Studies show immigrants are assimilating

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Part of what fires up the immigration debate is the view, shared by many Americans, that new waves of immigrants are not assimilating as rapidly and completely as did previous waves of immigrants.

The only problem with this theory is that it is wrong on both counts. First, despite what many of us like to think, previous waves of immigrants - from Germany, Italy or Ireland - were in no great hurry to dissolve into the melting pot. Instead, in many cases, they tried to hold on to their native languages, heritages and customs even while impressing upon their children the need to learn English in order to succeed in this country.

Second, there is a stack of evidence suggesting that recent immigrants are assimilating. In fact, some studies find that the immigrants of today, who are likely to come from Asia and Latin America, are actually blending into our society more quickly than did their counterparts a century ago.

That stack of evidence got a little bigger this week with the release by the Manhattan Institute of its first annual Index of Immigrant Assimilation. The study, authored by Duke University professor Jacob Vigdor, examined three types of assimilation: economic, cultural and civic. He also looked at more than 100 immigrant groups. He found that Mexican immigrants have relatively low rates of economic and civic assimilation, but that they're actually more culturally assimilated than immigrants from China, India or Vietnam. He also found that, contrary to stereotype, immigrants from developed countries do not necessarily assimilate better than others. And, in one of the most disturbing findings, he also learned that immigrants who speak English don't necessarily do better economically than those who don't. Better news was that America's capacity to assimilate immigrants is stronger than ever.

As the immigration debate continues, studies such as this help make the discussion more informed. They also remind us that assimilation of newcomers remains a worthwhile goal and one that is being met every day by different groups, in different ways, all across this remarkable country.

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