

Changes in Migration Policy - An Answer to Permanent Migration

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Abstract

This study describes recent changes in Polish emigration to the US, focusing on the changing characteristics of migrants and major forces influencing migration between the two countries. We find that the tendency of recent Polish migrants is to seek to reside permanently in the US, though today's migrants are also better educated and integrate faster into the US society than earlier cohorts, often bypassing predominantly Polish communities. However, the overall number of Polish migrants to the US has been declining in the last decade. To understand the forces driving migration we focus on push and pull forces, concluding that restrictions on Polish migration maintained by the US and eliminated by the EU are the key factors in this decline. This finding generally supports the broader argument that relaxing migration restrictions helps control permanent migration flows and diminishes the negative impact of such migration on domestic resources.

Key words: Polish migration, Permanent vs. temporary migration

Introduction

The following study describes recent changes in Polish emigration to the US, focusing on the changing characteristics of migrants and major forces influencing declining migration between these countries. Historically, Polish migrants to the US have been driven mostly by economic opportunities, which are characterized in the literature as pull and push forces. They had limited education, clustered in specific blue collar jobs and often lived in predominantly Polish communities. In the last decade those patterns are changing; as the migration declines, the new migrants are more educated and tend to integrate faster into the US society, often bypassing the initial traditional stages of living in predominantly Polish communities.

At the same time, Polish migration to the US remains typically permanent in nature, which is in sharp contrast to the recent, predominantly temporary Polish migration to the EU countries. Today Polish immigrants to the EU face an open door policy, which is still not the case for those coming to the US. Findings of this paper further support the claim that relaxing migration restrictions helps controlling permanent migration, which often strains domestic resources. Temporary labor movements, which do not force migrants to stay permanently for the fear of no return are less costly and help to restore the economic equilibrium in both host and home countries. While finding accurate emigration data is always challenging, we rely on several data sources and cross reference their reliability. The key sources involve the US State Department information on various types of visas granted to Poles, reports on migration by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), the 2009 American Community Survey and the US Census data.

Polish immigration to the US – basic characteristics

According to the 2009 American Community Survey there are almost 10 million Polish Americans in the US, which constitutes over 3 percent of the entire population, and makes this group the fifth largest in the country, after Germans, Irish, English and Italians. Of those, about 1 million are first generation emigrants from Poland. This study focuses only on the recent Polish emigrants, analyzing characteristics of this population and forces explaining declining migration patterns. While it is impossible to generalize about a profile of a "typical" Polish immigrant to the US some characteristics are shared by a large number of Poles living in the US, including their legal status, gender, education, and average income. According to the 2000 US census data, recent Polish migrants are typically legal residents in the US and they are less likely to be naturalized today than those coming to the US prior to the 1990s.

Specifically, among Poles who arrived into the US in the period 1981-90, 56 percent acquired US citizenship by year 2000, and of those who arrived after 1990 that percentage was only 17 percent did so by that same year (Census2000). While it is impossible to fully explain why the numbers of Poles seeking naturalization diminished, changes in Poland's political and economic system and consequent changes in migration policy must have played a role in those decisions. Prior to the 1990s Poles could not freely travel and those few who came to the US often faced a dilemma "stay in the US forever or return to Poland and never travel again." Beginning in the early 1990, domestic restrictions on travel abroad were lifted, and the EU gradually abolished their visa restrictions (Klos 2006). The new ability to travel and work more freely within the EU must have impacted temporary migration to the US and diminished the need for naturalization in the US. This is consistent with the literature findings that restrictive migration policies lead to a more permanent migration (as opposed to temporary), as migrants, who face high costs and risks when migrating opt for permanent stay and ultimately more frequently seek citizenship in their new home countries (Bencivenga 1997 and Martinoia 2009).

With relaxing policies towards migration in Europe the characteristics of Polish migrants to the US have also changed. In terms of educational attainments in 1980 over 40 percent of Polish migrants had no high school education; by 1990 that percentage declined to 26 percent, and in 2000 it was only 17 percent. Increased educational attainments have led to a selective upward mobility, but mostly for Polish females (Radzilowski 2010). In fact, in the period 1980-2000 the professional status of males hardly changed, showing 55 percent of males clustering in blue collar jobs in 1980 and 56.2 percent in 2000, while the share of male Polish born professionals remained stable around 23 percent. By contrast, in 1980 of all Polish born female migrants 14 percent occupied professional positions, which increased to 19 percent in 1990 and 29 percent in 2000. At the same time, the share of Polish born female blue collar workers declined from 35 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2000 (American Community Survey, 2010).

Clearly, Polish born males tend to hold to their blue collar jobs for longer periods of time. This may be a result of types of jobs which male immigrants often occupy: working in construction, where Poles constitute over 10 percent of all workers, and auto mechanics where their respective share is 6 percent (Bayer 2005). This explanation of the limited upward mobility for males is consistent with their income data, as construction or auto mechanics jobs tend to be relatively well paid despite their relatively low educational requirements. Such interpretation is also consistent with the persistent gender income gap among Polish migrants: despite their higher educational attainments Polish born females reported average annual income of \$39,000 as opposed to males, for whom this number was \$51,200 in 2010 (American Community Survey, 2010).

For both males and females, Polish educational attainments vary negatively with age. The most striking characteristic is that among the youngest cohort, typically children of recent immigrants' ages 15-24, over 95 percent are in the process of continuing their higher education in the US. However, when comparing the overall education of recent Polish migrants with the rest of the Americans, generally the level of education of Polish born Americans is lower than that of the entire US society. Relative to other ethnic groups Poles are better educated on average than emigrants' from Mexico, Vietnam or Italy but not as well as an average emigrant from China, India, Great Britain, or Russia (International Migration Outlook 2009).

There have also been some changes in terms of geographical location where Polish immigrants cluster in the US. Historically, Polish immigrants used to live in large communities relying heavily on diasporas (Jelavic 2010). However, the recent generation of migrants is far more mobile geographically and today's migrants rarely start their lives in the US in traditional Polish communities. In addition, those who already live in those communities are moving to areas often not dominated by any ethnic group, thus blending with the US society, which used to be the case only with second generation migrants (Briggs 1993). Thus, historical centers of Polish migration, such as suburbs of Chicago or New York, traditionally homes to generations of Polish emigrants, are losing importance for Polish recent migrants, and are often treated as temporary, first stop in the journey through the new land. The trend to move out of predominantly Polish communities combined with the falling numbers of new migrants moving into those areas have led to a slow decline of Polish neighborhoods and communities in the US.

With the changing characteristics of Polish emigrants, the purpose of some visitors coming from Poland has changed as well. Prior to the 1990s, Poles arriving into the US on tourist visa most often sought employment and over time turned into permanent immigrants.

Starting in the mid-1990s several new categories of temporary visitors appeared among Poles coming to America: an increasing number of students, short-term scholars and legal summer workers (relying on “work and study program”) as well as au pairs (Iglicka2009). Despite appearance of these new type of visitors, the overall number of Poles coming to the US for both temporary and permanent stay has declined in the last decade, from its peak level of 108 thousand in 2000 to 68 thousand in 2011 (US State Department 2012).

Forces driving declining migration

The above general description of recent Polish migrants to the US raises a question about forces responsible for their changing characteristics and trends. When measuring the role of different forces shaping migration we rely on statistical data describing population movements, which are always problematic, particularly when some of the migrants lack legal status. Further problems arise when statistical analysis of migration relies on macroeconomic data, such as average incomes, prices etc. Those kinds of data are employed in the regression analysis that attempts to shed an additional light on the recent Polish migration to the US. This analysis is rooted in the literature describing push and pull forces driving migration (Lee 1966, Cohen 1996). Such distinction, however, can be somewhat arbitrary as it is often difficult to discern and measure individually the strength of pull and push force. For example, when there are considerable wage differences between two countries it is hard to separate the impact of relatively low wage in Poland (push force) from the higher wage in the US (pull force).

In our model we attempt to better understand the relative importance of several economic factors in a decision to migrate from Poland to the US. In our regression analysis we use historical data on visitors into the US on B1-2 visas as a proxy for migration, which is the exogenous variable, relying on the assumption that historically most Polish B1-2 visitors sought employment and over time turned into permanent immigrants. Our endogenous variables include: differences in the two countries’ GDP/capita; unemployment rates; average wages; total GDP growth rates; and the exchange rate of Polish currency against the US dollar. The key sources of data on various types of visas include the US State Department, reports on migration by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), the 2009 American Community Survey, and US Census data. The period examined is 1991-2011.

Of the variables examined, only one, the exchange rate of Polish currency against dollar does not appear significant in decisions to migrate to the US. The two significant factors ($p < .05$) affecting migrating Poles are the differences in the US/Poland GDP per capita in PPP, and US/Poland unemployment rates. The difference in growth rates is also significant and, as expected, is inversely related to the emigration. Remarkably, the average difference between the US/Poland wages is the least significant with a p-value of .8597. The more surprising is that since 2005 as the wage and GDP gap differences between the U.S. and Poland increases migration declines, which implies that additional factors play a role.

The most likely factor contributing to this decline is Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004 and consequent opening of alternative labor markets to Polish migrants. The newly opened labor markets of Great Britain, Ireland and Sweden provided Poles with legal job opportunities at substantially lower transportation and visa related costs. Subsequent opening of the other EU labor markets must have further diverted potential Polish workers from the US, which continues to require costly and time consuming visas and limits workers ability to travel back and forth..

Conclusions

Beginning in the 1990s there have been significant changes in the emigration from Poland to the US. The characteristics of a typical Polish immigrant have changed; when going to the US most recent migrants are seeking far less frequently to make it a permanent home though naturalization, they are better educated and more upwardly mobile (particularly women) and live more often than in the past outside traditional Polish communities. These changes are taking place, despite rising income gap between Poland and the US and we attribute them to the opening of the EU labor markets, which must have diverted a number of Polish migrants from coming to the US.

These finding raise a question about the need and effects of the US current visa requirements applied to Polish citizens. One might argue that relaxing US visa restrictions would contribute to an increase in the number of Poles arriving for a temporary stay, as a response to the labor market needs on both sides of the border, which has been experienced within the EU.

Based those EU experiences recent Polish migrants, typically relatively young and educated adjust quickly to the changes in labor demand, as illustrated by a reversed migration of Poles from the UK following 2008 recession (Koehler 2010).

The other positive effect of relaxing visa restrictions would likely be the diminished permanent migration. For example, elimination of visa requirements would likely induce some Poles, who never legalized their stay in the US to go back to Poland, providing them with an option to return if they chose to. This outflow of migrants who are 'stuck' because they have no option to travel back and forth could potentially diminish US costs, including medical expenses for those involved.

Appendix

Regression results

Regression results:

$$\text{Immigration (US)} = 6.45831\text{ExchRateUSDPLN} + .00387\text{diffUSPolGDPcapPPPUS} - 2.05688\text{PGDPgrowth} + .765688\text{USGDPgrowth} + .36297\text{unempIPL} - 6.93359\text{unemplUS} - .00552\text{averagediffUSPolwage} + 22.07660$$

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