

Immigrant Children and the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

The children of immigrants represent a large and growing segment of the US population. The children of immigrants are not progressing steadily as a group at the same rate or following a standard pathway to adulthood. Rather, there is wide variation across ethnic groups and immigrant generations, and immigrant children are not necessarily following the patterned sequence of the nonimmigrant majority.

Immigrant youth reach developmental milestones such as educational attainment, job attainment, and achieving independence from parents, but they do so at varying rates and with different levels of success. These young people are diverse in terms of their backgrounds and the places where they come of age, and these factors interact in ways that help explain why they are following divergent pathways to adulthood. In particular, legal status—whether of immigrant parents or of immigrant youth themselves—has become a “master status” that conditions their path to adulthood. Future research must continue to identify the ways in which geography, local organizations, immigration reform, and other factors interact to shape opportunities that immigrant youth as they approach adulthood.

The implications of the diverging developmental pathways of immigrant youth are significant, not only for immigrants and their families but also for the larger society. Given that they represent a large percentage of children today, these young people will heavily influence tomorrow’s workforce—and therefore the economic strength and security of this country.

BACKGROUND

The research on immigrant children and the transition to adulthood has emerged as a significant literature that concerns a large and growing segment of our population. There are over 40 million first-generation immigrants today, and their US-born children totaled over 32 million in 2008. At no other point in the last century have immigrants represented such a significant percentage of the nation’s population, and their children are the fastest growing segment of children under the age of 18. Therefore, as the children of immigrants come of age considerable attention has been given

to their outcomes on measures such as educational attainment, voting, and employment. The literature on the children of immigrants emphasizes that these young people are diverse in terms of their backgrounds and the places where they come of age, and that these factors interact in ways that help explain why they are following divergent pathways to adulthood.

Immigrants and their children are extremely diverse. Whether in terms of their country of origin, skin color, primary language, religion, education levels, or financial resources, today's immigrant population is unlike any previous era in America's history (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). While some arrive with visas, advanced degrees, and well-paying professional jobs, others come clandestinely with minimal levels of education and find employment in low-wage labor markets. The diversity of immigrant parents contributes to the divergent starting points from which their children begin their journey to adulthood. Depending on the resources immigrant parents are able to provide their children and how these families are received by the places where they settle, the children of immigrants from certain ethnic groups have a very different set of life options than those who pertain to another.

The transition to adulthood for the children of immigrants is important not only for these young people and their families, but also for an aging baby-boom generation who will increasingly rely on working-age children of immigrants for economic support (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). More broadly, the political, social, and economic incorporation of the children of immigrants has significant implications for the country as a whole.

Although there is no consistent definition among immigration scholars, immigrant children are generally understood to be individuals with parents who were born outside the United States. The American-born children of immigrants are often referred to as the *second generation*, while their parents are of the first generation. Most scholars define individuals with immigrant parents who were born abroad and moved to the United States before age 12 as the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut, 2004). While 1.5- and second-generation young people have much in common—at very least, they both grow up in immigrant households and straddle two separate cultures and languages—they differ from each other in important ways. Immigrant children who did not come to the country until later in childhood have had less time in the United States to develop English language skills, for example, or to learn the cultural nuances that children adopt from the context in which they grow up. Most significantly, while second-generation youth are US citizens by birth, those of the 1.5 generation do not enjoy any such guarantee.

We typically think about becoming an adult as the process by which one exits adolescence and assumes the tasks and responsibilities characteristic

of adulthood. Traditionally, this process entails the transition from full-time schooling to full-time work, and from living with (or otherwise being financially dependent on) one's parents to getting married and starting one's own family. The latter is often associated with buying a home, or physically living apart from one's parents. Moreover, we have come to associate the transition to adulthood with a normative timeline—certain milestones should be achieved by a certain age—even though there is considerable evidence that this timeline of events is getting pushed back (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010), although not necessarily for young people from minority, work-class or poor families (Berlin, Furstenberg, & Waters, 2010; Silva, 2012). Young people today are living with their parents longer than they were several decades ago, for example, and putting off marriage and having children for longer than in the past (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2002).

This is not necessarily the case with the children of immigrants—or at least not with all ethnic groups. As with the transition to adulthood summarized above, the children of immigrants reach a series of developmental milestones to adulthood such as independence from their parents, marriage, employment, and starting their own family (Rindfuss, 1991). However, these transitions are not necessarily linear or fluid, and the children of immigrants are not progressing steadily as a group at the same rate or following a standard pathway to adulthood. Rather, there is wide variation across ethnic groups and immigrant generations, and immigrant children are not necessarily following the patterned sequence of the nonimmigrant majority (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010).

There is considerable evidence that many children of immigrants are transitioning to adulthood successfully, but outcomes for the members of some ethnic groups are a cause for some concern. Whereas the 1.5 and second generations of certain immigrant groups are more likely to graduate from college and work high-paying jobs in the tech sector, members of other ethnic groups are at elevated risk of dropping out of high school, getting caught up in the criminal justice system, and becoming young parents—all factors that can interrupt the transition to adulthood. In other words, as these young people begin to approach adulthood, their divergent outcomes suggest that we may be reproducing the problem of inequality in America rather than resolving it.

The implications of these diverging pathways are significant, not only for immigrants and their families but also for the larger society. Given that they represent a large percentage of children today, these young people will heavily influence tomorrow's workforce—and therefore the economic strength and security of this country. This should be of particular concern for the aging baby-boom generation because they will increasingly rely on working-age children of immigrants for economic support (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). There are many other ways that their incorporation matters, of

course, not the least of which is political incorporation through voting and other forms of civic participation. Indeed, if the children of immigrants are blocked from entry into the mainstream economic, social, and political operations of society, their exclusion will have ramifications well beyond the individual young people who may experience this inequality most acutely.

Therefore, it is incumbent to explore *why* some children of immigrants are getting ahead while others are falling behind. Scholars find that the reasons for different mobility or incorporation pathways among the children of immigrants are multiple, complex, and overlapping. One way to think about why some children of immigrants are falling behind is cumulative disadvantage. Poverty, legal status, bad schools, community violence, discrimination in the labor market, and many other factors interact in ways that compound the barriers some immigrant youth must overcome in order to navigate the pathway to adulthood successfully. Cumulative disadvantage might be understood on a continuum. At one end, immigrant youth encounter few roadblocks to the transition to adulthood. At the other end, immigrant youth get bogged down by a host of factors that make it difficult to achieve the basic milestones marking the transition to adulthood. As growing numbers of the children of the most recent immigrants reach adulthood, researchers are pursuing the complexities of cumulative disadvantage and how these correspond with the major markers that signal this developmental transition, often with a focus on educational attainment, labor market outcomes, and independence.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The literature on the transition to adulthood identifies three developmental milestones: educational attainment, job attainment, and achieving independence from parents (Elder, 1985). Research on the children of immigrants provides insights into how each of these milestones is conditioned by a cumulative set of disadvantages, therefore affecting some immigrant groups more than others. Cross-cutting these themes is the immigration status of immigrant parents and, for the 1.5 generation, the children themselves. This section will briefly take up each of these milestones before underscoring the growing awareness among researchers of immigration status as a “master status” that fundamentally conditions the transition to adulthood.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Educational attainment is a central aspect of the transition to adulthood, especially given the shifting demands of today’s labor market. It is no longer as possible to get a stable job—let alone one with a decent salary—without a college degree. Increasingly, a graduate or professional degree is necessary to

be competitive on the labor market. This has prolonged the period of formal education for young people, ultimately delaying the moment when they are financially independent from their parents. However, for the children of immigrants, this is not uniformly the case.

Within the larger national population there are key differences by social class, country of origin, nativity, and immigrant generation (Mollenkopf *et al.*, 2005; Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). For example, many young people from less-advantaged immigrant households cannot afford to move seamlessly from high school to full-time postsecondary schooling because of lack of financial support from their parents or because they carry considerable financial responsibilities in their households that make it impossible for them to make tuition payments (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Moreover, many 1.5 and second generation young people from certain immigrant groups are in reciprocal financial relationships with their parents, often even supporting them (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). These arrangements shape the ways in which these children of immigrants enter into and experience early adulthood. Many are required to take on considerable financial and household responsibility and do not have the opportunity to pursue post-secondary schooling full-time and uninterrupted. As a result, for many of these young people college pursuits take a much longer time and do not always result in the successful completion.

LABOR MARKET ENTRY AND “SUCCESS”

The timing of entry into the labor market is important because it often coincides with when young people are no longer going to school. For nonimmigrant youth from middle-class families, many of whom are going to college and graduate school, this moment does not come until their early twenties. But for many immigrant children—particularly those of Latin American descent—entry into the labor market happens at a much earlier age. The need for families to spread out expenses among multiple members means that many children of immigrant families enter into the work force before high school completion. As a result, these young people do not enjoy the same degree of freedom from the stresses and responsibilities of adult roles that allow their middle-class counterparts to make investments in human capital.

Undeniably, one’s position in the labor market is also important. Not surprisingly, those who enter early and who tend to have less education do not earn as much on average because of the types of jobs that are available to them. Given the children of immigrants do not all approach adulthood with the same set of advantages, they enter the labor market at different starting

points and, as such, experience different rates of occupational and economic success.

PARENTAL SUPPORT VERSUS INDEPENDENCE

Young people today tend to rely on financial support from their parents well into their twenties, suggesting that financial independence—another marker of the transition to adulthood—has been moved back relative to earlier generations. This is not necessarily the case with immigrant youth, however, because “the pattern of support in immigrant families more often flows reciprocally or even in the opposite direction” (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2010). In other words, as they enter into adulthood many of the children of immigrants support their parents financially, or expect that their parents will move in with them when they retire or grow too old to care for themselves.

IMMIGRATION STATUS

Over the last two decades, the rights of noncitizens have dwindled while enforcement efforts at the border and also in communities and public spaces have increased. Millions of children and families are living with the results. Owing to unforeseen circumstances resulting from a buildup of border enforcement, disrupting once-circular migration patterns, the number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States grew nearly sixfold in a span of about 20 years (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Today, nearly two-thirds of adult undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States for more than 10 years, and nearly half are parents to minor children. Current research suggests that immigration status plays a large part in developmental and life course issues among the children of undocumented immigrants.

Parents’ immigration status and current policies restricting the participation of undocumented immigrants undermine the well-being of these children and can impair their cognitive development (Yoshikawa, 2011; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). The fear of authorities causes undocumented parents to forgo critical learning opportunities for which their children are eligible, particularly when services require several forms of identification, proof of employment or proof of earnings. These lost opportunities hamper children’s early language development as well as their motor and perceptual skills.

Undocumented parents’ work life also affects their children’s life chances. The types of jobs available to undocumented immigrants typically draw those with low skill levels, jobs that often involve long hours, tedious, and

laborious tasks, and very meager wages. These jobs provide limited opportunities for self-direction and autonomy. Taken together, the psychological distress of backbreaking and unfulfilling work, long hours and prolonged economic hardship are found to negatively affect parents' interaction with their children. Children with an undocumented parent also face the daunting fear that they will experience prolonged separation from one or more of their parents because of detention and deportation.

At the same time, growing numbers of undocumented children are moving through adolescence and young adulthood without full rights (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). These young people have unrestricted access to K-12 education but, because of their unauthorized immigration status, cannot legally work, vote, or travel outside of the country. They are also restricted from federal and state financial aid and cannot get driver's licenses in most states. They can also be deported. While their immigration status places few restrictions as their childhood lives, critical and adolescent transitions entail a fundamental shift in their experiences (Gonzales, 2011). However, as their rights narrow in adulthood their responsibilities increase. Many of these young people live in families that have difficulty making ends meet each month and must rely on the earning power of all members. As a result, undocumented young people must make difficult decisions about working illegally.

CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH

EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Community college has been celebrated by policy makers as a stepping stone for low-income and minority youth for whom a 4-year college is not an option. Immigrant youth, in particular, have been identified by policy makers and others as beneficiaries of the community college system, and President Obama acknowledged in his State of the Union address in 2013 that these institutions need more support given that they are a mobility springboard for many youth from minority and immigrant communities. However, little research has explored how immigrant youth are navigating these institutions or how they are leveraging these degrees to get ahead.

"Second-chance" educational institutions, such as those that offer General Educational Development (GED) credentials, are important for the nontrivial percentage of immigrant youth who drop out of high school. Some college is necessary to compete for well-paying jobs, and we need to better understand the types of "second-chance" programs that serve immigrant youth. [See Bloom (2010) on evaluation of these programs.]

Indeed, individuals with a college degree earn 1.8 times more than those with a high school diploma (Berlin *et al.*, 2010). So completing college is an

important step as young immigrant youth transition to adulthood. More research needs to explore the experiences of the college-going children of immigrants to understand why some are accessing the supports they need while others are not. It is possible that some of these young people are simply taking a less linear pathway through college, taking some time off to help their family financially before returning to finish their degree at some later point. Just as the pathway to adulthood does not seem linear for their peers who drop out of high school or go to community college, there is reason to believe that those who go to college may not hue to the conventional 4-year time to degree. As the children of immigrants, they often retain a strong connection and obligation to family. Whether that family connection is social, cultural, or economic—or some combination of the three—these linkages to family often remain strong.

GEOGRAPHY

Changes in immigrant settlement and the geography of poverty are reshaping how we understand the American metropolis and the life-course experiences of the children of immigrants. There is a growing literature documenting the various ways in which local and state contexts influence immigrant social, economic, and political incorporation. The impact of local contexts has become even more relevant in the wake of stalled immigration reform at the federal level. A growing number of state and local governments have adopted legislation that advocates and researchers consider unwelcoming—if not hostile—to immigrant newcomers. By contrast, some other places have intentionally embraced policies and practices that seek to incorporate immigrants.

To be sure, these changes have implications for the children of immigrants. But we have only a nascent understanding of how local contexts matter because many of these young people have not yet begun to transition into adulthood. We know that growing up in urban neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty can negatively impact many aspects of child development, but much less is known about growing up in nontraditional immigrant “gateways” such as the suburbs or understudied regions of the country, including the Midwest and southeast. Just as the children of immigrants come from diverse backgrounds, the places where they grow up vary widely.

Historically, most immigrant youth grew up in places such as Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York—cities that have been home to new immigrants for generations—and often lived in ethnic neighborhoods or areas of immigrant concentration. They attended high schools with immigrant youth from

similar ethnic backgrounds, and were embedded in large immigrant communities with ethnic grocery stores and restaurants. While many immigrants still raise their children in these ethnic urban environments, the dispersion of immigrants across the metropolis and into rural areas of the country raises questions about the developmental experiences of immigrant youth in these places.

Scholars studying immigrant settlement in new destination areas have written extensively about the role of sub-national governments who are crafting and implementing policies that affect immigrants. Some of these policies use language that specifically targets undocumented immigrants while others are less direct, but all such policies and practices influence the opportunities that immigrants have to get settled in their new communities, the protections they enjoy at the workplace, and the access they have to resources such as health care (Mitnik & Halpern-Finnerty, 2010). Some of these policies and practices are exclusionary while others aim to integrate immigrant newcomers (Marrow, 2009; Mitnik & Halpern-Finnerty, 2010), thereby creating variation in the type of reception immigrants receive at the local level (Alexander, 2003; Wells, 2004). Therefore, while the nation-state remains important for determining the context of reception writ large, the city is a viable—and perhaps better—unit of comparison for studying immigrant integration and migrant policy (Favell, 2001).

For the children of immigrants, in particular, one area in need of further research concerns the role of local organizations. Entities such as schools, youth-serving organizations, and sports clubs may serve as buffers against forces such as discrimination or anti-immigrant sentiment that may inhibit the life chances for immigrant youth and their families in these places. Ethnic organizations in urban ethnic neighborhoods have long served this protective function, but it is less clear how formal organizations and institutions in new settlement areas adapt to the needs of the immigrants who live there—especially when the reception extended to new immigrants is hostile.

IMMIGRATION REFORM

Again, cross-cutting a future research agenda is the legal context—and the possibility for policy reform. Future research will need to follow undocumented young people further into adulthood to better understand the challenges these transitions present.

Immigration policy is often influenced by public tolerance for immigration, and therefore is not static. The “context of reception” for immigrants tends to reactively swing from one extreme to another and is often counter-cyclical relative to economic trends (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Historically, as

the economy shrinks, intolerance for immigrants strengthens. At such times, immigrants are often characterized as outsiders and job stealers. The 1920s and early 2000s are good examples. However, during better periods when unemployment is low and economy stable, immigrants are less likely to be characterized as a threat. This pattern has been well documented by immigration historians. IRCA and the 1996 Act are both recent examples of these swings.

In the event that Federal immigration reform creates a path to citizenship, it will be critical to study how this policy is implemented, who benefits from it, and how these young people—whether they are able to attain legal status or not—become adults. On June 15, President Obama announced a change in policy that could provide deferred action to an estimated 1.4 million young people who have lived in the United States since childhood. The policy, while not granting a path to legalization, enables qualified young undocumented immigrants to remain in the country without fear of deportation and able to apply for work permits. While Congress debates their future, this policy potentially opens up other opportunities, including those that could enable young people to further their education, find jobs commensurate with their degrees, and access other government and private sector resources. This program, which began on August 15, 2012, presents a remarkable opportunity to better understand the educational, economic, and social and health impacts of widened access as these young people make critical transitions to adulthood. At the time of our writing of this entry, Congress is debating large-scale immigration reform that could potentially further widen access and rights for these young people and their parents.

MORE AND BETTER DATA

With the exception of a handful of large-scale studies of the 1.5 and second generation children of immigrants, there are relatively few data sources that give us a window into the textured reality of the transition to adulthood for these young people. The Decennial census stopped asking about parents' nativity decades ago. Indeed, the Community Population Survey, an annual snapshot taken by the Census, allows for us to assess labor market and education trends for immigrant children. But its limited sample makes it impossible to compare how these trends compare across finer geographies, such as neighborhoods.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7–12 in the United States during the 1994–1995 school year, is an example of a longitudinal study that has provided immigration researchers with some

promise. This study oversampled certain groups, including children of Mexican descent, making it possible to assess change for these youth across the early stages of the life course. Similar kinds of studies are necessary so we can explore and identify causal mechanisms that may be driving variable developmental pathways for immigrant youth.

Building on studies of intergroup differences that compare outcomes for immigrant youth by national origin, it is important that researchers find ways to collect new data (or leverage existing sources) to explore intragroup variation. Emerging work on intragroup comparison is selective given the limitations of existing data sources. One exception is a unique dataset on Mexican-origin immigrants, called the *Mexican American Study Project*, which tracks Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s (Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Intragroup comparisons using data from the Mexican American Study Project have challenged traditional frameworks for how we understand the processes of immigrant adaptation over time, the role of race in the exclusion of immigrants, and the importance of educational institutions for ameliorating barriers to social mobility for immigrant youth. Such studies promise to challenge long-standing and reductionist classification schemes whereby immigrant youth from some ethnic groups are described as following one type of mobility path (downward or upward, for example), thereby overlooking variation within that ethnic group and the factors explaining this heterogeneity.

And, finally, immigration status has increasingly become a central determinant for upward or downward mobility among immigrant youth. We have conceptual maps (Suárez-Orozco *et al.*, 2011) and a strong foundation of qualitative data (Gonzales, 2011) to provide a foundational understanding into the inner lives and vulnerabilities of undocumented youth. But there is much work to be done. Mixed methods research could go a long way in helping us better understand the ways in which unauthorized status intervenes in the transition to adulthood and how it is mediated by community institutions and variance across geographic settings. In addition, our findings thus far are largely driven by the work on Latino populations. A better understanding of this population must be achieved by careful attention to differences across ethnic and national-origin groups.

CONCLUSION

Divergent outcomes in the transition to adulthood have significant implications for the lives of the children of immigrants as well as American society writ large. Inequality in America is higher today than at any other point since the 1920s, and the promise that all newcomers have a chance to join and

contribute to this society is ironically under threat just when we are at the cusp of ushering millions of immigrant youth into adulthood. Given that the children of immigrants represent a significant percentage of youth today, it is imperative that we understand the barriers they encounter on the way to adulthood. A number of the obstacles that detour or derail immigrant youth en route to adulthood are common to those impeding nonimmigrant youth, but many immigrant youth encounter additional obstacles (and resources) that merit attention by researchers and policymakers. Immigration policy, diverse educational programs, and the contours of the labor market are three such factors. These and other factors are often conditioned in important ways by where in the United States immigrant parents settle—whether in the suburbs, new destination areas, or traditional ethnic neighborhoods in large cities. The experiences of immigrant youth who are coming of age is by no means uniform, whether across ethnic groups or even looking comparatively within ethnic groups, and researchers are compelled to develop new and innovative ways to better understand this variation and how it matters for these young people.

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