

# The Integration of Immigrants into **AMERICAN SOCIETY**

## ISSUE BRIEF: Legal Status and Civic Participation

The United States prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, and it has a long history of absorbing people from across the globe. Today, one of every four members of the U.S. population is either an immigrant or has a parent who is an immigrant. How well they are successfully integrating is an important and pressing question.

A panel of experts appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined the available evidence to assess how immigrants are integrating into U.S. society in a range of areas—education, employment and earnings, language, and health, among others. The committee's findings are presented in its report *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society* (2015). The report concludes that across all measurable outcomes, current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society.

**One facet of integration examined in the study is how the legal status of immigrants affects their integration pathways.**

### Legal Status Confers Varying Rights and Benefits

An immigrant's legal status is a key factor in his or her integration trajectory. Immigration statuses in the United States fall into four rough categories: permanent, temporary, discretionary, and undocumented.

These legal statuses differ in terms of the rights and benefits they confer, and they affect immigrants' opportunities to integrate across a wide variety of social dimensions. For example, only naturalized citizens are allowed to vote and fully participate in the U.S. political system. Legal status also defines access to social services and to health care; for instance, immigrants who are undocumented or who are not permanent residents are ineligible for medical care coverage, except emergency care and childbirth services.

### U.S. Naturalization Rates Lower than Many Other Countries

Naturalization rates in the United States—the rates at which eligible foreign-born residents become citizens—lag behind other countries that receive substantial numbers of immigrants. Among working-age immigrants who have lived in the United States for at least 10 years, only 50 percent have become citizens. Even after adjusting to account for the undocumented population—a group that is barred by law from citizenship—the naturalization rate among U.S. immigrants is still well below many European countries



and other traditional immigrant-receiving countries such as Australia and Canada. This is surprising, since the vast majority of immigrants, when surveyed, report wanting to become U.S. citizens.

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 pose a challenge for immigrants' political integration, because becoming a citizen is necessary to vote in federal and state elections. Naturalized citizens are also much more likely to be civically involved through community organizations than those who are not citizens.

## Effects of Undocumented Status

An estimated 11.3 million (26 %) of foreign-born people in the United States are undocumented. Undocumented status slows but does not fully impede integration into society. 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 U.S. should try to prevent the integration of the undocumented or provide a path to legalization is a political, not a scientific, question, and thus not within the panel's purview. However, the panel did find evidence that the current immigration policy has several effects on integration:

- Current policy 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.
- Current policy has led to great variation in laws related to the undocumented at the local, state, and federal levels. Some states and localities provide in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants, some provide driver's licenses, and some are declaring themselves to be sanctuary cities. In other localities there are restrictive laws, such as prohibitions on renting housing to undocumented immigrants or aggressive local enforcement of federal immigration laws.
- Effects of legal status reverberate beyond the individual to affect family members, even those who are U.S. citizens. 5.2 million children live in families with an undocumented parent, 4.5 million of them are native-born U.S. citizens. Parents' undocumented status can hinder the integration prospects of their U.S.-born children, even though, as citizens, it is in the country's best interest that these children integrate successfully. In particular, parents' undocumented status can have negative effects on children's socioeconomic outcomes, cognitive development, and mental health. 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.

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