Immigrant Children: Introducing the Issue

Marta Tienda and Ron Haskins

Large numbers of immigrant children are experiencing serious problems with education, physical and mental health, poverty, and 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 status, social and cognitive development, and long-term prospects for economic mobility.

The well-being of immigrant children is especially important to the nation because they are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population. In 2008, nearly one in four youth aged seventeen and under lived with an immigrant parent, up from 15 percent in 1990.[1] Among children younger than nine, those with immigrant parents have accounted for virtually all of the net growth since 1990.[2] What these demographic trends portend for the future of immigrant children, however, is highly uncertain for several reasons. First, whether they achieve social integration and economic mobility depends on the degree of access they have to quality education from preschool through college. Second, these young immigrants are coming of age in an aging society that will require unprecedented social expenditures for health and retirement benefits for seniors. Third, large numbers of these youth now live in communities where few foreign-born residents have previously settled. That more than 5 million youth now reside in households of mixed legal status, where one or both parents are unauthorized to live and work in the United States, heightens still further the uncertainty about the futures of immigrant children.[3] Although nearly three-fourths of children who live with undocumented parents are citizens by birth, their status as dependents of unauthorized residents thwarts integration prospects during their crucial formative years.[4] 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.

In this volume, we use the term *immigrant youth* to refer to children from birth to age seventeen who have at least one foreign-born parent. Because an immigrant child's birthplace—that is, whether inside or outside the United States—is associated with different rights and responsibilities and also determines

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eligibility for some social programs, to the extent possible contributors to the volume distinguish between youth who are foreign-born (designated the *first generation*) and those who were born in the United States to immigrant parents (the *second generation*). U.S.-born children whose parents also were born in the United States make up the *third generation*.[5]

The Problem

Contemporary immigrant youth are far more diverse by national origin, socioeconomic status, and settlement patterns than earlier waves of immigrants, and their growing numbers coincide with a period of high socioeconomic inequality.[6] Recent economic and social trends provide cause for concern. On most social indicators, children with immigrant parents fare worse than their native-born counterparts. For example, compared with their third-generation age counterparts, immigrant youth are more likely to live in poverty, forgo needed medical care, drop out of high school, and experience behavioral problems.[7] At the same time, however, immigrant youth are more likely than natives to reside with two parents, a family arrangement generally associated with better outcomes for youth than is residing with a single parent. The benefits of this protective family arrangement, however, are weakened for immigrant youth whose parents are not proficient in English, are not authorized to live and work in the United States, and have only limited earnings capacity.

The academic progress of the large majority of immigrant youth residing in households whose members speak a language other than English lags behind that of children whose parents were born in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the share of children aged five to seventeen living in families that speak a language other than English rose from 9 percent in 1979 to 21 percent in 2008. Of these youth in non-English-language households, who represent 5 percent of all school-aged youth in the United States, nearly one in four speaks English with difficulty.[8] Youth reared in homes where English is not spoken lag behind native youth in reading and math achievement, especially if their parents have little education. We underscore that it is the combination of poor parental schooling and not using English at home that is associated with poor scholastic outcomes for immigrant minority youth.[9]

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Historically immigrants have used schools not only to acquire the skills and knowledge needed for successful integration into U.S. society, but also, paradoxically, to achieve ethnic recognition. Even as the children of German, Italian, and Russian immigrants learned English and adopted American norms decades ago, their parents rallied around foreign-language instruction and bilingualism as a symbol of national identity.[10] Although contemporary immigrants largely hail from Latin America and Asia rather than from Europe, similar scenes play out

today in disputes between parents and school administrators about whether schools are responsible for maintenance of home languages and in the enactment of public laws that declare English the nation's official language. A crucial difference, however, is that the educational requirements for successful economic integration are higher now than in the past, when basic literacy and numeracy often provided entry to secure jobs that paid a family wage. Today, failure to master English in the early grades undermines scholastic achievement, educational attainment, and, ultimately, economic mobility.[11]

Although researchers and policy analysts agree that the educational attainment of immigrants rises between the first and the second generation, they are divided over whether educational gains plateau or perhaps even decline for the third generation and beyond.[12] The debate over that question remains largely academic because methodological and data problems prevent a definitive adjudication. Nor do studies of multiple generations of immigrants provide an answer, because the experiences of immigrants during the 1960s and 1970s do not reflect the diverse social and economic circumstances faced by contemporary immigrant youth. Although Mexicans are the nation's largest immigrant group and the subject of many studies, their experiences cannot be generalized to all recent immigrant groups, even those from Latin America.

Controversy about the most effective way to teach children whose first language is not English is anything but academic. Ideological and political debates about preserving home languages notwithstanding, both the contemporary and historical records show that regardless of whether immigrant youths are instructed in English or a combination of English and their home language, home language loss is virtually complete by the third generation, even in cities such as Los Angeles where the density of foreign-born populations permits bilingualism to proliferate in public venues.[13] What is not debatable is the responsibility of public schools to teach English so that immigrant youth can succeed in school. Pragmatically, that responsibility requires effective teaching of academic subjects in English so that students master increasingly complex concepts and vocabulary.

Researchers disagree about whether it is more effective to teach English to non-English speakers through bilingual instruction or English immersion. Indeed, in the debate over the better means to reach the end—academic achievement—the means sometimes becomes an end in itself. In their article in this volume, Margarita Calderón, Robert Slavin, and Marta Sánchez assert that the pedagogical strategy is less consequential than the quality of instruction, but this message has been slow to reach schools and districts mired in bureaucratic regulations for serving immigrant youth. Controversies about pedagogy aside, evidence is incontrovertible that children who begin kindergarten with limited proficiency in spoken English fall behind native speakers in both reading and math proficiency; moreover, early achievement gaps widen through primary school and carry over to middle school and beyond.[14] Sociologist Min Zhao claims, and we agree, that English mastery is the single most important prerequisite for academic success and socioeconomic assimilation of immigrant children.[15]

Analyses of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS–K), show that the reading skills of language-minority kindergarten students

who are proficient in spoken English are comparable to those of native speakers and that the two groups make comparable gains in skills as they move through school. Furthermore, math achievement gaps between native speakers and immigrant youth who are proficient in English when they begin school narrow over time.[16] By contrast, minority students who begin kindergarten with limited oral English proficiency fall behind native speakers in their reading ability, resulting in a substantial achievement gap by fifth grade.[17]

Despite ample evidence of upward educational mobility between the first and second generation, especially for immigrant youth from Latin America, the uneven progress by national origin is worrisome. Asian-origin migrants attain higher levels of education on average than native white youth, owing largely to their higher college attendance and completion rates. Most of Hispanics' intergenerational educational progress takes place at the secondary level; their postsecondary progress has been more limited.[18] College attendance, it must be said, is not a basic right nor is access to a postsecondary education guaranteed for academically qualified youth, regardless of their parents' or their own immigration status. The 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision that guarantees K–12 schooling for immigrant youth whose parents, or who themselves, are undocumented does not apply to postsecondary schooling, which is neither compulsory nor free.[19]

Findings of the Volume

The articles in this volume fall into three broad categories. The first two articles set the stage for the subsequent review of research about the well-being of immigrant youth in the United States and provide an overview of demographic trends and family arrangements. The following five articles address educational trends and differentials, including language fluency. The final three articles take a close look at youthful immigrants' health status, social integration, and participation in welfare and other public programs. We turn now to a summary of the articles in the volume.

Demographic Trends

Jeffrey Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center surveys demographic trends of the U.S. youth population, with an emphasis on trends among immigrant youth. Immigrant youth now account for one-fourth of the nation's 75 million children; by 2050 they are projected to make up one-third of more than 100 million U.S. children. The wave of immigration under way since the mid-1960s has made children the most racially and ethnically diverse age group in the United States in the nation's history. In 1960, Hispanic, Asian, and mixed-race youth made up 4 percent of all U.S. children; today their share is 28 percent. During that same period the share of non-Hispanic white children steadily dropped from about 80 percent to 57 percent. Demographers project that by 2050, when one-third of all U.S. children will be Hispanic, non-Hispanic whites will make up only 40 percent.

Because many immigrants arriving since 1970 are unskilled, and hence have low earnings capacity, the changing demography of America's youth presents policy makers with several challenges in coming decades, including high rates of youth poverty, particularly among foreign-born children and children of undocumented parents, dispersal of immigrants to new destinations, and a lack of political voice. In addition, youth and the elderly will compete for scarce societal resources such

as education funding, Social Security, and government health benefits.

Living Arrangements

Nancy Landale, Kevin Thomas, and Jennifer Van Hook, all of Pennsylvania State University, examine differences by country of origin in immigrant families' human capital, legal status, social resources, and living arrangements, focusing especially on children of Mexican, Southeast Asian, and black Caribbean origin. Problems common to immigrant families, such as poverty and discrimination, may be partially offset by the benefits of living in two-parent families, an arrangement that is more common among immigrants than among U.S.-born youth. But the strong marriage bonds that protect immigrant children erode as families in the second and subsequent generations become swept up in the same social forces that are increasing single parenthood among all American families.

Immigrant families face many risks. The migration itself sometimes separates parents from their children. Mixed legal status afflicts many families, especially those from Mexico. Parents' unauthorized status can mire children in poverty and unstable living arrangements. Sometimes unauthorized parents are too fearful of deportation to claim the public benefits for which their children qualify. Refugees, especially Southeast Asian immigrants, sometimes lose family members to war or hardship in refugee camps.

Education: Preschool Programs

Immigrant children are more likely than native children to face circumstances, such as low family income, poor parental education, and language barriers, that place them at risk of developmental delay and poor academic performance once they enter school. Lynn Karoly and Gabriella Gonzalez, both of the Rand Corporation, examine how early care and education (ECE) programs can offset these problems and promote the development of preschool immigrant children. Participation in center-based care and formal preschool programs has been shown to have substantial short-term benefits that may extend into adolescence and beyond. Yet immigrant children participate in nonparental care of any type, including center-based ECE programs, at lower rates than native children.

Affordability, availability, and access to ECE programs are structural barriers for many immigrant families, just as they are for disadvantaged families more generally. In addition, language barriers, bureaucratic complexity, and distrust of government programs, especially among undocumented workers, may discourage participation, even when children might qualify for subsidies. Cultural preferences for parental care at home can also be a barrier.

The authors make two policy recommendations for improving ECE participation rates among immigrant children. First, although federal and state ECE programs that target disadvantaged children in general are likely to benefit disadvantaged immigrant children as well, making preschool attendance universal, as some states have done, or making preschool available based on residence in targeted communities rather than based on targeted child or family characteristics, would likely further boost participation by immigrant children. Second, publicly subsidized programs can be structured and marketed to minimize such obstacles as language barriers, cultural sensitivities, informational gaps, and misperceptions about government services or ECE programs.

Education: K–12

Robert Crosnoe of the University of Texas–Austin and Ruth López Turley of Rice University examine the performance of immigrant children in K–12 education, paying special attention to differences by generational status, race and ethnicity, and national origin. Immigrant youths often outperform their native peers in school—an advantage known as the immigrant paradox, because it would not be predicted by the relatively higher rates of social and economic disadvantages among immigrant families. The paradox is more pronounced among the children of Asian and African immigrants than other groups, is stronger for boys than for girls, and is far more consistent in secondary school than in elementary school. School readiness appears to be one area of potential risk for children from immigrant families, especially those of Mexican origin. For many groups, including those from Latin America, evidence of the immigrant paradox usually emerges after researchers control for family socioeconomic circumstances and children's English language skills. For other groups, the immigrant paradox is at least partially explained by "immigrant selectivity," or the tendency for more advantaged and ambitious families to leave their home country for the United States.

Differences between immigrant and native youth in nonacademic outcomes are often more mixed. Adolescents from Asian immigrant families often rank higher than their peers in academic achievement but lower in socioemotional health. And kindergarteners from Mexican immigrant families often rank lower than their peers on academic skills but higher on classroom adjustment. Strong family ties help explain the immigrant advantages, but the poor quality of schools and immigrant neighborhoods may suppress these advantages and place immigrant children at risk for a host of negative developmental outcomes.

Crosnoe and Turley also discuss policy proposals targeting immigrant youth, especially those from Latin America. Among the proposals are the federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth who meet certain criteria, including completing two years of postsecondary education; culturally grounded programs to prepare immigrant adolescents for college; and programs to involve immigrant parents in young children's schooling.

Education: Community Colleges

Robert Teranishi, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, all of New York University, explore how community colleges can better serve the specific educational needs of immigrant students.

A first priority is to boost the enrollment of such students. Because community colleges are conveniently located, cost much less than four-year colleges, often feature open admissions, and often try to accommodate the needs of students who work or have family responsibilities, immigrant students are already highly likely to enroll in two-year colleges. But through outreach programs, community colleges could attract even more immigrant students by providing mentors to help them apply and to overcome hurdles unique to their status as immigrants. Both government and private-sector groups could support campaigns to inform immigrant families about financial aid available for postsecondary studies and assist them in navigating the financial aid system. Community colleges themselves could raise funds

to provide scholarships for immigrants and undocumented students.

To ensure that immigrant students succeed and continue their studies, community colleges should provide high-quality counseling and academic planning tailored to their needs. To better serve those seeking to improve their English language skills, community college leaders and state policy makers should fund high-quality adult English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Federal reforms should also allow financial aid to cover tuition for ESL courses.

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Perhaps even more than for most of the topics covered in this volume, research on programs that are successful in improving the preparation, boosting the enrollment, or improving the performance of immigrant students in community colleges is notably thin. There is no shortage of good ideas, as this chapter shows, but it is difficult to know whether the programs are effective. Thus, policy recommendations for improving the role of community colleges in increasing the educational achievement of immigrant students require more research about what works and why.

Education: Four-Year Colleges

Sandy Baum of Skidmore College and Stella Flores of Vanderbilt University stress that it is in the nation's long-term economic interest to enable immigrants to complete a postsecondary education.

Some immigrant youth are well represented in the nation's colleges and universities. Others, notably those from Latin America, Laos, and Cambodia, are not. The underrepresentation of those groups is largely explained by the poor neighborhoods into which they settle, the low socioeconomic status of their parents, the poor quality of the schools they attend, discrimination, and legal barriers. For low-income students, whether of the first, second, or third generation, paying for college is an especially formidable barrier.

The sharp rise in demand for skilled labor over the past few decades has made it more urgent than ever to provide access to postsecondary education for all. Policy solutions, say the authors, require researchers to learn more about the differences among immigrant groups, regarding both their human capital and the social and structural environments into which they are received.

Removing the legal barriers to education faced by undocumented immigrants poses political, not conceptual, problems. Because federal efforts have stalled, it is up to state legislatures to address this issue. Providing adequate funding for postsecondary education through some combination of low tuition and grant aid is also straightforward, if not easy to accomplish. Assuring that Mexican immigrants and others who grow up in low-income communities and attend low-quality schools can prepare themselves academically to succeed in college is especially challenging. Policies to improve the elementary and

secondary school experiences of all children are likely the most important components of a strategy to improve the postsecondary success of all.

Education: English Learners

The fastest-growing student population in U.S. schools today is children of immigrants, half of whom do not speak English fluently. Wide and persistent achievement disparities between these English learners and English-proficient students indicate that schools must address the language, literacy, and academic needs of English learners more effectively. Margarita Calderón and Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University and Marta Sánchez of the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill identify the elements of effective instruction and review a variety of successful program models.

Since the 1960s, most U.S. schools with large populations of Spanish-speaking English learners have developed a variety of bilingual programs to instruct English learners in both Spanish and English. Other schools have implemented English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in which teachers instruct only in English but use second-language acquisition instructional strategies (sometimes called "Structured English Immersion"). Researchers have fiercely debated the merits of both forms of instruction.

Calderón, Slavin, and Sánchez assert that the quality of instruction and programmatic features in a whole-school approach to instructing English learners is what matters most for promoting academic achievement. The authors examine English language instruction that has been proven effective, highlighting comprehensive reform models, as well as individual components of these models: school structures and leadership; language and literacy instruction; integration of language, literacy, and content instruction in secondary schools; cooperative learning; professional development; parent and family support teams; tutoring; and monitoring implementation and outcomes.

The authors conclude that because more and more English learners are enrolling in the public schools, schools must improve the skills of all K–12 educators through comprehensive professional development.

Physical and Mental Health

Health status is a vital aspect of human capital. Poor childhood health contributes to lower socioeconomic status in adulthood; unhealthy workers are less productive, more costly for employers, and earn less over their lifetimes. Subsequently, low socioeconomic status among parents contributes to poor childhood health outcomes in the next generation. This cycle can be particularly pernicious for low-income minority populations, including many children of immigrants, according to Krista Perreira of the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and India Ornelas of the University of Washington. For the children of immigrants, poverty, the stresses of migration, and the challenges of acculturation can substantially increase their risk for developing physical and mental health problems.

Despite their poorer socioeconomic circumstances and the stress associated with migration and acculturation, foreign-born children who immigrate to the United States typically have lower mortality and morbidity risks than U.S. children born to immigrant parents. Over time and across generations, however, the health advantages fade.

Access to health care substantially influences the physical and emotional health status of immigrant children. Less likely to have health insurance and regular access to medical care services than nonimmigrants, immigrant parents delay or forgo needed care for their children. When these children finally receive care, it is often in the emergency room after an urgent condition has developed.

By promoting the physical well-being and emotional health of immigrant children, health professionals and policy makers can ultimately improve the long-term economic prospects of the next generation. To that end, Perreira and Ornelas recommend that health researchers and reformers learn more about the unique experiences of immigrant children such as their language issues, family separations, and illegal status; increase access to medical care and the capacity of providers to work with multilingual and multicultural populations; and continue to improve the availability and affordability of health insurance for all Americans.

Assimilation

Alejandro Portes and Alejandro Rivas of Princeton University examine how young immigrants adapt to life in the United States. They describe two distinct ethnic populations of immigrant children: Asian Americans, whose parents generally are highly skilled migrants; and Hispanics, whose parents are mostly unskilled manual workers. Partly because of their settlement patterns, and in particular their residential concentration in poor, segregated neighborhoods with limited amenities, differences between these two groups both in human capital and in their reception in the United States mean large disparities in resources available to the families and ethnic communities raising the new generation.

Although poorly endowed immigrant families face distinct barriers to upward mobility, their children can overcome these obstacles through learning the language and culture of the host society while preserving, at least in part, their home country language, values, and customs. There is extensive evidence that immigrants adapt culturally and progress economically between the first and second generation. Because immigrant youth from professional families tend to achieve social and economic success, policy makers should focus on children from unskilled migrant families, many of whom are further handicapped by unauthorized legal status. Racial stereotypes produce a positive self-identity for white and Asian students but a negative one for blacks and Latinos, and racialized self-perceptions among Mexican American students endure into the third and fourth generations.

The authors cite two important policies that would help immigrant youth. One is to legalize unauthorized young migrants lest, barred from conventional mobility channels, they turn to unorthodox means of self-affirmation and survival. The other is to provide volunteer programs and other forms of outside assistance to guide the most disadvantaged members of this population and help them stay in school.

Poverty

Childhood poverty is linked with a range of negative adult socioeconomic outcomes, from lower educational achievement and behavioral problems to lower earnings in the labor market. But few researchers have explored whether exposure to a disadvantaged background affects immigrant children and native children differently. George Borjas of Harvard University uses Current Population Survey (CPS) data on two specific indicators

of poverty—the poverty rate and the rate of participation in public assistance programs—to examine this important question.

He finds that immigrant children have significantly higher rates both of poverty and of program participation than do native children. Nearly half of immigrant children are being raised in households that qualify for some type of means-tested assistance compared with roughly one-third of native children. Although the shares of immigrant and native children living in poverty are lower than the shares participating in means-tested assistance programs, for each measure the rate for immigrant children is nonetheless about 15 percentage points higher than that for native children. The higher immigrant participation in means-tested programs mainly reflects their receipt of Medicaid.

Poverty rates among children vary widely depending on whether their parents are immigrants. The rate for foreign-born children with two immigrant parents is nearly double that for native children. The rate for U.S.-born children of two immigrant parents is nearly as high as that for foreign-born children, but that of U.S.-born children with one immigrant parent is about the same as that for native children. Immigrant children's rates of poverty and participation in means-tested programs also vary by national origin, and the national origin groups with the highest measured poverty and program participation rates tend to be the largest immigrant groups.

According to Borjas's analysis of the CPS data, these native-immigrant differences persist into young adulthood. In particular, the program participation and poverty rates of immigrant children are strongly correlated with both rates when they become young adults. But it is not possible, says Borjas, to tell whether the link results from a set of permanent factors associated with specific individuals or groups that tend to lead to "good" or "bad" outcomes over time or from exposure during childhood to adverse socioeconomic outcomes, such as poverty or receipt of Medicaid. Future research must explore the causal impact of childhood poverty on immigrant adult outcomes and why the impact might differ between immigrant and native families. Developing successful policies to reduce the high correlations of poverty and program participation between immigrant parents and their children requires better understanding of this correlation.

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Securing the Future: Immigrant Dividend or Immigrant Division?

That today's immigrant children are coming of age in an aging society means that the well-being of future retirees will depend increasingly on the productivity of younger workers. Some 13 percent of the U.S. population today is aged sixty-five and over, and the elderly's share of the population will continue to climb as successive cohorts

of baby boomers approach retirement age. Even as the absolute number of youth aged eighteen and under soars to a historical high, estimated at around 75 million in 2009, young people represent a shrinking share of the U.S. population.[20]

The social and economic implications of this temporal coincidence cannot be overstated because the balance of public spending currently favors the burgeoning senior population, whose political clout is strengthened through powerful organizations like AARP. Unlike seniors, children do not vote, and if their parents are not citizens, they too have little say in the political and administrative decisions that affect their children's lives. Although many organizations support immigrants' rights, either individually or collectively, they lack the political muscle and focus that AARP and other organizations provide for seniors. These political realities are especially important now because Congress appears poised to begin attacking the federal government's long-ignored debt burden, in part by slashing social programs.

Declining birth rates and population aging have shifted the burden of economic dependence from the young to seniors. A study by Susmita Pati and her associates shows that the generational balance of public spending favors seniors over young people. Between 1980 and 2000, for example, social welfare spending grew in absolute terms and as a share of gross national product for both the young and the elderly; however, the distribution of spending remained fairly stable for seniors even as it fluctuated for children.[21] Furthermore, the per capita spending gap widened by 20 percent over the period owing largely to higher Medicare and Medicaid expenses for the elderly.[22] Worse, spending on health programs for the elderly will continue to explode; left unchecked, that spending will absorb almost all new federal revenues in the future and eventually bankrupt the federal government.[23]

Seniors enjoy another fiscal protection relative to youth in part because their social benefits are financed largely by federal payroll taxes; social programs for youth, notably education and health care, rely heavily on state and local tax revenue. Benefits do not shrink for seniors because no law requires federal legislators to maintain a balanced budget and federal legislators are politically loath to cut benefits. By comparison, most states do require a balanced budget, which forces state and local politicians to make tough choices in order to balance budgets. Unlike many programs for the poor, the universal social programs for seniors—Social Security and Medicare—do not shrink during periods of economic contraction. Simply put, seniors receive their Social Security benefits in both lean and prosperous times, but school and health budgets often shrink and expand with business cycles. The 2007–09 recession has been particularly harsh for state and local governments, many of which have demonstrated that no social program—not even education—is immune from the blades of fiscal pruning. Unfortunately for immigrant youth, the poorest school districts, where they are disproportionately concentrated, have fared much worse than the wealthy districts.[24]

As immigrant children become an ever greater share of the future U.S. workforce, the economic and social well-being of retirees will depend on the human capital and economic productivity of these younger workers to a much greater extent than ever before. Thus, 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 early education, including equalizing English proficiency by third grade, and reducing financial and nonfinancial barriers to college. Because language proficiency is the learning platform for subsequent academic success, closing English proficiency gaps is a necessary, if insufficient, condition for eliminating achievement gaps in math, reading, and higher-order skills. James Heckman argues that English language proficiency gaps must be closed before third grade because test score gaps are relatively stable after third grade. In other words, later remedial investments may do little to reduce such gaps.[25]

Poverty and low parental earnings capacity hurt all children, no matter what their own or their parents' legal status is. Because poorly educated parents are less likely to read to their children, a substantial share of immigrant youth, particularly those from Mexico and Latin America, has limited opportunity to acquire preliteracy skills. These gaps in school readiness are decidedly larger for Mexican-origin children, who make up the fastest-growing segment of the elementary school population. As we have emphasized already, immigrant children's lower preliteracy skills stem not from the language their families speak at home, but rather from their parents' low educational attainment.[26] Importantly, this disadvantage is remediable—by ensuring that second-generation Hispanic children have access to high-quality preschool programs.

Although a growing number of jobs require some postsecondary schooling, thousands of immigrant youth face financial and nonfinancial barriers to college attendance. Both because immigrant youth are the fastest-growing population group and because the returns to college relative to high school increased markedly during the 1980s and 1990s, it is essential to raise the college attendance and completion rates of immigrant youth to boost their economic mobility, foster social cohesion, and increase their contributions to the nation's economy and to federal and state revenues. Barriers to postsecondary education are especially hard to overcome for youth who lack legal status despite having attended U.S. schools and having achieved sufficiently high academic credentials to qualify for admission.

Several states, including Texas and California, have passed legislation that extends in-state tuition to undocumented youth who are admitted to public institutions, but taxpayer-funded financial aid remains off limits for these youth. Other states interpret the provisions of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act to explicitly preclude undocumented youth from attending public institutions, especially since the surge in anti-immigrant sentiment following several failed federal attempts to pass comprehensive reform legislation.[27] Resolution of legal status for young people who have attended U.S. schools is essential both to enable them to enroll in postsecondary institutions and to garner economic returns from public investment in their education.

Well before the advent of the current gridlock over comprehensive immigration reform, the U.S. Congress considered several versions of the DREAM Act as a solution to the plight of immigrant youth whose legal status often bars them from access to jobs, college, and driver's licenses.[28] Jeanne Batalova and Margie McHugh estimate that more than 700,000 young adults would qualify for

conditional permanent residence under the provisions of the most recent bill, including about 110,000 who currently hold an associate's degree or higher but are unauthorized to work legally or to obtain a driver's license. Equally important, an additional 934,000 children now under age eighteen would be eligible in the future if they complete a high school degree.[29]

However compelling the wisdom of enhancing the future of the nation through investments in immigrant youth, lawmakers face three formidable challenges to do the right thing. Political debate over immigration is polarized by differences about how to resolve the legal status of 11 million undocumented residents. State and local budgets have been eroded during the severe recession. And education spending is the largest single item in most state and local budgets. Making educational investments in immigrant youth is likely to meet with considerable opposition, particularly in school districts unaccustomed to the presence of large numbers of foreign-born residents. 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.

In summary, the papers in this volume provide compelling evidence that the development of immigrant children and their integration into American society will continue to lag unless some of the proposed recommendations are implemented. Most important are the investments in health and education. Although the future of immigrant children is uncertain, what is certain is that failure to make these investments will result in higher spending on means-tested assistance programs and lower tax revenues in the future. As the ratio of senior citizens to workers continues to climb, policies to ensure the productivity of future workers will safeguard the future of the nation as well as immigrant youth.

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey S. Passel and Paul Taylor, *Undocumented Immigrants and Their U.S.-Born Children* (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010).

2. Karina Fourtney, Donald J. Hernandez, and Ajay Chaudry, "Young Children of Immigrants: The Leading Edge of America's Future," Brief 3 (Washington: Urban Institute, August 2010).

3. Passel and Taylor, *Undocumented Immigrants and Their U.S.-Born Children* (see note 1).

4. In 2008, just under 7 percent of K–12 students had at least one parent who was undocumented; see Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States* (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009).

5. Rubén Rumbaut refined discussions about immigrant generations and coined the decimal generations—those between the first and second generation—to acknowledge the great importance of age at migration in shaping youth integration prospects and, in particular, English mastery and academic performance. The most important of these distinctions is the "1.5-generation," which refers to youth who arrive around age twelve or before. On many social indicators, the 1.5 generation is indistinguishable from U.S.-born children of immigrants. See Rubén G. Rumbaut, "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generation in the United States," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1160–1205.

6. Min Zhao, "Growing Up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrants," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 63–95.

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15. Zhao, "Growing Up American" (see note 6).

16. Reardon and Galindo, "The Hispanic-White Achievement Gap in Math and Reading in the Elementary Grades" (see note 14).

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18. Marta Tienda, "Hispanicity and Educational Inequality: Risks, Opportunities, and the Nation's Future," (25th Tomás Rivera Lecture, annual conference of the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, San Antonio, Texas, March 2009).

19. *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). The court ruled that the state of Texas could not withhold funds to school districts that educate children of undocumented immigrants because, as people in the "ordinary sense of the term," they are protected by the Fourteenth Amendment and because the laws that restricted funds to districts serving children of undocumented immigrants did not serve a compelling state interest.

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26. Schneider, Martinez, and Owens, "Barriers to Educational Opportunities in the U.S." (see note 9).

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29. Ibid.