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IMMIGRATION

The Sociodemographic Picture of Contemporary Immigrant Families

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Introduction

Most affluent countries around the world have experienced large increases in the number and diversity of immigrant families during recent decades. The first study drawing on population census and registration system data to present internationally comparable estimates for eight affluent countries found, for example, that children in immigrant families as a proportion of all children ranges from 10% in Italy and 16-17% in France and the United Kingdom to 22-26% in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, with still higher proportions of 33% in Australia and 39% in Switzerland.[1]

Because the children of today (ages 0-17 in 2010) will be in the prime working ages of 40-57 in 2050, they will form a very substantial portion the workers, taxpayers and voters who will support the elderly, retired and mainly non-immigrant populations in these countries at mid-century. Hence, the well-being, development and success of children in immigrant families – particularly those from non-western developing countries who often differ in race, ethnicity, language, religion

or culture from older non-immigrant population – are important to all residents in affluent countries. Their successful integration into the culture, schools and other institutions in the neighbourhoods, towns, cities and countries where they live is in the interest of everyone living in these countries.

Demographics

Among these immigrant families, many have origins in low- or middle-income countries (LMICs), which often differ in culture, religion and linguistic or ethnic background from the native population. Among these eight affluent countries, the proportion of immigrant families who have origins in LMICs ranges between about 50-80% (Germany at 10%).

The largest proportion of children in immigrant families with LMIC origins in eight affluent countries are typically from Africa, Asia or Latin America, and the Caribbean. Nearly all children in immigrant families (95-100%) with LMIC origins are from these regions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the U.S., and with very large proportions also in France (88%), the Netherlands (70%) and Italy (67%). These origins account for smaller proportions of the total with LMIC origins in Switzerland (36%) and Germany (20%), because LMIC countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are the predominant sources.[1]

Many immigrants in specific affluent countries are drawn from lower income countries which are geographically proximate or share a common colonial past or other geopolitical circumstances leading to high concentrations of immigrants from a small number of countries. For example, one country, Mexico, accounts for nearly one-half (46%) of children the LMIC origins in the United States, and two countries account for two-thirds (69%) of children in immigrant families with LMIC origins in France (34% from Algeria, 35% from Morocco), for one-half (50%) in Germany (31% from Russia, 19% from Turkey), and for nearly one-half (47%) in the Netherlands (23-24% each from Morocco and Turkey).

Although the concentrations are lower in the four other affluent countries, they are substantial at two-in-five (40%) in Switzerland (29% from the Republic of Yugoslavia, 11% from Turkey), one-third (35%) in the UK (15% from India, 20% from Pakistan), and more than one-in-five in Australia (24%, with 10% from the Philippines, 14% from Vietnam) and Italy (22%, with 10% from Albania, 12% from Morocco). At the same time, affluent countries also are typically the destination for immigrants from an extremely wide range of origins, leading to enormous diversity in the

immigrant population of specific countries.

Sociodemographic Strengths of Immigrant Families

Immigrants often must overcome enormous obstacles and challenges in their adopted homeland. Decisions to immigrate are driven by powerful motivations, including the search for improved economic opportunities, the desire to be reunited with parents, children, or other family members who already live in the new country, and the need to escape war or persecution because of their religion, social group or political opinions. It should, therefore, also not be surprising that immigrants bring great strengths and commitment to their new homelands.

- Families are a critical source of care, nurturance and support for children, and research in the U.S. and the UK has shown that children living with two parents are, on average, more likely than children in one-parent families to be somewhat advantaged in their educational success.[2,3] In 7 of 8 countries, children of immigrants are about as likely, or more likely, to live in families with two parents than are children in native-born families.[1] The proportions are nearly identical in Italy (92%), and slightly higher for immigrants in France (89% vs. 88%) and in Switzerland (91% vs. 88%); the immigrant group is more likely than the native-born group to have two parents in the home, with a difference of 8-9%, in Germany (87% vs. 79%) and in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom (83-84% vs. 74-75%).
- Immigrant parents have a strong commitment to work.[1] Despite the difficulties immigrants may experience in finding employment because of differences in language, education or culture, immigrant fathers are more likely, or only slightly less likely, compared to native-born fathers to be employed; in most countries at least 4 in 5 immigrant families have an employed father.
- Immigrant parents are not only committed to work, but to their adopted homeland, as reflected in statistics regarding length of residence and citizenship in the settlement country. The proportion of immigrant families with a parent who has lived in the country less than five years is only 16-17% in Italy and Switzerland, and still less at 11-12% in the U.S., Australia and the Netherlands.[1] Thus, the vast majority of parents have lived in their new homeland 5 years or more. In fact, many parents are citizens of the new country.[1]
- The vast majority of children in immigrant families are second generation born in their parents' adopted homeland.[1] The proportion generation rises from 40% in Australia, to 71% in Italy, 75% in Switzerland, 76% in the U.S., 79% in the UK, 84% in the Netherlands, and

86% in France and Germany. The proportions of children in immigrant families who are citizens of the parents' country of settlement are about the same in Italy (71%) or higher in the US (85%) and Australia (89%). In two countries where citizenship is not a birth right, however, the proportions who are citizens are substantially lower at 59% in Germany and 44% in Switzerland, creating a situation for many children of immigrants that they were residents of the settlement country from birth, but are not citizens of their birth country. Children in immigrant families who were born in the parent's settlement country are likely to spend most or all of their lives in this country, attending school and learning the language and customs as they grow older.

- The strong commitment of immigrant families to their adopted homeland also is reflected in high rates of homeownership in the settlement country.[1] More than one-third of children in immigrant families live in family-owned homes in France, and this rises to one-half or more in Italy and the U.S. to about two-thirds in the UK and Australia. These results suggest that many immigrants are putting down deep roots, tangibly investing in their communities by purchasing homes and showing a strong commitment to the local neighborhoods, towns and cities in their adopted homelands.

Challenges for Many Immigrant Families

The socioeconomic integration of immigrants may be a key to successful acculturation, and two important indicators of socioeconomic status for immigrants are educational attainments and family income.[4] Skill in the language of the settlement society also has long been used as an indicator of social integration or acculturation.[5] These indicators not only reflect the current level of social integration or acculturation, they also represent resources that are valuable for children as they seek to become integrated in their parents' adopted homeland. However many children of immigrants live in families that experience challenges associated with limited parental education, poverty and learning the settlement society language.

- Highly educated parents are well-positioned to help their children with homework and to negotiate on behalf of their children with teachers and school administrators; parents with limited education may lack the experience and knowledge to effectively provide such support. Many children in immigrant families, ranging from 11% in Italy to 42% in the UK, live with a father who has graduated from college.[1] But the proportions with fathers who have not graduated from high school are much higher and substantially exceed the levels

experienced by children in native-born families in each country (except in Australia and Italy). The gap with the immigrant group more likely to have a father who did not graduate from high school grows to 20% in France and in the U.S., Switzerland and Germany. (Results for mothers are broadly similar.) These low levels of parental education are a concern because it has long been known that children with less educated parents tend themselves of experience less success than other children in school and when they reach adulthood in the job market.[6,7,8,9]

- Family income provides essential resources to children, and those with low family incomes tend to experience less success in school and lower earnings when they become adults.[8,10,11] Most family income in most families comes from earnings that parents and other family members receive for their paid work in the labor force. Social transfers from government also can be important, particularly for families with low incomes. Taking into account both labor market earnings and government social transfers, the proportions living in poverty for children in immigrant families range from about 1-in-7 for Germany to nearly 1-in-5 in France and Australia, to more than 1-in-4 in the UK, and 1-in-3 in the U.S.. The poverty rates for children in native-born families are 6-13% lower in Australia and Germany and France, the UK, and the U.S. Thus, poverty rates, after taking account of the effect of social transfer programs, are lowest for both the immigrant and native-born groups in Australia, France and Germany, intermediate in the UK (29% and 16%), and highest in the U.S. Speaking the settlement society language is necessary for children enrolled in schools that teach in this language and for parents in the labour market and other settings that include schools, where parents may be the primary advocates for their children, and where they are the primary source, after teachers, of academic support and guidance. Learning the language of the settlement society presents a substantial challenge for many parents and children in immigrant families, although many others speak the new homeland language. For three countries with comparable data, the proportion of children in immigrant families speaking a non-local language at home is only 34% in Australia, but this rises to 62% in France, and 66% in the U.S.
- Most children in immigrant families learn the settlement country language as they make friends, attend school and engage in other aspects of social life. Children in immigrant families often learn the language of the settlement society more quickly than their parents; in the U.S., for example, 4 in 5 children in immigrant families (81%) speak English exclusively or very well. One-half of children in immigrant families (52%) speak another

language at home and speak English very well. Thus, many children in immigrant families are well-positioned to become fluent bilingual speakers, writers and readers – if they receive formal training in both English and the native language of their parent or parents.

- Overall, most children in immigrant families grow up in complex language environments that can help promote the development of English language skills, although a smaller proportion lives with parents and other family members who speak little or no English. These families, and their schools, confront both special challenges and opportunities. The challenges include the need for policies and programs that will most effectively educate children with immigrant parents.
- Results of a recent longitudinal study in the U.S. and a recent cross-national study of 13 countries including the U.S. suggest that adolescents who have fluency in both their parents' home language and the language of the settlement society, and who identify with and participate in both the culture of the society of origin and the society of settlement adjust more successfully than do those with other acculturation profiles.[12,13] Measures of adjustment in these two studies include higher self-esteem, higher education and occupation expectations, higher academic achievement, lower levels of mental health problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms) as well as higher satisfaction with life, and lower levels of antisocial behaviour.

Policies That Foster Integration

Policies and programs in four arenas (education, income and economic resources, health care, language outreach) can help to assure that immigrant families have the resources they need to succeed.

- ***Education***. Children in immigrant families should have access to high quality early education programs. Such programs may be particularly valuable for the cognitive and language development of children in immigrant families with English language learner parents.[14,15,16,17] Socioeconomic barriers play a critical role in limiting access of immigrant groups to early education programs.[18] There is a need for education policies, programs and curricula that foster bilingual spoken fluency and literacy (reading and writing). Education policies, programs and curricula for recent first generation, adolescent immigrants with little or no experience in schools must address a very different set of issues than policies for first generation immigrants who arrived at younger ages and who obtained most or all of their

education in the culture of destination.

- ***Economic resources and access to public benefits***. Insofar as the exclusion of some immigrant parents from eligibility for welfare programs acts to deprive children of important public benefits and services, and insofar as most of the children and parents are or will become citizens, the elimination of eligibility exclusion rules is in the interest of immigrant children and families and of all members of a society, including the baby-boom generation who will benefit from having a healthy and productive labor force to support them during retirement.
- ***Health insurance coverage***. Children and their families require good health to succeed in school and in work. Many children in immigrant families who come from countries of origin with high poverty rates are not covered by health insurance. The substantial risk of not being insured remains even after controlling for parental education as well as for reported health status, number of parents in the home, and having a parent employed full-time year-around.[19] The main reason reported by parents for lack of insurance coverage for children is the same for both immigrant and native-born groups: the lack of affordability of insurance coverage.
- ***Health care, language and professional cultural competence***. Home language outreach and interpretive services, as well as the culturally-competent provision of health care, are essential because many children and parents are still language learners, and many come from cultures with different traditions of health care provision. It is critical that education, health and other organizations provide out-reach and interpretive services in the home languages of children and their parents. Without these efforts, these organizations may be cutting themselves off from the rapidly growing client population of immigrant children and families.

Conclusions and Implications for Immigrant Services and Policy

Children of immigrants, particularly with LMIC origins, will become increasingly prominent during adulthood in the economic and social life of affluent countries because of their growing numbers and because non-immigrant populations are rapidly aging as a consequence of their low rates of natural increase. Recent population projections for the period between about 2000 and 2050 indicate, for example, that the non-Western population as a share of the total will approximately double from 9% to 25% in England and Wales, 7% to 18% in Germany, and 9% to 17% in the

Netherlands, with a similar increase for the race-ethnic minority population of the U.S. from 31% to 50%.[20,21] There is wide agreement that immigration laws should be enforced, but there are many possible approaches to enforcement, and the manner in which enforcement occurs should not bring harm to children.

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