

Insights Series #149

Do Latin Americans Believe in a Social Safety Net for Immigrants?

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Key Findings:

- Overall, more respondents in surveyed countries support immigrant access to government-sponsored social services than oppose it
- Beliefs in the necessity of federally sponsored programs to reduce inequality are positively correlated with support of immigrant access to government-sponsored social services: those who believe the government is responsible for implementing policy to combat income inequality are generally more supportive of social service access for immigrant populations
- Of the countries surveyed, Peruvians are the most opposed immigrant access to government-sponsored social services programs while Colombians show the highest level of support
- Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to approve of immigrant access to government-sponsored social services



Welfare chauvinism, the belief that welfare and social services should be limited to certain sectors of the population, reflects nationalist and nativist perspectives which strongly influence policy and opinions around fully-realized citizenship. Previous literature has isolated immigrants as one of many groups targeted by restrictionist welfare attitudes. While there is previous research on immigration as a threat to the welfare state focused on Europe and U.S., this *Insights* report fills a gap in literature focused on Latin America, adding to a discussion which previously gave attention to welfare attitudes exclusively in the developed world. Scholarship on Western trends in welfare chauvinism reveals a generally small sector of the population which holds strongly negative views against immigrants' access to social services. A survey in Europe found that "strict" welfare chauvinism is in the significant minority, with only 9.7% of the European population believing immigrants should never get equal access to social services.¹ Europeans, however, were not idealistic in their assumptions of immigrant equity in welfare, with only 9.0% believing that social services should be accessible to immigrant populations immediately upon arrival, and with the majority of the population believing that social rights should be received on "acquisition of citizenship."²

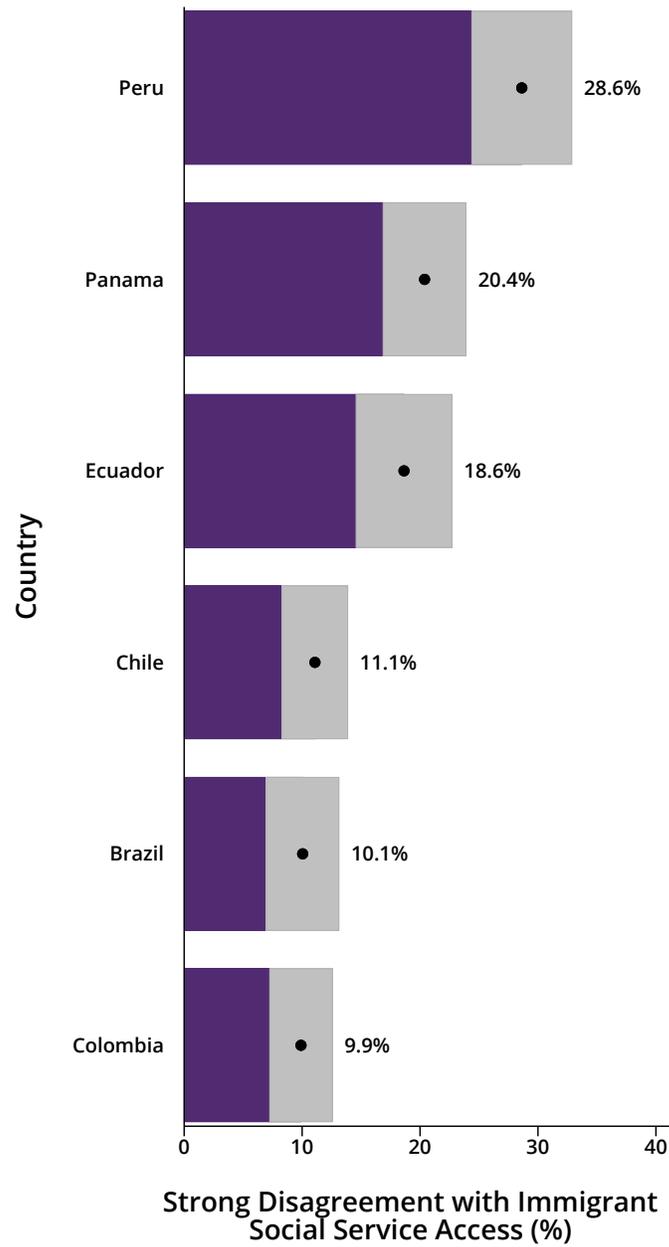
Similar studies in the U.S. indicate that trends of welfare chauvinism are strongly influenced by the population's negative sentiments towards immigrant populations. As reflected in a Gallup study within the U.S., Americans believed that immigrants are more prone to crime, more likely to destabilize the community, and stress citizens and tax-payers by "occupying more access to welfare than other populations."³ This pervading fear of immigrants as a threat to the welfare system is measured within this *Insights* report. However, unlike many studies which measure attitudes towards immigrants and welfare systems as separate concepts, this report captures both notions simultaneously through a measure which assesses individual-level welfare chauvinism across separate Latin American countries.

The following *Insights* report gauges attitudes towards immigrant access to government-sponsored social services in six countries within the Americas: Brazil, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, Colombia, and Chile. Using the experimental variable, **IMMIG1XB**, from the 2018/19 AmericasBarometer data, this report examines how a variety of demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, wealth,

etc.), as well as three potential predictors of sentiments towards immigrants and the welfare system impacts respondents' perceptions of whether immigrants in their country deserve access to government social service systems. Across the six countries surveyed, this report analyzes 3,083 responses to the following question:

IMMIG1XB: To what extent do you agree that the [nationality] government should offer social services, like health assistance, education, housing to **immigrants** who come to live or work in [country]? Do you...

The response categories for this measure range from 1-5, with 1 indicating those who strongly agreed with immigrants accessing social services and 5 indicating those who strongly disagreed with immigrants having access to social services.⁴



95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2018; GM_20211103

Figure 1: Which countries have the strongest opposition to government-sponsored social services for immigrants?

How Do Different Latin American Populations Think about Immigrant Social Service Access?

Figure 1 illustrates the percent of the population that most strongly disagrees with immigrant access to government social services, comparing data from each of the six surveyed countries.⁵ The gray bar shows the 95% confidence interval for each value, with the percentage of the population with the strongest disagreement depicted by the black dot. Overall, all countries surveyed had relatively low percentages of the population which demonstrated strong disagreement with immigrant social benefits. Peruvians indicated the highest overall dissent with immigrant access to social services with 28.6% of the public disagreeing strongly, while Colombians demonstrated the lowest level of strong disagreement at 9.8%. While Figure 1 only covers those with strongly negative positions on the issue, the overall distribution maintains that a larger portion of the total population of respondents support immigrant access to benefits with 56.6% of all respondents indicated some degree of agreement (responding either somewhat agree or strongly agree) and only 31.3% indicated some level of disagreement.

While there are no indicators as to why these specific percentages of the public came to these conclusions, a 2009 study suggests perceptions of an influx in immigration as a possible explanation.⁶ The study finds that communities who perceive their country's or community's number of incoming immigrants to be high or too high are generally less supportive of welfare access.⁷ This hypothesis varied across the countries surveyed. Based on recent immigration counts, Chile received a large number of immigrants, around 1.6 million,⁸ and yet had one of the lowest percentages of respondents who disagree with welfare for immigrants as shown in Figure 1. On the other hand, Peru and Brazil had similar levels of immigration (around 1.2 and 1.0 million, respectively) and yet had widely different individual-level sentiments towards immigration as indicated by responses to the IMMIG1XB measure.⁹

Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors in Welfare Chauvinism

This next section examines which socioeconomic and demographic variables are correlated with welfare chauvinism. To do this, I conduct a linear regression analysis with six socioeconomic and demographic variables including the respondents' dwelling in an urban setting or rural setting, level of education, gender, level of wealth, age cohort, and self-identified skin color.¹⁰ These key demographic factors are included to assess previously studied patterns related to welfare and sentiments towards immigrants. Race is one such factor, as previous studies indicated that racial stereotypes are a strong predictor of white residents' opinions towards welfare access.¹¹ For purposes of this analysis, I reverse the coding of **IMMIG1XB** such that the responses are now on a 1 to 5 ascending scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Figure 2 outlines these results using a regression coefficients plot. The blue bracketed lines indicate the 95% confidence interval while the red vertical line indicates the base of zero. Each variable's coefficient is captured with the dot in the center of the line, with the filled in dots indicating statistically significant relationships.

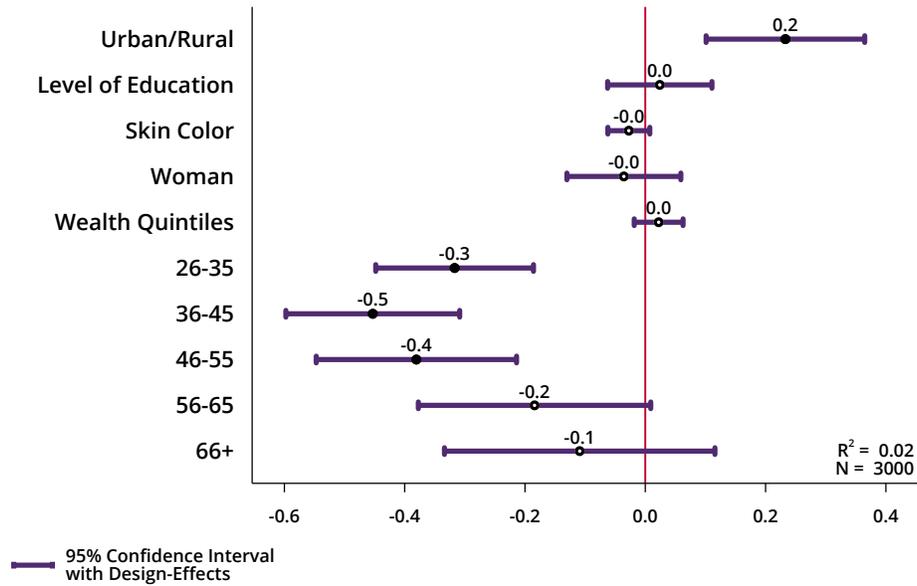


Figure 2: Socioeconomic and Demographic Correlates of Immigrant Access to Government-Sponsored Social Services

The results indicate that place of residence and age cohort are statistically significant. Urban-dwelling respondents were more likely than their rural peers to approve of immigrants’ access to social services and benefits by 0.2 units on the 5-point scale. Compared with those in the youngest age cohort (16-25), those in the next three cohorts (26-35, 36-45, and 46-55) were more likely to oppose immigrant access to social programs. That relationship is nonlinear with those in the 36-45 cohort being the most opposed to immigrant benefit access, compared with the youngest cohort. Despite expectations from previous literature, race was not a significant predictor of respondents’ sentiments towards immigrant social service access.

How Do Respondents' Personal Beliefs and Practices Impact Their Welfare Chauvinism?

Looking beyond socioeconomic and demographic variables, what other factors might influence welfare chauvinism? Does exposure to the news media or receiving government benefits change one's opinions on immigrants' access to the social safety net? Additionally, do preconceptions about the welfare state generally influence one's perception of immigrants' access to social services? In addition to the factors explored in Figure 2, this second model accounts for additional variables that are supported by previous literature as probable predictors of respondents' perspectives on immigrants as a threat to the welfare state. Figure 3 includes three independent variables which measure an individual's frequency of attention to the news, whether an individual receives government assistance, and the extent to which a respondent agrees (or disagrees) that the national government must implement strong policies to reduce income inequality.¹²

Each of these three independent variables is included based on previously analyzed predictors of attitudes toward social services and immigrant populations. A 1969 study of welfare recipients in Wisconsin found that individuals who received welfare benefits and felt societal stigma for receiving government assistance were less happy with their experience of being on welfare, less satisfied with the program overall, more critical of their caseworkers, and tend to leave the program more quickly.¹³ I examine whether this increase in critical perception of social service practices results in a degree of welfare chauvinism, as respondents could have increased skepticism of others' use of government social service resources. Do these respondents feel they deserve access to the social service system and therefore, other non-native citizens could be a threat to the safety net?

On the other hand, receiving government benefits could also be partial measure of proximity to social service systems, mirroring a question raised in a 2001 study which demonstrated that those who lived in communities with more welfare recipients were more likely to express support for welfare systems.¹⁴ Other studies have indicated that those with proximity to wel-

fare beneficiaries or who are recipients themselves have significantly less negative and stereotypical beliefs about beneficiaries.¹⁵ This more positive perception of welfare beneficiaries from those with close proximity to welfare benefits could potentially translate to less stigma about whether immigrants have access to government social services.

The media consumption variable in Figure 3 gauges general news consumption of respondents. While this measure does not gauge the types of media or types of information respondents are exposed to, previous sources have highlighted media as a key motivator of xenophobic trends. A U.N. study found that news media's coverage of migration influences public opinion of immigrants, how the public forms political judgements, and how the public makes decisions at the polls.¹⁶

The final measure in Figure 3 examines if respondents' general sentiments towards government policies aimed at reducing income inequality affect their perceptions of whether immigrants should utilize the welfare system. A study in 2009 found that native-born groups indicated decreased support for welfare systems during periods of immigration based on 1) disdain for immigrant populations and 2) concern about the potential for economic consequence for native-born populations.¹⁷ This previously studied heightened fear during periods of immigration may contribute to respondents' individual-level assumptions about immigrants and their access to the welfare state.¹⁸ Overall, a majority of the respondents from the six countries were in favor of government-led policies to reduce income inequality. Chileans had the highest mean response of 5.7 (on the 7-point scale) and Peruvians had the lowest average response of 4.9.

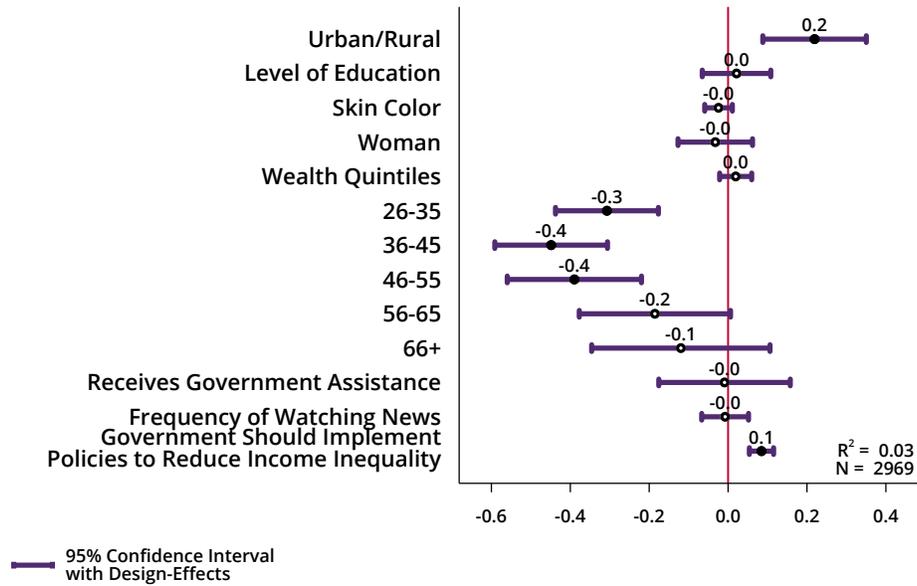


Figure 3: Media Exposure, Government Beneficiary Status, and Support of Policies to Reduce Income Inequality on Support for Immigrant Access to Government Social Services

Based on the results in Figure 3, the only new indicator to gain statistical significance is the variable for support for government policies to reduce income inequality is statistically significant. For every level of increase in support for policies to reduce inequality, there is a 0.1-unit higher level of support for immigrant access to government-sponsored social services. Including these additional results confirms the continued statistical significance of urban residence on views of immigrant access to government-sponsored social services, with the same effect size as in Figure 2. The non-linear relationship of age is similar to the results in Figure 2.

Discussion

While previous studies have investigated welfare chauvinism in the U.S. and European context, this *Insights* report reveals similar trends in individual-level public opinion about immigrant access to government-provided social services in Latin America. Overall, rural-dwelling respondents aged 36-45 are the most likely to strongly disagree with immigrants' ability to access the social safety net. This is somewhat supported by other studies on intergenerational welfare attitudes which found that the oldest respondents were the most likely to disfavor positions of altruism in welfare.¹⁹ This *Insights* report, however, shows the greatest level of disagreement with younger-middle aged respondents rather than their oldest counterparts.

This report also finds that more respondents were in favor of immigrants' rights to welfare than those opposed. This echoes a Pew Research Center report which found, in the global context, more of the population saw immigrants as a strength to their communities and social systems than those who perceived them as threat.²⁰

Variables measuring race and whether the respondent receives government benefits did not show statistically significant results despite expectations. These measures, however, did not perfectly encapsulate variables as used in previous literature. For example, the variable used as a measure of race captured respondents' personal perceptions of their own skin tone rather than a categorical representation of specific racial/ethnic categories (i.e., white vs. black) as used in previous studies.²¹ Similarly, the variable measuring whether the respondent receives government benefits captures those who receive only certain types of regular assistance and could potentially exclude those who receive government assistance in other forms, including pensions.²²

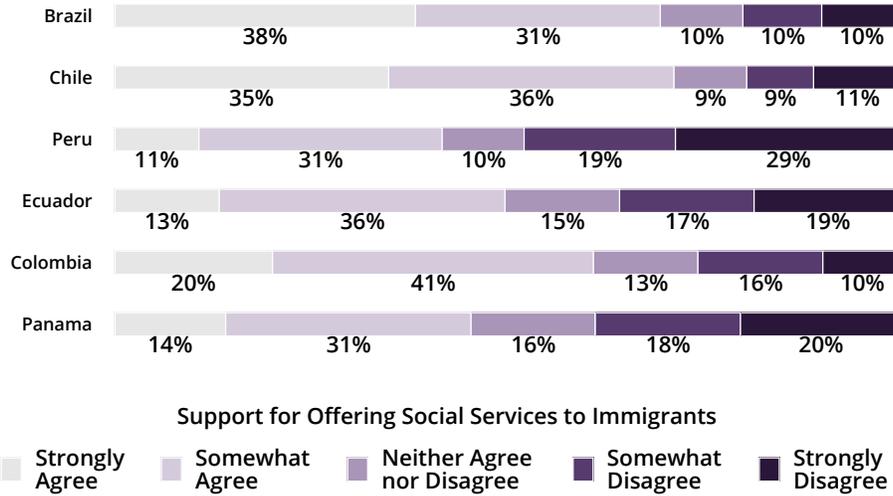
These results provide a basis for further questions and continued research. One such example is through a closer examination of the media's role in influencing public support for immigrant access to government-sponsored social benefits. Creating a narrower focus of the definition of media consumption,

specifically measuring the amount and kinds of political information respondents consume could establish consumption as a significant predictor of both generally xenophobic attitudes and more specifically restrictive beliefs about immigrant access to the welfare state. Similar to a more defined scope of media consumption, the factor of immigration influx that was investigated in Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009) provides an interesting basis for further analysis of xenophobic perspectives on welfare. Do countries undergoing major shifts in immigration or a perceived influx of immigrants have more negative attitudes towards immigrants and their effect on the efficacy of the welfare state? While this was somewhat indicated by the Chile example referenced earlier in this report, this factor would provide useful further analysis for countries like Brazil and others currently receiving increased numbers of immigrants.

Conclusion

Based on the literature currently investigating welfare chauvinism and attitudes towards the welfare state, more data are needed to examine the intersection between social services and attitudes towards immigration, rather than studies that focus on xenophobia or welfare attitudes exclusively. More importantly, greater discussion must be devoted to welfare and immigration attitudes in the developing world as the majority of the research focuses on attitudes towards migrants as a function of only developed and Western states. While data suggest that immigrants are both less likely to use social services and welfare, and, on average, consume fewer financial benefits from welfare systems than native-born populations, there is still a persistent sector of the population which strongly disagrees with immigrant access to government-sponsored social services, or to welfare protections in general.²³ Analyzing xenophobic attitudes such as welfare chauvinism reveals potential motivations and predictors of this unique strain of nativism which fears the impact of foreign influence on benefits that some believe are exclusive rights of native-born citizens.

Appendix



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2018; GM_20211108

Figure 4: Full Results of IMMIG1B by Country

Notes

1. Meuleman et al. (2018).
2. Meuleman et al. (2018).
3. Simcox (1997).
4. **IMMIG1XB**: is one variable in a set of three experimental questions (**IMMIG1XA-IMMG1XC**) each asked to about a third of the population of respondents. Each question asks about respondents' agreement or disagreement with social services for some group of incoming migrants living or working in the country: (A) Venezuelan migrants, (B) immigrants and (C) Spanish migrants. All three variables have response categories coded from 1-5 with the following answer options: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat disagree, or Strongly disagree.

5. The full spectrum of responses to the survey item can be located in the Appendix.
6. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
7. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
8. Migration Data Portal (2021).
9. Migration Data Portal (2021).
10. The demographic variables were coded as follows: **URBAN**: Urban vs. Rural dwelling (a dummy variable coded 1 for urban-dwelling and 0 for rural-dwelling), **EDR**: Level of Education (respondents indicated whether their highest education level was none (0), primary (1), secondary (2), or post-secondary(3)), **MUJER**: Self-identified sex (a dummy variable indicating whether or not the respondent identified as female, coded 1 if respondent is female), **QUINTALL**: respondent's wealth bracket (categorical variable measuring wealth in one of 5 brackets of ascending wealth), (see Córdova (2009) for more information), **EDAD**: respondents' age (measured in ascending categories from 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65 and 66+), and **COLORR**: respondents' self-identified race (measured by self-assessed skin tone on a 12-point, increasing from lightest to darkest: measure created by giving respondents a color card to identify their closest skin tone).
11. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
12. The question wording and coding is as follows. To measure attention to the news, I use the question, **GION**, which asks: "About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, radio, newspapers or on the internet?" The response categories are coded as follows: (1) Daily, (2) A few times a week (3) A few times a month, (4) A few times a year, and (5) Never. To examine whether someone receives welfare benefits, I use question **WF1**, which asks: "Do you or someone in your household receive regular assistance in the form of money, food, or products from the government, not including pensions/social security?" The response options are (1) Yes and (2) No. Finally, to measure preference for government policies to reduce inequality, I use question **ROS4**, which asks: "The (Country) government should implement **strong** policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?" The answer options are on a 1 to 7 scale and range from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.
13. Handler and Hollingsworth (1969).

14. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
15. Wertheimer, Long, and Vandivere (2001).
16. Desmarès (2018).
17. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
18. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
19. Daatland, Veenstra, and Herlofson (2012).
20. Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor (2019).
21. Senik, Stichnoth, and Van der Straeten (2009).
22. Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor (2019).
23. Nowrasteh and Orr (2018).

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