

## Summary

Like most nations, the United States imposes substantial restrictions on immigration. If you want to move to the United States, you have to obtain visas and other travel documents, pay various fees, and wait possibly years before you are allowed to immigrate. Although such immigration restrictions are nearly universal, there is another option. In this brief, I argue that nations should adopt a policy of “open borders,” where movement between countries is easy and regulations are light. An open borders policy has a number of benefits. First, the lives of migrants are improved by immigration. An open borders regime would allow people to immigrate in search of better jobs, higher wages, and safety from violence. Second, migration improves the destination country. Migrants tend to have low crime rates, they often perform low status jobs that native workers do not want, and they increase the productivity of the destination country. Finally, contrary to popular myth, studies show that migrants do not displace native workers. Given the benefits of migration and relatively low cost, migration should be made “safe, legal, and common.”

## Author Biography

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## The Case for Open Borders

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Every day, nearly 300,000 people travel between New Jersey and New York. Most are commuting to work, some are sight-seeing, and others are moving permanently to a new home. This massive daily migration attracts almost no attention from the public. New York politicians do not demand a wall between New Jersey and New York or suggest banning New Jersey residents outright. Government officials do not make residents of New Jersey wait in line at a “New York consulate” or implement a “New York Visa.” Rather, anybody, at any time, may move from New Jersey to New York.

“Open borders” is a simple idea: make the migration between nations as easy as the migration between states or cities. In other words, a regime of open borders means that there would be no visa system, no fees for entry, and no immigration enforcement. The main limit to migration would be an individual’s ability to fund their travel and accommodations upon arrival. The few regulations that might exist in an open borders immigration regime would be aimed at controlling clearly identified issues of public concern, such as infectious disease and violent crime.

Any analysis of migration policy must take into account the benefits to the person who wishes to migrate as well as the community that receives them. In this brief, I discuss two related issues: (1) How would free migration help the immigrant? (2) How would free migration help the destination country?

### 1. *Migration is a Benefit to the Immigrant*

Poor economic conditions are one of the strongest “push factors” for why people choose to immigrate. Consequently, there is massive migration from developing to developed nations, whose labor markets can provide well-paying jobs and a higher standard of living. Studies by social scientists show that a person’s place of birth is the biggest determinant of their income, including whether a person lives in poverty. One study showed that more than half of the variability in income is determined by country of residence, far outpacing factors such as effort or luck (Milanovic 2015). Moreover, researchers have often found that middle class professionals in developing nations have lower incomes than working class people in the developed world (Korzeniewicz and Moran 2009). For example, the *average* income in Mexico is approximately \$17,000 per year, compared to \$32,000 per year in the United States. Such inequalities in place mean that the ability to migrate at all constitutes a significant benefit to those who need it.

Restrictions to immigration not only keep many people in poverty, they also subject repatriated migrants to violence and other ill effects. For example, Golash-Boza and Cecliano-Navarro (2019) interviewed 157 people who had been deported from the United States. They found that many were socially isolated because they had not resided in their country of origin for decades. Others faced worse problems, including joblessness due to the stigma of deportation, and violence against themselves or family members. For most immigrants, an open borders regime would eliminate the risk of repatriation.

### 2. *Migration is a Benefit to the Destination Country*

In addition to the benefits to migrants, immigration also benefits natives. For example, economic research has shown that a 10 percent increase in migrants in a country is associated with a per capita income gain of 2.2 percent (Felbermayr, Hiller, and Salab 2010). Other economists have noted that

## Further Reading

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immigrants can boost the productivity of native-born workers. The professional who doesn't have to clean their own home because they hired a migrant worker has more time to devote to paid work. To this point, Cortés and Tessada (2011) show that native-born women are more likely to have paid work outside the home when there are more migrants in their city. Some of their models even suggest that highly-skilled female workers work longer hours when migrants are present. Because women perform the majority of household labor, free migration has the potential to benefit them the most.

The benefits of migration are not limited to jobs. Criminologists have also found that, on the average, immigrants are less likely to be convicted of violent crimes and have lower incarceration rates than natives. Recent analyses reinforce this point. For example, Michelangelo Landgrave, a political scientist, and Alex Nowrasteh, an economist at the Cato Institute, used the American Community Survey to examine the incarceration rates of immigrants versus natives. They estimate that native residents of the United States are incarcerated at a rate of 1,471 per 100,000. In contrast, illegal and legal migrants are incarcerated at a significantly lower rate of 756 per 100,000 and 364 per 100,000, respectively. Sociologists have found similar results. The urban sociologist Robert Sampson (2008) showed that neighborhoods in Chicago with more immigrants have lower homicide rates. In fact, poor "at risk" neighborhoods have a homicide rate that drops from approximately 10 per 100,000 to 7 per 100,000 when they have more foreign-born residents.

### Addressing Concerns about Job Loss

Opponents of open borders often suggest that increased immigration lowers the wages of native-born workers or otherwise puts them out of work. Considerable research, however, has shown that immigration has no, or very small, effects on native-born workers. This is because immigrants do not typically compete with native-born workers, especially those working in white-collar occupations. Rather, immigrants often do jobs that native-born workers find distasteful or unpleasant, such as in agriculture, construction, garment production, and domestic labor.

In some cases, large influxes of migrant labor may slightly lower the wages of native working-class people. For example, in a famous 1990 study of the Mariel Boatlift, economist David Card looked at how a sudden and unexpected influx of Cuban refugees affected the income of native Miami residents. Perhaps surprisingly, Card found that the income and employment rates of Whites in Miami after the refugee influx was similar to Whites living in other similar cities that did not experience an in-flow of refugees. For example, he found that White Miami residents had a 5.5 percent unemployment rate, compared to 4.4 percent unemployment rate among Whites in other cities. This was not a statistically significant difference. Even immigration critics, such as Harvard immigration economist George Borjas, find that the effects of immigration are small or nonexistent. In his own analysis, Borjas (1987) found that most workers are not affected by immigration at all and that the wages of relatively few—white workers with less than a high school degree—experience a modest wage decrease, which often disappears with time.

### Policy Implications

The policy implications from this research are clear. If migration improves the lives of immigrants, benefits the destination country, and migration has few negative "spillover" effects on natives, then migrant restrictions should be reduced or altogether eliminated. This includes a significant reduction and simplification of the visa system, an increase in the number of people legally allowed to migrate, and the immediate end of detention and the deportation of non-violent immigrants.