



October 2004, Issue 14

The Dynamics of Assimilation

John Mollenkopf, Mary C. Waters, Jennifer Holdaway, and Philip Kasinitz

Will the children of immigrants do better or worse than their parents? Will they follow the example of their parents who sought, but did not always travel, an upward path, or will the vicissitudes of urban life press them down into a newly multicultural ghetto poor? These are the questions John Mollenkopf and coauthors ask in their chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*.

Today, more than 60 million people in the United States—about 22% of the total population—are foreign-born or are of foreign parentage. In gateway cities such as New York and Los Angeles, immigrants and their children already make up a substantial majority of the population. A new generation of Americans reared in immigrant families has been coming of age, and the success of these youth as they make the transition to adulthood, suspended as they are between American and immigrant cultures, is an important social and policy issue.

The Immigrant Groups

To gauge the progress of immigrant youth into adulthood, the authors randomly surveyed a large and varied group of immigrant and native groups living in New York City and its environs. Most grew up in the city or its inner suburbs, but some, especially young whites, moved to the city to pursue jobs and education. Some had two working parents and an extended kin network, while others were children of single mothers on welfare. Many immigrant parents worked in ethnic niches, but others worked in the mainstream economy. Some families had money, others did not.

The immigrant groups represented include those whose parents came from the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, the West Indies, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Russia. The authors compare these groups with native-born Puerto Ricans, whites, and blacks. The researchers completed telephone interviews with 3,424 young adults, ranging in age from 18 to 32 between 1998 and 1999, and conducted a second in-person interview with 364 of the young adults between 1999 and 2001.

The New Second Generation

In general, groups tended to reproduce the initial advantage or disadvantage of their parents. Youth from modestly educated families tended to have not yet obtained college degrees, while those from better-educated families had typically gone to college.

There were exceptions, however. Chinese youth seemed particularly upwardly mobile. Among Chinese youngsters whose parents have only a high school degree or less, 46% went to college. The corresponding figures for other groups were only 8% to 19%.

In a mirror image of downward mobility from college-educated parents, native Puerto Ricans and blacks showed most of the decline, followed by West Indians and Dominicans. Puerto Ricans with poorly educated parents have especially low rates of upward mobility and those with better-educated parents had especially high rates of downward mobility. Native blacks also had a hard time achieving upward mobility, and experienced much downward mobility. Clearly, they succumb to barriers that Chinese young adults are able to surmount. Is this because black and Puerto Rican youth face barriers that Chinese youth do not? Or do the groups employ different strategies for advancement? The authors find that the answer is a little of both.

(over)

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Chinese youth tended to live with their parents longer, get support from more adults, and had fewer siblings to divide parents' time. They also concentrated on education, forgoing childbearing and working less. These factors seem to allow them to rise quickly in the educational ranks, often from modest beginnings. In contrast, the groups experiencing downward mobility tended to leave home earlier, get less support from parents, have children earlier, and forgo higher education.

Early parenthood is an especially limiting step. Of those working and not attending school (the largest group of young adults), only 7% of the Chinese young adults had children while 62% of native blacks had children, with West Indians, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans also toward the high end of the range. Being a parent reduced college pursuits for every group. Further, combining work or school is also difficult if one has a child. The decision to have a child clearly slows educational attainment, speeds exit from school, and hampers entry into the labor force.

New York City can be a tough place to grow up. Drugs, crime and violence, poor schools, high neighborhood mobility, and racial conflict are a reality for many youth, and key barriers to some. The vast majority of immigrant youth grew up in the city, while 53% of native whites and 30% of native blacks grew up in the suburbs or elsewhere. Four factors were especially likely to influence young adult lives: having a single parent, living in neighborhoods with open drug use, being held back in school, and being arrested. Native blacks and Puerto Ricans consistently had the highest exposure to such risks, with West Indians and Dominicans not far behind. Chinese and Russian youth had far less exposure to these risks.

In addition, New York City schools often reflect the neighborhood, and manipulating the system to ensure that youth attend better schools can be a daunting task. Prejudice and discrimination in the housing market have funneled Puerto Rican families, for example, into neighborhoods with declining schools, and families often lack social networks that can ensure that a child is placed in a better school.

While these risks are clearly tied to lower achievement, the authors find that family background and individual choices, particularly the decision of whether and when to have a child, have a greater effect on pathways into adulthood than neighborhoods.

Policy Implications

Today's labor market demands education. The interaction of initial advantage or disadvantage combined with the constraints of educational opportunities in the New York City public schools and other obstacles produce much of the observed outcomes. These groups clearly start at different places, and these opportunities, or lack of them, structure the subsequent life course.

Circumstances are not the only factor, however. Some initially disadvantaged groups can achieve surprisingly high rates of upward mobility. In particular, youth are more likely to be successful when their parents have fewer children to support, when their parents and family members hold high expectations for educational achievement, and when they are able to gain access to better parts of the system.

Based on John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters, Jennifer Holdaway, and Philip Kasinitz, "The Ever-Winding Path: Ethnic and Racial Diversity in the Transition to Adulthood," in On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy, edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming.

John Mollenkopf is executive director of the Center for Urban Research, City University of New York Graduate Center. Mary Waters is Harvard College Professor in the Department of Sociology. Jennifer Holdaway is a program officer in the International Migration Program of the Social Science Research Council. Philip Kasinitz is associate director of the Center for Urban Research, City University of New York Graduate Center.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.