

FROM NEWCOMERS TO AMERICANS: An Integration Policy for a Nation of Immigrants

by Tomás R. Jiménez*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States long has been a nation of immigrants, but its policies are out of step with this reality. Public policies with regard to the foreign-born must go beyond regulating who is admitted and under what circumstances. The nation needs an immigrant-integration policy that effectively addresses the challenges and harnesses the opportunities created by today's large immigrant population. It is not in the best interests of the United States to make integration a more difficult, uncertain, or lengthy process than it need be. Facilitating the successful and rapid integration of immigrants into U.S. society minimizes conflicts and tensions between newcomers and the native-born, and enables immigrants to more quickly secure better jobs, earn higher incomes, and thus more fully contribute to the U.S. economy.

Among the findings of this report:

- Today's newcomers are integrating into U.S. society in ways reminiscent of immigrants from previous eras, with the children and grandchildren of immigrants mastering English, improving their educational status, and joining the U.S. workforce.
- According to the 2000 Census, 91.1 percent of the children and 97.0 percent of the grandchildren of Mexican immigrants spoke English well.
- In 2004, the share of Mexican immigrants without a high-school diploma was 58.0 percent, but only 16.9 percent of their children lacked a diploma.
- The federal government must take the lead in facilitating the integration of immigrants. But rather than dictate policy, the federal government should partner with state and local governments, NGOs, and the private sector in carrying out the business of integration.
- The future prosperity of the United States depends on the success of today's newcomers given that immigrants who have arrived in the United States since 1960 make up almost one in ten individuals in the country, while the children of these immigrants comprise more than 10 percent of the total population.
- An active approach to integration is apparent in U.S. refugee policy. Refugees to the United States are greeted by an expansive web of government agencies and NGOs tasked with facilitating their integration into U.S. society.
- Civic integration of immigrants is essential and must involve opportunities to participate in civil society that facilitate trustful relationships between immigrant newcomers and all facets of their receiving community, especially law enforcement, elected officials, and other civic leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Immigrant integration has become a national issue as millions of America's newcomers adapt to communities that must in turn adjust to the social, economic, and political changes resulting from the presence of these newcomers. Integration is an inevitable process wherein immigrants and the communities in which they settle mutually adapt to one another. But the inevitability of integration does not always guarantee positive outcomes. Integration may follow a path that leads to divisiveness between newcomers and their receiving communities—a more likely outcome when integration is left to chance. A sound immigrant-integration policy can facilitate a more positive, unifying form of integration that benefits immigrants, their receiving communities, and the nation as a whole.

Political pundits and policymakers have done a good deal of hand-wringing about integration, but government policies are virtually silent on this issue. As Congress and the White House look to overhaul what most agree is a broken immigration system, the debate revolves around the laws that govern who is admitted to the United States and under what circumstances, while giving at most a symbolic nod to questions of integration. However, the United States needs much more than an overhaul of its immigration policy. This nation of immigrants also needs an *immigrant* policy that takes a more active role in the integration of newcomers, thereby maximizing the economic, social, and cultural contributions that immigrants make to the United States.

THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATION POLICY

Comparisons between contemporary and past waves of immigrants often lead to the conclusion that something is amiss with the way today's immigrants are integrating. Fears about their lack of integration are largely exaggerated, however. Though there is variation among groups, today's newcomers appear to be integrating into U.S. society in ways reminiscent of immigrants from previous eras, with the second-generation children and third-generation grandchildren of first-generation immigrants mastering English, improving their educational status, and joining the U.S. workforce.¹

Nearly all the children and grandchildren of immigrants speak English well, regardless of ethnic origin. For instance, according to the 2000 Census, 91.1 percent of the children and 97.0 percent of the grandchildren of Mexican immigrants spoke English well. Similarly, 93.8 percent of the children and 98.4 percent of the grandchildren of Salvadoran immigrants spoke English well in 2000 {Figure 1}.²

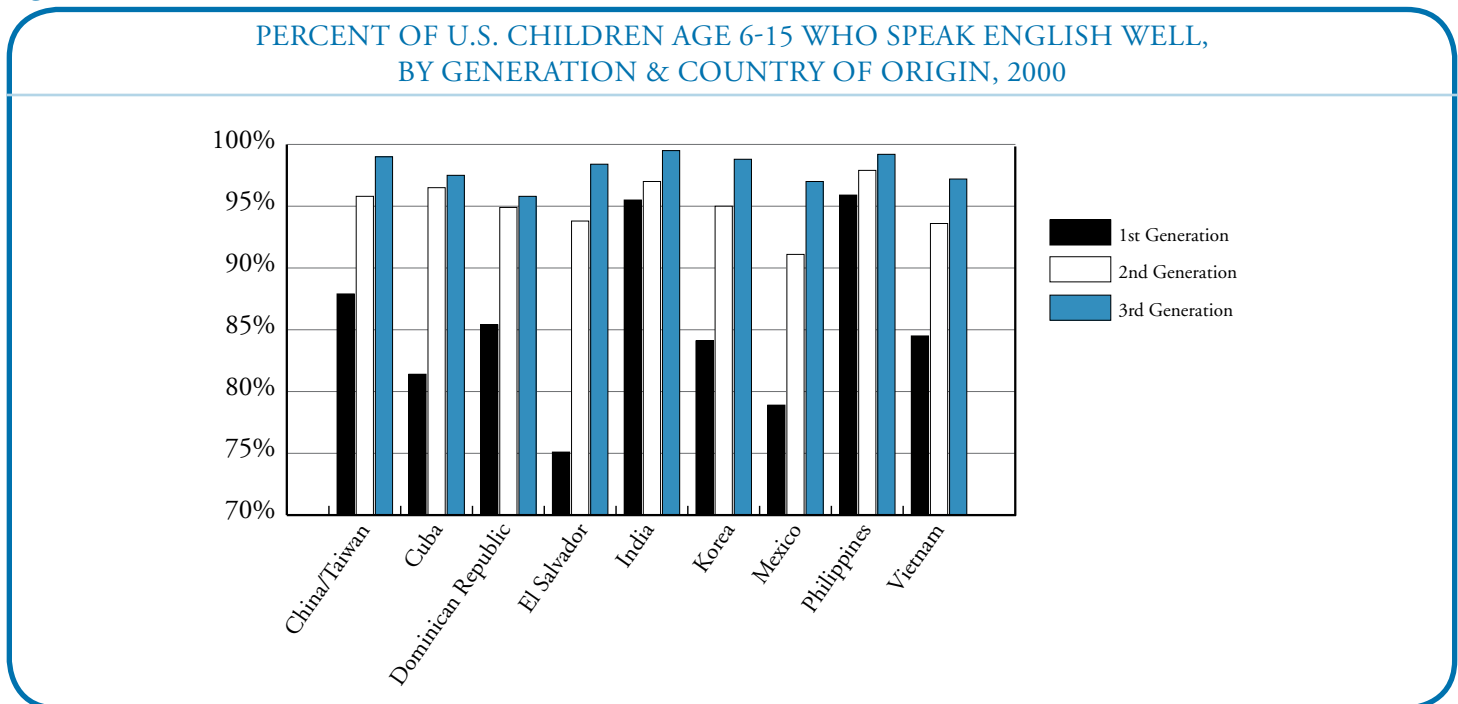
Patterns in educational attainment also evince inter-generational improvement. Calculations from the 2004 Current Population Survey show, for example, that the share of Mexican immigrants without a high-school diploma was 58.0 percent, but only 16.9 percent of their children lacked a diploma {Figure 2}. Conversely, only 5.7 percent of Mexican immigrants had a college degree, compared to 14.1 percent of their children {Figure 3}.³

1 Frank D. Bean & Gillian Stevens, *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003; Alejandro Portes & Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2006, chaps. 7 & 8.

2 Richard Alba, *Language Assimilation Today: Bilingualism Persists More Than in the Past, But English Still Dominates* (Working paper 111). La Jolla, CA: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California-San Diego, November 2004, Table 1 {Calculations based on 5-Percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) from the 2000 Census.}

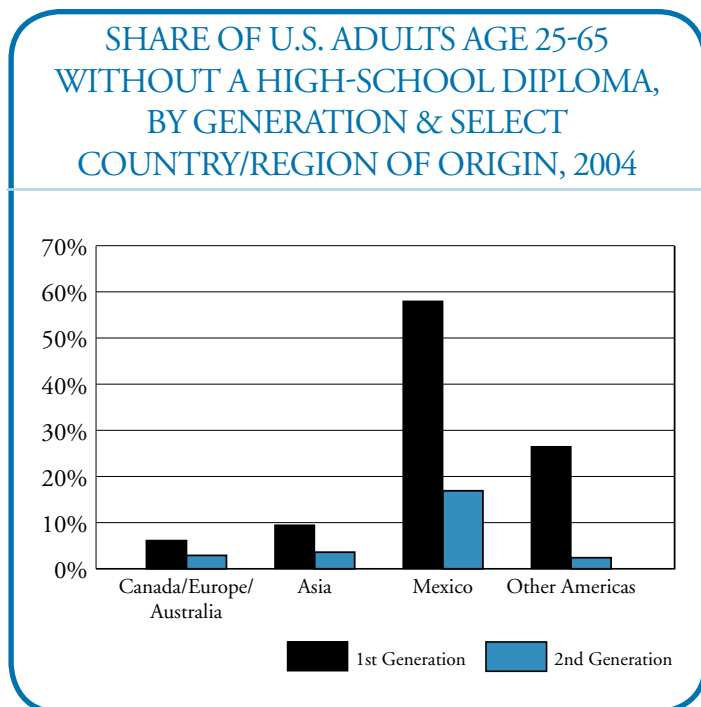
3 Roger Waldinger & Renee Reichl, "Today's Second Generation: Getting Ahead or Falling Behind?" in Michael Fix, ed., *Securing the Future: U.S. Immigrant Integration Policy, A Reader*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2007, p. 29-30.

Figure 1:



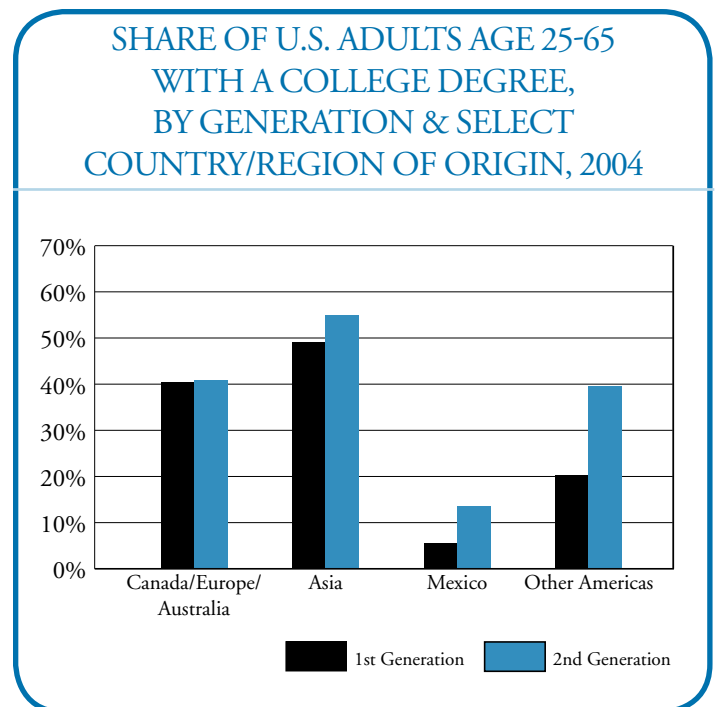
Source: Richard Alba, *Language Assimilation Today*, 2004, Table 1.

Figure 2:



Source: Roger Waldinger & Renee Reichl, "Today's Second Generation," in Michael Fix, ed., *Securing the Future*, 2007, p. 29.

Figure 3:



Source: Roger Waldinger & Renee Reichl, "Today's Second Generation," in Michael Fix, ed., *Securing the Future*, 2007, p. 30.

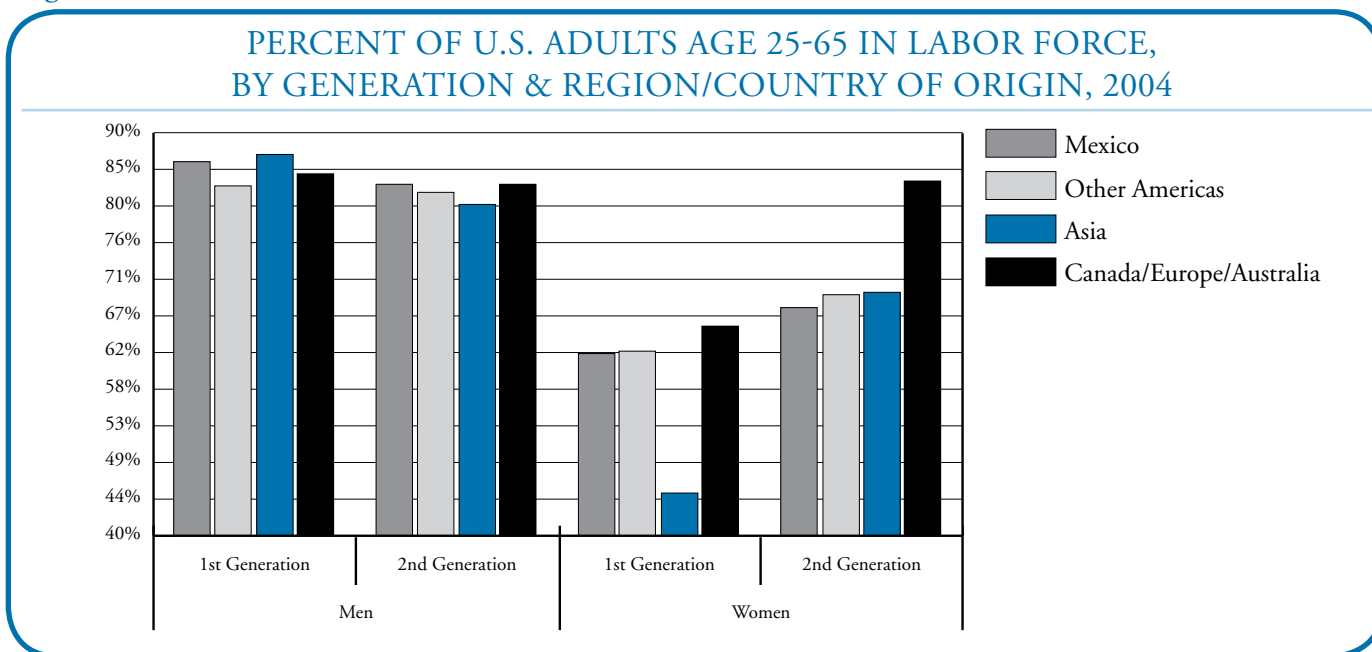
In addition, immigrants and their children are hardly idle when it comes to work. The 2004 Current Population Survey shows that adult immigrant men from Canada, Europe, and Australia had the lowest employment rate (83.4 percent), while those from Mexico had the highest (87.3 percent). Immigrants actually tend to have somewhat higher rates of employment than their children. The employment rate of second-generation men from Canada, Europe, and Australia was 82.6 percent, while that of second-generation Mexicans was 81.1 percent. Evidence of intergenerational improvement in employment rates is pronounced among women. For instance, only 45.3 percent of first-generation Mexican women were in the labor force, compared to 70.2 percent of their daughters {Figure 4}.⁴

Mexicans, by far the largest immigrant group at 31 percent of all foreign-born individuals, often are cited as an exception to these larger integration trends. But they too appear to be integrating over time, even if at a slower pace compared to other groups. Sociologist Richard Alba finds that each new generation of Mexican-origin individuals born in the United States improves

on their parents' educational attainment by an average of 2.5 years, though the third generation still lags behind non-Hispanic whites by 1-1.5 years (the gap is smaller among women).⁵ Similarly, a 2006 study by RAND Corporation economist James P. Smith found that successive generations of Hispanics have experienced significant improvements in wages and education relative both to their fathers and grandfathers and to the native Anglos with whom they competed in the labor market.⁶

These positive trends belie reactionary “solutions” to the “immigrant problem.” But the big picture also tends to gloss over challenges that both immigrants and their receiving communities confront on the ground. If left unaddressed, cultural and linguistic barriers, distrust between immigrants and receiving populations and institutions, and the economic, political, and social marginalization of immigrants and their descendants may lead to a form of integration that results in mistrust and disunity. The United States simply cannot afford such an outcome. The imperative for adopting a policy that ensures positive integration becomes clearer

Figure 4:



Source: Roger Waldinger & Renee Reichl, “Today’s Second Generation,” in Michael Fix, ed., *Securing the Future*, 2007, p. 33.

4 *ibid.*, p. 33.

5 Richard Alba, “Mexican Americans and the American Dream,” *Perspectives on Politics* 4(2), June 2006: 289-296.

6 James P. Smith, “Immigrants and the Labor Market,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 24(2), April 2006: 203-233.

when considering the following factors:

- *The future prosperity of the United States depends on the success of today's newcomers.* Immigrants who have arrived in the United States since 1960 make up almost one in ten individuals in the country, while the children of these immigrants comprise more than 10 percent of the total population. These children of immigrants, with an average age of 17, have not yet entered the full-time workforce, but soon will comprise a substantial proportion of American workers.⁷ The nation's economic, political, and social futures thus rest on the successful integration of these "immigrant stock" individuals. Indeed, the nature of their integration will strongly influence the ability of the United States to compete in an increasingly global economy, the health of our democracy, the vitality of civic life, and even the well-being of native-born families who have lived in the country for generations. Perhaps the clearest link between integration and the prosperity of the nation is seen in the graying of the native-born population. As massive numbers of baby boomers age into retirement, today's second

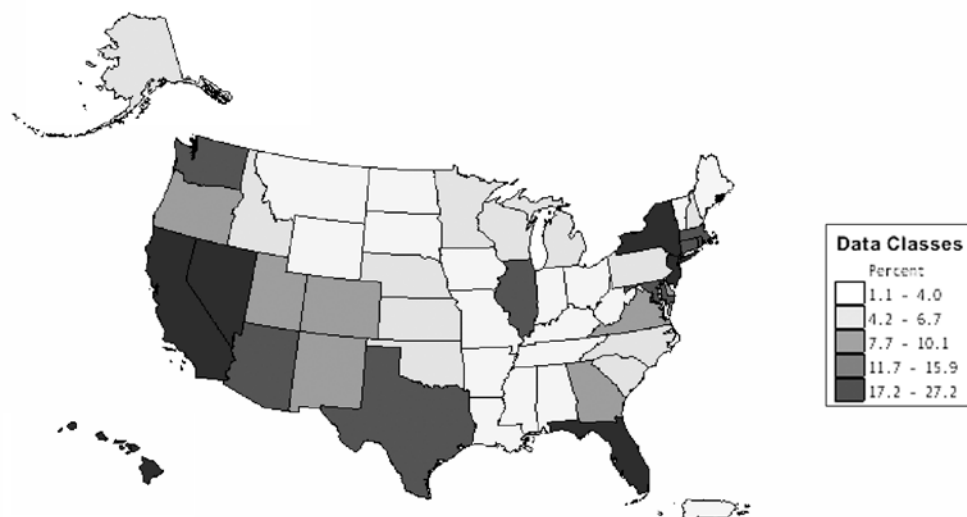
generation is the workforce on which aging baby boomers will depend for workers who provide both the direct services and the tax base that support programs for the elderly.⁸

The importance of immigrants and their children to the labor force is particularly acute in California, the most populous state in the union and a state in which 26.2 percent of the population was born abroad. Immigrants accounted for 66.9 percent of the growth in California's working-age population between 1980 and 2005. Over the next 25 years, however, the second generation will account for the majority of this growth, at 59.5 percent, and immigrants will account for almost all of the remaining growth.⁹

- *Immigrant integration is a national issue.* Immigration is no longer a regional phenomenon concentrated in a few, mostly border states. While states like California, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois remain the most popular immigrant destinations, since the early 1990s immigrants have fanned out to new Midwestern and Southern "gateways" that previously received few newcomers {Figure 5}.

Figure 5:

FOREIGN-BORN SHARE OF U.S. POPULATION, BY STATE, 2005



Source: 2005 American Community Survey, Thematic Map M0501: "Percent of People Who Are Foreign Born: 2005" (downloaded from <http://factfinder.census.gov>).

7 Alejandro Portes & Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 2006, p. 246-47.

8 Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.

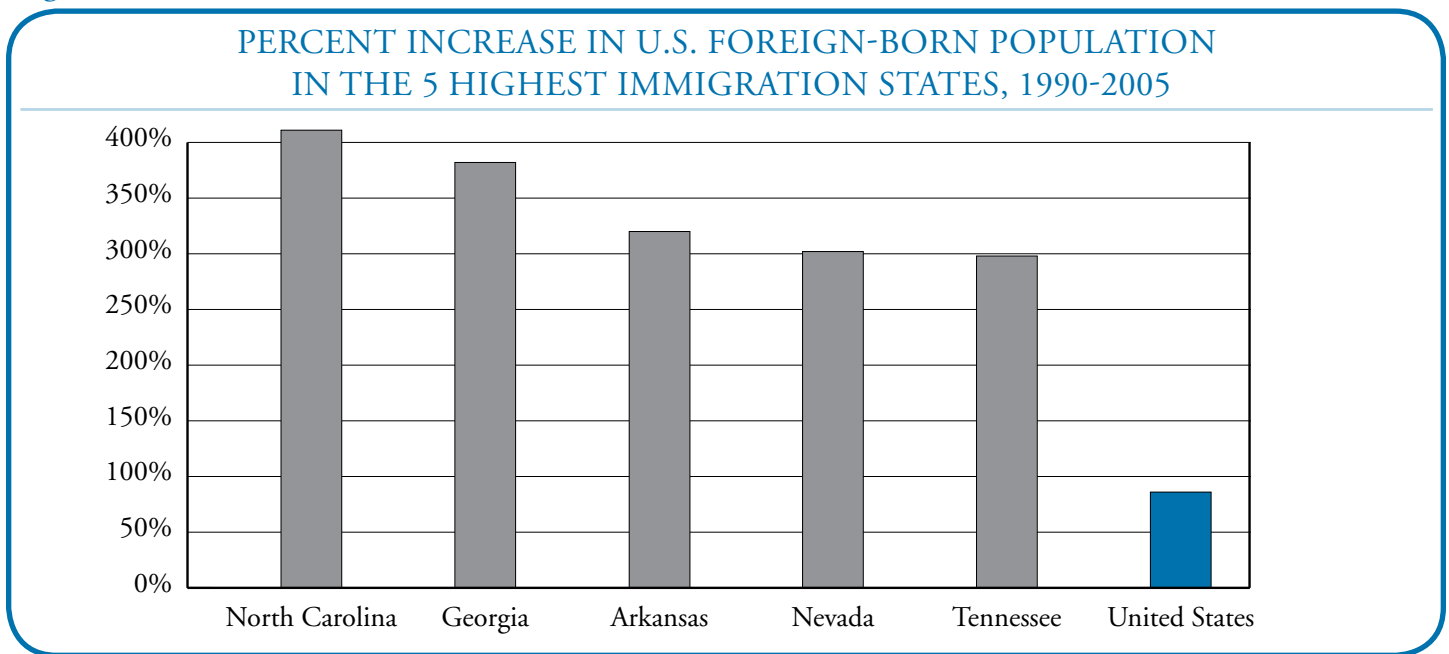
9 Dowell Myers, John Pitkin & Julie Park, *California Demographic Futures: Projections to 2030, by Immigrant Generations, Nativity, and Time of Arrival in U.S.* Los Angeles, CA: Population Dynamics Research Group, School of Policy, Planning, and Development, University of Southern California, February 2005, p. 18.

The rate of growth of the immigrant population in these new gateway states is enormous. All of the top-five immigrant-growth states from 1990 to 2005 are new gateways, and these states have experienced a rate of growth between 3.4 and 4.8 times that of the nation as a whole during this period {Figure 6}.¹⁰ The national nature of immigration means that communities throughout the country share a common set of challenges and opportunities related to immigrant integration. The benefits of a national integration policy, therefore, would reach into virtually every corner of the national map.

- *Any overhaul of immigration policy will have significant implications for integration.* Despite the failure of the 109th Congress to pass major immigration-reform legislation, the White House and new leadership in Congress are expected

to try again in the 110th. An earned-legalization program for undocumented immigrants now in the United States is once again likely to be a centerpiece of any proposed immigration overhaul. Many of the unauthorized immigrants whose legal status would change under such a program already are experiencing some degree of integration. Unauthorized immigrants constitute nearly 5 percent of the U.S. labor force and many have children who are U.S. citizens (64 percent of children living in an unauthorized family are U.S. citizens by birth).¹¹ A change in the legal status of undocumented immigrants would more deeply plant their roots in the United States, making their positive integration all the more necessary.

Figure 6:



Source: U.S. Decennial Census & 2005 American Community Survey.

¹⁰ Author’s calculations based on U.S. Decennial Census and 2005 American Community Survey data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute.

¹¹ Jeffrey S. Passel, *Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.: Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2006, p. 8-9.

The inclusion of a guest-worker program in a larger immigration-reform package also has relevance for integration. Even if workers are in the country on a temporary basis, some degree of integration will take place. Guest workers will live in communities throughout the nation, and the way in which receiving communities and guest workers interact with each other will determine the success of such a program.

PAST INTEGRATION POLICIES

In looking ahead to an integration policy for immigrants to the United States, it is worth examining and learning from past efforts. The nation historically has taken two broad approaches to immigrant integration. The first sees a role for policies that actively encourage integration. This more proactive approach first appeared on a large scale with the Americanization Movement of the 1910s and 1920s. Faced with large numbers of immigrants arriving primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe, communities throughout the country engaged in a massive effort to integrate and, in some instances, forcibly turn immigrants into “Americans.” Programs coordinated by public- and private-sector organizations provided English-language training, civics classes, and symbolic displays of patriotism—all aimed at expediting the removal of “old world ways” and the adoption of a singular American identity.¹²

The ideological underpinnings of the Americanization Movement resonate in many of today’s policy initiatives. English-only campaigns at the state and national levels, efforts to limit immigrants’ access to public resources, and bills that propose tightening citizenship requirements are all present-day policy cousins of the Americanization Move-

ment that aim to preserve an un-changed ideal of American identity. The problem with this approach to integration is that it often achieves outcomes that contradict those which policymakers intend. Americanization-style initiatives become a significant basis for division. Instead of turning their allegiances towards an American mainstream, immigrants and their children may begin to turn their backs on a country that they believe has rejected them. Efforts to strip immigrants and their children of their ethnic allegiances altogether can also have deleterious academic and psychological outcomes that further inhibit positive integration.¹³

A more thoughtful, but equally active approach to integration is apparent in U.S. refugee policy. Refugees to the United States are greeted by an expansive web of government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tasked with facilitating their integration into U.S. society. Established under the Refugee Act of 1980, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services heads refugee integration by providing funds for, “among other benefits and services, cash and medical assistance, employment preparation and job placement, skills training, English-language training, social adjustment and aid for victims of torture.”¹⁴ ORR’s efforts appear to be successful, but the reach of their programs is limited to the 5 percent of the immigrant population annually admitted as refugees or asylees. The other 95 percent have no access to assistance aside from a small amount of funding for English-language acquisition and some workforce training provided by a patchwork of programs that together do not constitute a coherent integration policy.

12 John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1963 [1955], chap. 9.

13 Alejandro Portes & Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001, chaps. 6-9.

14 Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Eligibility for Refugee Assistance and Services through the Office of Refugee Resettlement,” <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ort/geninfo/index.htm>.

A second and more predominant approach to immigrant integration involves virtually no policy intervention. This *laissez faire* method relies on a combination of immigrants' remarkable motivation and the ability of the labor market to provide jobs and incomes that, over time, facilitate the entrance of newcomers into the American economic, political, and social mainstream. However, the stakes are too high to rely on a *laissez faire* approach. The extent to which the prosperity of the United States depends on immigrants and their children, the national nature of immigration, and the sweeping changes that would result from enactment of comprehensive immigration legislation make an immigrant-integration policy essential.

PRINCIPLES OF AN IMMIGRANT-INTEGRATION POLICY

The principles on which a national immigrant-integration policy might be based can be gleaned from successful local-level integration initiatives in places like Santa Clara County, California,¹⁵ and the state of Illinois,¹⁶ as well as experimental efforts spearheaded by a coalition of government agencies and NGOs in Lowell, Massachusetts; Nashville, Tennessee; and Portland, Oregon.¹⁷

- *Integration is a two-way process.* Any integration policy must begin from the premise that immigrants influence the communities in which they settle as much as these communities influence the immigrants. Programs supported by

a comprehensive integration policy, therefore, must place mutual responsibility for integration on both immigrant newcomers and their receiving communities. Accordingly, the aim of a successful integration policy is not just to help immigrants find their way in a new land, but also to help receiving communities adjust to the economic, political, and social shifts that immigration entails.

- *The federal government must take the lead.* Immigration has long been considered a federal policy issue, while integration is largely relegated to individuals, local governments, and NGOs. But immigration and integration go hand-in-hand, and this division of labor thus makes little sense. Integration is a federal responsibility and a federal integration policy should function alongside immigration policy. The federal government must serve as the “north star” for integration, setting guidelines and goals for integration programs implemented at the local level. Rather than dictate policy, the federal government should partner with state and local governments, NGOs, and the private sector in carrying out the business of integration.

- *Integration takes place at the local level.* An integration policy must be spearheaded by the federal government, while allowing for flexibility in meeting challenges and opportunities that vary by locale. Although the effects of immigrant integration reverberate throughout U.S. society, it is at the local level where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Because some communities have a long history of immigration, they have

15 See ImmigrantInfo.org, sponsored by the Santa Clara County Office of Human Relations and IRIS (Immigrant Relations and Integration Services), <http://www.immigrantinfo.org>.

16 See immigrantIntegration.org, website of the New Americans Executive Order of the state of Illinois, <http://www.immigrantintegration.org>.

17 The Building the New American Community Initiative, which included the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Migration Policy Institute, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Immigration Forum, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), and the Urban Institute. See www.migrationpolicy.org/news/2004_12_9.php for more information.

existing institutional mechanisms that better equip them to carry out the business of integration. Other communities, however, have only a very recent history of immigration and lack these institutional mechanisms. The different immigrant groups that predominate in different locales also create an array of challenges and opportunities, requiring flexibility in the local implementation of integration programs. For example, Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the immigrant population is dominated by Southeast Asian refugees, likely faces a different set of cultural, linguistic, and social challenges and opportunities than Dalton County, Georgia, where nearly all immigrants are laborers from Latin America.

- *There are certain aspects of integration that are essential to the success of both immigrants and receiving communities.* If there is one aspect of integration that is preeminently important, it is English-language acquisition. There is little doubt that knowing English dramatically facilitates full participation in U.S. society, and an integration policy must have English-language acquisition as a centerpiece. Learning English does not require immigrants and their children to jettison their mother tongue, however. They are more successfully integrated, in fact, when they retain their native language while learning English,¹⁸ and having a bilingual workforce makes the United States more competitive in the global

economy. Civic integration of immigrants is essential, but should not be relegated to the memorization of basic facts about U.S. history and civics. It also must involve opportunities to participate in civil society that facilitate trustful relationships between immigrant newcomers and all facets of their receiving community, especially law enforcement, elected officials, and other civic leaders.

- *Integration is more than just U.S. citizenship.* U.S. citizenship is an essential goal of integration, but integration begins well before an immigrant takes the oath of citizenship. An integration policy should aim to develop important precursors to citizenship, like English-language acquisition, civic participation, and socioeconomic mobility. These antecedents provide immigrants with a greater stake in their adopted communities and make them more likely to eventually become citizens.¹⁹

- *Integration requires the cooperation of many different actors.* Virtually every sector of U.S. society has a stake in successful integration, and all actors in receiving communities have an important role to play. As refugee resettlement programs suggest, integration is most successful when federal, state, and local governments along with NGOs and the private sector work in collaboration with immigrant newcomers.

18 Alejandro Portes & Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, 2001, chap. 6.

19 Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

- *Integration policy works best as a complement to other institutions.* An integration policy is not a substitute for the key institutions that shape integration. Schools and legal institutions are particularly important engines of mobility. An integration policy will only work to the extent that immigrants and their children have access to high-quality and affordable primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. The success of an integration policy also requires U.S. legal institutions to protect immigrants from nativist discrimination and human-rights violations. Strong legal protections create mobility by tearing down the economic, political, and social boundaries that impede integration.

- *Knowledge sharing is essential.* No actor involved in the integration process should have to go it alone. An integration policy must create a systematic way for NGOs and local governments from around the country to share best practices. Regional variation in the history of immigration means that some locales have more experience with integration than others. Local governments and NGOs in newer immigrant gateways no doubt have much to learn from the successes and failures in more established gateways, while the latter may bring fresh approaches to integration that would benefit the former.

CONCLUSION

Immigrant integration is inevitable and, for the most part, immigrants and their descendents are experiencing success in becoming American without the benefit of an integration policy. But the nature of integration will exert a powerful influence on the nation's prosperity in the years and decades to come, and there is simply too much at stake to rely on the current *laissez faire* approach. It is not in the best interests of the United States to make integration a more difficult, uncertain, or lengthy process than it need be. Facilitating the successful and rapid integration of immigrants into U.S. society minimizes conflicts and tensions between newcomers and the native-born, and enables immigrants to more quickly secure better jobs, earn higher incomes, and thus more fully contribute to the U.S. economy.

The United States long has been a nation of immigrants, but its policies are out of step with this reality. Public policies with regard to the foreign-born must go beyond regulating who is admitted and under what circumstances. The nation needs an immigrant-integration policy that effectively addresses the challenges and harnesses the opportunities created by today's large immigrant population. An integration policy will help ensure a positive, unifying form of integration for newcomers and their receiving communities, thereby benefiting the nation as a whole.

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