



Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State

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In recent years there has been a flurry of legislative activity to exclude immigrants from access to social-welfare assistance at the state and national level. These efforts are controversial, with opponents denouncing them as “unprecedented,” while supporters claim that today’s newcomers are less self-sufficient than earlier generations of immigrants. “Our ancestors,” declared one Republican official, did not come “with their hands out for welfare checks.” Most Americans agree that European immigrants “worked their way up without special favors,” and are inclined to think that everyone today should do the same.

What is the truth about access to U.S. public assistance by different groups? To sort out the myths and realities, I closely tracked the experiences of white European immigrants, blacks, and Mexicans in the first half of the 20th century. My findings will surprise many on all sides.

Local Help for the Poor in the Early Twentieth Century

Before the New Deal, local communities were responsible for their needy residents. But access to relief varied greatly for impoverished whites, blacks, and Mexicans.

- Southern and southwestern cities with many blacks and Mexicans spent the least on poor relief, while northern cities with many European immigrants spent the most. Differences in relief generosity hold even after taking into account city size, local fiscal conditions, and degrees of need.
- Within particular cities, blacks were typically excluded from relief, relegated to segregated and underfunded private charities. European immigrants got more public help, and officials believed this assistance could help them become good Americans.
- Mexicans did not get the public help for needy widows reserved for Europeans, but they got more assistance than blacks. Unlike planters in the South, growers in the Southwest encouraged migrant workers to use relief between harvests to keep a labor pool on hand.

Expelling Mexicans, Shielding Europeans

Relief for Mexicans led to resentment – and as hostility grew, many were expelled simply for requesting assistance. Cities in the Southwest cooperated with immigration agents to deport needy individuals. During the 1920s, officials in Los Angeles allowed federal agents to investigate all relief applicants; and encouraged raids during the Depression. Across the country, officials used their own funds to hire trains to repatriate as many as forty thousand Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who requested assistance. Hundreds of thousands were removed, including those who left on their own due to the hostility they experienced.

In contrast, welfare officials in the Northeast and Midwest were wary of immigration agents and did not target Europeans newcomers for repatriation. Unlike in Los Angeles, officials in Chicago worried that admitting immigration agents to welfare offices would cause European newcomers to grow “suspicious and frightened” and would not “accomplish enough...to compensate for the harassment it would cause.”

Social Security Initially Favored Whites, including European Aliens

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act, launching the modern U.S. welfare state. But agricultural and domestic workers were initially excluded, leaving out more than half of all blacks and Mexicans. At first, European immigrants were more likely than even native-born whites to work in occupations covered by Social Security. Because immigration was restricted after 1924, almost half of the European-born were in their later working years when the first Social Security checks were issued in 1940. By law 65-year-olds needed only a few quarters on the job to be eligible so many European immigrants contributed little but collected almost as much as younger people who paid taxes their whole working lives.

European immigrants also benefitted because *there were no federal citizenship or legal-residence restrictions for most New Deal programs*. Then as now, surveys say that most Americans oppose relief for aliens. But New Deal reformers ignored public opinion and fought for assistance for aliens. Federal officials at the time reassured wary newcomers that immigration officials would not have access to Social Security files; officials did not even ask applicants whether they were citizens or aliens, or inquire how they had entered the country.

Lessons for Today

Not until the 1970s, long after most white European immigrants became U.S. citizens, did the federal government start mandating legal residency or citizenship to receive Social Security, Medicaid, Food Stamps, assistance to poor families with children, and other welfare benefits. Few immigrants, past or present, have come to America with their “hands out for welfare checks.” But our nation’s laws and practices have changed to make it much harder for needy newcomers to get public help. The change has been sharp for many kinds of immigrants, although not for Mexican Americans. They have always been treated harshly.

Read more in Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Princeton University Press, 2012).