

The Integration of Immigrants into American Society

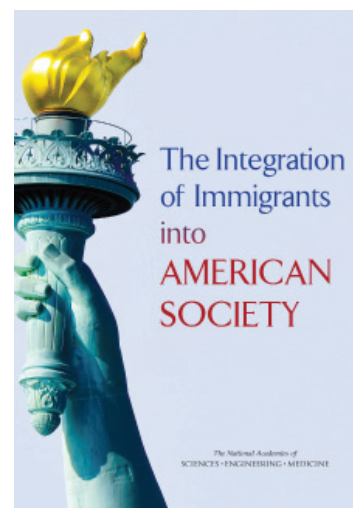
The United States prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, and it has a long history of absorbing people from across the globe. The successful integration of immigrants and their children contributes to economic vitality and a vibrant and ever-changing culture. Today, the 41 million immigrants in the United States represent 13.1 percent of the U.S. population. The U.S.-born children of immigrants, the second generation, represent another 12 percent of the population. Together, the first and second generations account for one out of four members of the U.S. population. Whether they are successfully integrating is an important and pressing question.

A committee of experts appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined the available research to assess how immigrants are integrating into American society in a range of areas such as education, occupations, health, and language. The committee's findings are presented in its report, *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*.

INTEGRATION AND WELL-BEING

Integration is the process by which members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another. The process of integration depends upon the participation of immigrants and their descendants in major social institutions such as schools and the labor market, as well as their social acceptance by other Americans. Greater integration implies movement toward parity in critical life opportunities with the native-born American majority. Integration is a two-way process; it happens both because immigrants change once they arrive, and because native-born Americans change in response to immigration.

The report measures two dimensions of change that immigrants and their descendants may experience—integration and well-being. Integration may improve the well-being of immigrants and their children—for example, if it enables those who arrive with little education to get more education. But greater integration does not always correspond to greater well-being. For example, immigrants on average come to the United States with better health than native-born Americans. Over time, their health becomes more like the native born—a shift that increases their integration but lessens their well-being.



FINDINGS

Overall, the panel found that current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society. Across all measurable outcomes, integration increases over time, with immigrants becoming more like the native-born with more time in the country, and with the second and third generations becoming more like other native-born Americans than their parents were. In many realms—educational attainment, occupational distribution, income, residential integration, language ability, and living above the poverty line—immigrants also increase their well-being as they integrate with the native-born. However, immigrants’ well-being declines in three other areas as they become more similar to native-born Americans—health, crime, and the percentage of children growing up with two parents.

Education. There has been strong progress over generations in educational attainment. Second-generation members of most of today’s immigrant groups meet or exceed the schooling level of typical third- and later-generation native-born Americans. This is true for both men and women.

This general picture masks important variations between and within groups, however. One difference from earlier

waves of immigration is the large percentage of highly skilled immigrants coming to the United States; over a quarter of the foreign-born have a college education or more. Other immigrants start with exceptionally low levels of education. This is particularly true for foreign-born Mexicans and Central Americans, who on average have less than 10 years of education. The children of these immigrants progress a great deal relative to their parents, with an average education of more than 12 years, but the second generation does not reach parity with the general population of native-born.

Employment and earnings. For the years 2003 through 2013, the overall male employment rate for all educational levels was slightly higher for first-generation immigrants (86 percent) than for the second generation (83 percent) or third- and later-generation native-born (82 percent). Among women the pattern is reversed, with a substantially lower employment rate for immigrants (61 percent) than for the native born (72 percent). Immigrant men with the lowest level of education are much more likely to be employed than comparable native-born men, indicating that they are filling an important niche in the U.S. economy; these immigrants appear to be filling low-skilled jobs that natives are not available or not willing to take. For-

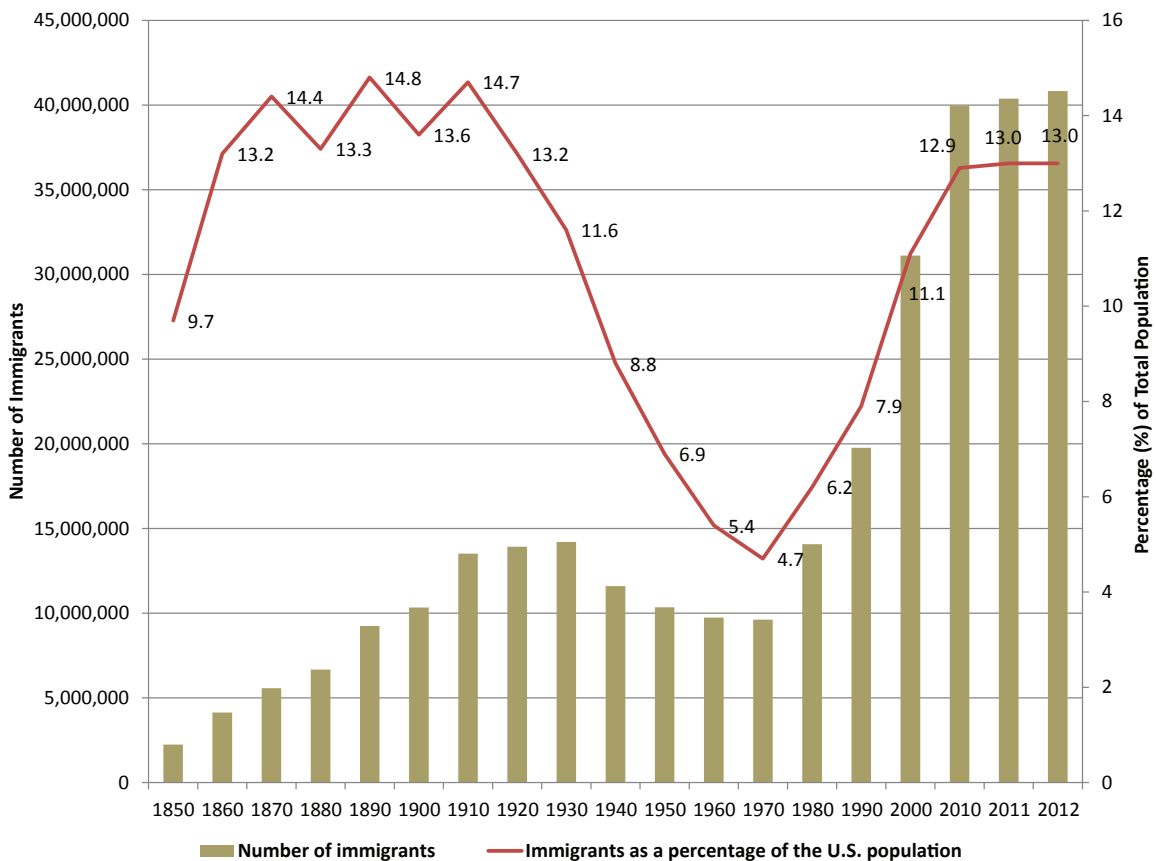


Figure 1 Number of immigrants and immigrants as percentage of the U.S. population, 1850 - present. Source: U.S. Census Bureau (Economics Draft Report).

ign-born workers' earnings improve relative to the native born the longer they live in the United States. But earnings assimilation is considerably slower for Hispanic (predominately Mexican) immigrants than for other immigrants.

Occupations. First- and second-generation immigrants have robust representation across the occupational spectrum, implying that the U.S. workforce has been welcoming immigrants and their children into higher-level jobs in recent decades. In the highly skilled professions of science and technology, immigrants comprise about one-fifth to one-third of all workers. Immigrant groups who are concentrated in low-status occupations in the first generation improve their occupational position substantially in the second generation, although they do not reach parity with third and later generations. Second-generation children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America have made large leaps in occupational terms: 22 percent of second-generation men from Mexico and 31 percent of second-generation men from Central America were in professional or managerial positions in 2003 to 2013. The occupational leap for second-generation women during this period was even greater.

Poverty. Immigrants are more likely to be poor than the native-born, even though their labor force participation rates are higher and, on average, they work longer hours. The poverty rate for foreign-born persons was 18.4 percent in 2013, compared to 13.4 percent for the native-born. However, among adults the poverty rate overall declines over generations, from over 18 percent in the first generation, to 13.6 percent in the second generation, and 11.5 percent in the third.

Residential integration. Data show that over time most immigrants and their descendants gradually become less segregated from native-born whites and more dispersed across regions, cities, communities, and neighborhoods. Recently arrived immigrants often choose to live in areas with other immigrants and thus have higher levels of residential segregation from native-born whites than immigrants who have been in the country for 10 to 20 years. Race also plays an independent role; in metropolitan areas Asians are the least segregated from native-born whites, followed by Hispanics, and then black immigrants, who are the most segregated. Undocumented immigrants are also more segregated than other immigrants.

Language. The vast majority of Americans (90 percent)—whether native- or foreign-born—agree that it is very or fairly important to be able to speak English. The available evidence indicates that today's immigrants are learning English at the same rate or faster than earlier waves of immigrants. Although the outlook for linguistic integration is generally positive, the barriers to English proficiency among the first generation are cause for concern. Funding

for English as a Second Language classes has declined even as the population of English-language learners has grown. The U.S. education system is not currently equipped to handle the large numbers of English-language learners in the K-12 system—nearly 5 million students, 9 percent of all students—and this may stymie the integration prospects of many immigrants and their children.

Health. First-generation immigrants have better infant, child, and adult health outcomes than the U.S.-born population in general and better outcomes than U.S.-born members of their ethnic group. Compared to native-born Americans, the foreign-born are less likely to die from cardiovascular disease and all cancers combined. They experience fewer chronic health conditions, lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of obesity, fewer functional limitations, and fewer learning disabilities. Immigrants have a lower prevalence of depression and alcohol abuse. Immigrants also live longer, with an average life expectancy of 80 years—3.4 years higher than the native-born population. Over time and generations, these health advantages decline, and their health status converges with the native-born.

Crime. Increased prevalence of immigrants is associated with lower crime rates—the opposite of what many Americans fear. Immigrants are less likely than the native-born to commit crimes, and among men ages 18 to 39, the foreign-born are incarcerated at a rate that is one-fourth the rate for the native-born. Neighborhoods with greater concentrations of immigrants have much lower rates of

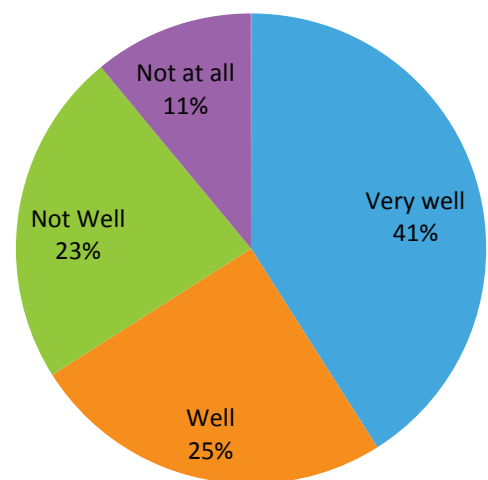


Figure 2 English-speaking ability of the foreign-born according to responses on the 2012 American Community Survey. Gambino, C.P., Acosta, Y.D., and Grieco, E.M. (2014). *English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2012*. No. ASC-26. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

crime and violence than comparable nonimmigrant neighborhoods. However, there is evidence that crime rates among second- and third-generation immigrants rise to more closely match the general population of native-born Americans.

Family patterns. Immigrant family-formation patterns change over time. Their divorce rates and out-of-wedlock birth rates start out much lower than the rates for native-born Americans, but over generations these rates increase. Immigrant children are much more likely to live in families with two parents than are third-generation children, and the prevalence of two-parent families continues to be high for second-generation children. Between the second and third generations, however, the percentage of children in two-parent families declines substantially, converging toward the percentage for other native-born American families. Two-parent families provide children with a number of important advantages; they are associated with lower risks of poverty, more-effective parenting practices, and lower levels of stress than households with only one or no parents.

CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The panel identified three causes for concern in the integration of immigrants:

Legal Status. The role of legal status in slowing or blocking the integration of not just the undocumented but also their U.S.-citizen children. Evidence makes clear that an immigrant's legal status is a key factor in the individual's integration trajectory. Of all foreign-born people in the United States, an estimated 11.3 million are undocumented; although they come from all over the globe, the majority—about 52 percent—are from Mexico. Since the mid-1990s, U.S. immigration policy has become more punitive toward the undocumented, and interior enforcement policies have attempted to prevent their employment and long-term residence. Whether the nation should try to prevent the integration of the undocumented or provide a path to legalization is a political question, not a scientific one, and thus it is not within the panel's purview. That said, the panel did find evidence the current immigration policy is having several effects on integration:

- *It has only partially affected the integration of the undocumented, many of whom have lived in the United States for decades.* The shift in recent years to more intense enforcement of immigration laws has not prevented the undocumented from working, but it has coincided with a reduction in their wages.
- *The immigration impasse has led to many laws targeting the undocumented at local, state, and federal levels—laws that often contradict each other, creating variation in integration policies across the country.* For example, some

states and localities provide in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants or provide driver's licenses or declare themselves to be sanctuary cities, while others prohibit renting housing to undocumented immigrants or authorize local enforcement of federal immigration laws.

- *The current system has created barriers to the successful integration of the citizen children of the undocumented, even though, as citizens, it is in the country's best interest that these children integrate successfully.* Undocumented status hinders socioeconomic integration not just for the undocumented immigrants themselves but also for their U.S.-born children. For example, Mexican-American children whose parents remained undocumented attained 1.25 fewer years of completed schooling than their counterparts whose parents transitioned to a documented status.

Race. The panel found that patterns of immigrant integration are shaped by race. While there is evidence of integration and improvement in socioeconomic outcomes for blacks, Latinos, and Asians, their race still matters, even after controlling for all other characteristics. Black immigrants and their descendants are spatially integrating with native-born non-Hispanic whites at the slowest rate, Asian immigrants and their descendants are integrating with native-born whites most quickly, and Latinos are in between. The panel found some evidence that racial discrimination against Latinos shapes their integration outcomes and some evidence that the large numbers of undocumented in this group may have a stronger impact on their integration trajectories. Progress in reducing racial discrimination and disparities in socioeconomic outcomes in the United States will improve the outcomes of natives and immigrants alike.

Naturalization rates. Birthright citizenship is one of the most powerful mechanisms of formal political and civic inclusion in the United States. But the rate at which immigrants become *naturalized* citizens in the United States, at only 50 percent, lags behind other countries. This is surprising since the vast majority of immigrants, when surveyed, report wanting to become a U.S. citizen. The overall level of citizenship among working-age immigrants who have been living in the United States for at least 10 years is, at 50 percent, far lower than other traditional receiving countries such as Australia (81%) and Canada (89%). The disparity holds even when the rate is adjusted for the high proportion of undocumented immigrants.

Moderate levels of naturalization in the United States appear to stem not from immigrants' lack of interest, or even primarily from the bureaucratic process of applying for citizenship, but from somewhere in the process by which individuals translate their motivation to naturalize into action. Further research is needed to clearly identify

the barriers to naturalization. Low naturalization rates have important implications for political integration, because the greatest barriers to political participation—especially participation in elections—are gaining citizenship and registering to vote.

EFFECT OF IMMIGRATION ON SOCIETY

Previous immigration from around the globe changed the United States. It is much more difficult to see and measure the ways in which immigration is changing the country now, because it is notoriously hard to measure cultural changes while they are occurring. Immigration has affected American society by increasing its racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, which has resulted in increased intergroup contact and the transformation of American communities and institutions.

Racial and ethnic diversity. In 1970, 83 percent of the U.S. population was non-Hispanic white; today, that proportion is about 62 percent, and immigration is responsible for much of that change. Hispanics have grown from just over 4.5 percent of the population in 1970 to about 17 percent today. Asians are currently the fastest-growing immigrant group in the country, as immigration from Mexico has declined. Asians represented less than 1 percent of the population in 1970 but are 6 percent today. Black immigration has also grown; in 1970, blacks represented just 2.5 percent of immigrants; today they represent 9 percent of immigrants.

Religious diversity. In 2014, 80 percent of immigrants were affiliated with a religious group or faith, compared with 77 percent of the U.S.-born. While a large majority of all immigrants are Christian, immigration is also bringing new religious diversity to the United States. Four percent of the foreign-born are Muslim, and while Muslim immigrants are doing better than the national average in education and income, they do report encountering high levels of prejudice and discrimination. Religious diversity is especially notable among Asian immigrants, with sizeable numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, and those who do not identify with any religion.

Marriage and family relationships. Immigrants become Americans not just by integrating into neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, but also into families. Marriages between the native-born and immigrants appear to have increased significantly over time. Immigrants have contributed enormously to America’s shifting patterns of racial and ethnic mixing in intimate and marital relationships. Today, about one of every seven new marriages each year is an interracial or interethnic marriage, more than twice the rate a generation ago. Inter marriage is also having an effect on family networks; a recent survey reported that more than 35 percent of Americans said that one of their “close” kin is of a different race, and integration of immigrants and their descendants is a major contributor to this large degree of intermixing. In the future, the lines between what Americans today think of as separate ethnic and racial groups may become much more blurred.

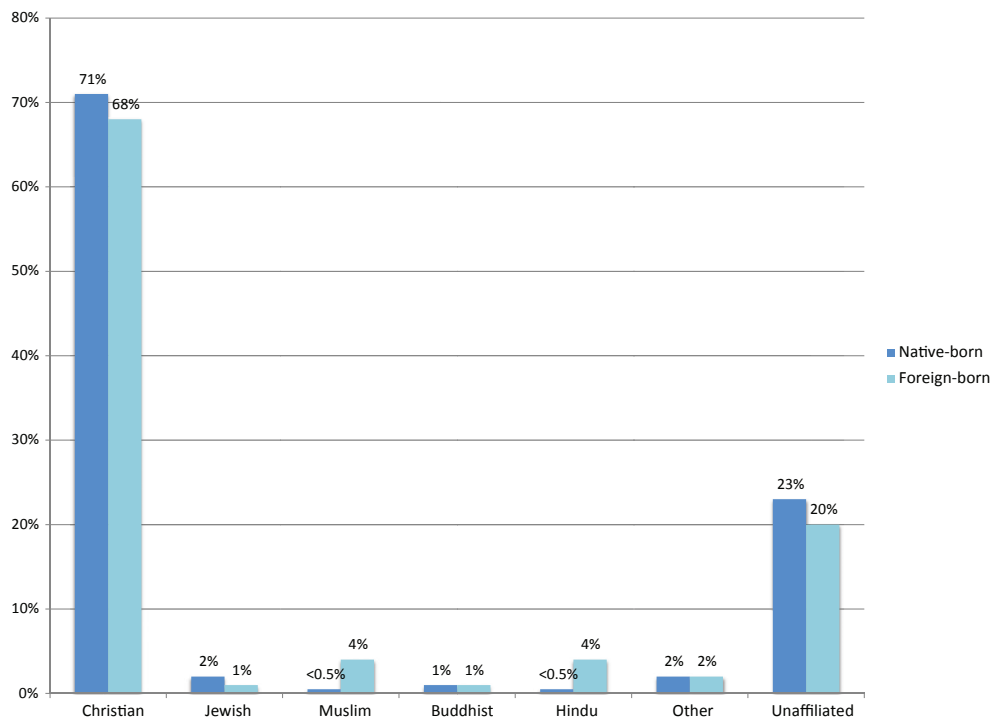


Figure 3 Religious affiliation of native-born and foreign-born adults in the United States, 2014. Source: Pew Research Forum (2015).

THE NEED FOR BETTER DATA

There is a scarcity of longitudinal data available to measure immigrant integration. This is a longstanding problem, but it has become increasingly critical as immigration to the United States has increased and as immigrants have become dispersed throughout the country. The report includes several specific recommendations for data collection. For example, the federal government should collect

data on generational status by adding a question on birthplace of parents to the American Community Survey. And any legislation to regularize immigrant status in the future for the undocumented should include a component to survey those who apply and to follow them to understand the effects of legalization.

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