

THE NEW IMMIGRANT SURVEY PILOT (NIS-P): OVERVIEW AND NEW FINDINGS ABOUT U.S. LEGAL IMMIGRANTS AT ADMISSION*

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This paper provides an overview of the New Immigrant Survey Pilot (NIS-P), a panel survey of a nationally representative sample of new legal immigrants to the United States based on probability samples of administrative records of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The NIS-P links survey information about immigrants' pre- and post-immigration labor market, schooling, and migratory experiences with data available from INS administrative records, including the visa type under which the immigrant was admitted. Results indicate that the procedures followed for locating, interviewing, and reinterviewing respondents yielded representative samples of new legal immigrants and high-quality data. On the basis of data obtained from the first round of the survey, we present new information never before available on the schooling and language skills of new immigrants and their earnings gains from immigration.

Immigration affects American society in profound ways. Yet in perhaps no other area of demographic and social science research has there been such a persistently large gap between information needs and existing data. Consequently, many fundamental questions remain unanswered. Among these are the following: How has the health and skill composition of entry cohorts of immigrants changed over time? How do the schooling and initial earnings of new legal immigrants compare with those of the U.S. native-born, foreign-born, and illegal immigrant populations? How large is the economic gain from becoming a legal immigrant? How many immigrants return to their home country? How do transitions between legal and illegal statuses occur? What are the contributions of immigrants to the American society and economy? How complete is their eventual assimilation?

Although useful for many purposes, existing demographic and economic databases providing information on the foreign-born population of the United States have important deficiencies. Among the more serious are no information on the legal status of the U.S. nonnaturalized foreign-born, no information on the pre-immigration experiences of immigrants, and the inability to follow a given cohort of immigrants over time. The first deficiency makes it impossible to distinguish the very different experiences, contributions, and costs of legal immigrants, legal nonimmigrants, and ille-

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gal immigrants who make up the U.S. foreign-born population. The lack of pre-immigration and lifecourse information for immigrant cohorts hinders understanding of the integration of immigrants, the roles of the selection criteria of U.S. immigration law, and the selectivity that governs who are immigrants and who are not.

The New Immigrant Survey Pilot (NIS-P) is a first attempt to resolve these problems. In this paper we describe the survey and report findings from its baseline data on adult immigrants (those age 18 or over at admission to permanent residence). We summarize our experience in locating and interviewing the immigrants who were sampled, and we assess the representativeness of the resulting sample of interviewed adult immigrants. We also report selected findings based on data obtained from the 1,130 adult-immigrant respondents.

OVERVIEW OF THE NEW IMMIGRANT SURVEY PILOT

Despite the importance of immigration in this country's past, present, and future, there has never been a nationally representative sample of new legal immigrants designed to follow their progress over time. Instead, research on immigration has been limited to relatively small special surveys of selected immigrant populations or has been based on those immigrants who happen to be included in mainstream social science surveys. Although useful demographic and economic research has been conducted using these traditional sources, they are inherently limited as a basis for firm scientific inferences about the immigration experience. In addition, studies derived from the standard national data sources—the Current Population Surveys (CPS), decennial censuses, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the set of National Longitudinal Surveys (NLSs)—have serious deficiencies for immigration research.

The first of these deficiencies is that two of the major databases used to study immigration, the census and CPS, are cross-sectional surveys; thus, key dynamic aspects of immigration for *individual* migrants cannot be investigated at all.

Second, except in the census, the sample sizes available to study immigrants are problematic given the substantial heterogeneity among immigrants in many dimensions. When the research focus turns to subgroups of immigrants—for example, immigrants born in Mexico, South America, Vietnam, or Russia—the sample sizes available severely limit analysis.

Third, existing surveys omit much relevant data about immigrants. In particular, they contain no indication of the

specific visa category that permitted entry into legal immigrant status and are largely silent about the pre-immigration characteristics and experiences of immigrants—jobs and incomes, health status and behaviors, and migratory patterns. These omissions are understandable in mainstream social science surveys, but they seriously limit research on immigration.

Fourth, the most common research design using mainstream data sets to study assimilation of immigrants is flawed. Specifically, cohort tracking using census and CPS surveys has become the standard technique for evaluating assimilation (Borjas 1985), but cohort tracking is problematic given that immigrant cohorts are not closed. Return migration is not insignificant. For example, on the basis of the fraction of age-entry cohorts of Mexico-born persons in the 1970 census that appear in the 1980 census, roughly one-third of the 1970 Mexican immigrants had emigrated by 1980. An even smaller fraction of the original immigrant cohort would remain by 1990. Similarly, Jasso and Rosenzweig (1982) present evidence based on administrative records of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) that emigration rates among legal immigrants differ substantially across countries of origin, ranging from 10% to 60% in the first decade after admission.

A related problem is the current definition of time since immigration. The census and the CPS ask only about the year when the respondent came to the United States *to stay*, perhaps assuming that most immigrants are entering for the first time, or that, if they had made multiple trips, their last entry was the one in which they came “to stay.”¹ The NIS-P, however, suggests that both assumptions are incorrect. Most “newly admitted” legal immigrants are not entering the United States for the first time—two-thirds had prior experience in the United States—and some are not coming “to stay.” Even among those newly admitted legal immigrants who are “new arrivals” in the INS sense of coming with an immigrant visa obtained abroad, more than one-quarter have prior U.S. experience.

The nature of this problem is best illustrated with two of the major longitudinal surveys, the NLS and the PSID, given that only panel surveys can be used to address issues of individual change. The baseline immigrant samples in these surveys represent not new legal immigrants, but the then-existing foreign-born population, heterogeneous in visa status and in length of time in the United States. The unknown selectivity due to out-migration is a serious design problem for tracking change among immigrants over time.

These data shortcomings, combined with the unique aspects of immigration behavior, have implications for the type

of new immigration data needed for demographic, social, and economic research. The design should be a comprehensive, multicohort longitudinal survey of new legal immigrants to the United States. To monitor changes across cohorts, new samples should be drawn periodically. To monitor adaptation over time, each cohort sample of new immigrants should be reinterviewed at regular intervals. To assess the immigrants' legacy, information also should be obtained about and from their children, both the immigrant children they brought with them and the U.S. citizen children born to them in the United States.

The principal barrier to fielding such a longitudinal immigrant survey has been the high cost of screening, given that, in any year, new immigrants are less than half of 1% of the American population. Conventional area-based samples would be prohibitively expensive. Fortunately, a low-cost sampling frame can be obtained from INS administrative records of immigrant cohorts. For each new legal immigrant, there is a record containing the visa category and the address to which the new immigrant has requested that the “green card” be mailed. These records thus provide the sampling frame (enabling stratification by demographic characteristics and entry criteria) and make it possible to locate sampled immigrants.

Because such a longitudinal design based on INS administrative records had never been implemented, we conducted a pilot survey to minimize the risks of the full project and to maximize its potential. Legitimate questions about the feasibility of fielding a large nationally representative sample of new legal immigrants can be raised because of the difficulties involved in finding, interviewing, and retaining in subsequent waves respondents who are likely to be highly mobile both within the United States and abroad. There is also concern that immigrants may be especially suspicious now when anyone asks them about their current and past lives, and thus may be quite reluctant to participate in in-depth household surveys. As documented below, our pilot results indicate that a full new immigrant survey, although certainly challenging, is both feasible and valuable.

The NIS Pilot had three aims: (1) to assess the cost-effectiveness of alternative methods for locating sampled immigrants and maximizing initial response rates; (2) to explore the costs, feasibility, and effectiveness of alternative methods of tracking sampled immigrants after the initial contacts (a necessary feature for a longitudinal survey of a highly mobile population); and (3) to obtain useful information that would both aid in the design of survey instruments for a follow-up full survey and immediately provide new information on recently admitted legal immigrants.

The NIS-P consists of a baseline survey, a three-month follow-up of half of the original sample (to evaluate whether periodicity affected attrition), a six-month follow-up of all original sample members, and a one-year follow-up, also of all original sample members. The sampling frame for the NIS-P includes all persons admitted to legal permanent residence during July and August 1996. The total number of immigrants admitted during this period was 148,987. We drew

1. The instruction for the question on year of entry in the 1990 census states: “If the person has entered the United States...more than once, fill the circle for the latest year he/she came to stay.” In the 1980 census, however, respondents were asked for “the first year they came to stay permanently” (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980:K-21). Shifts in the definition, in census data, of the year when immigrants “came to stay”—for example, from *first* year to *latest* year—seriously compromise the study of assimilation and the method of cohort tracking.

a stratified random sample, undersampling children and oversampling employment-based immigrants (immigrants who acquire the immigrant visa on the basis of occupational skills). We did this because children are quite numerous among immigrants and because employment-based immigrants, in whom there is great interest, are a relatively small category. We defined the strata as follows: (1) All children (defined as under age 18 at admission to permanent residence) were placed in one stratum, with a selection probability equal to .003715; (2) all adults (defined as age 18 or over) with employment-category visas (including the spouses of those immigrants who qualified on the basis of their skills) were placed in the second stratum and were assigned the highest probability of selection (.047201); and (3) all other immigrants were assigned to the final group, with a probability of selection of .013486. Employment-based immigrants thus were 3.5 times as likely to be drawn as immigrants in the third category. The final sample numbered 1,984 persons, of whom 1,839 were adult immigrants.²

Interviews were conducted with adult sample members from the second and third strata and with the parents or caregivers of the sample members in the first stratum. Survey instruments were developed to record demographic characteristics of all household members, pre-immigrant migrations, education, employment, income and assets, health (self-reports, chronic conditions, access to care), formal and vocational schooling, English-language skills and classes, and receipt of income from government as well as other sources. Interviews were conducted in English and 17 other languages. The interview instruments were translated into six languages—Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Polish, Korean, and Vietnamese; trained bilingual interviewers conducted interviews in these and 11 additional languages.

Finding and Interviewing New Legal Immigrants

To meet the challenge of locating new immigrants, the NIS relies on a threefold “who-when-where” key: (1) Draw the sample from batches of electronic administrative records of new permanent resident aliens; (2) contact them as soon as possible after their admission to permanent residence; and (3) contact them at the address to which they have requested that their “green card” be mailed.

For budgetary reasons, however, the NIS Pilot was a telephone survey; thus the next challenge was to find the new immigrants’ telephone numbers, which are not included in the INS record. We used several strategies including (1) telematching services to obtain telephone numbers by using telephone company electronic and white page databases (matching is based on name and address, electronic directory assistance, and matches given on address only); (2) calling directory assistance ourselves; and (3) sending out ad-

vance letters notifying prospective respondents that they had been selected to participate in our survey. In these letters, respondents for whom we did not have telephone numbers were asked to send back an address and telephone update card or to call a toll-free number.

The telematching service yielded possible phone numbers for only 40% of the sample. We increased this list to just under 50% by calling directory assistance ourselves and through our mailed requests for telephone numbers to selected respondents. Several factors limited the success of these methods. The major problem was a quite high rate of unlisted and unpublished numbers. Such numbers are a growing trend in the United States, particularly in those geographic areas where immigrants concentrate. The proportion of such phone numbers runs as high as 69% in some urban areas, such as Los Angeles. These problems, which exist for all populations, were compounded by the presence of very common last names in some ethnic groups, for example, among Koreans. Finally, immigrant women and minors typically do not have phone numbers listed in their names, and in some origin-country groups, wives’ surnames differ from their husbands’.

Due to problems in obtaining telephone numbers, we altered our original pilot design to include field tracking; so that the cost of this unanticipated fieldwork would not be excessive, however, it was limited to areas where the sample was concentrated. For cases in which our normal procedures did not yield a response, a staff of field trackers was sent out to locate respondents and to obtain phone numbers in the following areas: Los Angeles area, northern California, Washington, DC, and parts of New York State, New Jersey, Connecticut, Florida, Texas, Washington, Michigan, Virginia, Maryland, and Massachusetts.

The baseline interviews were started in October 1996 and completed in February 1998. Several strategies were used to encourage participation in the survey: reminder letters and monetary incentive experiments both for providing telephone numbers and for completing interviews. Baseline interviews were conducted with 62% of our new immigrant sample. This figure, however masks a very salient fact: The response rates were much higher when a correct telephone number was obtained. In the 69% of the cases in which we knew we had contacted the respondent by phone, the overall response rate was 89%. Once some contact was made with the new immigrant, the pilot survey was extremely successful in converting that immigrant into a survey participant. In addition to the problem of unlisted numbers, the new immigrant was known to have moved from the original address in about 20% of our nonresponses. Thus the lesson for a full survey is that the first objective is to make contact with the sampled immigrants—an outcome that can be assured only with an in-person face-to-face survey soon after admission to permanent residence.

Our field tracking allows us to make a reasonable estimate of an achievable response rate with a face-to face survey. Our fieldwork had two limitations. First, because of the cost, we limited it to a subset of cases. Second, because field tracking was not part of the original design, we conducted it

2. We had selected a sample of 2,001. Of these, 20 lived in Puerto Rico, Guam, or the Virgin Islands; we retained three of these 20 adults in the sample to test methods for contacting individuals outside the 50 states, leaving an effective sample of 1,984 persons. Some of the analyses reported here exclude these three individuals, as their sampling properties differ from those of the rest of the sample.

much later than the optimal time. By extrapolating our fieldwork results to the full sample, we estimate that with timely fieldwork (so that respondents would not yet have moved), response rates could have been at least 75%.³ (These results are available on request.)

Completion rates are much higher for the 6- and 12-month follow-ups because we started with viable phone numbers. We were able to retain 92% of cases in the six-month follow-up and 95% in the 12-month follow-up. These response rates are very high for a survey based on using telephone methods alone. Most surveys, even those that use the telephone, such as the PSID and the HRS, employ extensive field tracking to relocate respondents who have moved.⁴

Sample Representativeness and Data Quality

Two distinct issues of representativeness of our immigrant sample must be addressed: (1) whether the July–August immigrants are representative of a full-year cohort, and (2) whether the interviewed immigrants are representative of the sampled immigrants. Even if the sample is representative, however, the value of the data obtained will depend on its quality and accuracy. The administrative-records-based design of the survey facilitates the assessment of both sample representativeness and data quality because these records provide information on all immigrants, whether sampled or not (in the current cohort and in past cohorts), and, if sampled, whether interviewed or not. This design thus allows both assessments of representativeness and comparisons of survey-based information with comparable items on the administrative records for those immigrants who are interviewed.

To assess the representativeness of July–August immigrants, we compared them with the remainder of the cohort, with respect to basic demographic characteristics as well as visa category and place of birth.⁵ The two subsets were almost indistinguishable with respect to demographic characteristics, year of entry as a nonimmigrant (among those who were adjusting their status), place of birth, and proportion in all visa categories except spouse of U.S. citizen; there the discrepancy was only five percentage points (29% of the July–August subset versus 24% of the rest of the cohort). July–August immigrants therefore appear to be representative of full-year immigrants.

A strength of the sample design is that it yields information about the immigrants whom we failed to interview, given that the data collected by INS include age, sex, marital status, visa type, place of birth, and (intended) state of residence. Table 1 reports these attributes for the interviewed subset and for the full sample. The persons interviewed resemble the full

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF NIS-P 1996 COHORT ADULT SAMPLE, BY INTERVIEW STATUS

Characteristic	Interviewed	Full Sample
Demographic Characteristics		
Mean age (years)	35.6	36.7
Percentage male	44.7	44.7
Percentage married	70.3	71.8
Visa Type and Time Since Entry:		
% Distributions		
Spouse of U.S. citizen	28.8	27.7
Parent of (adult) U.S. citizen	8.3	10.5
Sibling: principal and spouse	4.7	7.2
Employment: principal and spouse	11.3	11.1
Refugee/asylee: principal and spouse	10.8	8.9
Diversity: principal and spouse	5.4	6.7
Mean year of entry, adjustees	92.3	91.8
Place of Birth: % Distributions		
Africa	6.5	7.9
North and Central America	32.8	32.9
South America	8.8	7.8
Asia	32.6	35.3
Europe	19.2	15.9
Oceania	0.1	0.2
China	4.9	4.8
India	4.1	4.0
Korea	1.2	1.0
Philippines	5.9	6.1
Vietnam	5.0	4.6
Mexico	15.0	15.1
Former Soviet Union	8.3	6.0
Sample Size (N)	1,127	1,836

Notes: Adults are age 18 and older. Characteristics are drawn from INS immigrant records. Estimates are based on weighted data.

sample demographically: in age, sex, marital status, and, for immigrants adjusting from a temporary status, year of entry. With respect to visa type, the proportions in the major categories—spouse of U.S. citizen and employment-based immigrants—are similar across the two groups. The NIS-P was relatively more successful in locating and interviewing refugees and asylees, spouses of U.S. citizens, and employment-based immigrants than in locating and interviewing diversity immigrants and parents and siblings of U.S. citizens. The discrepancies are small, however: The largest discrepancy, both absolute and relative, involves siblings, who constitute 7.2% of the full sample but 4.7% of the interviewed immigrants.

To explore the representativeness of the interviewed group further, we examine place-of-birth distributions (also shown in Table 1). Continent distributions indicate that the two groups are very similar. Difficulties in locating and interviewing immigrants are confined largely to two continents:

3. Comparisons with the better social science surveys are informative. Baseline completion rates for HRS and AHEAD were around 80%; the rate for the 1968 PSID was 76%. In sharp contrast to the NIS-P, these surveys relied on face-to-face contact in the baseline round.

4. Attrition rates in HRS and AHEAD (with a two-year periodicity) run about 7% or 8%. The initial attrition rate for PSID was 11%, but this has stabilized at about 3% per year.

5. Because data for fiscal year 1996 were not available, these comparisons are based on FY 1994.

Asia—35.3% of the full sample but 32.6% of the persons interviewed (note that parents and siblings of U.S. citizens are visa categories much used by persons born in Asia)—and Africa, which accounts for 7.9% of the full sample but 6.5% of the persons interviewed. Information on state of residence (not shown) indicates that interviewed immigrants do not differ from the full sample in geographic residence except in California (with its high proportion of unlisted telephone numbers). California accounts for 20.3% of the persons interviewed versus 22.9% of the full sample.

The next issue concerned the quality of the collected data, which is especially relevant in a survey where many interviews were not conducted in English. (Among adult immigrants, 44% of the interviews were conducted in English, 26% in Spanish, and the remaining 30% in 16 other languages.) Item-response rates to individual questions appear to be high: 98–99% of respondents provided answers to questions pertaining to fertility, migration history, and visa status. In addition, the response rate for the question on years of schooling exceeds 99%, compared with a 90.9% response rate to a similar question among the recently arrived adult foreign-born population in the 1990 census. Questions on income and earnings are among the most difficult for which to obtain responses. Among the 61% of NIS-P respondents who reported that they currently worked, 87% provided valid information on their earnings in the current job. In contrast, the response rate on earnings income was 77% among the recently arrived foreign-born in the 1990 census who had worked in the last year. Respondents also were asked about their last job in the country they resided in before coming to the United States. Of those who reported a job abroad in the past 10 years (87% of those employed), 85% provided a response on earnings in that job along with the currency in which they were paid.

We also were able to verify response accuracy because some questions in the survey questionnaire elicited data already on the INS administrative record. Respondents' answers to interviewers' questions on marital status, age, and immigration visa category matched with almost 100% accuracy the corresponding items on administrative records. We were particularly concerned with the accuracy of our questions about visa statuses before immigration for new immigrants who had been in the United States before becoming permanent resident aliens. Because of a recent provision of immigration law allowing some immigrants (with payment of a fee) to adjust their immigration status from a nonlegal status without leaving the United States, for some immigrants, the INS record reports that they had "entered without inspection" (EWI) before adjusting their status to legal immigrant. Our sample included 125 such cases; among these, 82% reported in the interview that they had been without a visa or other entry document in their first visit to the United States. This proportion is not unreasonable, given the fluidity in entry mechanisms.

SUBSTANTIVE FINDINGS FROM THE NIS-P

The NIS-P provides, for the first time, data on the schooling, U.S. and pre-immigration foreign employment and earnings,

language skills, and migration histories of legal immigrants. Combined with their administrative records, these data inform us about how legal immigrants admitted under different legal criteria are faring. Moreover, these data enable comparisons of new legal immigrants with the native-born and with the larger foreign-born populations. Our results should be viewed as preliminary given that sample sizes are relatively modest and only one immigrant cohort is represented. Yet they suggest a high payoff to a full survey with repeated cohorts, which follows the same design.

Schooling

A key attribute of immigrants is their human capital, one measure of which is years of schooling. Immigrants are often thought to have significantly less schooling than native-born Americans, an observation typically based on comparisons using the foreign-born population in household surveys (Borjas 1985; Smith and Edmonston 1997). The top panel of Table 2 depicts the distribution of schooling in the entire adult NIS-P cohort, along with corresponding data based on the 1996 CPS for the foreign-born who entered the United States between 1992 and 1996 ("recent immigrants") and for the total U.S. native-born population. The 1996 CPS is used because it covers the same calendar year as the NIS-P. Immigrants born in Mexico represent the largest single contingent of the foreign-born, and Table 2 also examines separately the Mexico-born.

The CPS recent foreign-born population in fact registers much less schooling than the native-born: a 1.3-year gap in mean schooling. If the NIS-P is used instead, however, the median schooling for these legal immigrants, 13 years, is actually a full year higher than among the U.S. native-born, whereas the mean is only one-third of a year lower. The schooling distribution for legal immigrants has much fatter tails than that of the native-born. At the upper end, the proportion of NIS-P legal immigrants with postgraduate schooling (17+ years) is almost three times larger than that among the native-born enumerated in the 1996 CPS: 21% of the immigrants versus 8% of the native-born. At the bottom end, 20% of the legal immigrants have less than nine years of schooling, compared with only 6% of the native-born. The slightly larger discrepancy at the bottom of the education distribution accounts for the difference in ranking when median and mean levels of schooling are considered. At least in the mid-1990s, the idea that legal immigrants on average are less well schooled (and hence less skilled) than the native-born is a myth.

Similarly, in comparison with the recent foreign-born population documented in the CPS, there are far more legal immigrants at the top of the educational hierarchy and far fewer at the bottom. The CPS-based proportion for foreign-born recent entrants with less than five years of schooling is 1.6 times as large as the proportion based on the NIS-P (10.4% versus 6.4%); the CPS-based fraction with 17 or more years of schooling among the recent-entrant foreign-born is eight percentage points smaller than in the NIS-P (13.3% versus 21%). The CPS and census foreign-born popu-

TABLE 2. SCHOOLING DISTRIBUTIONS AND SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES: NIS-P 1996 COHORT SAMPLE, 1996 CPS FOREIGN-BORN (ENTERED 1992–1996), AND 1996 CPS NATIVE-BORN

Schooling Characteristic	All			Born in Mexico	
	NIS-P 1996	Foreign-Born	Native-Born	NIS-P 1996	Foreign-Born
Years of Schooling Completed, Persons Age 25 and Over					
Less than 5 years	6.4	10.4	0.9	21.3	24.7
5–8 years	13.6	14.5	5.1	29.9	36.2
9–11 years	13.8	8.0	9.1	13.0	11.3
12 years	12.6	22.4	35.9	11.0	15.7
13–16 years	32.6	31.4	41.4	15.6	9.0
17–18 years	11.9	8.2	5.4	4.7	0.2
19+ years	9.1	5.1	2.3	4.6	2.0
Mean years	12.7	11.7	13.0	8.9	7.5
Median years	13.0	12.0	12.0	7.0	—
School Enrollment, Persons Age 18–24					
	38.0	34.9	43.2	22.1	4.3

Note: NIS-P sample estimates are based on weighted data; sample sizes are 903 and 218, respectively, for the 25+ and the 18–24 samples.

lation apparently does not reflect the legal immigrant population, and therefore its use for assessing policy on legal immigration is problematic.

If there were no difference between the 1996 legal immigrants in the NIS-P and recent legal immigrants in the 1996 CPS, the discrepancy between the CPS and the NIS-P schooling distributions would reflect the presence of illegal migrants and legal nonimmigrants in the CPS. In a recent paper, Passel (1999) estimated that among all recent foreign-born persons in the 1995 and 1996 CPS, only 60% are legal immigrants. The corresponding fraction for the Mexico-born is only 20%. When Passel's (1999) estimates on legal status are combined with NIS-P schooling estimates, the implication is that the mean schooling of all undocumented immigrants and nonimmigrants combined is 11 years (almost two years less than all legal immigrants). It turns out that it would be closer to the truth to use the CPS native-born mean education to characterize legal immigrants than to use the CPS foreign-born population.

Current legal immigrants from Mexico are also better educated than the CPS suggests. Although the overall schooling level of NIS-P legal immigrants is relatively low for the Mexico-born—with a mean of 8.9 years and a median of 7 years—the fraction with less than 9 years of schooling is almost 10 percentage points less among the NIS-P legal immigrants than in the group enumerated in the 1996 CPS; the proportion with 17 years of schooling or more is over four times larger in the NIS-P sample. Similarly, the fraction who are college graduates is over 14% among the NIS-P legal immigrants, compared with 4.6% in the CPS. Mexico-born legal immigrants, though less highly schooled on average than all native-born Americans, nonetheless include a greater proportion who are highly educated (17+ years): 9.3% versus

7.7%. Finally, a combination of Passel's (1999) estimates and NIS-P estimates implies that the CPS Mexico-born illegal immigrant and nonimmigrant population has a mean schooling level of 7.1 years, much less than among legal Mexican immigrants.

These inferences about the schooling of legal and other immigrants are illustrated even more dramatically by differences in school enrollment rates among 18- to 24-year-olds, reported in the lower panel of Table 2. Enrollment rates among all legal immigrants in this age group are slightly lower than among the native-born, 38.0% versus 43.2%, but much higher than among the recently arrived foreign-born in the CPS. Even more dramatic, the CPS enrollment rate for recent entrants born in Mexico is less than one-fifth that of legal Mexican immigrants in the NIS-P.

By providing information on immigrants "at admission," the NIS-P makes it possible to take a further important step and assess the selectivity of the admission process inherent in visa categories. Table 3 lists the average number of years of schooling completed by all NIS-P sample respondents age 25 and older and by those in the same age group from Mexico and from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, classified by the major categories under which the immigrants qualified for a visa.⁶

Schooling of legal immigrants differs significantly by class of admission and country of origin. Not surprisingly, immigrants who qualified under the employment provisions of the law, many of whom were screened for skills in high

6. The classification in Table 3 highlights six major visa categories plus a residual category. In four of the six categories—sibling, employment, refugee/asylee, and diversity—visas are provided for the accompanying spouse and minor children of the principal immigrant (that is, the immigrant who qualified for the visa).

TABLE 3. YEARS OF SCHOOLING COMPLETED AMONG IMMIGRANTS AGE 25 YEARS AND OVER AT ADMISSION, BY VISA CLASS: NIS-P 1996 COHORT SAMPLE

Visa Class	All Immigrants		Born in Mexico		Born in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Spouse of U.S. Citizen	13.5	4.5	12.9	4.9	12.3	4.4
Parent of (Adult) U.S. Citizen	7.4	5.2	4.2	4.2	11.6	4.5
Sibling: Principal and Spouse	13.5	5.1	7.5	2.1	14.2	4.7
Employment: Principal and Spouse	16.1	4.3	16.0	6.1	17.6	4.4
Refugee/Asylee: Principal and Spouse	12.8	4.0	—	—	—	—
Diversity: Principal and Spouse	14.7	3.5	—	—	—	—
Other	11.2	4.6	7.4	3.9	13.4	4.3
All Immigrants 25 and Over	12.7	5.1	8.9	5.5	14.6	4.9
<i>N</i>	903		91		107	

Note: Figures are for all immigrants in the NIS-P 1996 cohort sample (July and August 1996) who were age 25 and over at admission to permanent residence; estimates that combine admission classes ("other" and "all" figures) are based on weighted data.

demand in the U.S. economy, have the highest levels of schooling: 16.1 years. This figure is much higher than in the U.S. native-born population. Although only the principals are actually screened by job or skill criteria, the schooling levels of the spouses of the employment-category principal immigrants also are high due to assortative mating. Diversity immigrants have the next highest level of schooling, followed by immigrants who qualified for a visa by marrying a U.S. citizen and by siblings of U.S. citizens. Generally, immigrants entering in visa categories associated with family reunification (except siblings) have the lowest schooling levels. Those entering as parents have by far the lowest mean education: only 7.4 years.

One possible reason for an association between immigrants' educational attainment and visa category is that the origin country matters, and immigrants from different countries differ in the routes by which they qualify for a visa. For example, many more immigrants from Mexico qualify for an immigrant visa as spouses of U.S. citizens than do immigrants from China. Yet there are strong patterns of visa-type selectivity among immigrants from the same countries of origin. In part this may be explained both by the selection criteria of immigration law and by the specific historical experiences of immigrants from different origin areas.

As in the full sample, among both the Mexican and Chinese immigrants, those in the employment-visa category have the highest schooling levels, whereas parents of U.S. citizens have the lowest schooling. For Mexican immigrants, however, spouses of U.S. citizens have the second highest schooling levels, far above those among the family-reunification immigrants.⁷ The selection mechanisms through as-

sortative mating are quite different for these two types of immigrants. The NIS-P indicates that 66% of the spouse-immigrants from Mexico marry native-born Americans. Native-born U.S. citizens have relatively high levels of schooling and prefer to marry partners who also have relatively high educational levels. On the other hand, many of the family-reunification immigrants from Mexico in the survey are kin of Mexican immigrants who came in under the recent IRCA legalization programs, and whose educational level is low. These patterns contrast sharply with immigrants from China. For them, family-reunification immigrants (except parents) have higher levels of schooling than spouse immigrants, possibly reflecting the fact that prior immigrants from China were disproportionately from skill visa categories and are from families with high levels of schooling.

Employment and Wages

Existing data on labor market outcomes of immigrants are even more problematic than data on education. Besides being affected by the same problems as summarized above for schooling, wages and employment are not stable attributes, and thus typically will differ before and after immigration. Yet knowledge of pre-immigration labor market outcomes is essential in order to understand the income selectivity of immigration and to evaluate the economic gains from immigration. Employment and earnings data from the baseline round of the NIS-P are displayed in Table 4.

Mean earnings in the United States from the jobs held by these immigrants were \$24,317 for men and \$23,835 for women, compared with average 1995 earnings of \$34,705 and \$20,570, respectively, for the entire U.S. labor force age 18 and above (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995:table 9). It is not surprising to find that the earnings of immigrant men at entry are below those of the U.S. male working population as a whole given that many of the immigrants are new, young entrants to the U.S. labor market. One-third of the new im-

7. It is customary to classify all relatives as family reunification immigrants, ignoring the distinction between immigration that produces new families—*family formation*—and immigration that unites separated family members—*true family reunification*. Because the dynamics of the two kinds of immigration may differ sharply, this distinction is important.

TABLE 4. U.S. EMPLOYMENT RATES AND ANNUAL EARNINGS OF NEW IMMIGRANTS, BY VISA CLASS AND SEX: NIS-P 1996 COHORT SAMPLE

Visa Class	Men		Women	
	Percentage Employed	Median Earnings (\$)	Percentage Employed	Median Earnings (\$)
Spouse of U.S. Citizen	89.7	18,000	47.9	16,640
Parent of (Adult) U.S. Citizen	29.2	16,640	6.2	10,400
Sibling: Principal and Spouse	47.6	12,844	35.0	13,280
Employment: Principal	94.8	36,400	95.1	35,100
Employment: Spouse	66.7	30,000	40.2	26,750
Refugee/Asylee: Principal and Spouse	61.2	13,220	61.4	10,712
Diversity: Principal and Spouse	61.5	15,600	52.4	11,336
Other	63.4	12,480	43.5	10,608
All Immigrants (Median Earnings)	71.0	15,600	44.5	12,480
All Immigrants (Mean Earnings)	71.0	24,317	44.5	23,835
<i>N</i>	531	350	596	248

Note: Figures are for all immigrants in the NIS-P 1996 cohort sample (July and August 1996) who were age 18 and over at admission to permanent residence; estimates that combine admission classes ("other" and "all" figures) are based on weighted data.

migrants had never been in the United States before 1996, the year when they became permanent resident aliens. For those who had spent some time in the United States before becoming legal immigrants, the average number of years spent in the United States was only 4.8. Similarly, 42% of the immigrants age 18 and above were under age 30. Female immigrants who were employed, on the other hand, report higher earnings than their native-born counterparts, indicating that quite different selection mechanisms are at work for male and female immigrants.

Who becomes a permanent resident alien may be critically shaped by the provisions of immigration law. If this is so, visa categories can help to explain immigrants' earnings in the United States. Moreover, if visa category is correlated with demographic characteristics such as place of birth, inferences about how these attributes affect the behavior of immigrants may be seriously biased without knowledge about visa type. Due to the absence of visa category information on the foreign-born, researchers have been unable to investigate the role of the "selection rules" of immigration law for understanding the effects of immigration and the behavior of immigrants. Visa categories can be, and often have been, changed by law; thus they also represent a primary instrument for designing immigration policy.

As shown in Table 4, visa categories matter a great deal. Not surprisingly, immigrants who came as employment-visa principals have by far the highest employment rates and earnings. These data also indicate a strong role of assortative mating; spouses of the employment principals have the second highest earnings, and spouses of U.S. citizens the third highest. In contrast, refugees and family-reunification immigrants, except the fathers of U.S. citizens, have the lowest earnings and employment rates. These very large differences

in U.S. earnings among immigrants who enter via different visa categories suggest that the average earnings of legal immigrants to this country can be altered significantly simply by changing the numbers of immigrants admitted under different categories.

But why do such large differences exist by visa status? In addition to the schooling disparities by visa type documented in Table 3, which map closely to the earnings disparities, two key determinants of immigrants' earnings are proficiency in English and prior experience in the United States. A major distinction between employment principals and other immigrants is that the former must attract a U.S. job offer. Residence in the United States and ability to communicate are useful in job searches. Similarly, spouse immigrants must attract the attention of mostly English-speaking U.S. citizens (94% of U.S. citizens are native-born). Table 5 lists the percentages of immigrants age 18 through 39 by visa category who are somewhat deficient in English (do not speak English "very well," the highest category on a five-point scale), the average number of years spent in the United States before immigration, and the average number of years between the time of their first trip to the United States and the time when they became legal immigrants.

Employment-visa immigrants have the lowest proportion of persons with poor English-language skills and the highest pre-immigration U.S. exposure. Spouses of U.S. citizens rank close to employment immigrants on all three attributes. Immigrants with the most deficient language skills are refugees/asylees and siblings and their spouses; immigrants with the lowest prior U.S. exposure are those who came as diversity immigrants.

The NIS-P survey also provides information about the earnings of immigrants in their last job before coming to the

TABLE 5. ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEFICIENCY, YEARS IN THE U.S. BEFORE IMMIGRATION, AND YEARS SINCE FIRST TRIP TO THE U.S. AMONG NEW IMMIGRANTS AGE 18–39, BY VISA CLASS: NIS-P 1996 COHORT SAMPLE

Visa Category	Percentage Not Speaking English “Very Well”	Mean Prior Years in U.S.	Mean Years Since First U.S. Visit
Spouse of U.S. Citizen	66.5	3.40 (3.53)	4.70 (4.91)
Sibling: Principal and Spouse	100.0	3.71 (4.35)	4.89 (5.42)
Employment: Principal and Spouse	58.3	4.61 (3.18)	5.87 (4.50)
Refugee/Asylee: Principal and Spouse	98.0	2.78 (7.17)	2.82 (7.16)
Diversity: Principal and Spouse	73.5	0.58 (1.44)	0.69 (1.60)
Other	78.9	3.12 (4.57)	4.16 (5.42)
All Immigrants Age 18–39	73.6	3.22 (4.32)	4.25 (5.27)
<i>N</i>	779	742	777

Notes: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Figures are for all immigrants in the NIS-P 1996 cohort sample (July and August 1996) who were age 18–39 at admission to permanent residence; estimates that combine admission classes (“other” and “all” figures) are based on weighted data.

United States, thus enabling an assessment of the initial economic gains from immigration. About two-thirds of the men and half of the women had last worked in a foreign country since 1987. We converted earnings in the last job abroad, provided by immigrants in native currency units, to dollar amounts based on estimates of the country-specific purchasing power of the currencies from the Penn International Comparisons Project (described in Summers and Heston 1991). These conversion factors are designed to take into account differences in the “cost of living” across countries and to avoid the distortions associated with exchange rate regimes in cross-country comparisons. These purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates permit comparisons of earnings across U.S. immigrants who have worked in many different countries and across earnings from different countries—that is, the home country and the United States—for the same immigrants.⁸

The average PPP-converted earnings for male immigrants in their last job abroad before working in the United States were \$15,055; for women, \$9,881. Based on reports of earnings abroad and in the United States, we can compute the initial economic gains from immigrating for those immigrants working at the time of the survey who also had worked abroad. On average, initial gains in earnings among immigrants are substantial: \$10,306 for men (a 68% increase) and \$6,146 for women (a 62% increase). At the same time, however, 28% of the new male immigrants and 27% of the new female immigrants were earning less at their job in the

United States than in their last job abroad. Only a panel design can assess whether their immigration investments eventually paid off.

Finally, the earnings gains for immigrants who entered under different visa categories can be compared. Not surprisingly, the largest economic gains from immigration to the United States were enjoyed by those who came primarily for work-related reasons. For male employment-principal immigrants, earnings increased, on average, by \$26,974 from their last job abroad to their current (initial) job in the United States. For male immigrants who became permanent resident aliens by marrying a U.S. citizen, earnings increased by \$14,179. The economic benefits to the foreign-born from marrying a U.S. citizen are still considerable and may contribute to the subsequent instability of these marriages. In contrast, the average income gain for immigrants in all other visa classes was only \$1,975, indicating that visa type indeed is an important proxy for the size of the economic gains from immigration.

What Do We Learn About Illegal Immigrants?

Although the NIS-P is a sample of legal immigrants, it provides information about illegal immigrants in two ways. *Direct* information is obtained on illegals through the retrospective information on legal immigrants, some of whom were illegals previously, and through information on family and household members, some of whom are, have been, or will be illegal.⁹ *Indirect* information is available by comparing (as

8. PPP conversion rates are unavailable for Vietnam and part of the former Soviet Union.

9. Additional data on illegal immigration can be obtained because some legal immigrants will become illegal in the future.

we did earlier) legal immigrants with all recent-entrant foreign-born persons, as enumerated in surveys such as the U.S. Census and the CPS. Because this foreign-born population also includes some legal nonimmigrants, this comparison is not exact, and it is more pertinent for some national-origin immigrant groups than for others.

Here we use direct information obtained from legal immigrants who were formerly illegal. Although those who attain permanent residence are undoubtedly a select subgroup of the originally illegal, some insights may be gained into the illegal experience and, more concretely, into the transition from illegal to legal status. In the pilot, we asked about two visits to the United States—the first and the last—and data were collected about entering without inspection (EWI). The attached INS record also contains two pieces of information potentially relevant to prior illegal experience: class of admission and, for immigrants adjusting their status, the nonimmigrant class from which they are adjusting. The immigrant visa type includes some categories designated for illegals who qualify for permanent residence; examples include suspension-of-deportation cases and registry-provision legalization. The nonimmigrant class code includes a category for persons who entered without inspection and are adjusting to legal permanent residence without first leaving the country, under the Section 245(i) provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act in effect in 1996, when sample members became immigrants.

Combining information from the NIS-P and from the INS record, we constructed a measure of prior illegal experience. We define those with prior illegal experience as follows: (1) respondents who self-reported that either on their first or their last trip they entered without documents; (2) respondents whose immigrant visa signals prior illegal experience; and (3) respondents whose nonimmigrant visa indicates prior illegal experience.¹⁰ Our data indicate that 19.4% of the NIS-P legal immigrants unambiguously have some EWI experience.¹¹ Table 6, which reports attributes for immigrants with and without prior illegal experience, shows that immigrants with EWI experience are 6.5 years younger than immigrants without EWI experience, 11 percentage points more likely to be male, and somewhat more likely to be married. Formerly illegal immigrants also report lower levels of schooling (by 2.5 years), and a greater proportion do not speak English “very well” (by over 8 percentage points).

A more specific question involves the travel patterns of persons who enter without inspection. It is widely asserted that, as border controls have tightened, the average duration of U.S. spells has lengthened and the total number of trips to

10. A total of 172 cases reported entry without documents on the first trip. The sample interviewed by NIS-P includes five suspension-of-deportation cases and one registry update case. Among the adjustees, 125 had entered without inspection.

11. Our measure of prior illegal experience understates the number of persons with EWI experience because it omits those who may have entered without documents on an intermediate trip. It also understates the total number of persons with illegal experience because it omits individuals who may have overstayed or otherwise violated the terms of a valid nonimmigrant visa.

TABLE 6. CHARACTERISTICS OF NIS-P 1996 COHORT ADULT SAMPLE, BY PRIOR ILLEGAL EXPERIENCE

Characteristic	No EWI Experience	Some EWI Experience
Personal and Demographic Characteristics		
Mean age (years)	36.8	30.3
Percentage male	42.5	53.6
Percentage married	69.7	72.6
Mean schooling (years)	13.0	10.5
Does not speak English “very well” (%)	75.3	83.7
Mean male earnings in last country of res. (PPP\$)	17,059	7,513
Mean female earnings in last country of res. (PPP\$)	10,302	7,066
Percentage men employed in U.S.	66.6	85.3
Percentage women employed in U.S.	44.7	43.0
Mean male earnings in U.S.	26,359	19,566
Mean female earnings in U.S.	24,748	18,673
Mean earnings gain to men	9,192	13,177
Mean earnings gain to women	4,761	16,949
Visa Type and Time Since Entry		
Spouse of U.S. citizen (%)	26.0	40.4
Spouse of U.S. permanent res. alien (%)	6.9	15.4
Parent of (adult) U.S. citizen (%)	9.9	1.8
Sibling: principal and spouse (%)	5.7	0.6
Employment: principal (%)	7.7	4.6
Employment: spouse (%)	5.0	1.2
Refugee/asylee: principal and spouse (%)	11.9	5.9
Diversity: principal and spouse (%)	5.7	4.2
Mean year of entry, adjustees	93.0	90.5
Mean year of first entry	91.7	88.5
Mean total number of trips	2.1	1.8
Place of Birth		
Africa (%)	7.0	4.7
North and Central America (%)	23.2	72.2
South America (%)	8.3	10.9
Asia (%)	39.1	5.7
Europe (%)	22.3	6.4
Mexico (%)	8.1	43.7
Percentage in Each Group	80.5	19.5
Sample Size	933	194

Notes: Adults are defined as age 18 and older. Estimates are based on weighted data. Respondents classified as having EWI experience met at least one of two criteria: (1) their first trip to the United States was without legal documents, or (2) adjustment to permanent residence was from an EWI status. The EWI group also includes two suspension-of-deportation cases whose prior illegal experience could not be classified unambiguously as EWI.

the United States has declined. As shown in Table 6, the total number of trips to the United States is smaller, on average, for immigrants with EWI experience than for the others—1.8 versus 2.1 trips—even though the total length of time since the first trip is longer for the non-EWI immigrants. A rough calculation suggests that EWIs average .225 trips per year, versus .44 trips per year among non-EWIs.

Most of these formerly illegal immigrants work. The percentage employed in the United States among men at the baseline interview is 85%, almost 20 percentage points higher than among immigrants with no reported EWI experience.¹² Employment rates among women across the two groups do not differ appreciably. Among those who are employed, mean earnings in the United States are lower for the formerly illegal: \$19,566 versus \$26,359 for men and \$18,673 versus \$24,748 for women. The gender gap in U.S. earnings for both groups is substantially smaller than in the U.S. population as a whole; female/male earnings ratios are .94 among the non-EWIs and .95 in the EWI group.

Persons who risk illegal entry may be motivated by harsh economic conditions in the home country. Immigrants with EWI experience reported substantially lower PPP earnings than did immigrants without EWI experience; men with EWI experience earned \$7,513 on average in their last job abroad, compared with \$17,059 among men with no EWI experience. The gender gap in foreign earnings is larger among those with no EWI experience, suggesting that the formerly illegal, of either sex, are dominated by low earners.

Information on earnings both before coming to the United States and after admission to permanent residence makes it possible to calculate the initial gain from legal permanent residence. The gain to men was \$13,177 among those with EWI experience and \$9,192 among those without EWI experience; the gain to women was \$16,949 among those with EWI experience and \$4,761 among those without such experience. The economic gain from immigration is larger, both absolutely and relatively, among the formerly illegal. Among immigrants with both pre-immigration earnings abroad and earnings in the United States at the time of the survey, men with no EWI experience increased their earnings by 52%, while the formerly illegal more than doubled their earnings. Among women, the differential gain between legal and illegals is even more dramatic; while women with no EWI experience increased their earnings by 37%, the formerly illegal more than tripled their earnings. These larger economic gains for the formerly illegal are consistent with the added hardships and risks endured by the formerly illegal. No doubt, the prospect of such large gains is the major reason why it is so difficult to affect the supply of illegal immigrants.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Questions about the progress of immigrants and their impact on the United States have been unresolved partly due to the

absence of appropriate data. For example, the question of whether the skill level of newly entering immigrants has declined over time has received inaccurate or, at best, partial answers because the large databases with information on schooling, occupation, earnings, and other indicators of skill do not distinguish between legal immigrants and all other foreign-born persons (including illegal migrants with low skill levels). Similarly, the question of whether immigrants screened for skills fare better than family-reunification immigrants has remained unanswered because the databases with information on visa category do not provide any measure of skill except occupation. In general, policies governing legal immigration have been made on the basis of information about all foreign-born persons.

In this paper we provided an overview of the NIS-P, a new pilot panel survey of new legal immigrants based on probability samples of INS records, and we presented selected findings from the baseline round. Results indicate that the procedures for drawing a probability sample from INS records of immigrants newly admitted to legal permanent residence and for locating, interviewing, and reinterviewing them are sound. A comparison of interviewed sample members with the full sample indicates that, at least on measured characteristics, they do not differ appreciably. The quality of the obtained data also appears to be high; item response rates, even for sensitive information, are high, and there is an almost perfect correspondence between the NIS-P responses and information available from the INS administrative records.

Substantively, the NIS-P data suggest high scientific payoffs to immigrant surveys. The NIS-P provides information never before available concerning the schooling, language skills, and earnings of legal immigrants, their past experience in illegal status, the visa-category routes to immigration, and the economic gains from immigrating. Among the new findings are the following: New legal immigrants are better schooled, on average, than the native-born population; new legal immigrants are better schooled than the foreign-born population, which also includes legal nonimmigrants and illegal migrants; relative to their own earnings in their last job abroad, both male and female new legal immigrants experience a substantial initial economic gain on average, although slightly over one-quarter of these immigrants experienced an initial drop in earnings; visa class of admission is an important correlate of skill and skill-related characteristics both within and across countries of origin; approximately 20% of new legal immigrants entered the United States without inspection at either their first or their last trip to the United States; and the economic gain from immigrating is larger among the formerly illegal.

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12. This figure must be interpreted cautiously, as the fraction enrolled in school among the formerly illegal is lower (at 17%) than among those without reported EWI experience (23%).

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