

Polish Migration to the US –The EU Effect

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Abstract

This study analyzes recent Polish migration to the US focusing on recent changes in the composition of Polish emigration to the US and ‘push and pull’ forces influencing those trends. The key findings are that in the last decade, in the pursuit of changing economic opportunities for Polish migrants within EU, fewer Poles were migrating to the US, irrespective of economic conditions in both countries. At the same time, Poles arriving to the US tend to be better educated, more upwardly mobile, and rely far less than in the past on Polish/American networks and communities for assistance in starting their new career paths. In the statistical part of the analysis we employ several data sources and cross reference data reliability. The key data sources relied on include the US State Department information on various types of visas granted to Poles, reports on migration by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), and data from the American Community Survey and the US Census.

Keywords: Polish migration, Permanent vs. temporary migration

1. Introduction

This study analyzes recent changes in Polish migration to the US describing some new trends and composition of Polish migrants to the US. Focusing on the ‘push and pull’ forces influencing those trends we try to discern factors driving changing recent migration flows. The key findings are that in the last decade, in the pursuit of new economic opportunities within EU, fewer Poles have migrated to the US, irrespective of economic conditions in both countries.

At the same time, Poles arriving to the US today tend to be more upwardly mobile, better educated and rely far less than in the past on Polish/American networks and communities for assistance in starting their new career paths. While finding accurate emigration data is often challenging we try to overcome that challenge by employing several data sources and cross reference their reliability. Key sources include US State Department information on various types of visas granted to Poles, reports on migration by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), and data from the American Community Survey and the US Census.

2. General Characteristics of Recent Polish Immigrants in America

According to the 2009 American Community Survey there are almost 10 million Polish Americans in the US, constituting over 3 percent of the entire population and the 5th largest ethnic group in the country after Germans, Irish, English and Italians. Of those, about 1 million are first generation emigrants from Poland.

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2.1. Naturalization

While it is impossible to generalize about a “typical” Polish immigrant to the US, various 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 less likely to be naturalized than those coming to the US earlier. Among Poles who arrived in the US during the 1981-90 period, 56 percent acquired US citizenship by the year 2000. This percentage was only 17 percent for those Polish immigrants who arrived after 1990 (Census 2000). Dramatic changes in Poland’s political and economic system and consequent changes in the ability to travel more widely must have played a significant role in those decisions. Prior to the early 1990s Poles could not freely travel, leaving those in with a stark choice – either remain in the US indefinitely or return to Poland and -quite possibly- never travel again. The lifting of domestic restrictions on travel abroad, coupled with the EU’s gradual elimination of visa restrictions, also eliminated this choice.

Unsurprising, 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 came to the US (Iglicka 2008).

The overall numbers of Poles coming to the US for both temporary and permanent stay has, however, declined significantly in the last decade, from its peak level of 108 thousand in 2000 to 68 thousand in 2011 (US State Department 2012). 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 risks and costs related to leaving the country opt for permanent stay.

2.2 Education

Along with changing migration opportunities, the characteristics of Polish migrants to the US have also changed. In 1980, over 40 percent of Polish migrants had no high school education; by 1990 that percentage had declined to 26 percent, and in 2000 it was only 17 percent. For both males and females, Polish educational attainments vary negatively with age. The most striking characteristic is that among the youngest cohort (i.e., children of Polish immigrants aged 15-24) over 95 percent are in the process of continuing their higher education in the US. The average educational level of Polish born Americans is lower than that of the entire US society but relative, to other ethnic groups Poles are better educated than emigrants’ from Mexico, Vietnam or Italy but not as well educated as the average emigrant from China, India Great Britain or Russia.

2.3 Economic Mobility

Increased educational attainment has led to a selective upward mobility, but mostly for Polish females (Radzilowski 2010).

During the 1980-2000 period, the professional status of males hardly changed, with 55 percent of males clustering in blue collar jobs in 1980 as compared to 56.2 percent in 2000, and the share of male Polish born professionals remaining stable at around 23 percent. By contrast, 14 percent of Polish born female migrants occupied professional positions in 1980, as compared to 19 percent in 1990, and 29 percent in 2000. At the same time, the share of female Polish born blue collar workers declined from 35 percent in 1980 to 18 percent in 2000 (American Community Survey, 2010).

The relative stability (and lack of upward mobility) exhibited by Polish born males may be explained, at least in part, by the types of jobs that male immigrants who initially lack strong language skills often occupy; that is, construction (where Poles constitute over 10 percent of all workers) and auto mechanics (where their respective share is approximately 6 percent). The relationship between job type and limited upward mobility is further suggested by their income data, as construction or auto mechanics jobs tend to be relatively well paid despite relatively low educational requirements. This interpretation is also consistent with the gender income gap among Polish migrants: despite their higher educational attainments, Polish born females reported an average annual income of \$39,000, as opposed to Polish born males, for whom this number was \$51,200 in 2010 (American Community Survey, 2010).

2.4 Geographic Changes

There have also been some changes in terms of the geographic locations where Polish immigrants cluster in the US. Historically, Polish immigrants have lived in large, ethnically distinct communities that relied on a flow of new immigrants from the diasporas to maintain their distinct character (Jelavic 2010). The recent generation of migrants to the US, being better educated (with all that suggests regarding English language and other skills) has much greater geographic mobility and only rarely remain in traditional Polish communities. Moreover, many of those who already live in established communities are moving to other areas, and thus blending with the US society, which is a characteristic of many second generation migrants (Briggs 1993). Historical centers of Polish migration, such as the suburbs of Chicago and New York, are therefore losing their importance as long-term destinations, and are instead increasingly treated as a temporary, first stop in the journey to the new land. The ability to leave predominantly Polish communities, combined with the lack of new migrants moving into those communities, has led to a slow decline of distinctly Polish neighborhoods in the US.

3. Forces Driving Declining Migration

When measuring the role of different forces shaping the decline of migrants from Poland we rely on statistical data describing population movements, which can be problematic, particularly when some percentage of migrants lacks legal status. Further problems arise when the statistical analysis of migration is combined with macroeconomic data, such as average incomes, prices etc., which are the types of data required for a regression analysis that attempts to better reveal these forces. Our analysis of migration forces is rooted in the literature describing *push and pull* forces that drive migrants (Lee 1966, Cohen 1996). That basic distinction can, however, be somewhat arbitrary as it is often difficult to discern and measure individually the strength of a pull or 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 leave Poland for the US. The regression analysis uses historical data on visitors into the US on B1-2 visas as a proxy for migration, which is the exogenous variable.

The underlying assumption is that until very recently, most Poles visiting the US for more just a short stay typically engaged in employment and therefore constituted a group considered as 'illegal temporary migrants'. Our other endogenous variables include the standards of living between Poland and the US as measured by differences in: GDP/capita; the two countries' unemployment rates; average wages; total GDP growth rates; and the value of 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.

Regression results:

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

Of the variables examined, only one - the exchange rate of the Polish currency (zloty) against the dollar - does not appear to play a significant role in the decision to migrate to the US. The two significant factors affecting Polish migration ($p=.05$) 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.

More unexpected is that the average difference between the US/Poland wages which, since 2005, has accelerated, is the least significant migration factor ($p = .8597$). Indeed, it appears that as the average difference between US and Polish wages increased (which should increase migration), Polish immigration to the US decreased, whereas when differences in GDP per capita in PPP of the two countries increased, Polish migration increased. This finding strongly implies that additional factors, outside of the US must have played a role in declining Polish migration to that country.

The most important factor is almost certainly Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, and consequent opening of alternative labor markets to Polish migrants. Newly opened labor markets in Great Britain, Ireland and Sweden provided Poles with legal job opportunities at substantially lower transportation and visa related costs, and the subsequent opening of other EU labor markets can only have enhanced these options, further diverting potential Polish workers from the US, which continues to require costly and time consuming visas. Those requirements limit workers' ability to travel back and forth, limiting temporary migration and making overall migration to the US less attractive.

These findings raise a question about the need and effects of the US current visa requirements applied to Polish citizens. Arguably, 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 be the diminished permanent migration. In addition, 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 so. This outflow of migrants who are 'stuck' because they have no option to travel back and forth could potentially diminish US costs related to permanent migration.

4. Conclusions

Beginning in the 1990s there have been significant changes in emigration trends from Poland. These changes are illustrated by the case of the US, which has historically hosted significant Polish migrant populations. The recent 'typical Polish migrants' to the US are less able to make it a permanent home though naturalization, they are better educated (particularly women) and are more likely to live outside historically ethnic Polish communities. At the same time, fewer Poles are coming to the US despite a rising income gap between the two countries. The steady decline in migration, despite wage and GDP gaps, indicates that additional factors must play a role.

One such key factor is the opening of the EU markets to Polish labor, which initially lead to a rapid increase in Polish migration to that market. The EU elimination of migration barriers allowed Polish labor to move freely and flexibly adjust to current labor conditions.

Such labor mobility facilitated a more efficient use of host and home countries resources and helped restore the economic equilibrium in both countries through labor mobility. An additional result was a substitution of the distant, uncertain and expensive migration to the US for a mostly temporary move to the EU. Declining migration and changing profile of those coming to the US bring into question the economic costs for both Poland and the US of the existing visa requirement for Poles, as such requirements still force some Poles coming to the US to choose between 'staying forever,' sometimes illegally, or never be able to return the US. The resulting costs of such permanent migration tend to exceed those of temporary labor flows.

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