

Lack of Appropriate Research Leads to Gaps in Knowledge About Children in Immigrant Families

Children in immigrant families are the fastest growing population of children in the United States, and they are leading the way toward the creation of a new American majority made up of current racial and ethnic minorities, says Donald J. Hernandez, a professor in the Department of Sociology and the Center for Social and Demographic Analysis at the State University of New York at Albany. Thus, he points out, “the circumstances and prospects of these children are enormously important to understand.” Few large-scale studies, however, have been undertaken to examine this population.

The Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine recently sought to draw attention to these children by convening a Committee on the Health and Adjustment of Immigrant Children and Families to consider several questions about children in immigrant families:

- ▶ Why should the nation focus attention on these children?
- ▶ What are their countries of origin, and where are they concentrated in the United States?
- ▶ How do they fare compared to children in native-born families along major socioeconomic risk factors, especially poverty?
- ▶ How does welfare reform specifically impact these children?
- ▶ How is their physical health, mental health, and school adjustment?
- ▶ What major new research initiatives need to be designed, developed, and pursued?
- ▶ What key issues need to be addressed in future research about these children?

To examine this population, the committee distinguishes three generations of children under age 18: *first generation* children born in a foreign country; *second generation* children born in the United States, but with one or both parents born in a foreign country; and *third- and later-generation* children born in the United States to parents who were both born in the United States—

referred to as native-born families. Taken together, the first and second generations constitute the children who live in immigrant families.

Growing Importance of Children in Immigrant Families

One of every five children under age 18 living in the United States in 1997—14 million children—were children of immigrants, with one or both parents foreign born. Between 1990 and 1997, the number of children in immigrant families grew by 47 percent, compared to only 7 percent for children in U.S.-born families. “When 2000 census data become available,” predicts Dr. Hernandez, who directed the committee’s study, “they will show that these numbers have grown still larger.” Preliminary data already indicate that immigration rates, especially from Asia and Latin America, continued to rise during the 1990’s.

By 1990, about one-half of children in immigrant families were of Hispanic origin and about one-fourth were Asian, contributing greatly to the increasing diversity of the U.S. child and youth population. According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, most future population growth in the U.S. is going to occur through immigration and through births to current and future immigrants and their descendants. Because most children in immigrant families belong to Hispanic or non-White racial and ethnic minorities, the Census Bureau predicts that the proportion of children under age 18 who are White and non-

Note from the Director—Barbara B. Blum

This issue of *the forum* is based on research conducted by Dr. Donald J. Hernandez, a distinguished scholar now on the faculty at the State University of New York at Albany. The topic of immigrant families and their children is one that requires far more attention and analysis than it currently receives. Dr. Hernandez’s work highlights trends in the population that are of extraordinary importance to our nation. These changes merit far greater consideration from researchers.

Hispanic will decline steadily and rapidly, from about 69 percent in 1990 to nearly 50 percent in 2030. Conversely, by about 2030, children who are Hispanic, Black, Asian, or of some other racial minority will constitute the other half of the childhood population of the United States, growing from about 31 percent in 1990. (See Figure 1.)

The Census Bureau also projects that by 2030, 74 percent of the elderly will be White, non-Hispanic, compared to only 59 percent for working-age adults, and 52 percent for children. (See Figure 2.) As a result, as the growing elderly population of the predominantly White baby-boom generation reaches retirement ages, it will increasingly

depend for its economic support on the productive activities and the civic participation (i.e., the voting) of working-age adults who are members of racial and ethnic minorities, many of whom lived in immigrant families as children. Policymakers concerned about the future of U.S. education, health care, and the labor force, explains Dr. Hernandez, “should consequently consider the circumstances of racial and ethnic minorities—groups with cultural orientations that may differ from the current non-Hispanic majority, and who, in the past have often experienced limited social and economic opportunities.”

Figure 1: Projected Percent of Children Who Are Hispanic and Non-Hispanic White, Black, American Indian, and Asian/Pacific Islanders: 1980–2100

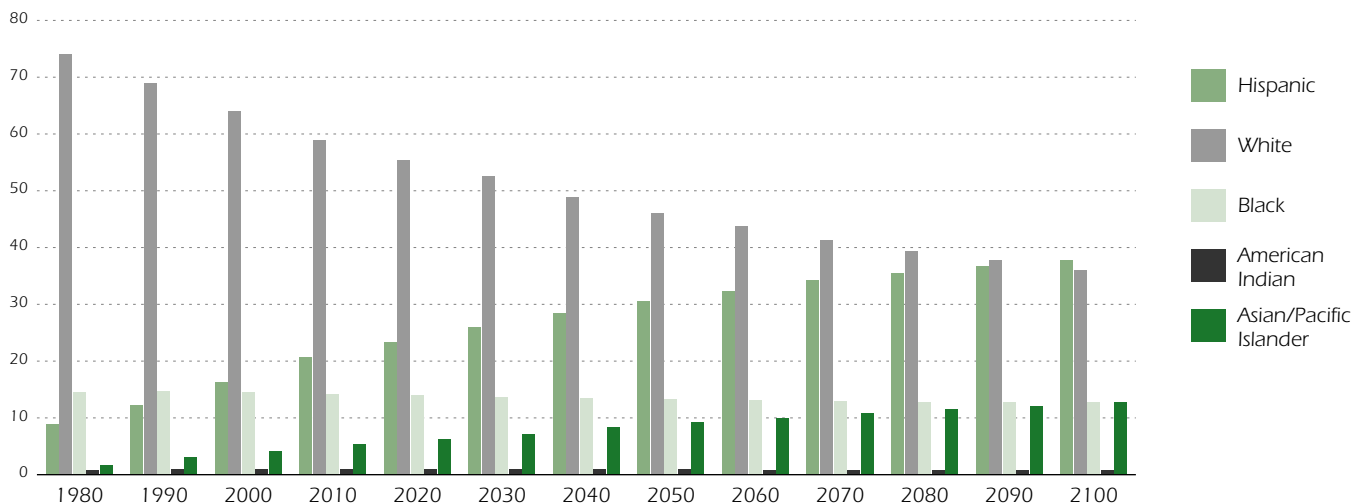
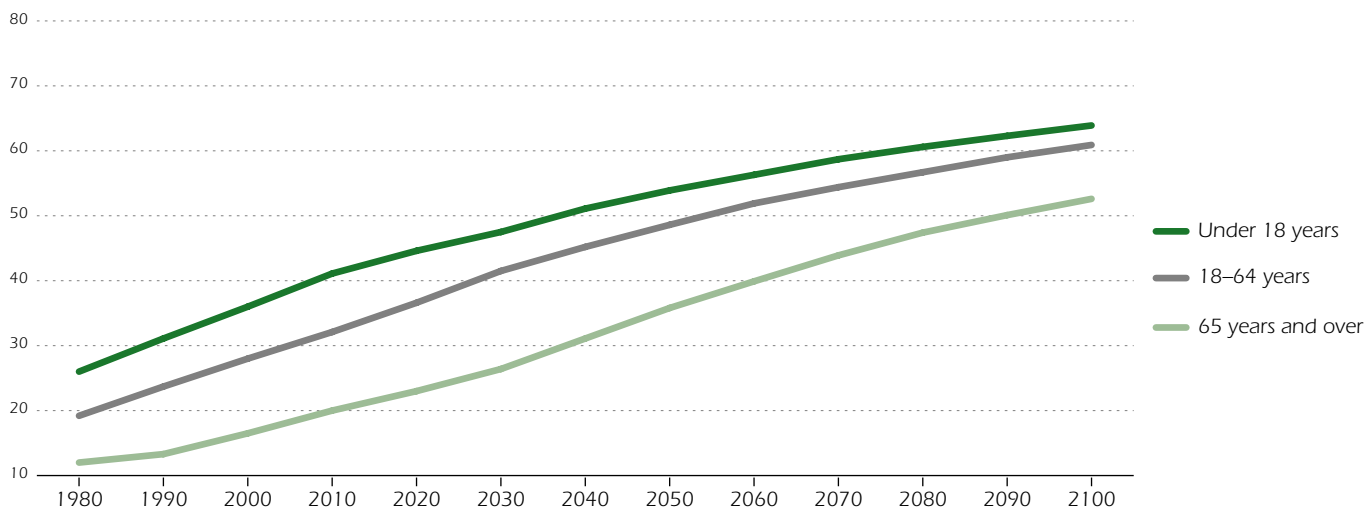


Figure 2: Projected Percent of Children and Adults Who Are Hispanic or Non-White: 1980–2100



The high poverty rate for children from these 12 countries is not strongly related to a lack of labor force participation among fathers or mothers, but instead is strongly associated with a lack of full-time year-round work among fathers, with extremely low educational attainments among fathers and mothers, and with linguistic isolation from English-speaking society.

Immigrants Hail From Many Countries But Concentrate in Few States

In 1990, 2.6 million children in immigrant families had origins in Mexico, 400,000 had origins in the Philippines, between 200,000 and 300,000 had origins in Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and at least 100,000 had origins in Laos, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Colombia, Jamaica, China, Japan, Italy, and India. These 19 countries accounted for nearly six million children in immigrant families, or about 71 percent of the 8.3 million children in such families in the 1990 census. An additional 15 countries each accounted for at least 50,000 children in immigrant families.

Despite such diverse origins, children in immigrant families are concentrated in only a handful of states and in less than a dozen major metropolitan areas in the United States. In 1990, 74 percent of children in immigrant families lived in only six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey. California alone accounted for 35 percent of these children. They do, however, constitute a large proportion of children in many states. In 1990, children in immigrant families accounted for 39 percent of children in California, 20 to 25 percent of children in Florida, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, and for more than 10 percent of children in an additional 10 states. Early findings from the 2000 Census show that, for the first time in U.S. history, almost half of the nation's largest cities are home to a larger percentage of racial and ethnic minorities than Whites.

Work Ethic Strong, But Education Low, Poverty High

Living in one-parent families has generally been found for children to have negative consequences for educational attainments and occupational success later during adulthood. The proportion of children living in one-parent families is substantially smaller for immigrant families than for children in U.S.-born families—17 percent vs. 26 percent in 1990. Children in immigrant families are substantially

more likely than those in U.S.-born families to have both parents in the home. “In fact,” points out Dr. Hernandez, “both first-generation and second-generation children are less likely than third- and later-generation children to live in one-parent families. These results indicate that children in immigrant families are more likely to benefit from stable two-parent family situations than are children in U.S.-born families,” he concludes.

Researchers have also found negative educational and employment outcomes for children who generally live in families that experience instability in parental employment and low parental educational attainments that lead to poverty-level family incomes. The overwhelming majority of children in immigrant families, like those in U.S.-born families, have fathers who are in the labor force, at 88 to 95 percent across the generations. Children in immigrant and native-born families are fairly similar in their having mothers in the labor force. These results indicate that children in immigrant and native-born families live in families with equally strong work ethics.

Children in immigrant families also differ little from those in U.S.-born families in the proportion with parents who are highly educated. As of 1990, a nearly identical 24 to 26 percent of children both in immigrant and in U.S.-born families had fathers with four years of college or more. Similarly, a nearly identical 16 to 18 percent had mothers who were college graduates. But children in immigrant families are much more likely to have a father or a mother who has completed only eight years of schooling or less. The proportion of children in immigrant families who have a father or a mother with no more than eight years of schooling is about 25 percent, compared to only 3 percent for children in native-born families. Thus, about one-fourth of children in immigrant families have parents with extremely limited educational attainments. “This has potentially important implications for the educational and employment trajectories for these children during the coming years,” says Barbara Blum, director of the Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism at the National Center for Children in Poverty.

Poverty Concentrated Among Certain Countries of Origin

Children in immigrant families are somewhat more likely than those in U.S.-born families to live under the official poverty line—22 percent versus 17 percent. Over one third of the first generation is especially likely to live in official poverty, (\$13,861 for a family of three in 2000) although poverty rates for children in immigrant families differ depending on their country of origin, and can range from a low of 4 percent for children from Ireland to a high of 51 percent for children from Laos.

Most of the poverty among children in immigrant families in the 1990 census was concentrated among children with origins in 12 countries, of whom one quarter to one half lived in poor families. These immigrants included officially recognized refugees, those fleeing countries experiencing war or political instability, and migrants seeking unskilled work. Mexico, currently the source of the largest number of both legal and illegal immigrants, has been an important source of unskilled labor for the U.S. economy throughout the 20th century.

In the 1990 census, the overall poverty rate for children in immigrant families from these 12 countries was 35 percent. “In view of the negative risks associated with poverty generally, the situation of children from these countries may be particularly serious,” comments Dr. Hernandez. Mexico alone accounted for 31 percent of all children in immigrant families, but they accounted for 50 percent of all children in immigrant families who lived in poverty. Altogether, children with origins in these 12 countries accounted for 46 percent of all children in immigrant families in 1990, but they accounted for about 80 percent of all children in poor immigrant families.

Although the overwhelming majority of children in immigrant families from these 12 countries—90 percent—had a father who was in the labor force, 40 percent had fathers who did not work full-time year-round, 46 percent had fathers with only 8 years of schooling or less, and 40 percent lived in linguistically isolated households where no one in the home age 14 or older spoke English exclusively or very well. Thus, the high poverty rate for children from these 12 countries is not strongly related to a lack of labor force participation among fathers or mothers, but instead is strongly associated with a lack of full-time year-round work among fathers, with extremely low educational attainments among fathers and mothers, and with linguistic isolation from English-speaking society.

Despite the fact that one-fourth of children in immigrant families live in linguistically isolated households, and about two-thirds speak a language other than English at home, language assimilation occurs very rapidly across generations. Nearly three-fourths of children in immigrant families speak English exclusively or very well. In addition, the proportion of children in immigrant families who

speak English exclusively or very well jumps sharply from 55 percent for the first generation to 81 percent for the second generation.

Welfare Reform Leaves Many Children Without Public Services

As a result of welfare reform, lack of U.S. citizenship has become a potential risk factor for children and parents in immigrant families. Although only one-fifth of children in immigrant families were not U.S. citizens in 1990, two-thirds were either themselves not citizens or lived with at least one parent who was not a citizen. Because parents who are not citizens may be unaware of their children’s eligibility for important services or may fear to contact government authorities on behalf of their children, a substantial portion of children in immigrant families may be at risk of not receiving important public services or benefits. This may especially be the case among children with origins in the 12 countries with very high poverty rates, because children from these countries not only have high proportions in poverty, they also tend to have especially high proportions who are not citizens or have parents who are not citizens.

Prior to welfare reform, eligibility criteria already divided legal from illegal immigrants. Legal immigrants were entitled to health and other public benefits on basically the same terms as citizens, while illegal immigrants were barred from most public services, although some exceptions were made for emergency health care, for maternal and child health, and for infant nutrition programs. Now, notes Dr. Hernandez, the line divides legal immigrants from citizens. Under welfare reform, both illegal and legal immigrants are ineligible for important programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Food Stamps during their first five years in the United States. Consequently, he emphasizes, “lack of U.S. citizenship has, for the first time, become a potential risk factor for children and parents in immigrant families.”

More Positive Picture On Child Health and School Adjustment

Not only is it important that the effects of welfare reform be studied to understand the circumstances of children in immigrant families, but it is also essential that immigrants be a major focus for future research to understand the overall effects of welfare, concludes Dr. Hernandez. “We know from recent research evidence that, prior to welfare reform, among those at greatest socioeconomic need, those in immigrant families had less access to health insurance and health care compared to third- and later-generation children, and they were less likely to live in families receiving a range of welfare benefits and services.”

But baseline research commissioned by the committee on the extent to which children in immigrant families

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received social services prior to welfare reform reveals some surprises. In view of their lower rates of public benefit use, children in immigrant families were doing at least as well, or better, than third- and later-generation children on a wide variety of indicators measuring physical health, mental health, and school adjustment.

“This conclusion must be tempered, however, for four reasons,” explains Dr. Hernandez. First, the evidence pieced together and generated by the committee regarding the health and well-being of children in immigrant families is consistent across a wide variety of domains, but it is limited both in its quality and in the number of domains for which research is available. Second, available evidence suggests there is enormous variability across children with various countries of origin for many indicators. Third, the health and well-being of children in immigrant families appears to deteriorate through time and across generations, suggesting that the protective benefits of immigrant culture become more diluted over time. Lastly, the recent welfare reform places many children in immigrant families at risk of losing potentially important economic and health resources.

More Research Needed to Study Immigrants

To be effective, policies and programs designed to foster the adjustment of children in immigrant families to American society must be founded on rigorous scientific knowledge about their needs, the processes that generate these needs, and approaches to addressing them, says Ms. Blum. “Unfortunately, few major data collection efforts provide a scientifically sound basis for monitoring or studying the health status and resources available to children in immigrant families.” None of the major evaluations of welfare and health care reform is focused particularly on consequences for children in immigrant families points out Dr. Hernandez. At a minimum, such studies need to include substantial sub-samples of children in immigrant families, paying attention to factors uniquely relevant to outcomes such as their circumstances of migration, the duration of child and parental residence in the United States, and the immigrant status of siblings and parents.

To expand the scientific knowledge needed to improve public and private policies and programs for immigrant children and their families, the committee calls for the following kinds of research:

- ▶ Ethnographic studies on the physical and mental health of children and youth in diverse immigrant families.
 - ▶ Both quantitative and qualitative research on the effects of welfare reform and health care reform for children and youth in immigrant families, and on how access to and the effectiveness of health care and other services are affected by the provision of culturally competent care.
 - ▶ Federal collection and coding of information on country of birth, citizenship status, and parents’ country of birth in key national data collection systems, as is now done in the Census Bureau’s annual Current Population Survey.
 - ▶ Sub-samples in federal surveys that are large enough to reliably monitor the circumstances of children and youth in immigrant families as a whole, and where feasible, for specific countries of origin.
- “The future of the economy and the polity depend on improved scientific understanding and on public and private policies and programs that assure healthy development, high educational attainments, and labor force success for these children,” states Dr. Hernandez. “The implementation of these recommendations would enormously expand knowledge not only about these children, but about all children, to the benefit of the children and the nation.”

The Committee on the Health and Adjustment of Immigrant Children and Families of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine published its findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the committee report, titled *From Generation to Generation: the Health and Well-Being of Children in Immigrant Families* in 1998, and in a volume of research papers, titled *Children of Immigrants: Health, Adjustment, and Public Assistance* in 1999. The study director of the committee is Dr. Donald J. Hernandez, professor at the State University of New York at Albany and former chief of the Marriage and Family Statistics Branch, U.S. Bureau of the Census. Volumes may be obtained by calling 888-624-8373 or by visiting www.nap.edu/catalog/6164.html. The National Center for Children in Poverty will be releasing its own analysis of children in immigrant families using Current Population Survey data from 1993 to 2000 at www.nccp.org.

RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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the forum, February 2002, Vol. 5, No. 1

The newsletter appears four times a year, printed on recycled paper and accessible through the Web at: <http://www.researchforum.org>. The Research Forum has been funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Chase Manhattan Foundation, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, George Gund Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, United Way of New York City, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For further information write Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism, NCCP, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032. Tel: (212) 304-7150. Fax: (212) 544-4200. E-mail: info@researchforum.org.

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