

European Population Conference 2024

12-15 June 2024, Edinburgh

Exploring the apparent success of Portuguese descendants in the US

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Short abstract

Although Portuguese immigration in the US has a long history, there is limited knowledge about the Portuguese descendants now living in the US. This study aims to fill this gap. Using the five-year microdata from the American Community Survey spanning 2006 to 2020, we first describe who are the Portuguese descendants and where do they live in the US, distinguishing between those who speak Portuguese and those who do not. Descriptive findings at the national level reveal that Portuguese descendants generally outperform other US residents in various socioeconomic variables such as, educational attainment, occupations, wages, and socioeconomic status, though there are significant differences among those who speak Portuguese and those who do not. Then, a multivariate analysis will show if the higher wage premium of the Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese persist even when controlling for other characteristics. In a further analysis, we will explore the labour earnings advantage of speaking a second language. For that, we will compare the Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese with other second-generation migrants that speak other languages at home, besides English. Finally, we will compare the Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese with Brazilian descendants who speak Portuguese, but who do not have any other ties to Portugal to try to ascertain the specific importance of the Portuguese language.

Extended abstract

According to the 2020 US Census data, the people living in the United States of America (USA) with Portuguese ancestry numbers 1,455,761. As noted by Brettell (2003), if America is considered a nation of immigrants, Portugal can be seen as a nation of emigrants. For Portuguese emigrants, primarily hailing from the Azores and Madeira archipelagos, the USA have played a significant role as a destination country since the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Those Portuguese immigrants in the US had limited economic resources, lower education, and were often concentrated in lower socio-professional positions compared to other immigrant groups in the country (Baganha 1991). Several studies also note that the educational attainment of Portuguese descendants used to fall below the national average in the United States (e.g. Scott 2009).

The enduring presence of Portuguese descendants' stocks has given rise to vibrant communities in several US states. However, little is known about their most recent dynamics, a gap this study aims to address. Making use of the information in the American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample on individuals' citizenship, place of birth, languages spoken at home besides English, and ancestry we can identify Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese and distinguish them from those who do not speak Portuguese.

The descriptive results show that in 2016–2020 the Portuguese descendants living in the USA can be found in all the 50 US states. Historically, the main areas of Portuguese settlement in the US were Massachusetts, California and Hawaii. Along with these more traditional immigration patterns, Portuguese descendants can now be found also in Florida and Texas – in a trend towards a greater geographical dispersion of the Portuguese descendants. Therefore, the main clusters of the Portuguese descendants in 2016–2020 are: i. Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut; ii. California; iii. New York and New Jersey; iv. Florida; and v. Hawaii.

Regarding the socioeconomic profile of the Portuguese descendants, new results emerge from the segmentation into those who speak Portuguese and those who do not. For instance, four out of ten Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese have obtained a bachelor's degree, nearly 10 percentage points higher than the average observed among other US residents (table 1). However, the percentage of Portuguese descendants who do not speak Portuguese is similar to that of the other US residents, around 30%.

Table 1. Individuals aged 18 and over with higher education (BSc+) among Portuguese descendants, and other US residents (%), 2006–2010, 2011–2015 and 2016–2020

	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese	25.54	32.09	39.64
Portuguese descendants who do not speak Portuguese	22.87	26.12	30.58
Other US residents	25.47	27.11	30.25

Source: Data from the 5-year sample of the American Community Survey. Azevedo et al. (2023).

The Portuguese descendants earn, on average, higher wages compared to other US residents (table 2). Notably, Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese exhibit the highest wage premium, with their earnings exceeding those of other US residents by 22%. Again, it is interesting to observe that the Portuguese descendants who do not speak Portuguese do not earn such high premium – they only earn 7% more than the other US residents.

Table 2. Total gross income received as an employee among Portuguese descendants, and other US residents, who have labour income (in USD), 2016–2020

	Average	As % of income of other US residents
Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese	63,581.34	122.28
Portuguese descendants who do not speak Portuguese	55,804.90	107.33
Other US residents	51,995.96	100.00

Source: Data from the 5-year sample of the American Community Survey. Azevedo et al. (2023).

Some Portuguese-speaking descendants work in economic sectors that have traditionally been occupied by Portuguese immigrants, while others find their place in sectors with larger proportions of other US residents. Nevertheless, in certain sectors like public administration, Portuguese-speaking descendants are underrepresented – it would be interesting to know whether it is by choice or due to difficulties accessing such positions.

In light of these descriptive results, it is important to understand the reasons for the apparent success of Portuguese descendants in the US, namely of those who speak Portuguese. To that, we will compare the Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese with other second-generation migrants that speak other languages at home. Finally, we use propensity score matching to compare the Portuguese descendants who speak Portuguese with Brazilian descendants who speak Portuguese but who do not have any other ties to Portugal to try to ascertain the specific importance of the Portuguese language.

Funding: This research was funded by the Luso-American Development Foundation, grant letter number: 2021/074.

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