

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/mapping-immigrants-impact-on-american-life>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What sort of Americans will the children of immigrants become?

This is one of the central questions that [Philip Kasinitz and his colleagues have studied for more than a decade](#). Kasinitz, a professor of sociology at the Graduate Center, CUNY, [recently spoke at Vera](#) about the changing landscape for first-generation Americans since the 1970s. His research focuses on immigrant youth who came to the United States as young children and have grown up balancing the demands of their cultures of origin and the American culture that they strive to remake as their own. The profound demographic changes in the past 40 years brought about by immigration raise questions that Kasinitz shared during his Vera presentation.

Among many indicators of success, including higher education and earnings than their parents generation, the children of immigrants have lower levels of criminal involvement than other groups. Although there is ample evidence for these phenomena, Kasinitz says that the findings merit repetition in the face of reflexive anti-immigrant sentiment. Despite successes, many problems facing both immigrants and native minorities require our attention, but one thing is clear: continued immigrant success stories depend upon how we as a society deal with immigrants legal status. Currently, one-third of immigrants in the U.S. are citizens, and one-third are lawful permanent residents. But unlike in the past, one-third are undocumented and currently have no path to becoming legal, which feeds growing disparities.

While racism is a real and harmful legacy, minority community organizations that have received and helped immigrant newcomers exist in immigrant gateway cities like New York. These organizations have adapted to the changing demographics of recent immigration patterns, and the children of immigrants are taking advantage of them. One of the concerns Kasinitz expressed is that the relative gains made by the children of immigrants can obscure the formidable challenges still facing native-born racial minorities.

The most pressing issue, according to Kasinitz, is addressing the exclusionary use of the term illegal, which has become even more incendiary in public discourse than race. In fact, anti-immigrant rhetoric often conflates the two terms and their meanings. This is ultimately a policy issue, because there are no legal protections for the undocumented of the sort the civil rights movement fought for and won. As Kasinitz asked at the end of his talk, Is illegal the new black?

In addition to speaking to the public at Vera, Kasinitz also sat down with Michael Jacobson, the Institute's director. Video of their conversation can be found [here](#).

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