Network on Transitions to Adulthood
Policy Brief
MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy
University of Pennsylvania • Department of Sociology
3718 Locust Walk • Philadelphia, PA 19104-6299

October 2006, Issue 37

Growing Up American: The New Second Generation

By Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut

A visitor to the San Diego home of Mr. Pao Yang, sent to gather data for a survey on the children of immigrants, finds the family in disarray in mid-1995; they are packing to move to Fresno. The interviewer had hoped to talk to Mr. Pao, his wife Zer Vue, and their 18-year-old son, Khae, but is told that the son is out and that they should start without him. Ten minutes later, the porch door slams open and the son enters, shirtless and with a shaved head. When asked to help with the interview, he responds, "No! I don't care for it or anybody."

This is not what Mr. Pao and his wife had imagined for their son when they arrived in the United States from Laos several years earlier. As refugees from a repressive communist regime, they saw America as the land of opportunity for him. His mother says that in Laos he had been "obedient, well-behaved, [and] went to school every day." Why shouldn't they expect him to do well in the United States?

The America that greeted Pao Yang and Zer Vue, however, was more of a nightmare than a dream. Their low-income neighborhood was saturated with drugs, violence, and crime. Eventually, Khae joined the Mesa Kings, a local gang, and quit school. "We cannot control him," said Mr. Pao through an interpreter, "Once I hit him and he pulled a gun on me. He knows English better than us—thinks that he knows everything. If he continues this way, he'll never finish high school; he'll be killed first."

"It would not have been like this back home; it is this country that is so hard to understand."

–Zer Vue, Laotian immigrant

Thus the reason for the move. Pao Yang and Zer Vue hope that the larger, more concentrated Hmong population in Fresno, and their relatives in the area, will help them keep Khae away from gangs. "I want to apologize for the bad attitude of my son," says Vue as she walks the interviewer to the door, "It would not have been like this back home; it is this country that is so hard to understand."

New Challenges Facing the Second Generation

The story of Mr. Pao and his family is just one of many collected by Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut in their book, *Immigrant America: A Portrait.* This brief summarizes chapter 8 in the book, which focuses on the transition to adulthood among immigrant youth. The authors base the chapter, and part of the book, on findings from their Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), which surveyed over ten years a panel of roughly 4,000 immigrant youth in Florida and California (from age 14 through age 24, on average), and also separately interviewed their parents. As the authors reveal, to a greater extent than for earlier waves of immigrants, the children of today's immigrants face a split society that offers both a wealth of opportunities and serious threats to their well-being.

A Changing Labor Market: From Pyramid to Hourglass

One of the surest routes to immigrant upward mobility in the United States has been through the labor market, but changes during the past several decades have altered the structure of occupational opportunity. Portes and Rumbaut argue that in the post-industrial America today, the labor market looks less like a pyramid, where immigrants, and

(over)

especially their children, can gradually move up the ranks of blue-collar and white-collar jobs, and more like an hourglass, where strong demand exists for minimally paid occupations at the bottom and advanced skills at the top. In the new system, moving from the bottom to the top requires a new set of skills and attributes, in particular an advanced education. In today's America, the question is not whether immigrant children will assimilate, but to which segment of society will they assimilate?

Contexts of Reception

The process of incorporation is affected by the contexts of reception that immigrants encounter upon their arrival in the United States—for example, at the level of government policies (depending on whether an immigrant has entered legally or not, or as a refugee or asylee), the community (whether they are met by an existing co-ethnic community in the United States established by previous waves of immigration), and the larger society (especially where the immigrants fit in the country's long history of contentious race relations and nativist hostility).

The bifurcated paths of immigration in many ways begin at the border. Those with an advanced education and professional skills and credentials are welcomed through legal channels and have access to positions at the top of the occupational structure, while labor migrants with much less education are drawn by the demand for low-wage, manual labor jobs and often must enter outside legal channels. The latter group faces the double jeopardy of mixing low levels of human capital with an unauthorized status, both factors that are critical to success.

Immigrants are met with a neutral or hostile context of reception, depending on whether they arrive legally or illegally, sanctioned or not. Those here illegally face seriously complicated prospects for social and economic mobility.

In other words, unlike refugees (who, as state-sponsored migrants, are positively received and gain access to public assistance on the same basis as U.S. citizens), other immigrants are met with a neutral or hostile context of reception, depending on whether they arrive legally or illegally, sanctioned or not. Those here illegally face seriously complicated prospects for social and economic mobility. In but one example, high school seniors applying for college—so critical to success today—typically must show proof of state residency. As a result, many young adult immigrants without legal status are dissuaded from applying at all.

Another context that affects their prospects is racial discrimination and nativist hostility toward particular groups, especially toward black and Mexican immigrants. Finally, their reception is affected by whether the new immigrant can rely on an existing co-ethnic community of fellow nationals in the United States. Some groups have long ties to the United States, while others, such as the Hmong and the Cambodians, had no such co-ethnic networks when they first arrived in the United States and were instead dispersed throughout the country by resettlement programs. The community, as illustrated below, can be a significant resource both for information and connections to jobs and basic services and for moral support in a new and sometimes bewildering environment.

Beyond these is another factor important to the chances for upward mobility among the second generation in their adult transitions: family structure. As ample research has found, children from intact families fare much better on a wide variety of outcomes than do those from fractured or single-parent families.

A Success Story

A bookend to the Pao family story is that of the Entenzas, who came to the country under different conditions and with a different set of resources and connections.

Esteban and Teresa lived in a comfortable home in the Miami suburb of Coral Gables. They had just returned from helping their youngest son, Ariel, move into his own apartment in Princeton, New Jersey. Teresa moved to the United States from Cuba in the 1960s, after the communist government expropriated the department store her parents owned in Havana. With what was left of his savings, his understanding of business, and a Havana friend

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

who became a loan officer at a small Miami bank, Teresa's father was able to start a new business in the U.S. While in college at Miami-Dade, Esteban met Teresa, married her, and went to work in his father-in-law's store.

When they had children, they sent them to Belén Prep, a Jesuit school transplanted from Havana to Miami. Ariel later attended Florida International University, where he completed a degree in finance. After working at the store founded by his grandfather, his father encouraged him to move on. "We did not make all these sacrifices for him to be just a small businessman," Esteban says. Hence the move to Princeton, where Ariel has a well-paid job in the accounting department of a New Jersey corporation.

Two Stories of the Second Generation

Khae Pao was seduced by the gang-driven America that he found in southern California, and is potentially headed for trouble. Ariel Etenza had the benefit of his parents' (and his own) human and social capital to ensure a smoother path. As data from the CILS show, although most immigrants succeed, some groups do so more easily than others.

Chinese and Filipino adult immigrants, for example, are often college graduates and can invest this human capital in their children. Jamaicans and other West Indian immigrants have higher education levels than some, but their children confront with full force the weight of racial discrimination. Cuban immigrants fall generally into two groups, those with high human capital and those without. Those who can afford to live comfortably and send their children to private schools (often those who arrived with a refugee status having fled Castro's Cuba in the early 1960s) do well, while those who end up in public schools (often the children of Mariel boat lift immigrants) fare much as other, less well-educated nationalities. At the other end of the scale, Haitian and Mexican immigrants, and Laotian and Cambodian refugees, had very low levels of education upon arrival.

Although many second-generation children manage to graduate from high school, splits occur among those who pursue higher education: 92.5% of upper-middle-class Cubans in South Florida continue education after high school, while 74% of Nicaraguan children do. In Southern California, 60% of second-generation Mexican, Laotian, and Cambodian children pursue higher education.

Occupations of first-generation immigrants differ by nationality as well. Professional-level occupations are common among Chinese and Filipinos, less likely among West Indians and Cubans, and are rare among Haitian, Mexican, Laotian, and Cambodian parents.

Family income tracks with human and social capital. In South Florida, the children of upper-middle-class Cuban exiles (enrolled in private schools) enjoy the highest median family incomes ($70,395 per year) and Haitian-American youth the lowest ($26,974). In California, Filipino-Americans have the highest median incomes ($65,000), followed by Chinese-Americans and Korean-Americans. Mexican, Laotian, and Cambodian families fare the poorest.

The familial situation trickles down to the children. Although many second-generation children manage to graduate from high school, splits occur among those who pursue higher education: 92.5% of upper-middle-class Cubans in South Florida continue education after high school, while 78.3% of Cubans in public schools and 74% of Nicaraguan children do. In Southern California, 60% of second-generation Mexican, Laotian, and Cambodian children pursue higher education.

A home in the suburbs, a private school education, a summer trip back home to reinforce family ties are all expensive propositions. Families able to afford these opportunities can confront with a measure of equanimity the many challenges faced by their children. Yet even without the immediate comfort that education and income bring, immigrant families can draw, as the Entenzas did, on the strength of their immigrant community to help ease adaptation and offer the second generation new opportunities. Pooling resources, creating networks, and sustaining

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

cultural ties are common strengths of immigrant communities. Families that can tap into that social capital find an added safety net for their families.

Risks of Assimilation to the American Way?

Assimilation into American society is not always an unqualified good, the authors find. Their results show a strong immigrant drive to succeed in many ways. Immigrant parents have high ambition and optimism for their children. The children themselves have high educational expectations and consistently outperform students from the general population. They have superior grades and lower dropout rates than the norms for the school districts in which they are enrolled. But, the results also imply that the longer an individual is in the United States, the lower the drive and performance. Other, less healthy, changes also emerge with increasing acculturation from the first to the second and third generations, including poorer diet, rising rates of obesity and related morbidity, more risk behaviors, higher rates of incarceration, and higher rates of divorce, among other conditions.

For second-generation youth, especially those struggling in school, gangs, drugs, and other "street" lures may offer an alternative path to adaptation, away from school and in the opposite direction of their parents' expectations. Of the nearly 2,500 immigrant parents interviewed in the CILS, 80% were preoccupied with the negative influences their children were exposed to in school and in the neighborhood, as well as the gap between their own values and goals and those of their children's friends.

What develops from these results is a picture of a struggle between assimilation into a less productive American ethos and the aspirations of immigrant parents. In this situation, the key is how strong the family and community ties are, the context of their immigration, their reception in the new country, and how well parents can influence their children until they are able to make progress in education and accomplishment before other consequences of American culture set in.

Hope for the Future

In the past, it was common to speak of assimilation as a straightforward process of joining the American mainstream. The current America, however, is so heterogeneous and the contingencies confronting immigrant families so bewildering that it is difficult to sustain the notion of a single mainstream or even a "typical" assimilation path. Instead, the process has become segmented, following divergent courses that depend largely on the ways that family and ethnic community resources are deployed to confront the challenges faced by the second generation.

Despite some tangible evidence of downward mobility among some groups, Portes and Rumbaut remain positive about immigrant youth. By and large, they contend, young people are doing well. They perform better academically than their native-born peers, most graduate high school and many continue to college, and many work hard at their first jobs to take the first step to independence. Even children of families with little money and human capital can move forward, given the determination and support of family and community.

This brief is based on chapter 8 of Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, Immigrant America: A Portrait, *3rd* edition *(University of California Press, 2006).*

Rubén G. Rumbaut *is professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, and a Network member.* ***Alejandro Portes*** *is professor of sociology at Princeton University and Director of the Center for Migration and Development. They are the coauthors of* Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation, *and coeditors of the special issue of* Ethnic and Racial Studies *(November 2005), "The Second Generation in Early Adulthood," which was devoted entirely to the latest CILS results.*

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.