

Older immigrants living in US more satisfied with life than native-born counterparts

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FSU Assistant Professor of Sociology Dawn Carr. Credit: FSU /Bruce Palmer

Most people who immigrated to the United States for a chance to live the "American Dream" are more satisfied with their lives in the "land of the free" than those who were born here, according to new research from

Florida State University.

A team of researchers, including FSU Assistant Professor of Sociology Dawn Carr, found immigrants from white, Hispanic and other racial groups have higher levels of happiness and overall [life satisfaction](#) than those born in the United States.

Their findings were recently published in the February 2019 print edition of the *Journal of Aging and Health*.

"We discovered that people who are foreign-born and living in the United States do have higher levels of life satisfaction," Carr said. "We examined life satisfaction because it is a useful global measure for understanding how people are doing on the whole with regard to how they feel about their life. It's a good way of capturing their overall well-being."

Scholars found Hispanic immigrants in the United States had the highest overall life satisfaction of any other racial group. Study participants had lived in the United States for an average of about 30 years.

"The older adult immigrants in our sample adjusted to life in the United States, and they're thriving more than their native-born counterparts," Carr said. "This is particularly true for Hispanics, who maintain their well-being despite having fewer resources than their native-born counterparts. They seem to have developed a life that provides a good old age."

In the past 50 years, scholars have examined a concept known as the "Hispanic Paradox," which refers to the observation that older Hispanic immigrants in the United States tend to have [better health outcomes](#) than non-Hispanic whites despite their more limited socioeconomic resources.

"We wanted to see if this was also true for overall well-being," Carr said.

The paradox is believed to stem from cultural and [social factors](#) specific to immigrants of Hispanic origin.

"It might be that those cultural factors are quite beneficial in terms of maintaining well-being," Carr said. "For instance, it may be their overall spirituality or sense of community. Studies have shown there are expectations for support in the Hispanic culture. However, we were unable to identify specific mechanisms that explain these effects."

Researchers examined data from more than 7,000 participants 60 years and older who were surveyed for the most recent wave of the Health and Retirement Study in 2014. This study is the largest and most comprehensive study of older adults in the US.

The team also found that foreign-born blacks did not report the same increases in overall life satisfaction as compared to other races.

"It was very discouraging to see this outcome for the black sample," Carr said. "Blacks in general have lower levels of life satisfaction than everybody else and foreign-born blacks do not experience any better outcomes."

Carr and her colleagues also studied how levels of education were linked with overall life satisfaction. For whites, higher levels of education translated to higher levels of life satisfaction. However, they found for both native and foreign-born blacks, the more education they had, the lower their life satisfaction.

"That was a puzzling discovery," Carr said. "This means that education does not seem to enhance the lives of minorities like we might expect. We do not know the reasons for these trends, but we might guess that

factors like discrimination are involved, detracting from their overall happiness. For instance, someone who has a college degree, who is in a job with similarly educated individuals who are not minority, might be more overtly aware of the discrimination they're experiencing."

Researchers found higher levels of education for native-born Hispanics also was associated with lower [life satisfaction](#).

Carr said further research needs to take place to determine what factors are at the root of these varying levels of happiness in later life.

More information: Rocío Calvo et al, Expanding the Happiness Paradox: Ethnoracial Disparities in Life Satisfaction Among Older Immigrants in the United States, *Journal of Aging and Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0898264317726608](https://doi.org/10.1177/0898264317726608)

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