The National Research Council on the Integration of Immigrants into American Society

Thirteen percent (41 million) of the US population is foreign-born. This proportion is substantially lower than the foreign-born shares in other longstanding countries of immigration, such as Canada or Australia. But in the US the share has risen steadily until the last few years from a low point (5 percent) in the 1960s. The present level was last seen nearly a century ago, at the end of the last wave of mass immigration (see Figure 1 below). Moreover, Census Bureau projections point to continuing increases in the decades ahead, with the prospect of reaching a foreign-born proportion of nearly one-fifth of the population by 2060. By then also, given the dominance of Latin America and Asia as migrant origins in recent decades, the Census Bureau expects that "non-Hispanic whites" will have fallen to less than half the population. Another significant feature of the US situation is that an estimated 11 million persons (about one-quarter of the current foreign-born total) are "undocumented"—having entered the country illicitly or overstayed their visas. In the last several years, annual deportations from this group have approached or exceeded 400,000.

These bare numbers underlie much of the often-heated discourse on immigration issues in the US political debate. Mostly left out of that debate, but arguably as important as the numbers themselves, is the pace of assimilation of migrants into the country's economy and society. This is the subject of a new report by a National Research Council panel, chaired by Mary C. Waters, professor of sociology at Harvard University. (The Council is the operating arm of the National Academies of Sciences.) The report paints a generally positive picture of migrant integration, even for those groups (mainly from Mexico and Central America) entering with low educational levels and little English proficiency. The children of migrants are seen to have converged substantially to native-born averages in a broad array of domains. The paths of convergence are not uniform across different racial and ethnic categories: the report finds that integration with native-born non-Hispanic whites is fastest for Asian immigrants, slower for Latino immigrants, and slowest for black immigrants. Integration is especially slow and difficult for undocumented individuals.

Successful integration with the native-born US population for the most part means improved well-being for migrants, but that is not always the case. The excerpt from the NRC report printed below, taken from the summary section on patterns of integration, describes six areas (education, employment, occupational status, poverty, residential integration, and language) in which integration leads on average to improvements in migrant well-being, and three areas (health, crime, and family stability) where it apparently produces declines in well-being.

The extract (pp. 3–8 of the Summary) and Figure 1 (from Chapter 1) are reprinted from The Integration of Immigrants into American Society, *edited by Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, 2016, with permission of the National Academy of Sciences, courtesy of the National Academies Press, Washington, DC. (The statistics in the first paragraph above also come from this report.) The full report is available online at http://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/.*

Education

Despite large differences in starting points among the first generation, there has been strong intergenerational progress in educational attainment. Second generation members of most contemporary immigrant groups meet or exceed the schooling level of typical third+ generation native-born Americans. This is true for both men and women.

However, this general picture masks important variations between and within groups. One difference from earlier waves of immigration is the large percentage of highly skilled immigrants now coming to the United States. More than a quarter of the foreign-born now has a college education or more, and they contribute a great deal to the U.S. scientific and technical workforce. These immigrants' children also do exceptionally well educationally and typically attain the top tiers of the occupational distribution.

Other immigrants start with exceptionally low levels of education. This is particularly true for foreign-born Mexicans and Central Americans, who on average have less than 10 years of education. These immigrants' children progress a great deal relative to their parents, with an average education of more than 12 years, but they do not reach parity with the general population of native-born. This outcome mostly reflects the low levels of schooling, English proficiency, and other forms of human capital their parents bring to the United States.

Employment and earnings

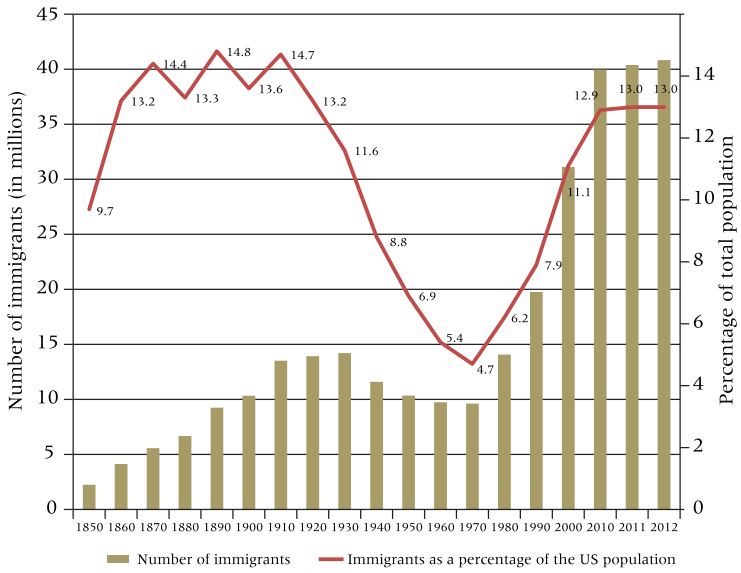
Immigrant men have higher employment rates than the second and higher generations. This employment advantage is especially dramatic among the least educated immigrants, who are much more likely to be employed than comparably educated native born men, indicating that they are filling an important niche in our economy. For second+ generation men, the trajectories vary by ethnicity and race. By this measure, Asian men are successfully integrating with the non-Hispanic white population, and Hispanic men are making gains once their lower education is taken into account. However, second generation blacks appear to be integrating with the general black native-born population, where higher education does not translate into higher employment rates. Among women the pattern is reversed, with a substantially lower employment rate for immigrants than for the native-born, but employment rates for second and higher generation women moving toward parity with the general native-born population, regardless of race.

Foreign-born workers' earnings improve relative to the native-born the longer they reside in the United States. These overall patterns, however, are still shaped by racial and ethnic stratification. Earnings assimilation is considerably slower for Hispanic (predominantly Mexican) immigrants than for other immigrants. And although Asian immigrants and their descendants appear to do just as well as native-born whites, these comparisons become less favorable after controlling for education. Asian Americans' schooling advantage can obscure the fact that, at least among men, they tend to earn somewhat less than third+ generation non-Hispanic whites with the same level of education.

Occupations

The occupational distributions of the first and second generations reveal a picture of intergenerational improvement similar to that for education and earnings. The groups concentrated in low-status occupations in the first generation improve their occupational position substantially in the second generation, although they do not reach parity with third+ generation Americans. Second

FIGURE 1 Number of immigrants and immigrants as percentage of the US population, 1850 to 2013



SOURCE: Original figure based on U.S. Census Bureau data.

generation children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America have made large leaps in occupational terms: 22 percent of second generation Mexican men and 31 percent of second generation men from Central America in 2003–2013 were in professional or managerial positions. Like their foreign-born fathers, second generation men were overrepresented in service jobs, although they have largely left agricultural work. Second generation Mexican men were also less likely than their immigrant parents to take jobs in the informal sector and were more likely to receive health and retirement benefits through their employment. The occupational leap for second generation women for this period was even greater, and the gap separating them from later generation women narrowed greatly.

The robust representation of the first and second generations across the occupational spectrum in these analyses implies that the U.S. workforce has been welcoming immigrants and their children into higher-level jobs in recent decades. This pattern of workforce integration appears likely to continue as the baby boom cohorts complete their retirement over the next two decades.

Poverty

Immigrants are more likely to be poor than the native-born, even though their labor force participation rates are higher and they work longer hours on average. The poverty rate for foreign-born persons was 18.4 percent in 2013, compared to 13.4 percent for the native-born. However, the poverty rate declined over generations, from over 18 percent for first generation adults (immigrants) to 13.6 percent in the second generation and 11.5 percent by the third+ generation. These overall patterns vary by race and ethnic group, with a troubling rise in poverty for the black second+ generations relative to the black first generation. The panel's analysis also shows progress stalling among Asian Americans between the second and third generations. Overall, first generation Hispanics have the highest poverty rates, but there is much progress from the first to the second generation.

Residential integration

Over time most immigrants and their descendants gradually become less segregated from

the general population of native-born whites and more dispersed across regions, cities, communities, and neighborhoods. Earnings and occupation explain some but not all of the high levels of foreign-born segregation from other native-born residents. Length of residence also matters: recently arrived immigrants often choose to live in areas with other immigrants and thus have higher levels of residential segregation from native-born whites than immigrants who have been in the country for 10–20 years. Race plays an independent role—Asians are the least segregated in metropolitan areas from native-born whites, followed by Hispanics and then black immigrants, who are the most segregated from native-born whites. New research also points to an independent effect of legal status, with the undocumented being more segregated than other immigrants.

Language

Language diversity in the United States has grown as the immigrant population has increased and become more varied. Today, about 85 percent of the foreign-born population speaks a language other than English at home. The most prevalent language (other than English) is by far Spanish: 62 percent of all immigrants speak Spanish at home.

However, a more accurate measure of language integration is English-language proficiency, or how well people say they speak English. There is evidence that integration is happening as rapidly or faster now than it did for the earlier waves of mainly European immigrants in the 20th century. Today, many immigrants arrive already speaking English as a first or second language. Currently, about 50 percent of the foreign-born in surveys report they speak English "very well" or "well," while less than 10 percent say they speak English "not at all." There are significant differences in English proficiency by region and country of birth: immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean generally report lower rates of English-language proficiency than immigrants from other regions, and they are most likely to say they speak English "not at all."

The second+ generations are generally acquiring English and losing their ancestors' language at roughly the same rates as their historical predecessors, with English monolingualism usually occurring within three generations. Spanish speakers and their descendants, however, appear to be acquiring English and losing Spanish more slowly than other immigrant groups. Yet even in the large Spanish-speaking concentration in Southern California, Mexican Americans' transition to English dominance is all but complete by the third generation; only 4 percent still speak primarily Spanish at home, although 17 percent reported they can speak Spanish very well.

Despite the positive outlook for linguistic integration, the barriers to English proficiency, particularly for low-skilled, poorly educated, residentially segregated, and undocumented immigrant populations, are cause for concern. Funding for English-as-a-second-language classes has declined even as the population of English-language learners (ELL) has grown. The number of children who are ELL has grown substantially in recent decades, presenting challenges for many school systems. Since 1990, the school-age ELL population has grown at a much faster rate than the school-age population overall. Today, 9 percent of all students in the K-12 system are ELL. Their relative concentration varies widely by state and district. Overall resources for education in English as a second language are limited for both adults and children.

Health

Foreign-born immigrants have better infant, child, and adult health outcomes than the U.S.-born population in general and better outcomes than U.S.-born members of their ethnic group. In comparison with native-born Americans, the foreign-born are less likely to die from cardiovascular disease and all cancers combined; they experience fewer chronic health conditions, lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of obesity, and fewer functional limitations. Immigrants also have a lower prevalence of depression and of alcohol abuse.

Foreign-born immigrants live longer, too. They have a life expectancy of 80.0 years, 3.4 years more than the native-born population, and this immigrant advantage holds

across all the major ethnoracial categories. Over time and generations, these advantages decline as their health status converges with the native-born.

Even though immigrants generally have better health than native-born Americans, they are disadvantaged when it comes to receiving health care to meet their preventive and medical health needs. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) seems likely to improve this situation for many poor immigrants, but undocumented immigrants are specifically excluded from all coverage under the ACA and are not entitled to any nonemergency care in U.S. hospitals.

Crime

Increased prevalence of immigrants is associated with lower crime rates—the opposite of what many Americans fear. Among men ages 18–39, the foreign-born are incarcerated at a rate that is one-fourth the rate for the native-born. Cities and neighborhoods with greater concentrations of immigrants have much lower rates of crime and violence than comparable nonimmigrant neighborhoods. This phenomenon is reflected not only across space but also over time. There is, however, evidence that crime rates for the second and third generation rise to more closely match the general population of native-born Americans. If this trend is confirmed, it may be an unwelcome aspect of integration.

Family patterns

The panel's analysis indicates that immigrant family-formation patterns change over time. Immigrant divorce rates and out-of-wedlock birth rates start out much lower than the rates for native-born Americans generally, but over time and over generations these rates increase, while the likelihood of living in extended families with multiple generations under one roof declines. Thus immigrant children are much more likely to live in families with two parents than are third generation children. This is true overall and within all of the major ethnic and racial groups. Two-parent families provide children with a number of important advantages: they are associated with lower risks of poverty, more effective parenting practices, and lower levels of stress than are households with only one or no parents. The prevalence of two-parent families continues to be high for second generation children, but the percentage of children in two-parent families declines substantially between the second and third generations, converging toward the percentage for other native-born families. Since single-parent families are more likely to be impoverished, this is a disadvantage going forward.