BOOK REVIEW


How does immigration affect poverty trends and socioeconomic inequality? How are the children of immigrants integrated into American society? What role do public policies play in shaping the experiences of immigrants and their participation in social programs? Immigration, poverty and socioeconomic inequality effectively addresses these three complex questions while providing original insights into the enduring impact of post-1965 immigration on American society.

This volume contains four main parts, with a total of 13 chapters addressing four related themes: the impact of immigration on poverty via competition, segregation, and dispersion; the relationships among immigration, poverty, and intergenerational mobility; the relationship between public policy and poverty; and the immigrant experience in Europe. Parts I–III focus exclusively on the USA, whereas the final chapter, in Part IV, provides a comparative look into the European context.

In light of the public debate and mounting concern over the ‘social problems’ associated with immigration, a few key findings are worth emphasizing. First, the impact of immigrant workers on native workers’ wages is minimal. Second, the effect of immigration on the poverty rate of natives is rather small in both old and new immigrant destinations. Third, there is significant mobility across immigrant generations, although there is equally significant diversity in the pace of assimilation across groups. Finally, lack of legal status negatively affects the children of immigrants – especially among Mexicans – pointing to the need for comprehensive immigration reform.

Immigration, poverty and socioeconomic inequality has several strengths. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing broadly from economics, demography, geography, sociology, and public policy to provide a well-rounded assessment of the impact of immigration on American and European societies. The volume brings together a stellar group of both junior and senior scholars, resulting in a balanced, fascinating, and multifaceted set of empirical analyses and findings. It also takes advantage of the respective disciplines’ strengths. Whereas the chapters by economists, demographers, and geographers provide an overview of broad social trends, those from sociologists and policy experts present detailed analyses of the social and historical processes that underlie these trends.

The volume makes use of a variety of data sources and methods, including census, administrative, survey, interview data, ethnographic work, and historical and policy analyses. Taken together, these sources are impressive in both range and scope, illuminating trends over five decades. To the editors’ and the authors’ credit, this massive amount of data is not only effectively integrated but also judiciously interpreted, with a sharp focus on the findings’ implications regarding poverty and inequality.
The topics covered are wide-ranging, reflecting the authors’ diverse backgrounds. They include labor-market competition and socioeconomic attainment, patterns of spatial segregation and dispersion and their consequences for poverty, social mobility across immigrant generations, the role of immigrants’ social class background and ethnic culture in shaping achievement among the children of immigrants, the effect of undocumented status on youths, the role of increased border patrol and reinforcement on the rise of mass illegality, and the impact of state and federal policies on immigrants’ participation in the labor force and in social programs.

Although the volume is rather comprehensive, two critical observations are in order. First, I wish the authors and editors had focused more on the relationship between (increasing) immigration and (increasing) socioeconomic inequality in the USA. Although much attention has been paid to these two trends separately, few scholars have systematically explored if and how immigration might contribute to growing inequality. Second, the volume devotes only one chapter to the immigrant experience in Europe, which does not quite do justice to this growing body of research. Despite these minor limitations, this volume makes a significant and welcome contribution to our understanding of the immigration, poverty, and inequality nexus. It should also become a standard reference for work in this area in the coming decade.

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