

The Immigrant Advantage

If you want to die a successful American, especially in the heartland, it helps to be born abroad.

Statistics show that if you are born elsewhere and later acquire American citizenship, you will, on average, earn more than us native-borns, study further, marry at higher rates and divorce at lower rates, fall out of the work force less frequently and more easily dodge poverty.

What's curious is where this immigrant advantage is most pronounced. In left-leaning, coastal, cosmopolitan America, native-borns seem well groomed by their families, schools and communities to keep up with foreign-borns. It's in the right-leaning "Walmart America" where foreigners have the greatest advantage.

From Mississippi to West Virginia to Oklahoma, native-borns are struggling to flourish on a par with foreign-born Americans. In the 10 poorest states (just one on the East or West Coast: South Carolina), the median household of native-borns earns 84 cents for every \$1 earned by a household of naturalized citizens, compared with 97 cents for native-borns in the richest (and mostly coastal) states, according to Census Bureau data. In the poorest states, foreign-borns are 24 percent less likely than native-borns to report themselves as divorced or separated, but just 3 percent less likely in the richest states. In the poorest states, foreign-borns are 36 percent less likely than native-borns to live in poverty; the disparity collapses to about half that in wealthier states like New Jersey and Connecticut.

This phenomenon came vividly to life for me while I was reporting a book about the brutal collision of a striving immigrant and a hurting native. One was Raisuddin Bhuiyan, a Muslim immigrant from Bangladesh, working in a Dallas minimart in 2001 to save for a wedding and an education; the other, Mark Stroman, shot him in a twisted post-9/11 revenge attack, blinding him in one eye, during a rampage that killed two other immigrant clerks. Mr. Bhuiyan eventually learned more about Mr. Stroman and the world that formed him. What he found astonished him, then inspired him to forgive his attacker and battle to rescue him from death row.

Mr. Bhuiyan realized that he was among the lucky Americans. Even after the attack, he was able to pick up and remake himself, climbing from that minimart to waiting tables at an Olive Garden to six-figure I.T. jobs. But Mr. Bhuiyan also saw the America that created Mr. Stroman, in which a battered working class was suffering from a dearth of work, community and hope, with many people failing to form strong bonds and filling the void with escapist chemicals, looping endlessly between prison and freedom.

Eventually, Mr. Bhuiyan petitioned a Texas court to spare his attacker's life because he had lacked his victim's advantages: a loving and sober family, pressure to strive and virtuous habits. The naturalized citizen claimed the native Texan hadn't had the same shot at the American dream as the "foreigner" he'd tried to kill.

At a time when even the American middle class is struggling, a difficult question arises: Are you better off being born in some of the poorest parts of the world and moving here than being raised in the poorer parts of the United States?

There's no easy answer. But let's first acknowledge the obvious: Most naturalized citizens — nearly half of America's roughly 40 million immigrants — arrived by choice, found employer sponsors, navigated visas and green cards. (We're not talking here of immigrants who never reach citizenship and generally have harder lives than American citizens, native- or foreign-born.) It's no accident that our freshest citizens have pluck and wits that favor them later.

BUT I also think there's something more complicated going on: In those places where mobility's engine is groaning and the social fabric is fraying, many immigrants may have an added edge because of their ability to straddle the seemingly contradictory values of their birthplaces and their adopted land, to balance individualism with community-mindedness and self-reliance with usage of the system.

American scholars have long warned of declining "social capital": simply put, people lacking the support of others. In Texas, I encountered the wasteland described by writers from Robert D. Putnam on the left to Charles Murray on the right. In mostly white, exurban communities that often see themselves as above the woes of inner cities, I found household after household where country music songs about family and church play but

country-music values have fled: places where a rising generation is often being reared by grandparents because parents are addicted, imprisoned, broke or all three.

In places bedeviled by anomie, immigrants from more family-centered and collectivist societies — Mexico, India, Colombia, Vietnam, Haiti, China — often arrive with an advantageous blend of individualist and communitarian traits.

I say a blend, because while they come from communal societies, they were deserters. They may have been raised with family-first values, but often they were the ones to leave aging parents. It can be a powerful cocktail: a self-willed drive for success and, leavening it somewhat, a sacrificial devotion to family and tribe. Many, even as their lives grow more independent, serve their family oceans away by sending remittances.

Mr. Bhuiyan seemed to embody this dualism. By back-home standards, he was a rugged individualist. But in America it was his takes-a-village embeddedness that enabled his revival: Immigrant friends gave him medicine, sofas to sleep on, free I.T. training and job referrals.

Working at Olive Garden, Mr. Bhuiyan couldn't believe how his colleagues lacked for support. Young women walked home alone, sometimes in 100-plus degree heat on highways, having no one to give them rides. Many colleagues lacked cars not because they couldn't afford the lease but because nobody would cosign it. "I feel that, how come they have no one in their family — their dad, their uncle?" he said. They told stories of chaotic childhoods that made them seek refuge in drugs and gangs.

Mr. Bhuiyan concluded that the autonomy for which he'd come to America, while serving him well, failed others who had lacked his support since birth. His republic of self-making was their republic of self-destruction. "Here we think freedom means whatever I wanna do, whatever I wanna say — that is freedom," he said. "But that's the wrong definition."

A second dimension of this in-between-ness involves the role of government. In this era of gridlock and austerity, many immigrants have the advantage of coming from places where bankrupt, do-nothing governments are no surprise. They often find themselves

among Americans who are opposite-minded: leaning on the state for economic survival but socially lonesome, without community backup when that state fails.

All this has nothing to do with the superiority of values. If distrust of government made for the most successful societies, Nigeria and Argentina would be leaders of the pack. What's interesting about so many of America's immigrants is how they manage to plug instincts cultivated in other places into the system here. Many are trained in their homelands to behave as though the state will do nothing for them, and in America they reap the advantages of being self-starters.

But they also benefit from the systems and support that America does offer, which are inadequate as substitutes for initiative but are useful complements to it.

Like many immigrants, Mr. Bhuiyan operated from the start like an economic loner, never expecting to get much from the government. He was willing to work at a gas station to save money. Recovering in his boss's home, he ordered I.T. textbooks online to improve his employability. Plunged into debt, he negotiated with doctors and hospitals to trim his bills.

But the system also worked for him. Robust laws prevented employers from exploiting a wide-eyed newcomer. He sued the Texas governor, in pursuit of leniency for his attacker, and was heard. Through a fund for crime victims, Texas eventually paid his medical bills.

In an age of inequality and shaky faith in the American promise of mobility through merit, we can learn from these experiences. Forget the overused idea popularized in self-help guides that native-borns must "think like an immigrant" to prosper, an exhortation that ignores much history. Rather, the success of immigrants in the nation's hurting places reminds us that the American dream can still work, but it helps to have people to lean on. Many immigrants get that, because where they come from, people are all you have. They recognize that solitude is an extravagance.

American poverty is darkened by loneliness; poverty in so many poor countries I've visited is brightened only by community. Helping people gain other people to lean on —

not just offering cheaper health care and food stamps, tax cuts and [charter schools](#) — seems essential to making this American dream work as well for its perennial flowers as its freshest seeds.