

UCSD research to take new look at role of immigrants in San Diego and Japanese economies

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UCSD RESEARCH TO TAKE NEW LOOK AT ROLE OF IMMIGRANTS IN SAN DIEGO AND JAPANESE ECONOMIES

The Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego has received \$400,000 in grants for research on the utilization of immigrant labor in the economies of San Diego County and a Japanese industrial city.

A \$200,000 grant from the James Irvine Foundation of California will support the San Diego portion of the study, which will develop more accurate and comprehensive data on the role of immigrant workers in the regional economy.

The Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership has awarded \$200,000 to the Center to support comparable research in the city of Hamamatsu (population about 500,000) and several nearby industrial towns. The Hamamatsu area has long been a magnet for foreign workers from Latin America as well as Asian countries.

This binational project will systematically compare the ways in which foreign-born workers are being utilized in similar sectors of the U.S. and Japanese economies, with special emphasis on manufacturing, construction, services, and agriculture.

In each country, highly detailed interviews will be conducted with employers and immigrant workers. Approximately 200 carefully selected firms will be studied by project researchers (100 each in Japan and San Diego County). More than 800 immigrant production workers employed in these and other firms will be interviewed.

In San Diego County, the industries to be represented in the study include agriculture and horticulture, construction, food processing, light manufacturing, building and landscape maintenance, hotels and motels, and restaurants. These are the sectors of the San Diego economy in which the demand for immigrant labor has been strongest and most persistent during the past fifteen years.

In San Diego, interviews will also be conducted with a random sample of migrant workers who seek day labor in street-corner labor markets. These workers are typically hired by small subcontractors involved in construction, landscaping, painting, and other services provided to individual homeowners and developers. They constitute a significant portion of the pool of immigrant labor available in San Diego County.

The study's principal investigator is immigration expert Wayne Cornelius, professor of political science at UCSD and director of studies and programs at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies. The co-principal investigator is Yasuo Kuwahara, professor of labor economics and associate dean at Dokkyo University in Tokyo.

According to Cornelius, the project will test two principal hypotheses. The first is that the migration of foreign workers to U.S. and Japanese cities remains significantly demand-driven, despite recent changes in the "push" factors that drive people out of key labor-exporting countries. Demand-driven migration is motivated by the employment opportunities offered by predominantly small and medium-sized employers in labor-intensive industries.

A second, related hypothesis to be tested in the study is that the demand for foreign labor in those sectors of the U.S. and Japanese economies where immigrant-dependent firms are concentrated is increasingly insensitive to cyclical fluctuations in the receiving economy, as well as to changes in laws and public policies affecting the entry and employment of foreign workers. Under this assumption, strong demand for foreign-born labor would be expected to prevail in immigrant-dependent firms and industries, whether the "host" economy is in an expansionary, recessionary, or recovery mode.

Such findings, said Cornelius, would also illustrate the difficulties inherent in using legal and public policy instruments, such as stepped up border enforcement efforts and more widespread workplace inspections by the INS, to restructure labor markets in which foreign workers have become dominant.

"It is politically fashionable today to dismiss low-skilled foreign workers as nothing more than readily disposable, cheap labor for rapacious businessmen," noted Cornelius. "The benefits of their employment supposedly accrue entirely to business owners, while the costs (e.g., in tax-supported social services used by foreign workers and their dependents) are borne by -all the rest of us.' It is that kind of simplistic cost/benefit calculus that needs to be challenged, but with far better data than presently exist."

Cornelius expects the comparative project to generate more reliable and up-to-date information on exactly how foreign-born labor is being utilized by San Diego and Hamamatsu employers, and in what kinds of jobs, at what pay scales, with what benefits, etc. He also said the study should shed needed light on the reasons why employers continue to rely on this labor source, when there are at least theoretical alternatives to using it (further mechanization, exporting labor-intensive production to cheap-labor countries, attempting to recruit native-born workers for jobs normally filled by immigrants, etc.).

The project is a collaborative venture of the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and the Institute of Statistical Research, an independent social science "think tank" in Tokyo. The research team includes 15 faculty members and graduate students in economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science, from a dozen U.S. and Japanese universities, including UC campuses at Berkeley, Irvine, and Santa Barbara.

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