



Children of Immigrant Families: Analysis

The number of children in immigrant families has grown rapidly in nearly every state across the country. According to the 2000 Census, 1 of every 5 children in the United States is an immigrant, or a child of immigrant parents. Regardless of how one might feel about our nation's immigration policies, there is no turning back the clock on the children of immigrants already living here, most of whom are U.S. citizens. To ensure a brighter future not just for the children of immigrants themselves, but for our entire nation, we must provide this segment of our population with the education and supports they need today to become American's productive, engaged citizens of tomorrow.

- ▶ **Immigrant families generally come to this country with many strengths, but also face many challenges.** Immigrant's strengths include healthy, intact families, strong work ethic and aspirations, and for many, a cohesive community of fellow immigrants from the same country of origin to ease their transition once they arrive. These strengths can help to insulate children of immigrants from various negative influences in society, but they are not always sufficient to keep children on pathways to success over time. Immigrant families also face many challenges, and their children often must navigate the difficult process of acculturation from a position of social disadvantage, with limited language skills and minimal family and institutional support.
- ▶ **Many children of immigrants live in poverty.** Immigrant parents often have low levels of education, and work at low-wage jobs with no benefits. As a result, poverty rates are high. According to the official poverty measure, 21% of children in immigrant families live in poverty, compared

with 14% of those in U.S.-born families. Their poverty often means lack of access to quality health care and education resources. In addition, although 4 of every 5 children of immigrants are born in this country (and therefore are entitled to services and benefits the same as every other U.S. citizen), they often do not take advantage of these programs. Reasons cited for their lack of participation include: lack of knowledge about the programs, confusion about eligibility requirements, language barriers, and fear of adverse immigration consequences for other family members who are not U.S. citizens or are here illegally.

- ▶ **Trends in well-being among children in immigrant families vary substantially across different countries of origin.** To have a significant impact on improving children's lives, it is important to focus on the unique circumstances of the families who are struggling the most to succeed in this country—such as those from Mexico, Central America, the non-English speaking Caribbean, and Indochina.

Although children of immigrants may start out with better health and higher educational aspirations, these strengths can dissipate by adolescence. In some ways, their needs are the same as the needs of other vulnerable low-income children. But children of immigrants also often need special help to compensate for difficulties adjusting to American culture, low parental education levels, lack of access to supports and programs due to their families' citizenship status, and most importantly, inadequate language skills. At each stage of development, further efforts are needed to ensure that children in immigrant families have access to the resources they need to help them stay on positive pathways to success.

Recommendations

1 - Preschool and Special Education

Federal, state, and local education agencies should expand the availability of quality programs and strengthen outreach efforts to encourage more children of immigrants to attend preschool and kindergarten, and to access special education resources when appropriate.

2 - Parent Support Groups

Schools should promote the formation of parent support groups for those families with limited English skills to facilitate communication between parents, teachers, and students, and ensure all parents understand the requirements for their children to enter college.

3 - After-School Activities

Community-based organizations in immigrant communities should expand efforts to provide after-school activities that reinforce the children's cultural values and heritage, while at the same time improving their English language skills by working with children and parents together in family literacy programs.

4 - History and Culture

To promote better cross-cultural understanding, schools should include in their curricula the history and culture of the major immigrant groups in their local community.

5 - Math, Science, and Technology

Schools should strengthen their courses in math, science, and technology to ensure students are well-prepared to compete in the increasingly technology-based labor market that is emerging.

6 - Bilingualism

Federal, state, and local education agencies should encourage bilingualism for all students—enabling children of immigrants to maintain ties with their heritage, and enabling children of U.S.-born families to be better prepared for life and work in a global society.

7 - Enhanced Outreach Efforts

Social service agencies and other institutions should strengthen their bilingual staff and/or work with community-based organizations to enhance outreach efforts to facilitate greater access to benefits for eligible children in immigrant families.

8 - Children of the Undocumented

Federal, state, and local agencies should explore ways to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the barriers to access to critical supports and resources for children of parents who are undocumented.

Article Summaries

Demographic Change and the Life Circumstances of Immigrant Families

Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D.

Several major demographic shifts over the past half-century have transformed who we are and how we live in this country. Most striking, however, is the fact that children today are much more likely to be a member of an ethnic or racial minority group, and/or to have immigrant parents. This article presents a wide range of statistics reflecting cultural, family, social, economic, and housing circumstances of the nation's children across various racial/ethnic and country-of-origin groups. The author observes that the parents' education level is perhaps the most important factor relevant to overall child well-being and development.

Economic and Labor Market Trends

Demetra Smith Nightingale, Ph.D., and Michael Fix, J.D.

A number of economic and labor market trends in the United States over the past 30 years affect the well-being of workers and their families. This article describes key changes taking place, and the implications for social and economic policies designed to help low-income working families and their children, particularly those families that include immigrants. The authors conclude that policies to help low-wage workers with families need to focus on more work supplementation strategies, improved access to supports, more targeted education and training services, and proposals regularizing the status of undocumented workers.

Leveling the Playing Field: Supporting Immigrant Children from Birth to Eight

Ruby Takanishi, Ph.D.

Many young children in immigrant families do not have good access to health and education services. To the extent that their life prospects are compromised as a result, these children—and the entire

society—suffer. This article discusses the needs of children from birth to age eight, with a particular focus on the educational needs of young children in immigrant families. The author observes that universal programs open to all children with a minimum of barriers—such as pre-kindergarten, special education, after-school, and family literacy programs—are most likely to be successful in facilitating the participation of young children of immigrant families.

The Multiple Contexts of Middle Childhood

Cynthia García Coll, Ph.D., and Laura A. Szalacha, Ed.D

Children's ability to forge a positive pathway through middle childhood can have major implications for their success as adults. The pathways to success, however, may differ for children of diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. This article provides a conceptual model of child development that incorporates the contextual, racial, and cultural factors that can play critical roles for children who are not part of mainstream society. Both their unique risk factors, as well as their unique protective factors, are highlighted. The authors conclude, however, that the ultimate elimination of differences in developmental outcomes can only result from a firm commitment to the eradication of racism and of the differential access to resources as a function of residence.

Preparing Diverse Adolescents for the Transition to Adulthood

Andrew J. Fuligni, Ph.D., and Christina Hardway, Ph.D.

Whether adolescents from immigrant and ethnic minority families will make a successful transition to adulthood hinges on their educational achievement, their acquisition of employable skills and abilities, and their physical and mental health. This article focuses on the extent to which diverse adolescents are prepared for adulthood according to these three critical developmental outcomes.

The authors find that, in general, adolescents from Latino and African American backgrounds appear to be less prepared to become healthy, productive, and successful adults than their peers, and that a key reason for these differences is that minority and immigrant youths have less access to and use of high quality institutions and programs such as high schools, colleges, after-school programs, and health care resources.

Growing Up American

Children of immigrant families must confront the challenges of first understanding, and then negotiating, their place in American society, often having to deal with racial and economic prejudice as they struggle to create a new identity for themselves. The articles in this section explore what it means to “grow up American” from three different perspectives: a Latino perspective, a Southeast Asian perspective, and an economically-disadvantaged perspective.

► **Shaping New Possibilities for Latino Children and the Nation’s Future**

Sonia M. Pérez, M.P.A.

► **Southeast Asian American Children: Not the “Model Minority”**

KaYing Yang

► **Separate and Unequal: America’s Children, Race, and Poverty**

Marian Wright Edelman and James M. Jones

Four Commentaries: Looking to the Future

In this section, experts across various organizations and backgrounds respond to the question: “How should policymakers, advocates, stakeholders, and practitioners respond strategically and pro-actively to demographic change and increasing diversity in order to promote the healthy development, productivity, and well-being of our nation’s children into the future?”

► *Mark H. Greenberg, J.D., and Hedieh Rahmanou*
Center for Law and Social Policy

► *Harris N. Miller, M.Phil.*
Information Technology Association of America

► *Karen M. Kaufmann, Ph.D., and J. Celeste Lay, Ph.D.*
University of Maryland and Tulane University

► *William D. Novelli, M.A., and Amy Goyer*
AARP

The Future of Children

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