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**Demographic Change and the Life Circumstances  
of Immigrant Families**

*by Donald J. Hernandez, University at Albany, SUNY*

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### ***Summary***

*Several major demographic shifts over the past half-century have transformed who we are and how we live in this country in many ways. Most striking, however, is the fact that children today are much more likely to be a member of an ethnic or racial minority group. Racial/ethnic minorities are destined, in aggregate, to become the numerical majority within the next few decades. This article presents a wide range of statistics reflecting cultural, family, social, economic, and housing circumstances across various race/ethnic and country-of-origin groups. Key observations include:*

- *Children in immigrant families are much less likely than children in native-born families to have only one parent in the home, and they are nearly twice as likely as those in native-born families to be living with grandparents, other relatives, and non-relatives.*
- *Parental educational attainment is perhaps the most central feature of family circumstances relevant to overall child well-being and development, regardless of race/ethnicity or immigrant origins.*
- *Children in immigrant families were only slightly less likely than children in native-born families to have a father who worked during the past year, but many of their fathers worked less than full-time year-round.*
- *Official poverty rates for children in immigrant families are substantially higher than for children in native-born families (21% versus 14%).*

*The author concludes that these results point to a growing need for policies and programs to assure the health, educational success, and well-being of all children across the varied race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups who now live in this country.*

Over the past half-century, our nation has experienced major demographic shifts that have transformed who we are and how we live. This is especially true for children. To start, proportionately, there are fewer of them. Children today make up only 25% of the U.S. population, compared with 36% in 1960. And children today are being reared differently. They are more likely to have a working mother, 67% compared to only 15% in 1950, and most spend significant amounts of time in out-of-home care. Many are also likely to live in or near poverty (26%), and to spend at least part of their childhood living with fewer than two parents (nearly 50%). At the same time, children today are healthier and have better-educated parents. Most striking, however, children today are much more likely to be a member of an ethnic or racial minority group, and the diversity of our nation's children is increasing at a dramatic rate.

Children in the United States are leading the way toward the creation of a new American majority. This transformation does not, however, reflect the emergence of a singular, numerically dominant group. Instead, it is characterized by a mosaic of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups from around the world. Historically, racial/ethnic minorities, including Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and American Indians, have accounted for substantially less than one-half of the American population. But taken as a whole, because they are growing much more rapidly than the non-Hispanic white population, they are destined, in aggregate, to become the numerical majority within the next few decades. ([See Figure 1.](#)) These new demographic realities pose enormous opportunities and challenges for public policies and programs aimed at assuring that the next generation of children reach their potential to become economically productive adults, nurturing parents, and engaged citizens.

*Click Here: [Figure 1](#)*

This article presents a wide range of statistics (calculated from the Public Use Microdata Sample, or PUMS, file of Census 2000,<sup>1</sup> unless noted otherwise) reflecting cultural, family, social, economic, and housing circumstances of children in native-born and immigrant families—statistics that merit the attention of policymakers and service providers who are responsible for initiating, designing, and implementing programs that will fully meet the developmental needs of America’s children. The article begins by describing the nature and sources of the ongoing transformation in the race/ethnic composition of the U.S. population, focusing especially on immigration as the most powerful force driving the current demographic change. Attention then turns to a description of the life circumstances of these immigrant families, including household composition, educational accomplishments of children and their parents, engagement in paid work, and poverty. Next, the barriers faced by immigrant families due to citizenship status and linguistic isolation are discussed. Finally, the article concludes with some observations concerning the implications for the future.

### **The Blossoming of Race/Ethnic Diversity**

The emergence of racial and ethnic minorities as the majority of the U.S. population is occurring most rapidly, and will become a reality first, among children.<sup>2</sup> Immigration and births to immigrants and their descendants are the forces driving this historic transformation: Children in immigrant families are the fastest growing segment of the child population in this country. Since 1990, the number of children in immigrant families has expanded about seven times faster

than the number in native-born families and, by the year 2000, 1 of every 5 children in the United States lived in a newcomer family, with one or both parents foreign-born.<sup>3 4</sup> Moreover, by about 2035, three-fourths of the elderly will be non-Hispanic white compared with only about one-half of the children.

### **Spatial Concentration and Dispersion**

Historically, children in immigrant families have been highly concentrated in a small number of states, but during the past decade their number has grown rapidly in nearly every state. In most states, growth in the immigrant population has contributed greatly to increases in the proportion of children who live in immigrant families, in race/ethnic minority families, or both.

Children in newcomer families today account for 48% of all children in California, and 20% to 30% in 10 other major immigrant gateway states across the country. Moreover, among states with few immigrants prior to 1990, many have also experienced enormous influxes during the past decade. ([See Figure 2.](#)) The resources in many of these states are being stretched thin, as the states that had small numbers of children in newcomer families in 1990 often have little institutional infrastructure for providing for the needs of immigrants who differ from native-born families in language and culture.

*Click here: [Figure 2](#)*

## **Countries of Origin Span the Globe**

The United States has been a destination for immigrants throughout its history, but two enormous waves of immigration are prominent: between 1901 and 1910; and during the 1980s and 90s.<sup>5</sup> Between these waves, the origins of children have shifted across the globe. In 1910, 97% of children in newcomer families had origins in Europe or Canada; in 2000, however, 84% had their origins in either Latin America or Asia.<sup>6</sup> ([See Figure 3.](#)) Mexico alone accounted for 39% of the children of newcomers, but no other country accounts for more than 4%. Thus, more than half of the children of newcomer families have origins in a very large number of countries spread across the globe. (For detailed statistics on number of immigrants by country of origin, see [Appendix 1](#) at the end of this article.) These children vary enormously, as do children in native-born families, in their family and socioeconomic circumstances.

*Click Here: [Figure 3](#)*

## **Family Circumstances of Diverse Race/Ethnic and Immigrant-Origin Groups**

The decades since World War II have brought unprecedented changes to children and their families' life circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Children experienced a dramatic increase in one-parent family living, and a drop in the number of siblings in the home. Parental educational attainments rose greatly, and there was an explosion in mothers' labor force participation. Meanwhile, the sharp rise in family income and fall in child poverty after World War II were followed by no or slow income growth and rising poverty. Many children today live in economic need. For children of

diverse race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, the effects of these trends vary widely, largely correlated with the parents' level of education. Throughout this article, reference is made to levels of parental education within five distinct groups, as depicted in [Figure 4](#). Across a wide range of socio-economic factors, children whose parents have more education tend to fare better than those whose parents have less education.

*Click Here: [Figure 4](#)*

### **Household Composition**

Children depend on the family members in their homes for the nurturance and economic resources they require to survive and develop. Most children live with two parents, but the proportion living with only one (usually the mother) has tripled from 8-9% in 1940-1960, to 24% in 2000. With rising divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing, nearly half of the children born since the 1980s will spend at least part of their childhood with fewer than two parents in the home. Among those with two parents, frequently one is a stepparent. Also, the number of siblings in the home has declined markedly.<sup>8</sup> Nearly two-thirds (63%) of children today live in families as the only child or with only one dependent sibling in the home. Among children of diverse race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, the number of persons in the home can have important implications for children's economic well-being and educational success. (For detailed statistics on household composition by race/ethnic and country of origin group, see [Appendix 3](#) at the end of this article.)

## **Parents in the Home**

Children with only one parent in the home tend to be somewhat disadvantaged in their educational, and subsequent economic, success.<sup>9</sup> As shown in [Figure 5](#), children in immigrant families are much less likely than children in native-born families to have only one parent in the home, but there is substantial variation across groups. For example, no more than 10% of children live with one parent among children in immigrant families who have origins in India, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, China, and the Eastern and Southern former Soviet bloc, compared to more than 30% for those with origins in the English-speaking Caribbean, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Similarly, the proportion with one parent in the home is 17% to 25% for children in native-born families who are white or Asian, compared to about 50% or more for those who are Central American and mainland-origin Puerto Rican. (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3](#).)

*Click Here: [Figure 5](#)*

The variation in number of parents in the household appears to be highly associated with level of parental education. For example, among children in immigrant families, only 10% live with one parent in the high education group, while 17% live with one parent in the medium and low education groups. Among children in native-born families, proportions are 18% for children with high education parents versus 49% for children with low education parents. The number of parents also appears to be highly associated with the age of the children. The proportion with one

parent rises from 20% at ages 0-2, to 24% at ages 3-8, and then to 25% at ages 9-13, and 26% at ages 14-17.<sup>10</sup>

### **Siblings in the Home**

The presence of brothers and sisters in the home is a mixed blessing for most children. Siblings provide companionship, but they must share available resources. Insofar as parental time and financial resources are limited, parental resources must be spread more thinly in families with a larger number of siblings than in smaller families. Dependent siblings under age 18 are especially likely to compete for parental time and income. As a result, family size can have important consequences for the number of years of school that a child completes and hence for economic attainments during adulthood.<sup>11</sup>

Among families of diverse native-born groups, the proportion with four or more siblings in the home ranges from 9% to 11% for Asians, Central Americans, and whites, to 18% for blacks and American Indians. In contrast, among children in immigrant families, the proportion in large families ranges more widely—from a low of 4% to 5% for children with origins India and China, to a high of 35% for those with origins in the Pacific Islands (other than Australia and New Zealand). (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3](#).)

As was the case with the number of parents, the number of siblings in the home also appears to be highly associated with level of parent education. Those children in families with high parental education are least likely to live with four or more siblings.

### **Grandparents and Others in the Home**

Relatives, such as grandparents and older siblings, and non-relatives in the home can provide childcare or other important resources for children and families, but they may also act as a drain on family resources. Especially in families with few financial resources, doubling up with other family or non-family members provides a means of sharing scarce resources, and benefiting from economies of scale in paying for housing, energy, food, and other consumption goods. At the same time, doubling up can also lead to overcrowded housing conditions with negative consequences for children.

Taking grandparents, other relatives, and non-relatives together, many children have someone other than a parent or dependent sibling in the home. As illustrated in Figure 5, however, children in newcomer families are nearly twice as likely as those in native-born families to have such a person in the home. Children in white, non-Hispanic native-born or immigrant-origin families are least likely to live with such other persons.<sup>12</sup> (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3.](#))

**Grandparents.** About 9% of all children in the United States have at least one grandparent in the home, and whether or not a child lives with a grandparent is strongly correlated with race/ethnicity and immigrant status. For example, living with grandparents is much less common for white children (3-8%) than for nonwhite children (12-22%).<sup>13</sup> Also, on average, a smaller proportion of children in native-born families live with a grandparent (8%) than do children in immigrant families (13%). However, 22% of children in native-born families who are Central American have a grandparent in the home. (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3.](#)) Overall, on average across all families, grandparents are more likely to be in the home when children are younger (12% for those ages 0-2) than when they are older (8-9% for those ages 3-

18).

***Other relatives.*** Other relatives in the home may be older siblings ages 18 and over, or extended family members such as aunts, uncles, or cousins. About 15% of children have another relative in the home. The difference overall between white children at 10%, and other children at 23%, is quite large. Moreover, children in immigrant families are more than twice as likely as those in native-born families to have another relative present (27% versus 12%). Having other relatives in the home is strongly correlated with parental education, with lower education linked to increased likelihood of living with relatives.<sup>14</sup> Among children in immigrant families with low parental education, 29%-36% live with other relatives. The likelihood of living with other relatives is also greater when younger children are present.<sup>15</sup>

***Non-relatives.*** Non-relatives, such as unrelated individuals (borders or boyfriends, for example) or families doubling up who are from the same immigrant-origin village, are also sometimes present in children's homes. In fact, the proportion of children with a non-relative in the home is the same as the proportion with grandparent in the home: about 9%. Differences between children in native-born families and immigrant families also are similar, on average: 8% versus 12%. Nevertheless, 20% of children in immigrant families with origins in Central America have a non-relative in the home. (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3](#).) Living with non-relatives is strongly correlated with lower parental education,<sup>16</sup> and to having younger children.<sup>17</sup> The data suggest that in families with parents who have limited education and part-time part-year work instead of full-time year-round work, sharing a home with another person may often result from financial necessity. Among low education immigrant families, for example, 21% of those with young children ages 0-2 have a non-relative in the home.

## **Overcrowded Housing**

Overcrowded housing has deleterious effects on child health and well-being, including psychological health and behavioral adjustment, as well as the ability to find a place to do homework without being disturbed.<sup>18</sup> As shown in Figure 3, nearly 1 in 5 children live in crowded housing conditions (that is, with more than 1 person per room). But nearly half of children in immigrant families live in overcrowded housing, compared to only 11% of children in native-born families. There is wide variation among groups, however. Among children in native-born families, the proportion in overcrowded housing ranges from 7% for whites to 40% for Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders. Among children in immigrant families, the proportion in overcrowded housing among white groups is about the same as for native-born white groups, while the highest levels of overcrowding are experienced by children in immigrant families from Central America (59%) and Mexico (67%). (For detailed data, see [Appendix 3](#).)

Overcrowding is strongly correlated with parental education and poverty, across race/ethnic and immigrant generation groups, suggesting the need to double-up with relatives or non-relatives to share resources. This appears to be especially true among immigrant-origin groups. Moreover, while overcrowding improves slightly for older versus younger age groups, these reductions tend to be smaller among children in immigrant families, despite their initially higher levels.

## **Children's Education and Health**

For most children in the United States, there have been dramatic increases in educational

attainment and health status over the course of the past century. Today, far more children attend nursery/preschool, stay in school longer, and graduate from high school, than was the case 50 years ago. Also, infant mortality rates have declined and life expectancy rates have increased. The data indicate, however, that children's educational attainment and health status vary widely across groups.

### **Early Education**

Early education prior to kindergarten can help assure that children are ready to learn when they reach elementary school, even among families with very limited educational and linguistic resources. (See the article by Takanishi in this journal issue.) According to data from Census 2000, overall, the proportion of children enrolled in nursery/preschool rises from 36% at age 3, to 58% at age 4, and then falls to 34% at age 5 as many children enter kindergarten. Beginning at age 3, children in native-born families are more likely than those in immigrant families to be enrolled (38% versus 30%). This difference expands substantially by age 4 (60% versus 48%), and then continues at age 5 (37% versus 26%).

There are large differences across children with different levels of parental education, however. At each age, regardless of race/ethnic or country-of-origin group, children in families with higher parental education generally are more likely to be enrolled in nursery/preschool than children in families with lower parental education. Moreover, it appears that children in lower parental education groups are more likely to enter kindergarten at the age of 4, while children in many more higher parental education groups are spending additional preparatory time in nursery/preschool. That said, however, the differences by race/ethnicity and immigrant origins are substantial. For example, enrollment at age 4 ranges from 60% or more for most high

education native-born groups, to 35% for children with immigrant origins in Mexico. (For detailed data on enrollment in early education by race/ethnic and immigrant-origin group, see [Appendix 4](#) at the end of this article.)

### **Progress in School**

According to data from the Current Population Survey, the vast majority of children are attending school and are in the grade appropriate for their age level. However, among those who are not at the appropriate level, children in immigrant families are more likely to be behind grade than are children in native-born families. Among 16-year-olds, 8% of children in native-born families are behind grade, compared with 10% of children in immigrant families. By age 19, 79% of children in native-born families are high school graduates, compared with 72% of children in immigrant families. Moreover, across some race/ethnic and regional immigrant-origin groups, the differences can be huge. For example, among the six race/ethnic and immigrant-generation groups distinguished in the available data from Current Population Survey, 83% of those categorized as white or Asian in native-born families have graduated from high school as of age 19, compared to only 62% of those in immigrant families with origins in Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Indochina. ([See Figure 6.](#))

*Click Here: [Figure 6](#)*

Moreover, across groups, how much children are behind grade in school is highly correlated with the level of parental educational attainment. For example, among children in families with high parental education, about 6-13% of those ages 17-18 are a year or more

behind in school. In contrast, among children in families with low parental education, the proportions who are a year or more behind in school at ages 17-18 are two or three times greater at about 15-28%. However, virtually all of the children with immigrant-origins and low parental education who are two or more years behind in school are themselves immigrants, and many are probably recent immigrants from Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, or Haiti, where progress through the educational system occurs more slowly than in the United States.

Among all 19-year-olds who have not graduated from high school, 48% are native-origin in high parental education groups, 9% are immigrant-origin in high or middle parental education groups, and 44% are native-origin or immigrant origin in low parental education groups. These statistics suggest that policies aimed at fostering high school graduation need to be quite diverse in their approaches, because 19-year-olds are extremely diverse in their race/ethnicity, their immigrant-origins, and the recency of their immigration to the United States.

## **Health Status**

The differences in the health status of children in immigrant and native-born families are complicated and sometimes paradoxical. Recent research has found children born to immigrant mothers in the United States are less likely to be born with a low birth weight, and less likely to die during the first year of life, than are children born to native-born mothers.<sup>19</sup> This relationship is especially strong within particular race/ethnic groups, most notably, for children in immigrant families with origins in Mexico. ([See Table 1.](#))

*Click Here: [Table 1](#)*

A recent report from the National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council noted

that, because of the limited number of studies and limitations in the available data, care must be taken in generalizing across diverse groups and domains of health, regarding the situation of children in immigrant families.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that along several important dimensions, children in immigrant families appear to be healthier than children in native-born families. The evidence also suggests, however, that the health of children in immigrant families tends to deteriorate through time and across generations as families assimilate into the mainstream American culture.

According to data from the Current Population Survey, 82% of all children are reported to be in excellent or very good health, with children in native-born families somewhat more likely to be healthy than children in immigrant families (83% versus 77%). Across race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups for whom data are available, the proportion with excellent or very good health is strongly correlated with parental educational attainment. These results are broadly consistent with recent research using the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III), but not always consistent with results based on physical examinations, suggesting that health perceptions may be influenced by factors that are less well measured by a physician's examination.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, children in immigrant-born families are much less likely to be covered by health insurance than are children in native-born families (90% versus 78%). The difference is associated with parental education across groups, but the rates of not being covered by health insurance remain higher for Hispanic children even after controlling for parental education, work status, family income, and whether the parents work full-time year-round.<sup>22</sup> (For detailed data, see [Appendix 5](#).)

## **Parental Educational Attainment**

As families shrank during the last half of the past century, parental education rose. Among adolescents ages 12-17 in 1940, about 70% had parents who had completed no more than 8 years of school, while only 15% had parents who were high school graduates, and 3% had parents who were college graduates. Expenditures for education have expanded enormously since then, and the educational attainment figures have been turned on their head. By 2000, only 6% of adolescents ages 12-17 have parents with no more than 8 years of school, while 82% have parents with high school diplomas, including the 21-29% who have mothers or fathers with 4-year college degrees.

Parental educational attainment is perhaps the most central feature of family circumstances relevant to overall child well-being and development, regardless of race/ethnicity or immigrant origins. Parents who have completed fewer years of schooling may be less able to help their children with schoolwork, because of their limited exposure to knowledge taught in the classroom. They also may be less able to foster their children's educational success in other ways, because they lack familiarity with how to negotiate educational institutions successfully. Children whose parents have extremely limited education may, therefore, be more likely to benefit from, or to require, specialized educational program initiatives, if their needs are to be met by educational institutions. (For more on this topic, see the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue.)

More broadly, parents with limited educational attainments may also be less familiar with how to access successfully the health and other social institutions with which children and their parents must interact in order to receive needed services. Equally important is that parental

educational attainments influence their income levels. Parents with limited education tend to command lower wages in the labor market and are, therefore, constrained in the educational, health, and other resources which they can afford purchase for their children. For all of these reasons, among children generally, negative educational and employment outcomes have been found for children with low parental educational attainments.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, nearly one-fifth (18%) of children ages 0-17 in the United States have a mother who has not graduated from high school,<sup>24</sup> but the proportion of varies widely for native-born versus immigrant-origin groups. Among native-born families, Asians are the most likely to have a mother who has graduated (only 6% have a non-graduate mother), while Island-origin Puerto Ricans are the least likely (37% have a non-graduate mother). Among immigrant families, those with origins in Canada are the most likely to have a mother who has graduated (6% have a non-graduate mother), while those from Mexico are the least likely (68% have a non-graduate mother). (For detailed statistics on parental educational attainment by race/ethnicity and country of origin, see [Appendix 2](#).)

Knowing the parental educational attainment level of different race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups can be helpful because children whose parents have a limited education may be especially in need of special initiatives and programs to assure their success in school, and to insure their access to resources from additional education, health, or social service institutions.

### **Parental Paid Work**

As education levels rose, children experienced a half-century explosion in mothers' labor

force participation. In 1940, only 11% of children lived with a mother with a paid job. Today, over 70% of children have mothers who worked sometime during the past year. Mothers' increased employment is important to children for at least two reasons. First, the more that parents work, the greater the income available to the family. Second, the more that parents work, the greater the potential need for non-parental childcare for young children—care that may require substantial expenditures of scarce economic resources.

Despite the limited parental education among children in many race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, most children who live with their fathers have fathers who are employed, and most who live with their mothers have mothers who work for pay, as is the case with the population overall.<sup>25</sup> In 2000, children in immigrant families were only slightly less likely than children in native-born families to have a father who worked during the past year (93% versus 95%).<sup>26</sup> Among most race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, 91-97% had a father who worked during the past year, but many fathers worked less than full-time year-round. (For detailed statistics on parental work by race/ethnicity and country of origin, see [Appendix 6](#) at the end of this article.) Full-time year-round work by fathers is strongly associated with parental education levels across race/ethnic and immigrant generation,<sup>27</sup> while the age of the children appears to make little difference.<sup>28</sup>

The story is quite different with respect to mothers. Overall, 27% of children have a mother who does not work for pay, but the proportion is substantially higher for children in immigrant families than for children in native-born families (39% versus 24%).<sup>29</sup> About half of this difference is accounted for by a difference in full-time year-round work, and about half by part-time or part-year work. (For detailed data, see [Appendix 6](#).) Although mothers' work is

strongly associated with native-immigrant status,<sup>30</sup> it is not strongly correlated with parental education levels. However, the age of the children does matter. Among children in all race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, the proportion with a mother who works usually increases for older versus younger age groups.

Counting either the father's or the mother's work, 77% of children live with at least one parent who works full-time year-round. Overall, the proportion is somewhat higher for children in native-born than in immigrant families (78% versus 72%), but having at least one parent who works full-time year-round varies widely across groups and is strongly correlated with parental educational attainments. For example, among those families with high parental education, the proportion with full-time work ranges from 69% for Central Americans and Native-Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders, to 86% for those with origins in Canada, and Australia and New Zealand. Among those families with low education, the proportion with full-time work ranges from 56% for island-origin Puerto Ricans, to 72% for those with origins in Haiti. Moreover, the age of the children appears to have little impact. For nearly all native-born and immigrant-origin groups, the proportion with at least one parent who works full-time year-round changes little across children of different ages.<sup>31</sup> (For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.)

### **Economic Resources and Poverty**

In contrast to the steady progression of changes during the past half-century that children experienced in one-parent family living and in parental education and employment, trends in economic resources and poverty have fluctuated. Between 1940 and 1973, median family income

jumped by more than 100%, but has increased much more slowly since then, despite the continuing, large increases in mothers' labor force participation. Meanwhile, after peaking at 38% in 1940 following the Great Depression, the relative child poverty rate dropped sharply,<sup>32</sup> reaching its historic low of 24% in 1970, and has lingered between 25% and 29% ever since.

In general, poverty has been found to have negative developmental consequences for children.<sup>33</sup> Children in impoverished families may be at risk of educational failure, because they lack access to adequate nutrition, health care, dental care, or vision care, as well as lacking access to educational resources which parents with higher incomes can afford to purchase for their children.

The most widely used measure of poverty is the official poverty rate published by the U.S. Census Bureau. According to this official measure, poverty rates for children in immigrant families are substantially higher than for children in native-born families (21% versus 14%). It is well-known, however, that the official measure underestimates the true level of economic need in the United States. Recognizing the inadequacy of the official measure, major public programs for children are increasingly setting eligibility criteria at higher levels. For example, children in families with incomes ranging between 130% and 185% of official poverty are eligible for reduced-priced meals through the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program administered by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.<sup>34</sup> States have also raised their eligibility thresholds for various programs.<sup>35</sup> To provide indicators that reflect levels of economic need more faithfully than the official measure, various other poverty measures have been developed. ([See Box 1.](#)) These alternative poverty measures were examined across various race/ethnic and country of origin immigrant-origin

groups, with fairly consistent results. (For detailed data on child poverty rates using various measures, see [Appendix 7](#) at the end of this article.)

*Click Here: [Box 1](#)*

The measure using 200% of the official poverty threshold as the criterion (that is, setting thresholds at twice the official level), provides the best available measure of economic need among children. According to this measure, referred to as the “2x poverty rate,” overall poverty rates for children in immigrant families are substantially higher than for children in native-born families (49% versus 34%). In addition, while there is great variation within these groups that is strongly correlated with parental educational attainments, poverty rates are high even among the most highly educated groups. For example, among native-born and immigrant-origin groups with low education, the 2x poverty rate ranges from 48% for third and later generation Mexican children, to 69% for immigrant families from Mexico. But the 2x poverty rate is quite high even among several of the most highly education groups, ranging from 16% for children with origins in Australia and New Zealand, to 43% for children in native-born families who are Native-Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders. With respect to children’s age, most groups show a slight decline in poverty rates between the younger and older age groups, but some show a slight increase.

Just as having a parent who can find full-time year-round work is strongly associated with parental education levels, so too are child poverty rates. Children with lower education parents have parents who are less able to find full-time year-round work, and work they find pays less well. As a consequence, policymakers and program administrators in areas with large numbers of children in groups with low parental education tend to have children as clients who

not only have parents with limited education, but who work more sporadically, and who have limited income to provide for the needs of their children. Data presented here on the range of child poverty rates for the different race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups offer important guides to policymakers and program administrators who are developing and implementing programs using eligibility criteria set far above official poverty thresholds.

### **Barriers to Educational Success and the American Dream**

Children in many immigrant families confront an additional set of barriers to well-being and development that are experienced by comparatively few children in native-born families. Many children in immigrant families live in a household that includes at least one member who is not a U.S. citizen, and as a result, the family may be ineligible for—or reluctant to seek—certain supports and benefits. In addition, many children in immigrant families live in a household that is linguistically isolated from English-speaking society, or their parents are limited in their spoken English, or they themselves are limited in their English. Lack of language skills can make it difficult to communicate with teachers and with health and other service organizations. These barriers, combined with the other indicators discussed above, cause children in immigrant families to be more than twice as likely as those from native-born families to experience multiple risk factors critical to their development.

### **Recency of Immigration and Family Citizenship Status**

Immigration to a new country can involve a wide range of changes, including the need to become familiar with a new language, with new educational and health institutions, and with

new social customs. Children in newcomer families who have arrived most recently have had less time to adjust life in the United States and to become naturalized citizens.

Every child in a newcomer family is foreign-born or has at least one foreign-born parent, and many of the parents are recent immigrants. Among children in newcomer families, 52% have a father—and 60% have a mother—who has lived in the United States for less than 15 years. Children in immigrant families in the highest parental education group are most likely to have a father who has lived in the United States for less than 15 years.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as most children in immigrant families were born in this country, the proportion with a father or mother who has lived here for less than 15 years declines substantially for older versus younger age groups.

Citizenship status within immigrant families is important because, for the first time, the recent welfare reform legislation (enacted in 1996) excluded many non-citizens from eligibility for important public programs.<sup>37</sup> As a result, immigrant parents who are not citizens may be hesitant to seek public benefits for their children, even if their children were born in the United States, and hence have been citizens for their entire lives. Although many children have parents who have lived in the United States for less than 15 years, the overwhelming majority of children in immigrant families live in a family where either the child or a parent is a citizen of the United States. Four of every five children in an immigrant family is a U.S. citizen, because they were born here. These children are eligible for programs and services on the same basis as all other U.S. citizens.

Although 30% of children in immigrant families have parents who are naturalized citizens, 53% of children in newcomer families live in a mixed-status nuclear family, where at least one sibling or parent is not a U.S. citizen, and at least one sibling or parent is a U.S.

citizen.<sup>38</sup> The highest proportions living in a mixed-status nuclear family occur among children with low parental education and origins in Mexico (66%). The lowest proportions in mixed status nuclear families occur among children with Southern and Eastern Soviet bloc origins (32%). (For detailed data on citizenship status by race/ethnic and immigrant-origin group, see [Appendix 8.](#))

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 number of children in immigrant families are at risk of not receiving important public services or benefits. This may be especially the case among children with low parental education, because children from these countries not only have high proportions with non-citizen parents, but also high proportions in poverty who may, therefore, be eligible for critical public benefits or services.<sup>39</sup>

### **Language and Linguistic Isolation from English-Speaking Society**

Lack of language skills may pose a significant barrier stemming from the cultural circumstances of children in newcomer families, and requiring special attention or programmatic initiatives from educational, health, and other institutions. With the global span of countries of origin of children in immigrant families comes an extraordinary diversity in languages spoken by children and their parents. Because many children in newcomer families have parents who have arrived within the past fifteen years, and because learning a new language, especially during adulthood, can be a long-term process, many children in immigrant families speak a language

other than English at home, and many live in linguistically isolated households where no one over the age of 13 speaks English exclusively or very well.

These children may have substantial difficulty communicating with and learning from teachers, because the teachers are, in turn, limited in their ability to speak the primary language that the child uses. These children and their families also may experience barriers in communicating with health and other service organizations and agencies that are not prepared to function in a variety of languages. Linguistic isolation among immigrant families is not a new phenomenon, but it continues to act as an important barrier for many children and families. All together, 18% of children in the United States speak a language other than English at home. Among children in native-born families, 6% speak a language other than English at home, and among children in immigrant families, the proportion rises to 72%. Especially likely to speak a language other than English at home are children in low parental education homes with origins in Mexico and the Dominican Republic (both at 91%). (For detailed data on language skills by race/ethnic and immigrant-origin group, see [Appendix 8](#).) Even among children in several native-born groups, between one-fifth and two-fifths speak a language other than English at home.

In nearly three-fourths (74%) of homes where a language other than English is spoken, at least one person over age 13 speaks English exclusively or very well, providing a linguistic bridge to English-speaking institutions. But this means just over one-fourth of these homes do not have such a person, and are characterized by the Census Bureau as linguistically isolated from English-speaking society. Overall, 6% of children live in linguistically isolated households, but this varies widely between native-born and newcomer families. Only 1% of

children in native-born families are linguistically isolated, but one-fourth (26%) of children in newcomer families are linguistically isolated. Although linguistic isolation varies among different race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, it is strongly correlated with parental education—that is, those with lower parental education most likely to be linguistically isolated. Linguistic isolation also varies sharply by age for many newcomer children, declining among the older age groups.<sup>40</sup> For example, among children in newcomer families with origins in Mexico, 44-45% of children ages 0-8 live in linguistically isolated households, but this falls to 36% at ages 9-13, and to 15% at ages 14-17.

Focusing on children themselves, 6% have limited English skills, that is, they do not speak English exclusively or very well. The proportion is nearly twice as large among parents: 12% have fathers and 11% have mothers with limited English skills. Most of the children with limited English skills live in immigrant families, and their English proficiency is strongly correlated with the level of parental education and age. Groups with higher parental education are less likely to have limited English skills compared to those with lower parental education. Moreover, within each race/ethnic and immigrant-origin group, older children are less likely than younger children to have limited English skills. (For detailed data, see [Appendix 8](#).)

### **Multiple Risk Factors**

A wide range of socioeconomic and cultural factors in children's families can have negative impacts on child well-being and development. The statistics presented thus far indicate the extent to which children of different groups experience various risk factors, looking at each risk factor individually. But some children experience none of these risks, while others

experience several. Four critical risk factors that can have significant effects on children's outcomes include:

- (1) Having a mother who has not graduated from high school;
- (2) Living in economic deprivation (based on the 2x poverty measure);
- (3) Living in a linguistically isolated household; and
- (4) Living in a one-parent family.

Overall, nearly one half of children experienced at least one of the four risk factors. ([See Figure 7.](#)) Although there are enormous differences across race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, it is important for policymakers and program administrators to note that even among white children in native-born families, 35% experience at least 1 of these risk factors. But among immigrant-origin groups, the overall proportion experiencing at least one of these risk factors is substantially higher at 67%. (For detailed data on risk factors by race/ethnic and immigrant-origin group, see [Appendix 9.](#))

***Click Here: [Figure 7](#)***

As shown in Figure 7, however, many children experience more than one risk factor. Overall, about a quarter of all children experience at least 2 of the 4 risk factors. Moreover, the proportion experiencing at least 2 of the 4 risk factors is more than double for children in immigrant families compared with children in native-born families. Among children in most high parental education families, only 5-14% experience at least 2 of 4 risks, but this jumps to

35-57% for children most in low parental education groups, and to 65% among Mexican-origin children. Thus, many children experience multiple circumstances that may benefit from policy initiatives.

## **Conclusions**

Many states that have not been immigrant gateways in the past are now experiencing large increases in the number of children in newcomer families. Driven primarily by rapid growth in the number of children in immigrant families, in 2000, nearly two of every five children in the United States were members of race/ethnic minority groups, members of newcomer families, or both. By the year 2035, more than half of the children in this country will be members of these groups. Thus, it is important that policy makers and services providers throughout the nation, including those in most states and many localities, develop and implement education, health, and service programs in a fashion that assures access and that meets the needs of these vulnerable, but rapidly growing, populations of children.

Across a wide range of indicators, significant variation often exists between native-born and immigrant families, and also among the specific race/ethnic or immigrant country-of-origin groups within each of these categories. For example, the vast majority of children live in homes where the father worked last year, but immigrant-origin groups with parents having more part-time or part-year work tend to experience greater economic deprivation. (See the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.) Also, native-born families are more likely than

immigrant families to be headed by a single parent, but immigrant families are more likely to have another person in the home—such as siblings, grandparents, other relatives, or non-relatives. Overcrowding is strongly correlated with parental education and poverty, across race/ethnic and immigrant generation groups, suggesting the need to double-up with relatives or non-relatives to share resources, and this is especially true for immigrant-origin groups.

An index of risk indicating the extent to which children experience at least 1 of 4 risk factors (low parental education, 2x-poverty, linguistic isolation, or a one-parent family) shows that many children in major race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups are exposed to one or more important potential risks. Despite great differences across race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups, even among white children in native-born families, 35% experience at least 1 of the 4 risk factors. In light of the extensive research that documents that children with such risk factors are more likely to experience negative outcomes,<sup>41</sup> these results point to a growing need for policies and programs to assure the health, educational success, and well-being of children across all race/ethnic and immigrant-origin groups.

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**Appendices:**      [Appendix 1](#)              [Appendix 2](#)              [Appendix 3](#)  
                         [Appendix 4](#)              [Appendix 5](#)              [Appendix 6](#)

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<sup>1</sup> The specific data files used are the 5% Census 2000 sample distributed as the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. See Ruggles, S., Sobek, M., et al. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0*. Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 2003; and the IPUMS Web site at <http://www.ipums.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Census Bureau projections do not, however, distinguish or we do not report here multi-race/ethnic individuals who are born within the increasingly large number of marriages that involve parents who are members of different groups, including Hispanic-white intermarriages and Asian-white intermarriages. Therefore, all of the race/ethnic groups projected by the Census Bureau will have significant to substantial proportions who consider themselves to be of mixed race/ethnic origin. See Edmonston, B., Lee, S.M., and Passel, J.S. Recent trends in intermarriage and immigration and their effects on the future racial composition of the U.S. population. In *The new race question: How the census counts multiracial individuals*. J. Perlmann and M.C. Waters, eds. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002, pp 227-255.

<sup>3</sup> The results presented here often distinguish between children in immigrant (or newcomer) families and children in native-born families. Children in newcomer families are first generation immigrants if they were born in a foreign country, and they are second generation immigrants if they were born in the United States but at least one of their parents was born in a foreign country. Children in native-born families were born in the United States, and have parents who also were born in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Although 20% as of 2000 is much smaller than the 28% of children in 1910 who lived in newcomer families, it is much larger than in recent American experience when only 6% of children in 1960 and the 13% in 1990 lived in immigrant families. See Hernandez, D.J., and Darke, K. Socioeconomic and demographic risk factors and resources among children in immigrant and native-born families: 1910, 1960, and 1990. In *Children of immigrants: Health, adjustment, and public assistance*. D.J. Hernandez, ed. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999, pp 19-125.

<sup>5</sup> Chiswick, B.R., and Sullivan, T.A. The new immigrants. In *State of the union: America in the 1990s--Volume two: Social trends*. R. Farley, ed. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995, pp. 211-270; and U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Statistical yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service: 2001*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Estimate based on note 4, Hernandez and Darke, 1999, and data from Census 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Hernandez, D.J. *America's children: Resources from family, government, and the economy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993; and Hernandez, D.J. Children's changing access to resources: A historical perspective. *Social Policy Report* (Spring 1994) 8(1):1-23.

<sup>8</sup> During the peak of the baby-boom in 1960 and 1970, for example, 59% of children lived in families with 3 or more siblings under age 18, but this has fallen to only 14% today.

<sup>9</sup> Cherlin, A.J. Going to extremes: Family structure, children's well-being, and social sciences. *Demography* (November 1999) 36(4):421-428; and McLanahan, S., and Sandefur, G. *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Both the level and the pattern vary, however, across education and immigration origin groups. Children in the high education immigrant-origin group have the lowest levels of single-parent households, ranging from 6% for ages 0-2,

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to 13% for ages 14-17. In contrast, among children in high education native-born families, and medium and low education immigrant families, the range is about twice as high at 12-14% at ages 0-2, and 20-22% ages 14-17. Among children in low education native-born families, the proportion is even higher, and changes very little across the ages, at 50-52% for each of the four age groups 0-2, 3-8, 9-13, and 14-17.

<sup>11</sup> For a review of studies concerning the effects of sibling size on the psychological well-being of adults, see Hernandez, D.J. Childhood in sociodemographic perspective. In *Annual review of sociology: Volume 12*. R.H. Turner and J.F. Short Jr., eds. Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews, 1986, pp. 159-180. Also see Blake, J. *Family size and achievement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Only 15-23% of the children in these groups are likely to have another person in the home (with one exception, children with origins in the Eastern and Southern former Soviet bloc at 28%.) See [Appendix 3](#).

<sup>13</sup> The lone exception among the white country-of-origin groups are those families from the Eastern and Southern former Soviet bloc, with 10% having a grandparent in the home.

<sup>14</sup> Among 8 of 11 high parental education groups, the proportion with another relative in the home is 10-16%. The proportion rises to 17-26% for 5 of the 8 middle education groups, and to 29-36% for children in low education immigrant-origin groups, and for children in immigrant families with origins in the Pacific Islands.

<sup>15</sup> The proportion with one or more other relatives in the home rises from 10% for ages 0-8, to 15% for ages 9-13, to 27% for ages 14-17. Much of this increase is no doubt associated with the fact that adolescents are more likely than younger children to have a sibling age 18 or older in the home.

<sup>16</sup> Among 14 of the 19 high and medium education groups, 3-10% have a non-relative in the home, compared to 1 of 11 low education groups (children in immigrant families with origins in Indochina, at 9%).

<sup>17</sup> Overall the proportion with a non-relative in the home is 12% for children ages 0-2, but this decreases to 10% for children ages 3-8, and to 7-8% for children ages 9-17.

<sup>18</sup> Saegert, S. Environment and children's mental health: Residential density and low income children. In *Handbook of psychology and health, volume II: Issues in child health and adolescent health*. A. Baum and J.E. Singer, eds. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982, pp 247-271; and Evans, G.W., Saegert, S., and Harris, R. Residential density and psychological health among children in low-income families. *Environment and Behavior* (March 2001) 33(2):165-180.

<sup>19</sup> Only among blacks was infant mortality greater for immigrants than for native-born, white women. See Landale, N.S., Oropesa, R.S., and Gorman, B.K. Immigration and infant health: Birth outcomes of immigrant and native-born women. In *Children of immigrants: Health, adjustment, and public assistance*. D.J. Hernandez, ed. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999, pp 244-285.

<sup>20</sup> Hernandez, D.J., and Charney, E., eds. *From generation to generation: The health and well-being of children in immigrant families*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Mendoza, F.S., and Dixon, L.B. The health and nutrition status of immigrant Hispanic children: Analyses of the Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. In *Children of immigrants: Health, adjustment, and public assistance*. D.J. Hernandez, ed. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999, pp. 187-243; and note 20, Hernandez and Charney, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, E.R., Wyn, R., Yu, H., et al. Access to health insurance and health care for children in immigrant families. In *Children of immigrants: Health, adjustment, and public assistance*. D.J. Hernandez, ed. Washington, DC:

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National Academy Press, 1999, pp. 126-186.

<sup>23</sup> Featherman, D.L., and Hauser, R.M. *Opportunity and change*. New York: Academic Press, 1978. See also Sewell, W.H., Hauser, R.M., and Wolf, W.C. Sex, schooling, and occupational status. *American Journal of Sociology* (1980) 83(3):551-583; and Sewell, W.H., and Hauser, R.M. *Education, occupation, and earnings*. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> The educational attainments of mothers and fathers are generally similar, although fathers are somewhat more likely to graduate from college. In this article, the mother's education is used as the criterion for assessing parental education levels, because it is available for most children insofar as all children in two-parent families, and most children in one-parent families live with their mother.

<sup>25</sup> Throughout the era since the Great Depression, among children living with a father, nearly all (95-97%) had a father who was in the labor force—that is, who was employed or looking for work. See note 7, Hernandez, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> All statistics for fathers' employment pertain only to children who have a father in the home.

<sup>27</sup> Among children whose fathers worked at all during the past year, a very large proportion worked more than full-time during the weeks that they worked, at 49% overall, and at 52% and 40%, respectively for children in native-born and immigrant families. Among children whose father usually worked more than 40 hours per week, 9% had fathers who worked less than year-round (1-47 weeks), but this ranged from 8% for children in native-born families to 16% for children in immigrant-origin families.

<sup>28</sup> Across age groups, only one race/ethnic or immigrant-origin group experiences a change of more than a few percentage points in the proportion with a father who works full-time year-round, despite the large increases with age among children in newcomer families in the number of years that fathers have lived in the United States. Among children in newcomer families with origins in Indochina, the proportion with a father working full-time year-round declines from 73% at ages 0-2, to 59% at ages 14-17.

<sup>29</sup> All statistics for mothers' employment pertain only to children who have a mother in the home.

<sup>30</sup> Ten of the 11 native-born groups have high mother's labor force participation in the range of 72-79% (with the exception of island-origin Puerto Ricans at 62%), while children in only 7 of 19 immigrant-origin groups have this high proportion of mothers working.

<sup>31</sup> Only among children in newcomer families with origins in Indochina does a decline occur between ages 0-2 and 14-17 in the proportion have at least one parent working full-time year-round (from 75% to 62%). In sharp contrast, among children in native-born families, only among island-origin Puerto Ricans does the proportion with at least one parent working full-time year-round not increase.

<sup>32</sup> Because real income and living standards rose enormously between 1940 and 1973, social perceptions about what income level is considered "normal" and "adequate" also changed substantially. To take account of these changes, it is most appropriate to measure poverty for this historical era by using a relative poverty measure that sets the poverty threshold at one-half median family income for each specific year.

<sup>33</sup> Duncan, G.J., and Brooks-Gunn, J., eds. *Consequences of growing up poor*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997; and McLoyd, V.C. Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American Psychologist* (1998) 53:185-204.

<sup>34</sup> See the U.S. Department of Agriculture Web site at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/AboutBFast/bfastfacts.htm>. (Retrieved March 22, 2004.)

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<sup>35</sup> For example, ten states have set eligibility levels for the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) at 200-350% of the poverty level. These states are California, Connecticut, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. See the Center for Policy Alternatives web site at <http://www.stateaction.org/issues/schipkids/index.cfm>. (Retrieved March 22, 2004.)

<sup>36</sup> Among the highest parental education group, 55-73% have a father who has lived in the United States for less than 15 years. This also holds true for 4 of the 8 middle education groups: China, blacks from Africa, South America, and the Eastern and Southern former Soviet bloc. Among children with other immigrant origins in the middle parental education group, and all the children in the low parental education groups, a smaller 41-52% have fathers who have lived in the United States for less than 15 years.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Greenberg, M., Levin-Epstein, J., Hutson, R., et al. The 1996 welfare law: Key elements and reauthorization issues affecting children. *The Future of Children: Children and Welfare Reform* (Winter/Spring 2002) 12(1):27-57.

<sup>38</sup> When the citizenship status of extended family members is taken into account, overall, the proportion living in mixed-status families grows to 62%. Within each group, the percentage is nearly always 5-12 percentage points greater than the proportion living in mixed-status nuclear families

<sup>39</sup> See the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue.

<sup>40</sup> Statistics vary for different children at different ages, but it is not certain that a particular cohort of children will experience these changes as it ages (although it is certainly possible that with increasing age, children tend to experience declines in household linguistic isolation). Much of this change, especially after age 13 is no doubt due to the fact that children in immigrant families often speak better English than parents, and as they (or their older siblings) become the bridge to the English-speaking world, and their household will no longer defined as linguistically isolated when they, themselves or their sibling, pass age 13.

<sup>41</sup> See note 20, Hernandez and Charney, 1998.