. The number of immigrants who achieved a bachelor's degree or higher increased by 93% for Haitians, 74% for Jamaicans, 42% for Vietnamese and 28% for Mexicans between 2009-11 and 2021-23.

- The vast majority of family immigrants speak English and improve with time spent in the United States. On average, 87% of individuals from high family admissions countries spoke English in 2021-23, an increase of 18% from 2009-11. The most significant improvement over this period came from immigrants from El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama and Costa Rica (as a group), Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. On average, the number of individuals from high family admissions countries who spoke English "well" increased by 45% from 2009-11 to 2021-23.

- On average, only 1.6% of individuals from high family admissions countries received public assistance income in 2021-23. That is lower than the 1.7% of U.S.-born in the same age range who received public assistance income in 2021-23.

- Family immigrants have a low rate of incarceration (in jail or prison). On average, only 1% of individuals from high family admissions countries were in jail or prison in 2009-11 compared to 1.7% for U.S.-born individuals in the same age range. The incarceration rates were between 0.0% and 0.2% for family immigrants from Bangladesh, Haiti, Pakistan, Peru and Ecuador, the Philippines, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon (as a group), Vietnam and Poland, Lithuania and Czechia (as a group.)

The low initial earnings of many family-based immigrants may not be due to low ability, but due to difficulties transferring their skills to the U.S. labor market. When this happens, immigrants have an unusually high incentive to gain new skills. The investment in new skills is most evident in new high school and college degrees. But much skill investment comes in the form of trying new jobs and working for advancement and purposeful improvement in English language skills. In the end, much of the investment in new skills hypothesized by the Immigrant Human Capital Investment Model is observed indirectly via rapid earnings growth. Rapid earnings growth for family immigrants occurs because of the rapid increase in the value of these new skills to the American economy.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. Over the past 24 months, NFAP's research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other major media outlets. The organization's reports can be found at www.nfap.com. X.com: **@NFAPResearch** Bluesky: @NFAPResearch.bsky.social

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