

Immigrant Children

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Large numbers of immigrant children are experiencing serious problems—inadequate education, poor physical and mental health, and poverty—that compromise their assimilation into American society. The purpose of this volume is to examine the well-being of these children and what might be done to improve their educational attainment, health, social and cognitive development, and long-term prospects for economic mobility.

Immigrant children are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population today. Their future, however, is highly uncertain. They are coming of age in an aging society that will require unprecedented social expenditures for health and retirement benefits for seniors. Thus they must compete with the elderly for education funding and government health benefits. More than 5 million youth now reside in households where one or both parents are unauthorized to live and work in the United States. Although nearly three-fourths of these children are citizens by birth, their status as dependents of unauthorized residents thwarts their prospects for integration into U.S. society during their crucial formative years. Even having certifiably legal status is not enough to guarantee children's access to social programs if parents lack information about child benefits and entitlements, as well as the savvy to navigate complex bureaucracies.

Focus of the Volume

Contributors to the volume review research about the well-being of immigrant youth in the United States—demographic trends and family arrangements, educational trends and differentials, and youthful immigrants' health status, social integration, and participation in welfare and other public programs. Contributors also suggest policies to improve the well-being of immigrant youth. Some important research findings are:

--Depending on their country of origin, immigrant children vary widely in their educational achievement, legal and health status, living arrangements and economic resources. Some children, such as those of Mexican origin, tend to struggle; others, such as those of Asian and black Caribbean origin, tend to do well.

--Although participation in early childhood education programs can offset problems such as poverty, poor parental education, and language barriers, immigrant children attend such programs at lower rates than do native children. Barriers to participation in early education include affordability, availability, bureaucratic complexity, and distrust of government programs.

--Performance of immigrant children in K–12 education varies by generational status and national origin. Immigrant youths, even some from economically disadvantaged families, often outperform their native peers in school. Poor parental education, poor-quality schools, and segregated neighborhoods, however, pose risk factors for immigrant children generally.

--Immigrant youths from Asia and the Middle East are well represented in the nation's postsecondary educational institutions; those from Latin America, Laos, and Cambodia, less so. The sharp rise in demand for skilled labor over the past few decades has made it urgent for the nation to provide access to postsecondary education for all immigrants, but especially for Latinos.

--Barriers to postsecondary education are especially formidable for youth who lack legal status despite having attended U.S. elementary and secondary schools and having qualified for admission to college. Because federal efforts to ease these barriers have stalled, state legislatures that have not already done so must address this issue.

--Achievement disparities between immigrant children who do not speak English fluently and English-proficient students are wide and persistent. Closing that achievement gap requires effective English language instruction so that immigrant children are fluent in English by third grade.

--Immigrant children are less likely than native children to have health insurance and regular access to medical care. Improving access to health care substantially influences the physical and emotional health status of immigrant children and can improve the long-term economic prospects of the next generation.

-- Although disadvantaged immigrant families face formidable barriers to upward mobility, their children can overcome these obstacles through simultaneously learning the language and culture of the host society while preserving their home country language, values, and customs.

Key Policy Issues and Initiatives

As ever greater numbers of baby boomers approach retirement age, immigrant children are becoming an ever greater share of the future U.S. workforce. The economic and social well-being of U.S. retirees will thus depend increasingly on the human capital and economic productivity of these younger workers. At a critical juncture in its history, the United States has an opportunity to invest in immigrant youth and enable them to contribute to national prosperity even as population aging unfolds.

Concretely, such investment requires strengthening immigrant children's access to high-quality education, from preschool programs through postsecondary school. Policy makers and educators should eliminate achievement gaps between immigrant and native children by enabling more immigrant children to attend early education programs and by offering effective English language instruction. They should also reduce financial and nonfinancial barriers to participation in college. Raising the college attendance and completion rates of immigrant youth would boost their economic mobility, foster social cohesion, and increase their contributions to the nation's economy and to federal and state revenues. Resolving legal status issues for young people who have attended U.S. schools is essential.

However compelling the wisdom of enhancing the future of the nation through investments in immigrant youth, lawmakers face formidable challenges. Political debate over immigration is polarized by differences about how to resolve the legal status of 11 million undocumented residents. Education spending is the largest single item in most state and local budgets, both of which have been eroded during the severe recession. Because disadvantaged youth often benefit disproportionately from universal social programs, investments in immigrant children should be targeted within universal programs, and goals could be set to increase participation rates of immigrant youth.