Coming of Age in Immigrant America

By Rubén G. Rumbaut

In at least one sense the so-called “American century” is ending much as it began: The United States has become anew a nation of immigrants, and is again being transformed in the process. Central to this transformation are immigrant children and U.S.-born children of immigrants, who account for nearly 20 percent of all American children today, including 64 percent of all Hispanic children and an overwhelming 84 percent of all Asian-American children. In 1997, data from the Current Population Survey show, there were approximately 10.8 million U.S.-born children under 18 who had at least one foreign-born parent, and another 3 million foreign-born children under 18.

Immigrant families, moreover, are heavily concentrated in areas of settlement. For example, fully one third of the “immigrant stock” population of the U.S. resides in California, and another third resides in Florida, Texas, and the New York-New Jersey region, with the concentrations being denser still within a handful of metropolitan areas in these five states. The size and concentration of this emerging population, its diverse national and socioeconomic origins, and its multiple forms of adaptation, pose significant challenges to all concerned, from the local school board to federal bureaucracies, and make its evolution extraordinarily important for the future of the nation.

The rapid growth of immigration to the United States over the last three decades has led to a mushrooming research literature and an intensified public debate about the new immigrants and their impact on American society in an age of unprecedented diversity. Less noticed, however, is the fact that a new generation of Americans, raised in immigrant families, has been coming of age. They are transforming their adoptive society even as they themselves are being transformed into the newest Americans. Over time, these children will decisively shape the character of their ethnic communities and, indeed, the nation as a whole. It is no exaggeration to say that the long-term effects of contemporary immigration will hinge more on the trajectories of these youths than on the fate of their parents. These children of today’s immigrants—a post-immigrant generation oriented not to their parents’ immigrant pasts but to their own American futures—are here to stay, and they represent the most consequential and lasting legacy of the new immigration to the United States.

There are many ways of framing the question of how this legacy will play itself out, but perhaps the most succinct was posed by the sociologist Alejandro Portes, the co-principal researcher of the study on which this paper is based, who asked whether these youth will follow the trajectory of earlier European immigrants and successfully join the middle class, or whether they will instead find their access blocked and become “part of an expanded multiethnic underclass.” It is far too early to render a final verdict on this question; however, a number of preliminary indicators are available that, collectively, suggest that many of the recent political responses to immigration may be misguided.

This paper will look at three issues that bear on the question: language acquisition; ethnic “identities”; and academic achievement and career ambition. It relies on the latest results (continued on page 3)
Editor’s Note

Model Minorities

An extraordinary proportion of today’s school children are immigrant children or the children of immigrants. In some cities, the numbers range up to sixty percent; some schools are a virtual UN of immigrant children. This influx poses challenges that can seem overwhelming, particularly given the prevalence of misconceptions about these youth. These misconceptions come at several levels.

At worst, there are a proliferation of stereotypes and pseudo-scientific “findings” about the intellectual capacities of different ethnic groups. Think of the dust kicked up just a few years ago by the now-infamous book, The Bell Curve, which asserted that different races-a concept whose problematicity the authors failed to recognize—were endowed with differential mental abilities.

More common, perhaps, than an outright racism premised on shaky biological beliefs is a kind of “sociological” racism that slots the races into a neat hierarchy of achievement. Some groups are said to be “model minorities,” sweeping up the National Merit Scholarships and the Westinghouse Science Awards; others are thought to be on a downward track, spiraling into a new, multi-hued underclass.

So it is instructive, in this issue of RPM, to study Ruben Rumbaut’s analysis of the data he and Alejandro Portes have uncovered regarding the academic achievements, identities, and English language proficiency of different national-origin immigrant groups.

What makes their arguments difficult to ignore is the solid empirical basis on which they are made. Rumbaut and Portes conducted interviews with over 5,200 youths in 1992, and with over 80 percent of them on a second interview three to four years later. This was the first major, longitudinal study of the children of immigrants ever conducted; its results are therefore of more than usual interest.

The first, and in many ways the most important finding, is that immigrant groups of all national origins and races—consistently outperform the native-born, work harder at schooling, are more engaged and motivated, and value education more.” This finding holds for (African-origin) Dominicans, Chinese, Mexicans, or any of a host of other groups.

Equally interesting, perhaps, are the variations by national origin, for they complicate the neat sociological hierarchy considerably. The low academic ambition of the Hmong, the high academic achievement of Dominicans: These results were made public as a kind of “acting white.”

The results are not always reassuring. Newspaper accounts of the study made a point of remarking on the irony that although the study’s two authors are both of Cuban origin, the children of Cuban immigrants were the study’s poorest academic performers. This sort of finding, it might be said, is the price of empiricism. Yet the larger impression is a reassuring one: These children are doing well.

If the author brings one message out of his analysis, it is that “we reap what we sow.” He points out that the experience of discrimination can provoke the formation of a “reactive identity” that views hard work and study as “acting white.” Pogo’s famous remark seems particularly appropriate: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”
Executive Summary:

*One of five American children today is either an immigrant or the child of immigrants.

*Immigrant families are concentrated in a handful of cities.

*The number, concentration, and diversity of the children of immigrants make the question of how their futures will play out extremely important.

*The children of immigrants not only come to speak, read, and write English with fluency, but prefer it overwhelmingly to their parents’ native tongue.

*Change in ethnic self-identity has not been toward assimilative mainstream identities; but toward a more nationalistic reaffirmation of the immigrant identity for some groups, and toward pan-ethnic minority group identities for most of the others.

*Despite widespread experiences of discrimination, a large and growing majority of survey respondents agreed that “there is no better country to live in than the United States.”

*Children of immigrants are ambitious, and more rank a good education as very important than any other value.

*Children of immigrants have drop-out rates of half the district-wide average, and outperform the native-born in GPA.

*There are large national origin differences in the educational performance and social, cultural and psychological adaptation of children of immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), an investigation of the educational performance and social, cultural and psychological adaptation of children of immigrants, the largest study of its kind and the only longitudinal study of the new generation. The study followed the progress of a sample of teenage youths representing 77 nationalities in two key areas of immigrant settlement in the United States: Southern California (San Diego) and South Florida (Miami and Fort Lauderdale) from 1992 to 1996. Because the study only tracked students from junior high through the end of high school, it does not track post-secondary education or the crucial “school-to-work” transition, which will be key determinants in the second generation’s socio-economic progress. However, the results to date have clear implications for the future of these youths and for public policy responses.

Language Acquisition

A perennial controversy in the U.S. public debate on immigration concerns bilingual education and perceived threats to the continuing predominance of English as the national language. A popular new initiative on the June 1998 primary ballot in California, called “English for the Children,” reflects this impulse. It would abolish “bilingual education,” place immigrant students in one year of English immersion and then move them into regular classes unless their parents secure a waiver. CILS data on language preference and proficiency provide some illuminating information in this regard.

Over 90 percent of these children of immigrants report speaking a language other than English at home, mostly with their parents. This indicates clearly that their natal language, or language of origin, is not English. But as seen in Table 1, in 1992 already 73 percent of the total sample preferred to speak English instead of their parents’ native tongue. By 1995, the proportion who preferred English had grown to 88 percent, including 83 percent of the foreign-born and 93 percent of the U.S.-born. Even among the most mother-tongue- retentive group—the Mexican-origin youth living in San Diego, a Spanish-named city on the Mexican border with a large Spanish-speaking immigrant population and a wide range of Spanish-language radio and TV stations—the force of linguistic assimilation was clear: while in 1992 only a third (32 percent) of the Mexico-born children preferred English, by 1995 that preference had nearly doubled to 61 percent; and while just over half (53 percent) of the U.S.-born Mexican-Americans in San Diego preferred English in 1992, that proportion had jumped to four-fifths (79 percent) three years later. Even more decisively, among Cuban-origin youth in Miami, 95 percent of both the foreign-born and the native-born preferred English in the final survey, in both public and private schools.

An important indicator of this large and rapidly growing preference for English has to do with the children’s increasing fluency in English (both spoken and written) relative to their level of fluency in the mother tongue. Respondents were asked to evaluate their ability to speak, understand, read and write in both English and their mother tongue. The response format, identical to the item used in the U.S. census, ranged from “not at all” and “not well” to “well” and “very well.” Over three-fourths of the total sample in 1992 and 1995 reported speaking English “very well,” compared to only about a third who reported an equivalent level of spoken fluency in the non-English language. Even among the foreign born, 69 percent spoke English “very well” compared to 41 percent who spoke a foreign language “very well.”
And the differences in reading fluency are much sharper still. Those who can read English “very well” are three times as many as those who can read a non-English language very well (78 percent to 24 percent). The ability to maintain a sound level of literacy in a language, particularly in languages with entirely different alphabets and rules of syntax and grammar (such as many of the Asian languages brought by immigrants to California), is nearly impossible to achieve in the absence of schools that teach it, and of a community that values it and in which it can be regularly practiced.

As a consequence, the bilingualism of these children of immigrants becomes increasingly uneven. The CILS data vividly underscore the rapidity with which English triumphs and foreign languages atrophy in the United States—even in a border city like San Diego, or in Miami, the metropolitan area with the highest percentage of foreign-born in the country. The second generation not only comes to speak, read and write English with fluency, but prefers it overwhelmingly to their parents’ native tongue.

### Identity Shifts

In both surveys, an identical open-ended question was asked to ascertain the respondent’s ethnic self-identity. Four main types of ethnic identities became apparent: (1) a plain “American” identity; (2) a hyphenated-American identity; (3) a national-origin identity (e.g., Filipino, Cuban, Jamaican); and (4) a pan-ethnic minority group identity (e.g., Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Asian, Black). The way that adolescents see themselves is significant. Self-identities and ethnic loyalties can often influence patterns of behavior and outlook independent of the status of the families or the types of schools that children attend. They may also reflect social dynamics weighted with significant long-term political implications.
In 1992, the largest proportion of the sample (41 percent) chose a hyphenated-American identification; a fourth (27 percent), identified by national origin; 17 percent selected pan-ethnic minority identities; and 11 percent identified as plain “American.” Whether the youth was born in the U.S. or not made a great deal of difference in the type of identity selected: in 1992, the foreign-born were four times more likely to identify by national origin (43 percent) than were the U.S.-born (11 percent); conversely, the U.S.-born were much more likely to identify as American or hyphenated-American than were the foreign-born. Those findings suggested an assimilative trend from one generation to another.

But the results of the 1995 survey (conducted in the months after the passage of Proposition 187 in California) turned conventional expectations on their head. The San Diego and Miami stories diverge here. In Southern California, the biggest gainer by far in terms of the self-image of these youths was the foreign nationality identity, chosen by 32 percent in 1992 but by 48 percent in 1995. This shift took place among both the foreign-born and the U.S.-born, most notably among the youth of Mexican and Filipino descent—the two largest immigrant groups in the U.S. It reflects an apparent backlash during a period (1992-96) of high anti-immigrant sentiment and a widespread perception that political leaders were engaged in immigrant-bashing, above all in California. Pan-ethnic identities remained at 16 percent in 1995, but that figure conceals a steep decline among Mexican-origin youth in “Hispanic” and “Chicano” self-identities, and a sharp upswing in the proportion of youths now identifying pan-ethnically as “Asian” or “Asian American,” especially among the smallest groups. The rapid decline of both the plain “American” (cut to less than 2 percent) and hyphenated-American (dropping from 43 percent to 30 percent) self-identities points to the growth of a reactive ethnic consciousness.

In South Florida, by contrast, the biggest gains overall were in pan-ethnic identities such as “Hispanic” and “Black,” doubling from 17 percent in 1992 to 38 percent in 1995. This change was notable mainly among the Latin Americans and the Jamaicans, while the percent identifying by national origin remained unchanged at about a fifth; a plain American identity dropped sharply from 19 percent to less than 4 percent overall, and hyphenated-American identities fell from 41 to 30 percent. The Haitians were the sole and interesting exception in Florida: resembling the California pattern, the proportion selecting a non-national pan-ethnic identity decreased, while the proportions identifying as “Haitian” and “Haitian-American” increased notably. This response was given in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Haiti in the Fall of 1994, and suggests, in a very different way, the importance of the sociopolitical context in shaping ethnic self-identities.

Change over time has, thus, not been toward assimilative mainstream identities (with or without a hyphen). Rather, it has been toward a more “militant” or nationalistic reaffirmation of the immigrant identity for some groups (the Mexicans and Filipinos in California, the Haitians in Florida), and toward pan-ethnic minority group identities for almost all others, as these youths become increasingly aware of the ethnic and racial categories in which they are persistently classified by mainstream society.

**Discrimination And Views of the United States**

The process of growing ethnic awareness among the children of immigrants in the CILS sample is especially evident in their experiences and expectations of racial and ethnic discrimination. Reports of being discriminated against increased from 54 percent to 62 percent of the sample in the last survey. Virtually every group reported more such experiences of rejection or unfair treatment against themselves as they grew older, with the highest proportions found among the children of Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants, followed by Mexicans and other Latin Americans, and the lowest proportions among the Cuban youth in Miami.

Among those reporting discrimination, their own race or nationality is overwhelmingly perceived to account for what triggers unfair treatment from others. (Only 13 percent of this sample of children self-reported racially as “white.”) Such experiences tend to be associated over time with a higher incidence of symptoms of depression, and with the development of a distinctly more pessimistic stance about their chances to reduce discriminatory treatment through higher educational achievement. In both surveys the students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: “No matter how much education I get, people will still discriminate against me.” In 1992, 32 percent of the sample agreed with that gloomy assessment; by 1995, the proportion agreeing was about the same, at 35 percent; both instances included substantial majorities of black immigrants from the West Indies (57 percent) and Haiti (64 percent).

It is important as well to underscore the fact that despite their growing awareness of the realities of American racial biases, most of the youth in the sample (almost two-thirds) continued to affirm a confident belief in the promise of equal opportunity through educational achievement. And even more tellingly, 60 percent of these youths agreed in the 1992 survey that “there is no better country to live in than the United States,” and that endorsement grew to 72 percent three years later—despite a strong anti-immigrant mood in the country during that period. The groups most likely to endorse that view were the children of political exiles who found the most favorable context of reception in the U.S.: the Cubans and the Vietnamese. The groups least likely to agree with that statement were the children of immigrants from Haiti, Jamaica and the West Indies: those, in other words, who report having most felt the weight of racial discrimination.


Academic Achievement & Career Ambition

These children of immigrants are ambitious. When they were in the 8th and 9th grades, 67 percent aspired to advanced degrees and another 24 percent would not be satisfied with less than a college degree. Three years later, as the high school years came to a close, these proportions stayed exactly the same—showing the remarkable stability of these aspirations over time. The students were also asked for a “realistic” assessment of their chances of achieving those aspirations. In 1992, 42 percent “realistically” expected to earn advanced degrees and another 37 percent would not be satisfied with less than a college degree; in 1995, these proportions too stayed about the same—44 percent now “realistically” expected to earn advanced degrees and another 38 percent expected to graduate from college—again showing the resilience over time of these more realistic expectations. The proportion of those who realistically believed that they would not reach as far as a college degree dropped marginally from 21 percent in 1992 to 18 percent in 1995. Given the modest family origins and material resources of many of these children, their aspirations and expectations may be disproportionate with what many will be able to achieve; that too remains an open empirical question.

But ambition and a sense of purpose clearly matter. The research literature shows that high expectations are necessary for subsequent achievement. While most of these youths aim high, the least ambitious expectations are exhibited by the Mexicans, Cambodians and Laotians, that is, by groups with the lowest socio-economic status. Children from better-off families have predictably higher and more secure plans for the future. Still, the children of immigrants in this sample almost universally value the importance of a good education. Out of a variety of choices given in the 1995-96 survey, 90 percent ranked a good education as “very important” (more than any other value), while less than half as many (41 percent) equally valued “having lots of money.” And these values are backed up by persistent effort and hard work. The majority of these children of immigrants invest a substantial amount of time on daily school homework. Although wide variations are seen among the different national origin groups, at both 1992 and 1995 about 80 percent of the CILS sample reported spending more than an hour each day on homework, and over 40 percent spent over two hours daily on homework, well above the national U.S. average of less than an hour a day.

Achievement

A key question raised by this study is whether the level of achievement exhibited by these children of immigrants matched, exceeded, or fell below the grade 9-12 average for the respective school districts overall—and hence how the immigrants’ children compared to the children of non-immigrants. We can address this question directly with district-wide and CILS results from San Diego and Miami-Dade, focusing first on school dropouts—an issue of central public policy concern. A precise comparison of official dropout rates is possible, since the respective school systems are the same source of information for both populations and define the dropout measure equivalently.

A first major finding is that, in both school districts on both coasts, a significantly greater proportion of all students district-wide drop out of school than do the youth from immigrant families. As the Table 3 breakdown by race-ethnicity and gender shows, the multi-year dropout rate for grades 9-12 in the Miami-

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### TABLE 3

Multi-year (Grades 9-12) Dropout Rates, Miami-Dade and San Diego School Districts, by Race-Ethnicity and Gender: All Students District-wide vs. Children of Immigrants (CILS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<td>Miami-Dade Schools:</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students:</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children of</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Immigrants (CILS):</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Diego Schools:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All Students:</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants (CILS):</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(** Too few cases of non-Hispanic white and black children of immigrants in San Diego CILS sample for reliable rates.)
of students district-wide drop out of school than do the youth from immigrant families. The multi-year dropout rate for grades 9-12 in the San Diego schools was 16.2 percent, nearly triple the rate of 5.7 percent for the CILS sample there. And since the district-wide figures by definition include all students—both the children of immigrants and of non-immigrants—the comparison shown here is most probably a conservative estimate of the extent to which the children of immigrants are more apt to stay in school overall.

The CILS dropout rates were also noticeably lower than the district-wide rates for preponderantly native non-Hispanic white high school students (13.6 percent in Miami-Dade, and 10.5 percent in San Diego). Both males and females showed lower dropout rates, and for every racial-ethnic category among the children of immigrants. In Miami-Dade, the highest dropout rate in the district was found among non-Hispanic black students (20.2 percent), but the rate among Haitian, Jamaican and other West Indian children of immigrants was only 7.5 percent. In San Diego, among the students from immigrant families, the highest dropout rate was 8.7 percent for “Hispanic” students (including a rate of 8.8 percent among Mexican-origin youth), but even that rate was noticeably less than the 26.5 percent district norm for all Hispanics, and slightly lower than the rate for non-Hispanic whites. Finally, while in both school systems the lowest dropout rates were registered by Asian-origin students (most of whom tend to come from immigrant families), on both coasts the Asian youth in the CILS sample (all of whom are children of immigrants) had lower rates still. These findings, coming from two of the nation’s largest school districts most affected by large-scale immigration, are remarkably consistent and in general diminish public concern about the potential for an expanded multiethnic underclass in the new second generation.

Another key measure of school performance, academic grade point averages (GPAs), can also be examined comparatively with district-wide data from San Diego City Schools, broken down by grade level (9-12), compared against the GPAs earned in grades 9-12 in those same schools by the entire original CILS sample during 1992-95. The results show that at every grade level the children of immigrants outperform the district norms, although the gap narrows over time and grade level. Only 29 percent of all 9th graders in the district had GPAs higher than 3.0, compared to 44 percent of the 9th graders from immigrant families. And while 36 percent of 9th graders district-wide had GPAs under 2.0, only 18 percent of the children of immigrants performed as poorly. Those differentials decline over time by grade level, so that by the 12th grade the gap is reduced to a few percentage points in favor of the children of immigrants. That narrowing of the GPA gap is influenced by the fact that, as shown above, a greater proportion of students district-wide drop out of school than do the youth from immigrant families.

A Common Misconception
At first glance, the CILS study appears to present a rosier view of the academic achievement and performance of the children of immigrants than might be anticipated from other studies. In fact, there is a dearth of research on the subject. One main reason is that the school systems do not collect any data on the nativity or immigration status of students or their parents. The closest proxies are studies which use limited English proficiency (LEP) and fluent English proficiency (FEP) statuses to compare children of immigrants with English-only co-ethnics. The largest such study concluded that “all of the non-English immigrant minorities were outperforming their English-only co-ethnics as well as majority white students.”

There are two national-level data sets that contain information on the children of immigrants. One is quite dated; the other has not yet yielded much published information. The limitations of such studies are numerous. Their results are usually aggregated in broad panethnic categories like “Hispanics” and “Asians,” missing the diversity by and within national origin. Regional studies representing a variety of methodologies, including several ethnographies and surveys, are more numerous, and unlike the national studies mentioned above have focused on specific ethnic communities. The interesting thing they all have in common is the finding that the children of immigrants outperform the native-born, work harder at schooling, are more engaged and motivated, and value education more. These results are striking and raise the question of what explains them.

Predictors of Achievement and Ambition
It is important to determine what set of factors is most predictive of the children of immigrants’ educational achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethno-national Origin of Parents</th>
<th>GPA at T2</th>
<th>Expects advanced degree</th>
<th>Dropped out by 95</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>64.3</td>
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<td>5.5</td>
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<td>Filipino</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hmong</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>2.39</td>
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<td>Nicaraguan</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>49.5</td>
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<td>Cuban</td>
<td>2.20</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6.2</td>
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<td>Dominican</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Does not include “inactives” by 95, a category which includes dropouts as well as transfers and others.
How Many Immigrants Are There?

The 1990 census showed that there were 19.8 million immigrants living in the U.S. It has been estimated that roughly one million immigrants have been added to the population per year since then, but, until recently, firm data have not been available. Given the very large flows—it is expected that more immigrants will have arrived in this decade than at any time in U.S. history—accurate and up-to-date data are at a premium.

The CPS, or Current Population Survey, is a large monthly survey conducted by the Census Bureau to collect detailed information about the US population in between its decennial censuses. Since 1994, the CPS has one other major advantage over the last two censuses: it now asks questions about the nativity of the respondent’s parents, enabling researchers to determine the size of both the first generation (foreign-born) and the second generation population (US born with at least one foreign born parent). The following portrait emerges from an analysis of the merged 1997 and 1996 CPS data files.

The “immigrant stock” of the United States today numbers about 55 million people. Of these, 26.8 million persons are immigrants themselves and 27.8 million are U.S.-born children of immigrants (two-thirds of these have two immigrant parents and one-third have one immigrant parent). If today’s “immigrant stock” formed a country, it would rank in the top 10% in the world in population size—about twice the size of Canada, and roughly the size of the United Kingdom, France, or Italy.

Of the 27 million foreign-born, fully 60% arrived between 1980 and 1997, and an overwhelming 90% immigrated to the U.S. since 1960. Of those post-1960 “new immigrants,” the majority (52%) have come from Latin America and the Caribbean, with Mexico alone accounting for 28% of the total. Another 29% have come from Asia and the Middle East; the Filipinos, Chinese, and Indochinese alone account for 15% of the total, or as much as all of those born in Europe and Canada combined. (Africa and Oceania made up most of the remaining 4%.)

This “new immigration” is, by definition, of very recent vintage. But it is only partly true that the 1965 changes in U.S. immigration law ushered in these new flows: the 1965 Act did open the gates to previously excluded Asian (and African) immigration and expanded immigrant family categories. But the law had little to do with the dominant flows from the Americas, including Mexico. The 1965 Act actually sought to restrict the flows from the Western Hemisphere and was not responsible for the huge refugee resettlement programs that were a legacy of the Indochina War specifically and of the Cold War more generally.

Imigration, as always, is mostly the province of the young. Of the more than 24 million who immigrated since 1960, over 40% came as children under the age of 18 (what the author long ago termed the “1.5 generation” to distinguish them from both the adult “first generation” and the U.S.-born children of immigrants), and another 40% came as young adults between the ages of 19 and 34. Only one in ten immigrated after the age of 40.

And of the 28 million who form the U.S.-born “second generation” (defined as those with at least one foreign-born parent), about 40% are children under 18 today, and another 15% are young adults 19 to 34—mostly the offspring of the new immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. About a third, however, are over 55 years old-born before World War II to parents who had immigrated to the U.S., mostly from Europe, in the early part of this century.
The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in 1992 surveyed over 5,200 students representing 77 nationalities enrolled in the 8th and 9th grades in San Diego and South Florida schools, and reinterviewed 82 percent of the baseline sample in 1995-96. Reflecting the geographical clustering of recent immigration, the principal nationalities represented in the San Diego CILS sample are Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and smaller groups of other children of immigrants from Asia (mostly Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian) and Latin America. In the South Florida CILS sample, the principal national-origin groups consist of Cubans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Colombians, Nicaraguans, Dominicans, and others from Latin America and the Caribbean. These groups are representative of the principal types of immigrants in contemporary American society—including immigrant laborers, professionals, entrepreneurs, and refugees with sharply contrasting socioeconomic origins, migration histories, and contexts of entry:

(1) **Mexicans** constitute by far the largest legal and illegal immigrant population in the U.S.—in fact, they form part of the largest, longest, and most sustained labor migration in the contemporary world. San Diego, situated along the Mexican border, has long been a major area of settlement. The 1990 census showed that among adults over 25, Mexican immigrants had the lowest educational levels of any major U.S. ethnic group, native or foreign-born.

(2) Since the 1960s, the **Filipinos** have formed the second largest immigrant population in the U.S.—in fact, they form part of the largest, longest, and most sustained labor migration in the contemporary world. Many have come as professionals (nurses most conspicuously) and through military connections (especially the U.S. Navy, making San Diego with its huge Navy base a primary area of settlement). The 1990 census showed that Filipino immigrants had the lowest poverty rate of any sizable ethnic group in the U.S.

(3) **Cubans** form the third largest contemporary immigrant group in the U.S., becoming internally diversified over time from the huge first waves of political exiles of the early 1960s, to the “freedom flights” of 1965-73, the Mariel boatlift of 1980, and the balseros of the 1990s. Half of the 1.5 million Cubans in the U.S. today are concentrated in South Florida, where they have built one of the most visible ethnic enclaves in the country in Miami, dubbed “Havana USA.”

(4) Since the end of the Indochina War in 1975, refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos have formed the largest refugee population in the U.S. The 1990 census found the highest poverty and welfare dependency rates in the country among Laotians (including the Hmong) and Cambodians (many of whom are survivors of the “killing fields” of the late 1970s). The latest CPS data show that the Vietnamese are the country’s fifth largest foreign-born population, following the Mexicans, Filipinos, Cubans, and the Chinese (from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan).

(5) **Hatians and Jamaicans**, who are concentrated both in the New York and South Florida areas, are not only among the top ten recent immigrant groups in terms of size, but also form the two largest groups of “black” immigrants in the U.S. Their children’s experiences have underscored the salience of racial prejudice in American life.

Remarkably, although the 26.8 million immigrants in the U.S. in 1997 came from over 150 different countries, 40% came from only four: Mexico, the Philippines, Cuba, and Vietnam. Children of immigrants from those same four countries make up 60% of the CILS sample.

**Notes:**

1 That figure does not include nearly 2.8 million others residing in the 50 states who were born (as were their parents) in Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories, nor the even larger number who reside in Puerto Rico and the other territories. It does include 1.2 million persons classified as born abroad of American parents: almost all of these persons had one foreign-born parent; the majority of these were born in Mexico, Canada, and Europe, and 80 migrated to the U.S. after 1960.
and aspirations. The CILS longitudinal data afford an opportunity to examine the effect of variables measured in 1992, when these young people were in junior high, upon selected outcomes by the end of senior high in 1995-96.

The presentation of results is organized in Table 4, based on different indicators of educational outcomes reported by the school system: the latest GPA achieved, having officially dropped out of school at any point since 1992, and having left the school district for whatever reason since 1992. In addition, a measure of educational expectations in 1995-96 is examined as an outcome for the purpose of this analysis (the most ambitious responded in the 1995-96 survey that they “realistically” expected to earn an advanced degree).

The factors selected as likely predictors of these outcomes included nationality, gender, family structure, parent-child conflict, father’s and mother’s education and occupation, home-ownership, having attended an inner-city or suburban school in 1992, school classification as a limited English proficiency (LEP) or fluent English proficiency (FEP) student, friends’ dropout status and college plans, school homework hours per day, TV-watching hours per day, educational aspirations in 1992, parents’ educational aspirations, ethnic self-identity, and self-esteem in 1992.

Multivariate analyses controlling for all of these predictors simultaneously were then undertaken to identify the strongest and most significant determinants of each of the three achievement and ambition outcomes in 1995.

National Origin and Gender

There are very large differences in all educational outcomes that signal significant national origin differences in the socioeconomic trajectories of these youths as they make their transition into the adult labor force.

The Chinese finished high school with by far the highest GPAs and the lowest dropout rates in the study. They had very ambitious educational goals—as did other Asian-origin high-status immigrant groups (especially those from India, followed by the Japanese and Koreans). Also exhibiting above average performance were the Vietnamese and the Filipinos, followed by Laotians and Cambodians. The latter two groups, however, expressed the lowest educational expectations for the future. Jamaicans and other West Indians had lower GPAs, and the Haitians much lower still; nonetheless those Afro-Caribbean groups reported well-above-average ambitions.

Overall, the poorest performance was registered by Latin American youth, with the lowest GPAs in the sample found among the Dominicans and, unexpectedly, the highest dropout rates among Cuban youth in Miami public schools (10.1 percent), followed by Mexican-origin youth in San Diego (8.8 percent). The dropout rate for Cuban youth is particularly surprising, given that they are a highly assimilated group of longer residence in the U.S. than most among the “new immigration.” They also have average to above average socioeconomic backgrounds, have experienced less discrimination than any other group in the CILS sample, and reside in a dense ethnic enclave (half of the more than one million Cubans in the U.S. are concentrated in the Miami metropolitan area alone). Nevertheless, the Cubans (notwithstanding their lower GPA and higher dropout rates) and South Americans were the most ambitious, reflecting the relatively high socioeconomic status of their parents. Among others of Latin American origin, Mexican, Dominican, and Central American children showed the lowest educational expectations.

While gender makes only a small difference in terms of dropping out of school or leaving the school district, it strongly affects grades and ambitions, with females exhibiting superior performance compared to male students, as well as a significant edge in educational expectations.

The Family: Resources and Vulnerabilities

Children who come from intact families with both natural parents present at home clearly do much better—they have higher GPAs, much lower dropout and “inactive” rates, and higher aspirations—compared to children raised in stepfamilies or single-parent homes. The greater the stability of the family, both structurally and in terms of the quality of parent-child interactions, the greater the educational achievement and aspirations. Conversely, high-conflict non-intact families fare worst (notably in high dropout rates), and yield equally poor GPAs regardless of type of family structure.

Youths whose parents have a college education and higher status occupations perform much better in terms of achieving high grades, remaining in school, and aspiring to advanced degrees, than do those whose parents have lesser levels of education or who work in low-wage jobs or are not in the labor force. Similar patterns are evident for other indicators of socioeconomic status, such as homeownership, neighborhood poverty rates, or attendance at an inner-city school. It is scarcely surprising that a more cohesive, stable, and resourceful home environment leads to higher educational achievement. In that sense, children of immigrants are no different from the native-born.

Fluent Bilingualism, Work Discipline, and Future Goals

Students who had been classified as LEP by the schools in 1992 remained significantly associated with lower academic achievement and far more modest aspirations by 1995. More noteworthy, however, is the finding that FEP students achieved higher
GPAs and had lower dropout and inactive rates than both LEP and English-only students, confirming previous research findings on the positive link of fluent bilingualism with cognitive achievement—although, as seen earlier, the maintenance of fluent bilingualism in the second generation is likely to prove an elusive goal.

The students who had dedicated more hours to school work in junior high in 1992 did significantly better in terms of educational achievement three years later—an explanation for the superior school performance found among these children of immigrants relative to district-wide norms. Conversely, students who spent a large number of hours in front of the television by age 14 were more prone to perform poorly in subsequent years.

Educational and occupational goals in early adolescence are themselves closely associated with remaining in school and with better educational performance. High educational aspirations in 1992 were strongly and positively associated with high GPAs in 1995, net of other factors. In addition, the higher the parents’ achievement expectations as perceived by their children, the higher the students’ GPAs and their own ambitions, and the less likely they were to drop out of school or leave the district. Taken together, these results show that, even among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, work discipline and a clear sense of future goals can pay off handsomely in school achievement dividends.

Peer Groups, Self-Esteem, and Pan-ethnic Self-identities

Also significant is the influence of peers. The worst outcomes in all three measures in 1995 were associated with having close friends who themselves had dropped out of school or had no plans for college; conversely, the best outcomes were attained by students whose circle of friends consisted largely of college-bound peers.

Finally, other subjective factors also shaped performance outcomes. The self-esteem score in 1992 remained significantly associated with all of these outcomes across the board: the lower the self-esteem score in 1992, the worse the school performance three years later and the lower the ambitions. Pan-ethnic self-identities (e.g., Chicano, Latino) selected by age 14 or 15 in junior high were linked three years later with lower GPAs, higher dropout rates and lower aspirations (but not with lower self-esteem or higher depression scores). No such effects were observed for any of the other types of ethnic self-identities in 1992. That finding lends support to analyses that have pointed to the defensive development in the adolescent years of “oppositional” or “adversarial” identities which, while protective of self-esteem, disparage doing well in school as “acting white” and as a betrayal of ethnic loyalty.

Policy Implications

In some respects, the children of immigrants who are the subject of this report are quite similar to what one would find with a sample of non-immigrant, non-minority youth. But in others, they face complex circumstances that significantly add to the stress of adolescence, and exhibit wide variations among national origin groups in their vulnerabilities and resources. Despite these added challenges—or perhaps because of them—the overall picture that emerges from this study is one of noteworthy achievement and resilient ambition. Whether that can be sustained as these youths make their entry into the world of work and careers in a restructuring U.S. economy, as they form new families of their own, and as they seek to carve out a meaningful place in the society of which they are the newest
Nevertheless, the results of the study have implications for several issues that concern policy makers. The first, in many ways the most obvious, is that the research serves as a useful corrective to those who view today’s children of immigrants with alarm. Our research demonstrates that these students are doing better than average academically and that they have high academic ambitions. They are learning English swiftly, and, by large majorities, are adopting positive beliefs about the United States and their own future within it, despite experiencing discrimination. Much of the concern, therefore, that children of immigrants are failing to learn English, struggling academically, or rejecting the core civic values of the United States, would appear to be unfounded.

At the same time, it is important to point out that those who would argue that the U.S. needs to establish an “immigrant policy” that incorporates a variety of government programs targeting the children of immigrants may also have overshot the mark. Part of problem with an immigrant policy for these children is that it is premised on the idea that immigrants require or deserve different policies and interventions. Aside from certain specific groups of children with needs that do require additional resources, our research suggests that the majority of the “second generation” are remarkably similar to children of native-born parents, except that they often overcompensate by working harder.

English Language Ability

For the vast majority of students, the pattern of rapid linguistic assimilation prevails across nationalities and socioeconomic levels and suggests that, over time, the use of and fluency in foreign languages will inevitably decline. The findings suggest that the linguistic outcomes for the third generation—the grandchildren of the present wave of immigrants—will be little different than what has been the age-old pattern in American immigration history. The grandchildren may learn a few foreign words and phrases as a quaint vestige of their ancestry, but they will most likely grow up speaking English only. While the debate over immigrants’ learning of English remains contentious, what is being lost are these children’s ability to maintain fluency in the language of their immigrant parents. As noted above, this constitutes a real loss of scarce and valuable language resources not only for the individual but for the United States in an increasingly global economy.

Indeed, as Portes and Hao observe, the rise of “global cities” in the international economy has triggered a growing need for professionals and managers able to conduct business in more than one language. Among American cities, New York and Los Angeles are examples of global cities, where fluency in a number of languages is in demand. Other cities have more specialized functions. Miami, for example, has become the administrative and marketing center of the nation’s Latin American trade, and is often dubbed the “capital” of Latin America. Business leaders there have recently complained about the dearth of Spanish skills among the children of Latin immigrants. A University of Miami study sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce argued that young Hispanic Americans are leaving school with such insufficient Spanish-language skills that Miami’s position as an international marketplace may be at risk. Although, as seen in the CILS data, many children of Cuban and other Latin immigrants retain some ability in the language, their Spanish is not fluent enough to be able to conduct business transactions. This situation recently led a local businesswoman to note that even with 600,000 Hispanics in Miami, she could not find qualified people to write a letter in Spanish.

Identity & Americanization:

The study reveals that a large majority shares an appreciation for American society. Sixty percent of the children of immigrants believed at the outset of our study that the U.S. was...
the best country in the world to live in; three years later, that percentage had grown to 72 percent. Nevertheless, it appears that the experience of discrimination plays a role in the adoption, by some minority of children of immigrants, of an adversarial identity that discourages academic achievement. As noted earlier, this is seen particularly among certain Latino or Chicano youths who self-identify using these pan-ethnic labels.

These results also point to the rise of a “reactive ethnicity” that, if sustained, may portend important political alignments and commitments in their adult years. Already among first-generation adults, the past few years have seen an unprecedented increase in the number and proportion of immigrants who have applied for naturalization and who have registered to vote—with some notable and unexpected consequences. Recent press reports indicated that Republican politicians and party strategists have recognized that they were perceived by many first and second generation immigrants to have engaged in anti-immigrant rhetoric during the 1996 election. They are concerned that in the 1996 election, more immigrants voted, and voted Democratic in greater proportions, than in prior elections, and are reportedly studying ways to court the immigrant, Hispanic, and Asian vote. Whether and to what extent such future outcomes may be extrapolated from present trends remain, to be sure, open empirical questions.

**Academic Achievement**

While most children of immigrants are doing well, a portion are indeed “falling through the cracks”. For example, the population that continues to have limited English proficiency, the LEPs, are, as a group, not simply less capable linguistically than other students. Rather, they belong to a different and more vulnerable group than the majority of their peers. They have one or both parents unemployed, live in poorer neighborhoods, are more likely to grow up in female-headed households and households with higher levels of conflict, and tend to be older boys. Moreover, a substantial proportion of the LEP youth are US-born, suggesting that their problem is not simply recency of arrival from another country. Any policies meant to address their needs would have to be much more systematic and intensive than simply offering them additional language instruction.

There is a final consideration on the horizon. Given the modest family origins and material resources of many of these children, their aspirations and expectations may be at odds with what many will be able to achieve; it remains an open empirical question what will happen to these youth if their aspirations are frustrated, and what the consequences may be if they are, not just for the students themselves, but for the nation as a whole.

**Notes:**

1. The CILS survey asked the youth to report their “race” according to a fixed response format, which included a “multiracial” option as well as “other” (in which case they were asked to specify). Fewer than half adhered to the standard categories of white (13 percent), black (7 percent), and Asian (26 percent), while another 12 percent chose “multiracial.” But about half of the Cubans and other Latin Americans, and a fourth of the Mexicans, specified “Hispanic” as their race, while about half of the Mexicans and a fourth of the Filipinos listed their nationality as their race—underscoring the socially constructed character of these perceptions.

2. Even more ambitious than these children are their own parents. Asked what their parents’ expectations were for their educational futures, the students felt that their parents expected them to achieve at a higher level than the students themselves aspired to. Indeed, for many immigrants that is precisely the purpose of bringing their children to the United States. In 1995, while 44 percent of the students expected to attain an advanced degree, 65 percent of their parents did so; and while 18 percent of the children expected to stop short of a college degree, only 7 percent of the parents held such a low expectation. Parental expectations in turn are highly correlated with students’ school performance. In contrast to the perceived parental pressure to achieve are the plans of the students’ close friends—and again the types of peer groups in which the students are embedded vary in part by family socioeconomic status. The sharpest contrast in these friendship networks is seen between the Jamaicans, Filipinos and Other Asians (most of whose friends intend to attend 4-year colleges and universities) and the Mexican students (only a quarter of whom have friends who plan on attending 4-year colleges, and about 8 percent of whom reported in 1995 that most of their close friends had already dropped out of school). These social circles can exercise a powerful influence in either reinforcing or undercutting children’s aspirations and confidence in reaching them.

3. Race-ethnicity as classified by the Dade County and San Diego City Schools. These one-size-fits-all categories unfortunately combine students regardless of nativity, national origin, or generation in the U.S. Thus, the various national origin groups in the CILS sample have been aggregated here equivalently for comparative purposes. The multi-year (or longitudinal) dropout rate for grades 9-12 measures the percentage of students enrolled in the 9th grade who dropped out of school before finishing high school four years later.
Suggested Reading


- Vernez, Georges, and Allan Abrahamse. 1996. *How Immigrants Fare in U.S. Education*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.


In this complex, ambitious book, Professor Charles Tilly explores the structure of systematic patterns of substantive inequality. He contrasts his relational approach, which focuses on structural categories, with individualist methodologies that concentrate on the personal characteristics and circumstances of individuals. “Large, significant inequalities in advantages among human beings,” he contends, “correspond mainly to categorical differences such as black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, or Muslim/Jew rather than to individual differences in attributes, propensities, or performances.” What follows is merely a sketch of his richly textured argument.

All groups, ranging from households to business corporations to states, draw boundaries to distinguish insiders from outsiders. These boundaries are based on designated criteria that define the common elements shared by group members and are codified through rules, customs, organizational structures, and so on. Within groups, internal boundaries are drawn to demarcate the place of members according to their role, function, status, and authority. Differences in membership create inequities in the distribution of power and resources among members and among groups. Groups construct boundary markers from particular social characteristics, such as race, gender, educational qualifications, ethnicity, religion, and kinship. These markers make boundaries more visible, help legitimate these boundaries, promote internal solidarity, and reduce the costs of maintaining organizational control.

A boundary line has two sides, so drawing one typically generates pairs of persons and groups. “Categorical work,” he explains, “always involves imputing distinctive qualities to actors on either side of the boundary...” But categories are not merely devices of classification. They are also embedded in the social relationships among persons and groups. Consider the example of a household. The categories of parent/child, husband/wife, and master/servant are all binary descriptive labels by which persons in the household may be classified, but these labels also reflect and help to order structural relationships among household members.

Paired categories do not in themselves denote or generate substantive inequality between members of one and the other, but insidiously reinforce inequalities of hierarchical orders. In explaining how this reinforcement occurs, Tilly distinguishes between “interior” categories, such as managers/workers, that “belong to a particular organization’s internally visible structure” and “exterior” categories, such as black/white, that originate outside of any particular organization. When organizations match hierarchical interior categories to complementary exterior ones, the combined categories powerfully fortify one another. Householders, he points out, have routinely matched the low status, low wage category of domestic servant with complementary exterior categories of gender, ethnicity, national origin, and race. Guestworker programs are typically based on a similar matching process.

Tilly identifies two major mechanisms through which people and groups produce substantive, categorical inequality: exploitation and opportunity hoarding. To illustrate the first of these mechanisms, Tilly examines the history of South African apartheid. The example serves his purpose well, because it shows how the creation, manipulation, and enforcement of racial categories have been used to establish and preserve an extensive system of labor exploitation and political disempowerment. To illustrate the second of these mechanisms, Tilly aptly points to the example of chain migration. The example enables him to show clearly how social networks operate and employ interior and exterior categories to select new members and exclude others.

States play an important role in the construction, alteration, and maintenance of membership categories. Differences in these categories are typically tied to differences in the allocation of rights, duties, benefits, and burdens.

Tilly brings his usual prodigious erudition and analytical rigor to his subject matter, but general readers unfamiliar with the specialized fields from which he draws may find some of his arguments elusive. Through a more extensive comparative approach, he might have explored why certain distinctions among persons and groups become authoritative categorical boundaries and other distinctions do not. Nevertheless, Tilly’s conclusion is well worth pondering: he argues that substantive inequalities in this allocation is not only undemocratic but can undermine the foundation of a democratic order.

-Doug Klusmeyer
The International Migration Policy Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a leading source of expert analysis and policy ideas on migration and refugee issues. The Endowment was established in 1910 with a gift from Andrew Carnegie. As a tax-exempt operating (not grant-making) foundation, the Endowment conducts programs of research, discussion, publication and education in international affairs and U.S. foreign policy.

The Urban Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan policy research organization established in 1968 to investigate the social and economic problems confronting the nation and assess the means to alleviate them. Two programs at the Urban Institute focus on migration issues: the Immigrant Policy Program, which examines the integration of newcomers into the United States, and the Program for Research on Immigration Policy, which focuses on immigration flows and impacts.

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We invite the submission of books and articles for possible review and/or mention in the newsletter. We also welcome information about forthcoming conferences, events, and research opportunities. We would be particularly grateful for news about research/grant opportunities offered by private and public sector agencies, and relevant studies and data sources from these agencies.