

Conclusions

Conference on “Children of Immigrants in New Places of Settlement”

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by

Alejandro Portes

Princeton University and University of Miami

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-- The first result of note of this event was taking stock of the literature on the subject of children of immigrants in new areas of settlement in the United States. The papers contributed by participants provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the existing literature, along with summaries of several notable studies conducted by themselves or their associates. Jointly, these papers represent an authoritative assessment both of recent research on the topic and of the actual situation of the population of interest. For this reason and, if no other, it will be important to assemble these papers and memoranda in accessible form that can be circulated promptly among academics and policy makers. The webpage of the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University is the vehicle of choice followed, if possible, by publication in print in an AAAS-sponsored volume or a specialized journal.

-- Substantively, the papers and discussions at the conference converge in several important conclusions:

-- First, the condition of the undocumented immigrant population in the United States, estimated at about 11 million, is one of increasing precariousness, insecurity, and fear. The effective policy of the federal government has not been to provide a path of regularization for this population, but to summarily deport it. This policy was not initiated by the current Trump Administration which has simply accelerated the pace of deportations. As a result, an estimated 2.5 million immigrants have been detained and sent back to their countries of origin.

This policy, which Douglas S. Massey labels a “war of the nation on its immigrants” is notable because the overwhelming number of undocumented migrants came in response to labor demand in agriculture and other labor intensive industries. In the absence of legal channels to

avail themselves of these employment opportunities, migrants came clandestinely. While exceptions exist, the overwhelming majority took jobs in low-skilled, low-paid sectors for the American economy and sought to progress economically from there.

-- Second, the reception of host communities in the U.S. varied by a number of factors reflecting local culture, the economic situation, and the composition of the immigrant flow itself. While employers generally welcomed the migrants, and were often the cause for their arrival, native workers and their families were less uniform in their response. In some places, immigrants were regarded as a necessary supplement to a dwindling local labor force while, in others, they were seen as a source of economic competition and a threat to local culture and the predominance of the English language.

As David Griffith notes for the case of eastern North Carolina, as long as migration was composed of single persons working in agriculture and other labor-intensive jobs, they were tolerated as a useful addition to the local labor force. However, when families and children started to arrive and seek to settle in local towns and rural areas, the reaction became much less favorable. It was at this point when nativist fears made their appearance and immigrant families were confronted with a widespread hostile reception. Griffith conceptualizes this transition as going from migrants being a production factor to becoming reproductive communities.

-- Third, the situation of children of undocumented migrants has been permanently challenging -- from early childhood into adolescence. Children brought at an early age from abroad and even those born in the United States often arrive at school speaking little or no English. By law, public schools are required to accept and educate all children in their districts, but the extent to which

they succeed varies greatly depending on their resources to deal with English-limited students and the support of this effort by local institutions.

Children of immigrants, who succeed in staying in school, learning English, and graduating then go on to confront another series of challenges after leaving high school. As noted by Roberto Gonzales, there are a series of “choke points” that threaten to bar these youths from pursuing their studies and thus confine them to a situation of permanent social and economic disadvantage. These choke points include: 1) whether they can gain access to institutions of higher education or not; 2) if so, whether they are eligible for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities or not; 3) if so, whether they have access to state aid or other sources to finance their tuition and other expenses; 4) if so and they graduate, whether they are eligible for licenses to practice their chosen professions.

Depending on how they navigate these contingencies, children of immigrants may succeed in joining the American middle-class mainstream or move toward a path of “downward assimilation”, confined to occupations no better than their parents or even joining the underclass at the bottom of society.

-- Fourth, the second generation population is not uniform, but is divided according to birthplace. U.S.-born children are in a generally more advantageous position since they can overcome the choke points listed above by virtue of their legal status. The twelve million U.S. born children of immigrants are themselves divided according to whether their parents have legal status in the country or are undocumented and, hence, deportable. If the latter, children could be forced to accompany their parents to the country of origin or be left without their immediate families in the United States. For reasons explained at length in the conference papers, both situations are

traumatic and carry the risk of derailing the education and future lives of children exposed to them.

For youths born abroad and themselves undocumented, a great deal depends on whether they accessed the DACA program initiated by the Obama Administration in 2012. About 800,000 undocumented youths were able to register but, due to the formal limits of the program, a still greater number remains outside of it. “Daca-mented” youths, as Gonzales labels them, have gained certain important privileges, such as temporary protected status against deportation and permits to work. Their new status does not guarantee, however, that they will be able to overcome the challenges listed above. A great deal depends on the state in which they reside. For those living in relatively generous states (California, Massachusetts), DACA-status is accompanied by access to public colleges and universities and even eligibility for in-state tuition and financial assistance. For those in states where a conservative mind-set predominates (South Carolina, Georgia), DACA-status is no guarantee that these youths will be able to continue their education since they are ineligible for financial assistance or even the right to enroll in public institutions of higher education.

The worst situation naturally corresponds to undocumented youths without DACA-status since they can be deported and, hence, live in a state of permanent insecurity. Again, a great deal depends in such cases on the state and locality where they reside. These range from those willing to grant such youths sanctuary and economic assistance to those ready to denounce them to federal agents so that they can be apprehended and removed from the country.

-- Fifth, the deportation policy enacted by the federal government has not only removed millions of first-generation migrants, but a sizable number of their children as well. This population, that

some estimates put at more than half-million, includes not only foreign-born, but U.S.-born youths who left the country accompanying their deported parents. Thus, an unanticipated effect of this policy is to have created a population of American “immigrants” to Mexico and other sending countries. The dramatic situation of these returned children, as they confront a culture they do not know and a language they do not speak has been the topic of several notable recent studies. A number of them are included in a recent volume edited by conference participants, Ruben Hernandez-Leon and Victor Zuñiga.¹

As a new country of immigration, courtesy of U.S. policy, Mexico finds itself in a situation similar to its northern neighbor in terms of the difficulties of educating a large number of immigrant children and youths. As reported by Patricia Gandara, English Learner (EL) students (a proxy for children of immigrants) rank consistently at the bottom of all academic performance criteria in elementary and secondary school in the U.S. As a result, a high proportion of these students become discouraged and drop out of school. The number of such dropouts is estimated to be at least double that of other high school students adding to the almost two-thirds of Latino immigrants, 25 years of age or older, who have not completed a high school education.²

Mexico now faces the mirror image of this situation, as its schools are confronted with an avalanche of new immigrant students who do not speak Spanish well and are unfamiliar with the local culture. While English fluency among these deportee children could be construed as a valuable skill, the inability of teachers to communicate with them and the complete

¹ Ruben Hernandez-Leon and Victor Zuñiga, *Contemporary Return Migration from the United States to Mexico*, Special issue of *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 32 (Summer 2016).

² Patricia Gandara, “Policy Report – The Students We Share,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 32 (Summer 2016): 357-378.

unpreparedness of the Mexican educational system to cope with these new arrivals do not bode well for the future. Abandoning schools and joining street gangs and the local informal economy loom as distinct possibilities. This would reproduce the phenomenon of downward assimilation, observed among many children of poor and undocumented Mexican migrants in the United States, back in their country of origin.³

In practical terms, the significant set of findings presented and discussed during the April conference deserves broad dissemination and follow-up in the future. The unsettled situation at present -- marked by uncertain and changing policies at the federal and state levels, widely different local contexts of reception, continuing deportations, and a rising population of young American immigrants in Mexico -- does not lend itself to large-scale surveys or longitudinal panels. Such studies would be appropriate for relatively stable populations in normal times. However, when the situation can change from one day to another and when immigrants and their offspring contacted today can be gone tomorrow, instruments of investigation far more nimble and flexible are required.

A cooperative effort among experienced scholars and academic centers in the United States and Mexico recommends itself for this purpose. Binational teams would monitor policies at the national, state, and local levels in both countries; visit strategic communities of destination and return; meet and interview significant stakeholders including migrant families, school authorities, government personnel, and relevant social organizations; identify and propose alternative policies to cope, stabilize, and, when necessary, reverse actions by government at all levels.

³ Rubén Rumbaut, "Turning Points in the Transition to Adulthood: Determinants of Educational Attainment, Incarceration and Early Childbearing among Children of Immigrants," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (November 2005): 1041:86.

A day-and-a-half conference does not provide a sufficient basis to advance policy prescriptions in order to alter the present situation. A cooperative and flexible binational research program lasting one year and culminating in a new conference should be able to accomplish this goal. While the present situation of summary deportations, family break-ups, enforced returns, and generalized insecurity is untenable, workable alternative policies must take into account the facts that already exists on the ground and that may be difficult or impossible to reverse. It seems clear, however, that the continuation of current governmental actions does not provide a viable path toward social stability, respect for basic human rights, or long-term international cooperation. Considering alternatives to such actions should, therefore, be a major priority for all concerned parties.