

The Geography of Opportunity: Educational Progress of the Children of Immigrants in New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations

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Introduction

Through much of American history, immigrants settled almost exclusively in a few major cities such as New York or Los Angeles. From 1971 to 1995, 78% of immigrants settled in one of five states (New York, California, Florida, Texas, and Illinois) and 48% went to one of five metropolitan areas (Massey and Capoferro 2008:26). These "Traditional Immigrant Destinations" still attract many immigrants, but they have been joined by hundreds of "New Immigrant Destinations." By 2005, only half of recently arrived immigrants were in the top five states named above.

This dispersal has broadened the "contexts of reception" under which immigrant integration takes place in the United States. Immigrants and their children now constitute a tenth or more of the population in many rural farming towns, booming suburbs, and major urban centers that received little immigration earlier in the twentieth century.

For immigrants, geographic dispersal presents a set of opportunities and risks. The New Immigrant Destinations appear to offer extensive opportunities for better employment and housing. Yet, there are also risks. Local and state governments, schools, and other organizations and institutions must accommodate a new population with a distinct set of needs, in many cases without the experience and capacity their peers in the Traditional Immigrant Destinations have built over time. The New Destinations may not have the co-ethnic support networks and established employment niches that promote economic and social progress in the Traditional Immigrant Destinations. If immigrants are greeted with hostility or discrimination in the New Immigrant Destinations, their success may not be assured.

The greatest of these risks and opportunities may lie in the education of the children of immigrants. The concentration of the children of immigrants in underfunded and underperforming urban public schools in the Traditional Immigrant Destinations is blamed for many of the problems of immigrant students. This forms part of the basis for the concept of "segmented assimilation," in which outcomes such as the scholastic performance of the children of immigrants from specific countries actually suffer with time in the United States and its schools (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Hao 2004). Another perspective focuses on the failure of schools to engage immigrant students and posits that bilingual and culturally relevant education and outreach is conducive to the success of immigrant students (Suarez-Orozco, Saurez Orozco, and Todorova 2008; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix and Clu-Clewell 2000). Dispersal, by breaking up the geographic concentration of the foreign-born, may improve the character of the schools attended by the children of immigrants. Yet many rural and even suburban schools are also poorly resourced and perform poorly. Further, schools in the New Immigrant Destinations may not be capable of or interested in actively meeting the special needs of the children of immigrants.

Little information is available on either the educational outcomes or inputs for the children of immigrants in the New Immigrant Destinations. Kandel and Parrado (2006a) document changes in the ethnic makeup of metropolitan and non-metropolitan school districts and present two cases studies of how school districts have responded. Stamps and Bohon (2006) compare the educational attainment of young adult immigrants in metropolitan New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations, but members of their sample reached age 18 before 1993, before the dispersal of the foreign-born was fully underway.

This paper first answers a basic question raised by geographic dispersal of the foreign-born: Do the children of immigrants in New Immigrant Destinations show better educational progress than their peers in the Traditional Immigrant destinations? It then tests the extent to which parental and child characteristics or school district characteristics best explain differentials between New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations. Along the way, it documents differences in the characteristics of school districts and immigrant families between the New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations. In order to accomplish these comparisons, it first develops a comprehensive classification scheme for identifying New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations.

Defining New Immigrant Destinations

There is no well-established definition for the “New Immigrant Destinations” at geographic levels below the state. Much of the existing literature describes either changes in the inter-state distribution of the foreign-born (Massey and Capoferro 2008; Durand, Massey, and Capoferro 2005) or subsets of what might be classified as “New Immigrant Destinations,” focusing on metropolitan areas (Singer 2008), specific regions (Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya 2005) or rural areas (Kandel and Parrado 2006b).

In order to make a more comprehensive comparison of the New Immigrant Destinations and Traditional Immigrant Destinations, this paper classifies Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) according to their proportion foreign born in 1980, the growth rate of the foreign born population between 1980 and 2000, and point change in the proportion foreign born between 1980 and 2000. A working classification scheme follows. All data used for classification and description of the PUMAs are from Census Public Use Microdata.

Traditional Immigrant Destination: In highest 10% of PUMAs ranked by proportion foreign born in 1980.

New Immigrant Destination: Not a Traditional Immigrant Destination, and in the top 25% of PUMAs in terms of rate of growth of the foreign-born population between 1980 and 2000 *and* in the top 25% of PUMAs ranked by change in proportion of population that is foreign-born between 1980 and 2000. These criteria are intended to capture population change that significantly alters the character of a community.

Comparing and Explaining Immigrant Educational Progress

The paper first makes a simple comparison: Are the children of immigrants in New Immigrant Destinations more or less likely to be below grade level than their peers in the Traditional immigrant

Destinations? This is measured using an indicator of whether a child has accomplished the number of grade levels expected for his or her age, loosely following the method used by Thomas (2009). This and other parental and child-level variables are derived from Census 2000 Public Use Microdata.

The paper then tests two hypotheses for why this outcome may differ across the types of immigrant destinations. The first is that differences between New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations in the proportion of children of immigrants who are below grade level can be explained by differences in the characteristics of immigrant families. These characteristics include variables such as the parents' and child's year of arrival in the United States, country of origin, internal migration history, education level, income and the number and marital status of resident parents.

The second hypothesis tested is that differences between the New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations in educational progress among the children of immigrants can be explained by differences in the characteristics of the schools and school districts attended by the children of immigrants in each type of destination. Key variables here include per-student expenditures and indices of concentration of minority and low-income students. Education input variables are created at the PUMA level by aggregating data from the school districts within each PUMA after weighting districts by their immigrant population¹. These are calculated from the Census and the US Department of Education's Common Core of Data.

Hypothesis testing begins by regressing the indicator for the child's grade-level status on an indicator for the type of PUMA—New or Traditional Immigrant Destination—he or she resides in (those not residing in either type of immigrant destination are excluded from this analysis). The two sets of variables representing the child's characteristics and school characteristics are then introduced to the model separately, and then jointly. The key comparison is the extent and direction of change in the association between residence in a New or Traditional Immigrant Destination and the probability of below-grade-level status as each set of variables is introduced to the model.

This analysis thus presents several sets of new and useful information. It provides a first comparison of how the children of immigrants in New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations are performing in school. It also provides a comparison of the personal and family characteristics of the children of immigrants and of their school districts in these two types of places. It tests whether the characteristics of children or those of their schools better explain differences in education success between the New and Traditional Immigrant Destinations. In doing so, it also provides information about what child and school-level variables best predict the risk of below-grade-level performance among the children of immigrants, regardless of place of residence.

¹ PUMAs, which have a population of at least 100,000 persons, are the finest unit of geographic identification permitted by Public-Use Microdata. The aggregation of school-district level data to create PUMA-level variables introduces some measurement error. However, I argue that the aggregated variables are useful: most PUMAs contain four or less school districts. Among PUMAs that contain many school districts, variation of school district characteristics is relatively small and the majority of school districts have very small foreign-born populations. The implications of this geographic aggregation will be explored and discussed.

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