

The Socioeconomic Effects of Immigration on Caribbean Microstates

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CONTEXT

Ever since Manumission came to the European colonies in the Caribbean archipelago in the 19th century, migration has become a necessary way of life. Between 1840 and the present, there have been five waves of emigration, the fifth and current wave being characterised by considerable intraregional migration. What distinguishes this wave is that the sending countries are relatively small insular states in the region, and the receiving countries are sometimes even smaller island states within the Caribbean Basin. This intraregional movement of labor threatens to overwhelm these microstates where within a few years, native peoples could be in the minority, and traditional socioeconomic practices could be severely disrupted.

METHODS

Data on migration in the region show that up until about 1950, much of the movement of labor took place between the Caribbean islands and the larger countries of northern South America and Central America. After World War II, most emigrants from the British West Indies traveled to the United Kingdom and Canada. When the United Kingdom was closed to its overseas British subjects, the United States became the next popular destination. A series of immigration measures placed restrictions on the ease of travel to the US.

Many of the former colonies, now independent, embraced tourism and financial services in their economic development. It soon became evident that the rapid economic growth that many countries experienced could not be serviced by the domestic labor force. Per capita incomes rose dramatically and large divergences appeared in wage levels between countries with booming economies and stagnant ones. In country after country, immigrant labor was the answer to the need for workers in those sectors in which natives found the work arduous, or where they lacked the requisite skills in white-collar jobs. As labour markets expanded, the distribution of population showed increasing proportions of foreign-born workers in some sectors, and virtual domination in others.

The impact of immigration on microstates is often more dramatic than that on large countries. Data from select Caribbean countries including Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, St Maarten and the US Virgin Islands will be presented. Analysis of the data show how demographic factors like population growth, sex and age composition, fertility rate and occupational status are all significantly influenced by high immigration rates in small islands. The discussion also focuses on the impact on housing, education and health services. And even more importantly, the analysis demonstrates the enormous significance of the impact of immigration on domestic politics and ethnic diversity.

RESULTS

Sustained immigration both documented and undocumented on relatively small islands has the dramatic effect of creating rapid population growth that often cause nationals to demand the imposition of drastic measures of curtailment. The sex ratio in most instances has been largely affected by immigration, and so too has been the fertility rate which is higher among migrant females in most countries. Some occupational sectors have become dominated by foreigners, and others by natives. In almost all countries, immigrants occupy the lowest wage brackets, but in some others like the

financial services area, foreigners are the source of local ire because they dominate the white-collar jobs. Immigrants tend to have both higher rates of saving and lower rates of unemployment. They occupy some of the worst housing; some immigrant children have no access to education, and in other instances, undocumented immigrants may not enroll in health insurance plans. In no instance was it found that a government had institutionalised a sociocultural process by which immigrants are incorporated into the country.

CONCLUSIONS

The small physical size of most Caribbean microstates renders them highly vulnerable to the severe impact of inadequately regulated immigrant flows. Because the sex and age composition of the population is markedly affected, government agencies need to plan carefully to avoid demographic anomalies. Health and educational services need to be made adequate to meet the increased demands placed on the system by immigrants. Provisions should be in place to manage rising unemployment of natives due to their replacement by foreign workers, if it takes place. Significantly, if governments do not make a concerted effort to incorporate their foreign-born residents into the sociocultural fabric of their societies, the long-term consequences do not bode well for ethnic harmony in countries with large immigrant populations.