

Assessing “Brain Drain” from the Former Soviet Union to the United States

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Short Abstract

Among the more significant, but least analyzed, effects of the fall of the Soviet Union has been emigration from these to other lands. This could reflect a “brain drain” with implications for both the Former Soviet Union and the international community. Unfortunately, little, if any, systematic data has been used to assess this phenomenon. In this paper, I use U.S. Census data from Summary File 3 and from Public Use Microdata Sample files from the decennial U.S. censuses of 1980, 1990, and 2000 to assess the characteristics of migration from the Former Soviet Union to United States in recent decades. Coupled with analysis of recent censuses of the FSU, these data sources can help assess how much brain drain, if any, has occurred to the United States, and point to issues to examine in considering migration to other lands that have attracted still more FSU emigrants.

Extended Abstract

Among the more significant, but least analyzed, ways the fall of the Soviet Union affected the nations comprising it and the global community is through the emigration of hundreds of thousands of persons now calling other lands home. Since the dissolution of the USSR, about 200 thousand have emigrated to the United States, and more than 50 thousand have emigrated to Canada.

Such high emigration levels could, conceivably, reflect a “brain drain” with profound implications for the nations of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and the international community. At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some analysts speculated that the departure of highly skilled workers such as scientists and mathematicians could devastate the economies of the region, threaten its security structures, and potentially boost military capabilities of rogue states.

Unfortunately, little, if any, systematic data have been used to test such assertions. Most media reports have assumed some brain drain has occurred, though some contradictory accounts also mention “scientists” from these lands who have been able to find work only as taxi drivers or in similar positions in the West. Still other analyses have contended that brain drain has waxed and waned with Western economic conditions, and that some technically skilled workers have even returned to the lands of the FSU, though the number of emigrants to Germany, Israel, the United States, and Canada continue to exceed the number of persons returning.

In this paper, I will use U.S. census data from Summary File 3 and from Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files from the decennial U.S. censuses of 1980, 1990, and 2000 to assess the characteristics of migration from the Former Soviet Union to the

United States in recent decades. Summary File 3 data can show such aggregate characteristics as the distribution of persons born in the Former Soviet Union now living in the United States, as well as the timing of their arrival. PUMS data offers detailed data on age, education, employment, income, and other social and economic characteristics. Preliminary tabulations of these data, shown as an appendix to this abstract, show Russian immigrants to be comparatively young, better able to speak English, more educated, and wealthier than immigrants from the Ukraine and other immigrants from the Former Soviet Union.

Coupled with analysis of recent censuses of the nations comprising the FSU, these data sources can help assess how much brain drain, if any, has occurred. With the October 2002 census of Russia, every nation comprising the FSU has now completed a post-Soviet census. Such comparisons can also point to issues to examine in considering possible “brain drain” from the FSU to other lands.

Appendix—Selected Characteristics of Persons Born in the Former Soviet Union and Living in the United States in Year 2000 Census

	Russia	Ukraine	Other FSU
Less than 40 years of age	54%	43%	50%
Male	46%	46%	47%
American citizen	45%	47%	49%
Arrived since 1990	69%	65%	62%
Speak English "well" or better (persons 5+ years of age)	78%	66%	75%
At least 4 years of college (persons 25+ years of age)	52%	40%	43%
Annual household income \$80K+	30%	21%	25%

Counties with Greatest Numbers of Native Russians

1	Kings County, New York	51,781
2	Los Angeles County, California	19,821
3	Queens County, New York	17,232
4	Cook County, Illinois	11,743
5	Santa Clara County, California	6,021
6	New York County, New York	5,832
7	Sacramento County, California	5,550
8	Middlesex County, Massachusetts	5,539
9	King County, Washington	5,456
10	San Francisco County, California	5,301
11	Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania	5,275
12	Bergen County, New Jersey	5,258
13	Montgomery County, Maryland	3,776
14	Cuyahoga County, Ohio	3,743
15	Richmond County, New York	3,452
16	Oakland County, Michigan	3,416
17	Clark County, Washington	3,284
18	Suffolk County, Massachusetts	3,167
19	Middlesex County, New Jersey	3,137
20	Bronx County, New York	3,111
21	Miami-Dade County, Florida	3,053
22	San Diego County, California	3,034
23	Multnomah County, Oregon	3,015
24	Baltimore County, Maryland	2,896
25	Broward County, Florida	2,801

Counties with the Greatest Numbers of Native Russians per 100,000 Population

1	Southeast Fairbanks Census Area, Alaska	2,511
2	Kings County, New York	2,100
3	Clark County, Washington	951
4	Yolo County, California	915
5	Summit County, Colorado	815
6	Richmond County, New York	778
7	Queens County, New York	773
8	Schley County, Georgia	717
9	San Francisco County, California	682
10	Middlesex County, Virginia	644
11	Hand County, South Dakota	615
12	Bergen County, New Jersey	595
13	Falls Church city, Virginia	569
14	Harrisonburg city, Virginia	568
15	Rockland County, New York	479
16	Kidder County, North Dakota	472
17	Lexington city, Virginia	466
18	Suffolk County, Massachusetts	459
19	Multnomah County, Oregon	456
20	Sacramento County, California	454
21	Wheeler County, Oregon	452
22	Whatcom County, Washington	440
23	Montgomery County, Maryland	432
24	Middlesex County, New Jersey	418
25	Allamakee County, Iowa	409

Native Russian Population by County

Native Russians
per 100,000
population

