VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR "IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION: CURRENT RESEARCH"

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On-screen text:
Immigration and Integration: Current Research
a discussion with Jens Hainmueller and Duncan Lawrence

On-screen text:
Jens Hainmueller
Co-Director, Immigration and Integration Policy Lab

Jens Hainmueller: The Immigration and Integration Policy Lab at Stanford focuses on broadly three different types of immigrants. We look at documented immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees. Let me give you just three examples of the kind of projects that we do.

In the first project, we look at the effect of becoming a naturalized citizen in Switzerland. Switzerland is one of the hotbeds of immigration in Europe because immigrants make up 25 percent of the population there today. Successfully integrating this large immigrant group is critically important for the economy and society of this country.

Policymakers often debate whether naturalization should be fairly restricted, because it's sort of seen as the crowning achievement on the successfully completed integration project. But there are other policymakers out there who think that, no, naturalization should be made fairly accessible because it can act as a catalyst to promote the integration of immigrants by giving them the resources and incentives to invest in a future in the host country. We want to get a sense for which perspective is more accurate.

We look at Swiss municipalities that for a long time decided on the naturalization requests of immigrants by popular votes. Voters in these communities would receive a leaflet detailing the immigrant applicant that applied for Swiss citizenship to them. They would learn where the immigrant came from, whether they're married, their education level, etc. Then voters would cast a secret ballot to either accept or reject a particular applicant, and only applicants that received more than 50 percent of "yes" votes received Swiss citizenship.

This direct democratic mechanism allows us, from the researchers' [perspective], to isolate the causal effect of naturalization on long-term integration. What we do is we compare immigrants that were barely accepted—that got, let's say, 51 percent of the votes—with immigrants that were unlucky and got barely rejected—say, with 49 percent of the votes. In this group of immigrants, whether you got Swiss citizenship or not was largely determined by, well, it was a matter of luck. It didn't have to do with the systematic characteristics of the applicants. That similarity allows us to isolate the causal effect of naturalization.

The result of this study is what you see in this figure here, where we have on the vertical axis the level of social integration of the immigrants measured 15 years after voters approved or rejected their application, and then on the horizontal axis you see the percentage of "yes" votes that the immigrants received in these votes. What you can see is that just as you cross the 50-percent threshold, you see that the immigrants that were barely accepted—with, say, 51 percent of the votes—they're today much more socially integrated than the ones that got just unlucky and were barely rejected. What this big gap suggests is that naturalization can really act as a catalyst and have a lasting and substantial impact on promoting the social integration of immigrants. This is important evidence for policymakers who might want to consider reducing barriers to naturalization and to basically get these benefits from a better integration of immigrants.

On-screen text:
Duncan Lawrence
Executive Director, Immigration and Integration Policy Lab

Duncan Lawrence: The second project that I'd like to describe focuses on how undocumented immigrants are treated in the United States. In most states in the U.S., immigrants actually can't obtain driver's licenses. That's because you need a social security number to get a license. So for some immigrants, if they need to drive to get to work, they drive as an unlicensed driver. That means they probably don't have insurance, they also haven't received necessarily any driver's education, and they haven't demonstrated that they can safely operate a vehicle.

Other undocumented immigrants choose not to drive, but that creates some barriers for them. It may restrict where they can work or what they can do. It also may restrict their ability to shop and where they can go for certain products. This type of barrier creates difficulty in terms of economic integration for these immigrants.

As you can see in the map, there are a number of states that have adopted polices which would allow immigrants to obtain driver's licenses. These aren't your typical driver's licenses, in that they can't be used as a form of identification, for instance, to vote in a federal election, and you might not be able to get on an airplane with one. But it does allow you to drive and get to work. For these immigrants, that potential economic barrier is eliminated. What our research is going to do is actually evaluate the impact of these policies.

We have some evidence that these driver's licenses are in high demand. Since January 2015, when California implemented its new driver's license policy, there have been over 500,000 applications for these driver's licenses. What we hope is that this research will actually help policymakers in other states who are considering whether to adopt this policy of a new driver's license or not, and they'll be able to use our rigorous research to make more informed decisions.

Jens Hainmueller: The third project looks at refugees, which are people who have been granted asylum in a safe country because they fear persecution based on their gender, political opinions, race, or social class in their home country. Refugees are often caught on a path of despair. They flee horrific circumstances in their home country, they embark on a perilous and often deadly journey, and then once they arrive in a safe country, they're often met with resistance by natives in the resettlement process.

Refugees often have to wait for a very long time on a decision on their asylum request that would tell them whether they can stay in the country or they're going to be sent back to their home country. For example, in Switzerland, the average wait time is about two years. During this wait time, in which refugees find themselves in what we call the "asylum limbo," they're essentially housed in camps or centers, they're isolated from the native population, they're restricted in terms of the work that they can do, they face this constant threat and uncertainty of being sent back to their home country. So their lives are essentially put on hold. What we do in this research project is we ask how the length of this wait time affects the subsequent economic integration of these immigrants, and specifically the probability of them finding a job once they're actually accepted.

We do this by leveraging a unique data set in Switzerland where we have all refugees that applied for asylum between 1994 and 2004 in Switzerland. What you can see in the first figure is that we have the average wait time in days plotted against the month of arrival for the six most important sending countries. Take Iraqis, for example. What you see there is that there are frequent spikes in these wait times, and that's because applications are processed in batches.

What that means is that the wait times are very randomly assigned. If you happen to arrive just before a batch is about to be processed, you will be processed very quickly. If you happen to arrive right after a batch was processed, it means you have to wait quite a long time in order to get a decision on your claim. This quasi-randomization—random assignment of these wait times—allows us to isolate the causal effect of wait times on the subsequent economic employment.

The second figure here shows the main result of the study. What we see is the effect of waiting one additional year on the probability of finding employment later on, conditional on the elapsed wait time. What we see here is that an additional year of waiting in the asylum limbo on average reduces the probability of employment by about six to eight percentage points, which amounts to a 25 percent drop over the average probability of finding a job. So it's a massive negative effect that only gets more pronounced as immigrants have to wait longer in the asylum limbo. So again, we think this is important evidence for policymakers because they can actually influence the wait times through administrative reforms, and this can be beneficial not only for the immigrants but also for the host country as a whole. For example, the study estimates that in Switzerland, by reducing the wait times by only 10 percent—that's 60 days—the Swiss government could save on the order of six million dollars in a single year alone. A small change in the administrative procedure could have big welfare gains for the country as a whole and benefit the immigrants themselves.