

Opening the Door: Migration and Self-Selection in a Restrictive Legal Immigration Regime

[link to latest draft \(when available\)](#)

Elizabeth Cascio and Ethan Lewis*
Dartmouth College and NBER

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Abstract

We estimate the impacts of expanding the set of countries with access to a legal immigration system that favors family reunification. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) led to 2.7 million “excess” Green Cards being awarded in the U.S. over 1989 and 1991. Exploiting cross-country variation in the magnitude of this legalization shock, we find that “opening the door” has increased immigration through legal channels, but effects have been small: each IRCA admission was responsible for the admission of only 1 to 2 family members, mainly spouses and children, over the following 25 years. We also find evidence that the legalization shock did not increase unauthorized inflows and slightly increased dependency ratios among recent arrivals, but only counting U.S. born children. At the same time, it raised the educational attainment of recent arrivals, implying an improvement in migrant self-selection. These findings suggest that expanding legal entry pathways to countries historically denied them may reduce challenges associated with unauthorized immigration. They are also inconsistent with popular claims that family-based immigration systems lead to run-away “chain” migration, large fiscal burdens, and poor migrant selection.

* Mailing address: Dartmouth College, Department of Economics, 6106 Rockefeller Center, Hanover, NH 03755. Email: elizabeth.u.cascio@dartmouth.edu, ethan.g.lewis@dartmouth.edu. For helpful comments and suggestions, we thank seminar participants at Cornell University, Harvard Kennedy School, Stanford University, Tufts University, and the University of Virginia. We are also extremely grateful for the research assistance of Meriem Fouad, Ben Matejka, and Michelle Wu, and funding support from Dartmouth College. All errors are our own.