RETURN MIGRATION FROM THE UNITED STATES TO AMERICAN SAMOA: EVIDENCE FROM THE 1980 AND 1990 CENSUSES

Dennis A. Ahlburg *University of Minnesota*

Census data on American Samoan migrants to the United States who return to American Samoa are investigated in an attempt to determine the extent of return migration, if return migrants benefit from their experience overseas, and if American Samoa benefits from the return of migrants. It is found that return migration decreased between 1980 and 1990. Return migrants had greater economic success in American Samoa in 1980 and 1990 than nonmigrants, although the extent of their advantage declined over the decade. However, a simple comparison of migrants and nonmigrants is likely to yield a biased estimate of the benefits of migration. Until better migration data is collected, the benefits of migration and return migration to American Samoa and other Pacific nations cannot be estimated with certainty.

Determining whether migration is "good' or "bad" for Pacific island nations requires complex calculation of the costs and benefits of migration (see Ahlburg and Levin 1990:6-10). One argument often made in favor of migration is that migrants acquire education and skills overseas that can be productively applied upon return. However, several researchers challenge this argument. First, it is not clear that low-skilled migrants can be transformed into skilled migrants by a period of employment overseas (Greenwood and Stuart 1986:124). Second, even if such skills and education *could* be acquired, it is not clear that they *are* acquired (Reichert and Massey 1982:8). Third, the amount of return migration is small (Connell 1984; Hayes 1985; Macpherson 1985; Ahlburg and Levin 1990). Fourth, even if migrants acquire skills and return, it does not follow that they apply their skills upon return (Straubhaar 1986).

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This article examines data from the 1980 and 1990 decennial censuses of American Samoa (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984, 1992), the only source of data relevant to return migration to American Samoa, to see if any conclusions can be reached on the extent and value of return migration from the United States to American Samoa. Migration to and return migration from the United States is important because the United States is the most common destination for migrants from American Samoa and is now the most important destination for most Pacific Island migrants (Greenwood and Stuart 1986).

The Census Data

Although the published census data do not address return migration directly, this can be done indirectly through the use of the question on residence five years before the census. Responses to this question give an underestimate of return migration since the question does not capture information on migration and return in the five-year period immediately before the census (1976-1980). Individuals were included in the census if they were normally resident in American Samoa for most of the time in the six months before the census. Thus, the return-migrant estimates are not likely to be inflated by migrants temporarily visiting American Samoa, that is, "in circulation."

Return migrants, those born in American Samoa but resident overseas in 1975, constituted 2.9 percent of the 1980 total population aged 5 years and older and 5.3 percent of the 1980 population born in American Samoa (Table 1).2 Of the American Samoa-born individuals who returned, 83 percent returned from the United States and 14 percent from Western Samoa. In 1990, return migrants were only 1.8 percent of the total population aged 5 years and older and 3.7 percent of the American Samoa-born population. Of these latter individuals, 81 percent returned from the United States and 16 percent from Western Samoa. These figures underestimate the extent of return migration since they refer only to first-generation returnees, that is, those born in American Samoa. Of the 1,835 U.S.-born individuals in American Samoa in 1980, 893 had been resident in the United States in 1975 (Table 1). In 1990, of the 3,102 U.S.-born persons, 1,016 had resided there in 1985. Of these individuals, about 60 percent were younger than age 15 in both 1975 and 1985. It is likely that a large number of these children were the offspring of first-generation returnees and thus may themselves be counted as second-generation returnees who may benefit the nation.

The lower incidence of return migrants in the population in 1990

TABLE 1. Residence Five Years before the 1980 and 1990 Censuses of Persons Resident in American Samoa, by Selected Country of Birth

	Total	Born in American Samoa	Born in U.S.
1980 Census			
All Persons 5+ years	27,511	14,730	1,835
Outside American Samoa in 1975	5,837	766	967
Resident in U.S.	1,639	632	893
Resident in Western Samoa	3,448	105	14
1990 Census			
Persons 5+ years	39,821	19,480	3,102
Outside American Samoa in 1985	6,299	720	1,060
Resident in U.S.	1,781	580	1,016
Resident in Western Samoa	3,415	112	16

Sources: (1980) U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984; (1990) U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992.

compared to 1980 could reflect either a decline in returning among migrants or a lower level of out-migration in the 1980s leading to fewer new migrants who may choose to return. In 1980, 9,361 American Samoa-born individuals were living in the United States; in 1990, there were about 15,000.³ The lower incidence of return migrants thus seems to relate to fewer migrants returning rather than to fewer Samoans migrating.

For data on the characteristics of return migrants from the United States we must rely on census data on individuals who resided in the United States five years before the census. Of those persons resident in the United States in 1975, 39 percent were American Samoa-born and 54 percent U.S. -born; in 1985, the figures were 33 percent and 57 percent. Thus the characteristics of returnees are at best a combination of the characteristics of first- and second-generation return migrants. These are the individuals most likely to acquire valuable skills overseas and apply them once back home. To address return migration directly, data are needed on the characteristics of American Samoa-born individuals who migrate at the time that they migrate and at the time that they return home. Information would also be needed on the economic activities they engage in before migrating and upon return. In the absence of such data, data on those resident in the United States in 1975 and 1985 are used as a proxy.

The age distribution data in Table 2 show that 69 percent of those res-

TABLE 2. Age Distribution of Those Resident in the United States Five Years Previously, 1980 and 1990

Age	1980 Census	1990 Census
	Num	ıber
Total	1,639	1,781
	Percer	ntage
Total	100.0	99.9
5-9	14.6	15.4
10-14	12.8	14.5
15-19	9.3	12.1
20-24	10.0	7.3
25-29	13.3	8.3
30-34	12.6	8.6
35-44	12.4	16.2
45-54	8.2	8.6
55-59	2.9	2.7
60+	3.9	6.2

Sources: See Table 1.

Note: In this and following tables, percentage-s may not sum to precisely 100.0% due to rounding.

ident in the United States in 1980 were of labor force age (aged 15-59 years) compared with 54 percent of the entire population. The respective figures for 1990 are 64 percent and 56 percent. These figures indicate that returnees made a disproportionate contribution in numbers to the labor force. Table 2 also shows a shift in the pattern between censuses. In the 1990 census, return migrants from the United States were less likely to be in the prime working ages (aged 20-34) than returnees in the 1980 census. This could signal increased permanent migration among younger workers or a change in the age structure of outmigration.

Data on income and labor-market activity of return migrants can be obtained from the published census reports and compared to data for all residents of American Samoa. In Table 3 data on income are reported. In both censuses return migrants were more likely to be income earners and to have higher incomes (median and mean). However, the income advantage enjoyed by return migrants (shown by the ratio of median or mean incomes) decreased between 1980 and 1990--from 80 percent of median income in 1980 to 60 percent in 1990.

Some of the reasons for the higher earnings among return migrants are revealed in Tables 4, 5, and 6. Return migrants had much higher levels of educational attainment in 1990 than did all residents of American Samoa (Table 4). Fully 82 percent had a high school diploma or higher qualification and 23 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher. For all residents the corresponding figures were 51 percent and 5 percent.⁴

Return migrants were less prevalent in the labor market in 1990 than a decade earlier. Although the labor force grew from 8,329 in 1980 to 14,198 in 1990, the number of returnees in the labor force fell by 21 per-

TABLE 3. Income for Persons Aged 15 Years and Older, by Residence Five Years before the Census

	Total Number with Income	0	Median Income (U.S.\$)	Mean Income (U.S.\$)
Residence in 1975				
American Samoa	19,090	51.3	4,219	6,159
U.S.	1,190	66.1	7,645	12,425
(Ratio, U.S./				
American Samoa)		(1.3)	(1.8)	(2.0)
Residence in 1985				
American Samoa	28,952	53.7	6,600	9,147
U.S.	1,249	60.0	10,625	16,186
(Ratio, U.S./				
American Samoa)		(1.1)	(1.6)	(1.8)

Sources: See Table 1.

TABLE 4. Educational Attainment of Persons Aged 18 Years and Older, by Residence Five Years before the 1990 Census (Percentage)

	Resident in American Samoa	Resident in U.S.
Total	99.9	99.9
Elementary	15.3	4.6
Some high school	33.8	13.6
High school graduate	30.8	31.0
Some college	9.6	18.8
Associate degree	5.6	9.0
Bachelor's degree	3.2	14.0
Higher degree	1.6	8.9

Sources: See Table 1.

sons and their labor force participation rate declined about 4 percentage points (Table 5). Return migrants had higher levels of labor force participation in 1980 than all adults in American Samoa but the rates had almost converged by 1990. Although there was a slight increase between the censuses in the number of individuals resident in the United States five years before the census (to 142 individuals), the number of returnees aged 16 years and older who were employed, and thus potentially applying skills they had acquired overseas, declined by 48. It is not uncommon for return migrants to experience problems in reentering the home labor market. Such problems may explain the higher rates of unemployment of returnees in both 1980 and 1990, and the extent of the problem may have increased between the censuses. Cross-classification of data by year of return would allow us to investigate this hypothesis.

Return migrants were more likely than all residents to work full-time (more than 35 hours) in 1980 but less likely to do so in 1990. The relative worsening of the labor market situation of return migrants in 1990 may explain, at least in part, the deterioration in their earnings advantage over all residents and may explain, at least in part, the lower level of return migration in 1990.

The industrial distribution of employment of return migrants and all

TABLE 5. Labor Force Status of the Population Aged 16 Years and Older, by U.S. Residence Five Years before the Census

	1	980 Census			1990 Censu	ıs
	All	In U.S. in 1975	Ratio (U.S./A	All) All	In U.S. in 1985	Ratio (U.S./All)
Population 16+						
(number)	18,319	1,155		27,991	1,198	
Labor force (number)	8,329	655		14,198	634	
Labor force participatio	n					
rate (%)	45.5	56.7	1.3	50.7	52.9	1.0
Civilian labor force						
(number)	8,308	642		14,187	633	
Employed (%)	97.6	96.9	1.0	94.9	92.7	1.0
35+ hours (%)	89	91	1.0	95	93	1.0
1-34 hours (%)	11	9	0.8	5	7	1.4
Unemployed (number) Unemployment	202	20		726	4 6	
rate (%)	2.4	3.1	1.3	5.1	7.3	1.4

Sources: See Table 1.

residents is shown in Table 6. The distributions are quite different. All residents had a concentration in manufacturing that increased between 1980 and 1990. Return migrants were concentrated in professional and related services and public administration. However, the percentage of return migrants in these two industries declined after 1980 and the percentage in manufacturing increased. Professional and related services and public administration pay almost twice as much as employment in manufacturing. Thus the different industrial distributions of employment help explain the income differences noted above.

Data on Persons Who Had Lived in the United States for Six Months or More

In the 1980 census, data were collected on individuals who had resided in the United States for six or more consecutive months at some time between 1970 and 1980.⁵ Unfortunately these data were not collected in the 1990 census. Information on those who had resided in the United

TABLE 6. Employment by Major Industry and U.S. Residence Five Years before the Census

	1980 Census		1990 C	ensus	
	All Persons	In U.S. in 1975	All Persons	In U.S. in 1985	
		Nı	umber		
Total Employed	8,106	622	13,461	587	
	Percentage				
Total	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.0	
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries	1.2	1.4	2.4	2.9	
Construction, mining	7.7	6.4	8.8	8.5	
Manufacturing	23.5	5.8	33.8	12.8	
Transport, communications	8.7	9.2	7.5	7.3	
Wholesale	1.9	1.8	1.9	2.7	
Retail	9.6	9.0	10.8	10.6	
Finance, insurance, real estate	1.3	3.9	1.3	3.9	
Business, repair	1.3	1.0	2.2	2.4	
Entertainment, personal service	3.3	2.3	2.5	1.2	
Professional, related services	21.6	33.4	18.2	28.4	
Public administration	19.8	25.7	10.6	19.3	

Sources: See Table 1.

States for at least six months may give us more insight into return migrants and the likelihood that they acquired valuable education and skills while overseas.

Individuals who had been away for at least six years constitute the largest group of returnees for males and females (Table 7). Fully 47 percent of males and 41 percent of females had been absent for this period. Short-term absences (six months to two years) were the next most common, accounting for 30 percent of male and 37 percent of female returnees (Table 7). These figures are consistent with two types of return migrants, a group who erred in migrating and returned quickly (or who were "on the trip") and another group for whom migration and

TABLE 7. Persons Aged 5 Years and Older Who Lived in the United States for Six or More Consecutive Months between 1970 and 1980 and Returned to American Samoa, by Sex, Age, and Length of Stay in the United States, 1980

Longth of Chan	M	ales	Fen	emales		
Length of Stay & Age Group	Number	Number Percentage		Percentage		
Total	1,795		1,797			
6 months to 2 years						
Under 1 5	99	5.5	126	7.0		
15-24	74	4.1	137	7.6		
25-34	95	5.3	132	7.3		
35-44	87	4.8	68	3.8		
45+	189	10.5	200	11.1		
3 to 5 years						
Under 15	8 5	4.7	74	4.1		
15-24	5 3	3.0	79	4.4		
25-34	8 5	4.7	73	4.1		
35-44	3 3	1.8	26	1.4		
45+	33	1.8	25	1.4		
6 or more years						
Under 15	136	7.6	104	5.8		
15-24	126	7.0	185	10.3		
25-34	206	11.5	199	11.1		
35-44	172	9.6	114	6.3		
45+	209	11.6	133	7.4		
Length of stay not reported	113	6.3	122	6.8		

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.

return migration after an extended absence were planned over the life cycle. Those who were away for three or more years were more likely to acquire skills and were the vast majority of returnees.

The labor force activity of returnees during their last six months of residence in the United States was lower than that for persons in American Samoa in 1979 (Table 8). Only 41 percent of male returnees and 29 percent of female returnees were engaged in working at a job or business compared to 58 percent and 39 percent for all males and females in American Samoa. This lower level of economic activity may reflect a higher incidence of other productive activities such as education (see Table 9), lower labor market participation, or higher unemployment. It may also imply that economic difficulties or retirement may have been a precipitating factor in the decision to return.

If education was a primary reason for initial migration and subsequent return migration, the probability of school attendance should have been higher for return migrants in the six months before their return than for those remaining in American Samoa. This does not appear to have been the case in 1980. Of the 3,592 individuals who had resided in the United States for six or more consecutive months, 35 percent reported school attendance during the last six months of residence (Table 9). This percentage is considerably less than the 47 percent of all American Samoans aged 5 years and older who were enrolled in school in 1980. However, 45 percent of returnees were of school age, that is, were aged 5-24, compared to 56 percent of the American Samoa population. Thus the probabilities of a school-age individual being in school or college were the same.⁶

TABLE 8. Persons Aged 16 Years and Older Who Lived in the United States for Six or More Consecutive Months between 1970 and 1980 and Returned to American Samoa, by Activity during Last Six Months of Stay, 1980

	Ma	ales	Females	
Activity for Last Six Months in U.S.	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Total	1,376	100.0	1,368	100.0
Working at job or business	559	4 1	400	2 9
Not working at job or business	642	47	819	6 0
Not reporting working	175	13	149	11
(In U.S. armed force) ^a	(217)	(16)	(17)	(1)

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.

^aThose in the armed forces are also recorded in the other categories.

TABLE 9. Persons Aged 5 Years and Older Who Lived in the United States for Six or More Consecutive Months between 1970 and 1980 and Returned to American Samoa, by School Attendance for Last Six Months of Stay, 1980

School Attendance for	Ma	ales	Females	
Last Six Months in U.S.	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Total	1,795	100.0	1,797	100.0
Attending school or college	629	35.0	641	35.7
Not attending school or college	915	51.0	933	51.9
Not reporting either	251	14.0	223	12.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.

Discussion

Data from the 1980 and 1990 censuses in American Samoa and the United States indicate that the amount of return migration to American Samoa is small and declined during the 1980s. Return migration may still, however, contribute to the economy if the migrants acquire skills that they use productively upon their return, Migrants returning from the United States were more successful in American Samoa than other American Samoans and other migrant groups. Their median incomes were considerably higher, their labor force participation higher, and their representation in professional services and public administration was higher than any other group. However, the economic advantage enjoyed by return migrants declined between 1980 and 1990. This decline was largely due to decreasing labor market success: a declining participation in the labor market (perhaps reflecting the increasing average age of adult returnees), increasing unemployment, declining hours, and decreasing occupational success.

Why has the relative success of return migrants decreased? Possible explanations are a decrease in the acquisition of education and skills, and decreased selectivity in out-migration leading to a greater likelihood that return migrants will be those who have failed to find a niche in the metropolitan countries.⁷

The superior performance of return migrants in the census-reported data does not allow us to conclude that migration is a "good thing" simply because return migrants are away long enough to acquire skills, earn more than other American Samoans, have higher educational attainment, and are employed in higher-paying industries than all American Samoans. The primary barrier to drawing this conclusion is

that we do not know what education and skills migrants left American Samoa with, that is, were education and skills acquired overseas? Nor do we know what education and skills would have been acquired if the individuals had not migrated. This latter problem is the problem of selectivity. That is, migrants tend to be a highly selected group who would have performed above average even if they had not migrated. Thus simple comparisons of migrants (and return migrants) with nonmigrants give an upward-biased picture of the benefits of migration. Ahlburg and Levin found that recent American Samoan immigrants to the United States had a similar occupational distribution to immigrants of longer residence (1990:8). This implies that migrants of different vintages have similar education and skills. In other words, migration is selective and little additional skill accumulation takes place beyond that which would otherwise occur. This is also suggested by the findings on the activity of those who had resided in the United States for six or more months between 1970 and 1980. If little additional skill and education is acquired, then the argument in favor of migration is considerably weakened.⁸ It must be emphasized that this is a very tentative conclusion because the occupational classifications in the published census data are so broad. Much better data are needed to resolve the issue of selectivity.

Conclusion

Data in the 1980 and 1990 censuses of American Samoa indicate that return migration declined in the 1980s. The data also seem to indicate that migration may make individuals more productive and thus adds to the national good. Return migrants were absent long enough to acquire education and skills and outperform nonmigrants in the labor market, implying that they may have acquired more human capital (education and skills), even though their advantage declined during the 1980s.

Closer analysis of the data leads us to be skeptical of this interpretation. Based on 1980 census data, at the time of return migrants had lower levels of economic activity and no greater rates of school attendance than all American Samoans. This throws some doubt on the hypothesis of greater acquisition of education and skills. The undeniably greater economic success of return migrants does not necessarily mean that they have acquired human capital as a result of migration. Migration is a selective process. Those who migrate would have been more successful than the average nonmigrant even if they had not migrated.

Thus it seems that American Samoans may have benefited from

migration to the United States but that the relative benefit declined in the 1980s. The conclusion is tentative and cannot be resolved until better data are collected on migrants and return migrants. Data could be collected on the productive attributes (education, training, occupation, and the like) of migrants at the time of migration and at their return. Expanded entry and exit cards may be used to collect these data. This information would need to be augmented with data on the individual's earnings and assets, such as those collected in the income and expenditure surveys carried out in American Samoa in 1985 and 1988. Collection, storage, and analysis of such data would allow the calculation of the benefits of migration with controls for the selectivity of migration and return migration.9 An ideal and unified approach to collecting such data is a panel, that is, individuals in randomly selected families are interviewed over a period of years. Such panels are utilized in many developed countries and in some developing countries. There are currently efforts being made to establish such panel data collections in some countries in Micronesia. A valuable addition to this statistical approach is the approach of in-depth case studies, such as used by Macpherson, and life histories of migrants. 10 Case studies and life histories give valuable insights that statistical studies do not, but they are necessarily limited to small numbers and their representativeness is suspect. The different approaches are complementary rather than substitutes.

NOTES

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- 1. Although there is no post-enumeration survey carried out in American Samoa, the census data are judged to be of high quality. The labor-force questions in the census yielded data consistent with data from labor-force surveys carried out in 1985 and 1988 (Michael Levin, U.S. Bureau of the Census, pers. com., 1993). In addition, the methodologies used in the 1980 and 1990 censuses were consistent, strengthening the validity of comparisons across the censuses.
- 2. Of the 27,511 individuals aged 5 years and older, 689 did not report a place of residence in 1980; 371 of these were born in American Samoa. To calculate these percentages, I used as denominators the totals of those who reported a place of residence.
- 3. The 1980 figure is from Ahlburg and Levin (1990) and the 1990 figure is from unpublished census data.
- 4. Data on educational attainment by residence in 1975 were not published in the 1980 census report.

- 5. Michael Levin, Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, provided these data from STF3 (Summary Tape File 3) (U.S. Bureau of the Census n.d.). They are discussed in greater detail in Ahlburg and Levin (1990:80-83).
- 6. Data more finely disaggregated by age would allow a more conclusive test of the role of education in return migration.
- 7. Connell characterized returned migrants as a group, largely composed of those who had failed overseas (1984:192). This does not appear to be true for American Samoan return migrants.
- 8. An argument can be made for migration if migration results in some other nation's paying for the acquisition of education and skills.
- 9. Data on nonmigrants would also be needed to control for the selectivity of migration.
- 10. See Ala'ilima and Stover (1986) for a discussion of life histories and Chapman (1991) for a discussion of more qualitative studies of migration.

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