

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON AFRICAN AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

Before the end of the Second World War Washington, DC did not attract many immigrants from outside the United States. By 1990, the foreign-born population represented 9.7 percent of the District's total population; and by 2000 it accounted for 12.9 percent of the total population. The foreign-born population, which grew by 24.9 percent between 1990 and 2000 is the major source of the District's population growth. This paper explores the economic impact of immigration on the African American population in Washington, DC from 1950 to 2000. I hypothesize that immigration has a net positive economic effect on all racial groups, especially African Americans.

KEYWORDS: *Immigration, African Americans, Washington DC, economic performance.*

INTRODUCTION

Before the end of the Second World War, Washington, DC did not attract many immigrants from outside the United States, perhaps because the economic opportunities in the District are less diverse than other metropolitan areas. By the 1950s, African Americans began to outnumber Whites in the District; with no one else around, the economic competition was between Whites and African Americans. With the baggage of institutional racism and

discrimination and the fact that many African Americans were confined to low wage employment, while Whites were in the professions; Whites easily outperformed African Americans in the economy.¹

The cultural configuration of the city began to change in the 1960s, as Hispanics began to arrive from Central America and the Caribbean.² The population continued to diversify in the 1970s, as Southeast Asians began to seek refuge in the District. By 1990, the foreign-born population represented 9.7 percent (or 58, 887) of the District's total population; and by 2000 it accounted for 12.9 percent (or 73, 561) of the total population.³ The 2000 US Census revealed that Washington, DC, treated as a state equivalent, was the only state to experience population decrease (down 5.7 percent from 1990). Therefore, the foreign-born population, which grew by 24.9 percent between 1990 and 2000, is the main source of the District's population growth. The Census Bureau also reports that more than 50 percent of the foreign-born population in DC entered the US between 1990 and 2000.⁴ Although more than 50 percent of the foreign born in the District are from Latin America, the foreign born population is heterogeneous, even within the Latin American group, El Salvador, the single largest sending country in 1990 and 2000 only accounts for 10% of the incoming immigrants.⁵ With 17.6% from Europe, 17% from Asia, 12.5% from Africa, 11.4% from the Caribbean and 1.7% from North America, the foreign stock in the District is much more diverse than other metropolitan areas.⁶ As the foreign born population increases, the impact of immigration on Washington, DC will increasingly demand the attention of policy makers, social scientists and community activists alike as the sheer volume and the related social, political and economic demands and dislocations are experienced or intensified.

This paper explores the economic impact of immigration on the African American population in Washington, DC from 1950 to 2000. The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether or not increases in the foreign born population negatively affects the economic well being of African Americans (and others). The four major questions under consideration: (1) Does immigration decrease the earnings of African Americans? (2) Are African Americans being displaced by immigrants in the labor market (as reflected in unemployment rates)? (3) Are immigrants making poverty more severe for African Americans? (4) Are African Americans being pushed out of schools by increased immigration? I hypothesize that immigration has a net positive economic effect on all racial groups, especially African Americans. Washington, DC is an important site for this discussion because it has a majority African American population and because it is a relatively new receiving city with not much research focus on the impact of immigration on the native-born African American population or the city in generally.

AVAILABLE PERSPECTIVES

The literature on the economic impact of immigration in Washington, DC is sparse. The District is a relatively new receiving area for foreign born immigrants, as a result, studies analyzing the economic impact of immigration on American cities have tended to ignore the District. The available literature on immigration in Washington, DC emphasize the overall migrant experience, that is, their efforts at acculturation, assimilation,⁷ economic mobility and their residential patterns in the city and surrounding areas.⁸ The continued growth of the foreign born population demands that analysts and policy makers evaluate the overall impact of immigration on the city and on the existing population.

In the general discourse on immigration, there are at least two broad frameworks in which the literature presents the issue: the open versus closed border theses.⁹ Within these broad frameworks are cultural arguments (including integration and assimilation arguments, multiculturalism and nativism) and politico-economic arguments (including economic advantages and disadvantages, issues of political representation and pressures on social services, the criminal justice system and the environment).

There is no shortage of debate as to whether or not immigrants should be allowed to enter the United States, the type of immigrant that should be allowed entry, and how many should be allowed from particular countries at particular times. The cultural framework in which immigration is understood allows old-timers, that is, the native-born population, to decide who the desirable and undesirable immigrants are.¹⁰ Martin and Midgley note that those who prefer no immigration (closed borders) tend to see immigrants from non-European countries to the United States as a recipe for disaster. It is certainly within the rights of states to decide who to admit and the conditions of the admittance. Walzer argues that it is the right of political communities to exclude in defense of their sovereignty and to preserve their national “distinctiveness,” which is in part a function of formal exclusion. However, Carens sees no justification for restricting immigration and maintains that people should generally be allowed to migrate, “subject only to the sorts of constraints that bind current citizens in their new country.”¹¹ Carens supports this position especially with reference to migration from the Third to the First World. He concedes that immigration would change the character of the community (or its distinctiveness) “but it would not leave the community without any character.”¹² A new national character, a new national distinctiveness would emerge fused with old and new ways of life.

Nozick on the other hand, sees immigrants as threats to territorial space, although it does not necessarily give governments the right to exclude non-citizens.¹³ Security concerns and protecting the homeland from foreigners are currently high priorities. Especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 the territorial threat presented by immigrants has been emphasized in US domestic and foreign policies. Similarly, the constant influx of Latin American immigrants, especially Mexicans, is seen as a threat to the territorial space of states like California, Texas and Arizona. Furthermore, the institutional framework of the receiving state must be such that it can absorb new immigrants in schools, the labor market, social services and residences; because if it cannot, then immigrants are seen as a burden on the functioning of the state, and therefore a threat to the space.¹⁴

Within the context of the open versus closed border thesis in the United States, cultural arguments have persistently focused on immigration integration and assimilation, which is premised on tolerance and accommodation of the native-born population and the unlearning of old ways by immigrants.¹⁵ Assimilation was seen as the only way new immigrants could benefit from the “American way of life” which is to say the Euro-American way of life. Immigrants were expected to “shed their own cultures, as if these were old skins no longer possessing any vital force, and wrap themselves in the mantle of Anglo-American culture.”¹⁶ Alba and Lee contend that the old way, the Eurocentric idea of assimilation must now make room for different types of immigrant incorporation and the potentially positive role of ethnic groups on American culture,¹⁷ which is forcefully argued by those committed to multiculturalism.

The growing trend towards transnationalism and multiculturalism has challenged the premises underlying, assimilationist arguments. Multiculturalism advances that ethnic loyalties, cultural values and institutions can be beneficial to both the ethnic group and the larger society

so that assimilation is a matter of choice rather than necessity. In many immigrant communities in the United States, assimilation and immigration are simultaneous processes. For instance, while an immigrant family is assimilating into American society, they are also receiving new immigrants into their family and/or the wider community and seemingly are always in the process of “becoming” assimilated. Alba and Lee conclude that new theorizing on assimilation must recognize that it “does not require the disappearance of ethnicity; and that the individuals undergoing it may still bear a number of ethnic markers.”¹⁸

Not everyone is as optimistic about the positive role of immigrants on American culture, especially as the sheer volume and concentration are perceived to disrupt the old ways of life.¹⁹ In fact, many analysts in favor of assimilation criticize that multiculturalism is premised on the retention of divided loyalties and hostility toward the new culture. The ability to maintain enclave ethnic institutions, especially in regionally concentrated areas, is seen as a threat to American culture and identity.²⁰ Huntington argues that regional concentrations slows or retards assimilation, which affects not only the American identity, but also the immigrants’ economic potential.²¹

The consistent increases in the foreign-born population (legal and illegal), as well as territorial and cultural insecurities, have instigated a backlash on immigration by native-born Americans. The trend toward increased nativism is evident in public opinion, national lobbies, recent laws enacted, state initiatives²² and political platforms.²³ Recent legislations have sought to limit the civil rights of immigrants, eliminate some forms of assistance to immigrants, including education to children of illegal immigrants.²⁴ Nativists argue that immigrant enthusiasts have been quick to celebrate diversity, exaggerating the benefits and ignoring the downsides.²⁵ McGowan concedes that immigrants have revived inner cities and the economy but

there are still causes for concern. Strains on the social fabric, on schools, hospitals, the social services and the protective and criminal justice systems should not be ignored. Moreover, he argues, Third World immigrants are slow to assimilate, which further exacerbates the problem. New immigrants lag behind native-born and the tendency to emphasize their “economic dynamism often obscures their impact on native-born workers.”²⁶ McGowan is critical of the multiculturalist paradigm because it encourages divided loyalties and treats new immigrants as groups rather than as individuals. He prefers that immigrants shuck “off the foreign customs, practices, habits of thinking and values that were – and still are – at odds with ‘progressive’ American ideals of democracy, economic upward mobility and middle-class life.”²⁷

The open versus closed border thesis as articulated in cultural arguments, explicitly and implicitly have political and economic undertones. Politico-economic arguments cover an array of issues including political representation, (minority marginalization versus inclusion), educational policies regarding languages of instruction, pressure on and access to social services, health care, housing and political rights. Economic arguments have tempted to assess the economic consequences of immigration on American society, especially on low-skilled workers. The arguments and the findings are contradictory. Those in favor of immigration tend to focus on the positive economic impact of immigrants on the American economy. They see immigrants as bringing skills and money, revitalizing cities, reviving the economy and raising the overall level of wages of native-born workers.²⁸ On the other hand, other observers focus on the negative impact of immigration on select states and urban centers, arguing that immigrants impose economic burdens rather than alleviate them.²⁹ These analysts emphasize that many of the new immigrants are low skilled or undocumented workers who depress wages and displace native-born (especially low-skilled) Americans in the labor force. This group also argues that

low skilled immigrants add pressure to the welfare system because they are more welfare dependent and add pressure to the criminal justice system because of increased criminality perceived among immigrants.

Moore's 1997 study concluded that cities with a higher percentage of foreign-born immigrants tended to have a more positive economic outlook,³⁰ with higher income, higher employment, lower poverty rates, low crime rates and lower tax burden.³¹ Furthermore, Moore argues that the foreign born population contributes to population growth as natives migrate³² and contribute to the expansion of the economy by forming their own "ethnic business ventures."³³ Moore argues that despite the overall positive impact of immigrants on American cities, there are possible negative impacts especially on lower-skilled, lower-income inner city residences such as African Americans.³⁴ Similarly, Kposowa and Chiswick argue that non-whites are negatively affected by increases in immigration, resulting in decrease in minority earnings³⁵ and displacing minorities in the labor market "especially in places where employers are racially insensitive to non-whites."³⁶

Chiswick's research (based primarily on foreign born whites and those entering the US with transferable skills) concludes that in eleven to fifteen years the income of immigrants catch up with and eventually exceed the earnings of native-born Americans. Skilled immigrants obviously fare better than low-skilled immigrants and have a more positive impact on the wages of the native population and the overall economy.³⁷ Similarly, the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates immigration reform and limits on immigration, released a study in 1998 that concluded that low-skilled immigrants, as substitutes for low-skilled native-born, tend to depress the wages of the native-born population and displace the working poor,³⁸ especially within the African American and other native-born minority communities. This is a view that is

also held in public discourse.³⁹ This is exacerbated by the fact that minority immigrants discriminate against African Americans in hiring for their small businesses located in African American communities. Furthermore, research has shown that white employers show preference for hiring immigrants to hiring African Americans.⁴⁰ It is not simply a matter of immigrants as such displacing African Americans as it is that the persistence of racial and cultural stereotypes and prejudices put them at a structural disadvantage when there is an availability of alternative sources of low-wage laborers.⁴¹ In his testimony before the US Congress, Frank Morris argued that high immigration rates are not in the national interest of the United States and hurt the most vulnerable sections of the population including poor and working class Americans but especially African Americans. He contends that African Americans are negatively affected not only in depressed wages but also in reduced educational attainment especially at the college and graduate levels. Morris argues for a reduction in immigration flows of both low skilled and educated migrants because he sees both groups as limiting the economic opportunities of African Americans. Alternatively, Shulman argues that although there are economic dislocations in the short run, in the long run, immigration will benefit African Americans.⁴²

The economic literature on immigration tend to focus on how immigrants negatively or positively affect the economic well being of the nation and assumes that the economic outlook of the immigrant is always positive relative to others. National statistics on the foreign born population shows that in 1990 and 2000, while the foreign born population had comparable college graduation to native-born, they had considerably lower proportion of high school graduates with Asians being better educated than Latin Americans on average.⁴³ Similarly, in 1990 more than fifty percent of the foreign born population were below the poverty level.⁴⁴ In 2000 the situation was no better as the foreign born were twice as likely to fall below the poverty

level than native born.⁴⁵ The literature also overwhelmingly concludes that at the national level and in many metropolitan areas, increased immigration has had a positive impact for whites and a negative impact for African Americans resulting in decreased earnings, lower levels of educational attainment, (especially that the college level), increased unemployment and poverty. This paper challenges these assumptions with reference to Washington, DC.

DATA ANALYSIS

The focus of this section is to analyze the effects of immigration on African Americans in Washington, DC and to determine whether or not immigration has harmed or benefited African Americans and others. Using data from the 1950 to 2000 US Population decennial censuses, extracted for the District of Columbia, I explore the following question: Has the increase in the non-European foreign born population negatively affected the economic well being of African Americans and others? To answer this question I look at four economic indicators: median household income, educational attainment (percentage of high school and college graduates), unemployment rate and level of family household poverty. These four indicators will help me assess whether the increase in the foreign stock has: (1) decreased African American income (depressed wages); (2) increased African American unemployment (labor market displacement); (3) increased the poverty level of African Americans (making poverty more severe); and (4) decreased the educational attainment levels of African Americans (crowding out effect).

Detailed and specific economic information on the foreign born is not available for all Census years and the micro data on the Washington, DC foreign born is mostly demographic. Consequently, I have used race categories of non-white, non-black as the proxy variable for the foreign stock. This can be done with the DC data because the non-European immigrant

population is relatively new to the city. In addition, the detailed information available on the places of birth of the foreign born indicates that the increase in the non-white, non-black racial categories, specifically the Hispanic, Asian and ‘Some Other Race’ categories can be attributed to the increase in the foreign born population (see Table 1). The variable “other non-European races” in this study combines the population and economic statistics of Hispanics, Asians and Some Other Race racial groupings. The foreign stock therefore refers to the foreign born and first generation American born to foreign and mixed heritage parents.

There are two caveats: First, Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa have been ignored as their statistical data are not differentiated in the Census from the larger African American category. Second, the Asian group, more than any other immigrant group will contain third generation native born Americans since the small but notable presence of Chinese and Japanese immigrants have been recorded in the DC censuses since 1890. It is also important to note that although Filipinos, Chinese, and Japanese were numerically counted in the DC population censuses since 1890, there was no discussion of their social or economic characteristics as a separate category until the 1980 Census. The Hispanic population or “Persons of Spanish Origin” were not counted in DC until the 1970 Census.

Table 1: Effect of Change in the Foreign Born on the Population	
Variable	Effect of Change
Native born	-.843*
White Pop.	-.362
Black Pop.	-.575
Other Race	.947**
* <i>Significant at the 0.05 level</i> ** <i>Significant at the 0.01 level</i>	

In order to determine the impact of immigration on the racial diversity of the population I correlated the foreign born population with the native-born population, black, white and other

races populations. The results displayed in Table 1 shows strong negative correlation between the foreign born and the native born population at $-.843 (.035)$. In other words, as the foreign born population increases the native population has decreased. The results also shows a strong positive correlation between the foreign born and other races at $.947(.004)$ indicating that as the foreign born population increases the other race population also increases. No correlation is observed between the foreign born population with either the Black or White populations. This is not an indication that the Black and White populations have not benefited from increased immigration but that the percentage have been small and statistically insignificant. The raw data indicates that of all the race groups, the Black population is the least represented among immigrants while Hispanics receive a much larger share of immigrants. Subsequently, the net lose in the native-born population of both Blacks and Whites have not been offset by net gains in the percentage of foreign born who identity themselves in either category. The growth in the population of other races (Hispanics, Asians and Some Other Race) is a reflection of the diversity in the place of birth of the foreign born, no longer only drawn from Europe and North America.

A preliminary glance at the descriptive statistics in Table 2 indicates that for the economic variables of concern (income, unemployment, poverty and educational attainment – high school and college), on average other non-European races outperform African Americans for all indicators. The only notable exception to this is in 2000 when Blacks recorded 70.3% who had completed high school or higher, compared to 55.8% of Other non-European races (and 94.4% of Whites).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics		
Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
FORGNBRN	48046.67	15132.040
WHITEPOP	267410.67	139008.449
BLACKPOP	391502.50	93538.654
WHITEHS	78.487	16.2775
BLACKHS	49.150	17.1908
OTHERHS	65.125	6.7357
WHITECOL	46.217	25.6529
BLACKCOL	10.933	4.7614
OTHERCOL	32.200	7.0583
WHITHINC	26156.83	24643.453
BLAKHINC	13906.67	11456.570
ORACHINC	21867.50	12099.916
WTFAMPOV	3.325	.9106
BKFAMPOV	18.125	2.7035
OTRACPOV	14.025	2.5250
WHITUNEM	3.117	.9432
BLAKUNEM	7.083	2.1349
ORACUNEM	4.925	.7365

In order to determine the impact of immigration on the economic health of African Americans, I correlated the variables foreign born, other races, Black poverty, Black unemployment, Black income, Black high school and college. The results, displayed in Table 3, shows that there are strong positive correlations between the increase in the population of other races and Black high school, college, and income, all statistically significant at the 0.01 level. There is a positive correlation between the increase in other races and an increase in Black poverty and unemployment however, neither is statistically significant ($p > 0.10$). The same

patterns are observed with reference to the increase in the foreign born population. However, the foreign born population has a negative (although not statistically significant) relationship to Black high school completion. This difference may be due to the fact that the foreign born category includes both whites and non-whites.

Table 3: The Effect of Other non-European races and the foreign born population on African American Economic Welfare		
	OTRACPOP	FORGNBRN
BLACKHS	.923 (.009)**	-.753 (.084)
BLACKCOL	.975 (.001)**	.861 (.028)*
BLAKHINC	.984 (.000)**	.889 (.018)*
BKFAMPOV	.797 (.203)	.751 (.249)
BKUNEM	.712 (.112)	.631 (.179)
* Significant at the 0.05 level ** Significant at the 0.01 level		

In order to add a measure of comparability to the analysis I correlated the foreign born population and the economic variables for the non-Black racial groups – Whites and Other non-European races. The results, shown in Table 4, support my hypothesis that immigration has had a positive impact on the economic well-being of all concerned, including the foreign born. There is a strong positive correlation between the incomes of all race categories and the increase in the foreign born population (see Table 3 for African Americans). As the foreign born population increases, the median household income increases for Whites .924 (.009), for blacks .889 (.018), and for other races .996 (.004). The results also show that increase in the income of other races has a strong positive correlations with White income .995 (.005) and African Americans .998 (.002) so that contrary to national findings, African American income has not decreased with increased immigration. There is no statistically significant relationship between immigration and unemployment for any of the groups. However, as Table 4 shows, the relationship is positive rather than negative for all groups. Intuitively as the population increases, unemployment

increases for all groups since there are more people in some job sectors competing for fewer jobs. However, the research shows that immigration cannot be said to be *the* cause of increased unemployment. More importantly, the findings indicate that White unemployment, (rather than African American) increases as the foreign born population increases. Although the findings are not statistically significant, of the three racial categories Blacks seem the least affected by an increase in unemployment as the foreign born increases. In other words, the increase in immigration has not resulted in increased unemployment of African Americans; it seems that they have not been displaced in the labor market as previously assumed.

Table 4: The effects of the foreign born on the economic welfare of Whites and Other races	
WHITHINC	.924 (.009)**
ORACHINC	.996 (.004)**
WHITUNEM	.806 (.053)
ORACUNEM	.918 (.082)
WTFAMPOV	-.475 (.525)
OTRACPOV	.974 (.026)*
WHITEHS	.650 (.162)
OTHERHS	.802 (.198)
WHITECOL	.770 (.073)
OTHERCOL	.468 (.532)
* Significant at the 0.05 level ** Significant at the 0.01 level	

The relationship between immigration and family poverty is only statistically significant for other non-European races. Therefore, the contention that immigration increases the poverty level or makes African American poverty more severe is not supported. However, the results do show that an increase in the population of the other non-European race is positively correlated to their increased rates of poverty. The impact of immigration on educational attainment is interesting. As already mentioned, there is a strong positive (statistically significant) correlation observed between foreign born and Black college attainment but not high school completion rates. Growth in the foreign born population is also positively correlated with White high school

completion and college, although neither is statistically significant ($p > .05$). On the other hand, increases in the foreign born population is negatively correlated with other races high school completion at .802 (.198) although it is not statistically significant ($p > .05$). This negative correlation is indicative of the fact that many of the new immigrants are low or unskilled workers from non-English speaking countries, and perhaps lack the English proficiency necessary to succeed in public schools that provide very little accommodation for new English language learners.

CONCLUSION

There are other (candidate) variables that are important to evaluating economic well being that were not discussed here, yet remain important to the discussion, those variables include: rate of house ownership, labor force participation, age in the labor force, family size, female headed households, and rate of incarceration and other institutionalization. Since we are provided with a wealth of demographic (and not much social or economic) information on the foreign born in Washington, DC, the increase in the non-European foreign stock is useful for assessing the economic performance of African Americans in an exploratory analysis such as this. Future research and continued focus on Washington DC will begin to make the discussion on the relationship between immigration and African Americans less exploratory and more comprehensive. And will demand that more detailed microdata be gathered.

In sum, the data shows that the foreign stock on average is faring better economically than native born African Americans in the District, with higher median household incomes, higher educational attainment at the college level, lower unemployment and lower family poverty rates. The higher income levels of the foreign stock may not necessarily have anything

to do with the so-called stricter work ethic of immigrants but may be a result of a variety of other factors including larger family structures, more households with working aged adults who can pool their incomes, ability to navigate available economic opportunities because of structural inequalities and institutional prejudices against African Americans and the fact that many immigrants to the District come as educated, skilled workers or came to pursue their education in the area and remained.

There are two additional points necessary to this discussion. The first is that although the median household income is reportedly higher for immigrants over African Americans, it does not capture the fact that their actual spending power might be considerably lower than African Americans' because of remittances to the home country. Second, not all immigrant groups are created equal. In other words low skilled workers do not fare as well as higher skilled immigrants. Moreover, the Asian foreign stock fares better than other non-European immigrant groups, especially the Hispanic foreign stock. Although the foreign stock in the District is generally faring better than African Americans; the growth of the foreign stock has had a positive (rather than negative) impact on the population as a whole, including African Americans. Immigrants outperforming Blacks may have little to do with immigrants displacing Blacks in the labor market and more to do with Blacks being marginalized by the dominant group, which it contributes to comparatively lower African American economic performance.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Keith Melder, *City of Magnificent Intentions: A History of the District of Columbia* (Washington, DC: Intrac Inc., 1983): 220.

² Ibid, 545.

³ US Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing 1990 and 2000: SF3

⁴ US Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing 2000

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Francine C. Cary, (ed.), *Washington Odyssey: A Multicultural History of the Nation's Capital*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1996).

⁸ Audrey Singer, "At Home in the Nation's Capital: Immigrant Trends in Metropolitan Washington." *Brookings Greater Washington Research Program*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy. (June 2003): 14.

⁹ Phillip Martin and Elizabeth Midgley, "Immigration to the United States" *Population Bulletin* vol. 54, no. 2 (June 1999): 1-48.

¹⁰ Peter S. Li, "The Place of Immigrants: Politics of Difference in Territorial and Social Space," *Canadian Diversity*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 23-28.

¹¹ Joseph H. Carens, "Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders," in *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, ed. Will Kymlicka, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 331-2.

¹² Ibid, 347.

¹³ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. (New York: Basic Books, 1974): 88-119.

¹⁴ Jeffrey G. Reitz, *Warmth of the Welcome: The Social Causes of Economic Success for Immigrants in Different Nations and Cities*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998): 3-68.

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