



Assimilation Today

New Evidence Shows the Latest Immigrants to America
Are Following in Our History's Footsteps

Dowell Myers and John Pitkin September 2010

Introduction and summary

The story of immigrants in our nation is about newcomers integrating into our society and then strengthening our culture and especially our economy. The longer immigrants have lived in the United States, the more “they” become “us.” Pasta, salsa, sausage, and egg rolls are now as common place on American dinner tables as corn, pumpkin, and turkey. Soccer is now a national pastime, at least among youth, and millions of sports fans cheer the hundreds of immigrants who are members of Major League Baseball.

Nonetheless, opposition to immigration today is whipped up by conservatives who claim that assimilation is not occurring and that instead most immigrants are a burden on our society. But our history tells us otherwise. Immigrants to our shores today are following closely in the path of their predecessors, assimilating rapidly just like they did in the past—as most Americans witness every day in one way or another.

In this paper we use the most comprehensive U.S. Census Bureau survey data to investigate how well the process is working for today’s immigrants. Replacing the misleading rhetoric of immigration opponents with firm data, this study shows that assimilation is happening across our nation. The illusion of nonassimilation is created by looking only at newcomers who have not had time yet to assimilate as fully as earlier arrivers. But once we examine immigrants’ advancement over time—in this study from 1990 to the present—we discover that the longer immigrants are here the more they advance and the better they are integrated into our society.

The results are plain to see. Evidence showing how more recent arrivals to our country are progressing is derived from careful study of census data over two decades, with a focus on key areas that demonstrate the advancement and integration of immigrants into society. Our assimilation benchmarks are those we know from our history to be bellwethers, among them:

- Citizenship
- Homeownership
- English language proficiency
- Job status
- Earning a better income

These benchmarks demonstrate that immigrants in our country since 1990 are advancing at high rates no matter their social and economic status 20 years ago.

Integration is occurring fastest in the areas of citizenship and homeownership, with high school completion and earnings also rising. The share of foreign-born men earning above low-income levels in our country, for example, rose to 66 percent in 2008, the last year for which complete data is available, from just 35 percent in 1990 when the immigrants were recently arrived.¹ And Latino immigrants in the first 18 years of U.S. residency swiftly attained the hallmark of the “American Dream”—homeownership, with 58 percent achieving this feat in 2008, up from only 9.3 percent in 1990. This is a substantial leap. While lower than the 66.6 percent homeownership rate for non-Hispanic native born men, the homeownership levels for Latinos and other foreign-born immigrants rises as their time in the United States lengthens.

Not surprisingly, the rates of assimilation in education and occupation are higher among immigrant children, especially among Latinos, than among adult first-generation immigrants who have less access to education because they are newly-arrived workers.

The college graduation rate among immigrants is also on the rise since 2000, demonstrating that immigrant children are more able to pursue opportunities for educational advancement. Lesser access to education and learning centers for immigrant adults also means a lower English proficiency rate, especially among Latinos, due not just to their work and income status, but also because language classes are not evenly provided across all states and have lost funding in recent years. But immigrant children are bridging this language gap exceedingly quickly.

Geographically, too, our nation’s latest immigrants are following in the footsteps of our ancestors, spreading out across the country to assimilate in communities large and small. There are now 14 states that have foreign-born populations greater than the national average share of 12.5 percent. In a reflection of the movement

Integration is occurring fastest in the areas of citizenship and homeownership, with high school completion and earnings also rising.

of immigrants into new communities, the data show 27 states with immigrant populations that are only recently arrived (since 2000) of at least two percent of these states' population.

New destination states such as Georgia and North Carolina have more “new” immigrants than immigrants who arrived before 1990. The opposite is true in the traditional immigrant destination states of California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois. The longer immigrants are in the United States, the more integrated they become—a fact that remains consistent across the nation, regardless of whether they came from Mexico and Central America or from other countries.

Indeed, in Arizona—the state that now has immigrants in the crosshairs of its law enforcement officials—Latino immigrants have proven much more successful than some assume. After 18 years of U.S. residence, 66.6 percent are homeowners, 59.2 percent speak English well, and 57.9 percent earn better than a low income.

So why is it that some residents in some states with large new immigrant populations believe that integration is not occurring? One reason is that new arrivals increased over a short period while assimilation, by definition, can only be observed over time. Therefore, states with larger segments of long-settled immigrants also are states where their melding into society has had more time to unfold, and thus immigrant advancement and integration has grown more visible. Many Americans fall prey to the presumption, largely unconscious, that “immigrants are like Peter Pan—forever frozen in their status as newcomers, never aging, never advancing economically, and never assimilating ... people who perpetually resemble newcomers.”² Seeing the data on immigrant advancement may be surprising and should help dispel the illogical Peter Pan fallacy.

Almost a half century ago, President John F. Kennedy reflected on how the immigration process contributed to the evolution of our great nation and became “central to the whole American faith.” Immigration, he added, “gave every old American a standard by which to judge how far he had come and every new American a realization of how far he might go.” It reminded every American, old and new, that change is the essence of life, and that American society is a process, not a conclusion.³

The longer immigrants are in the United States, the more integrated they become—a fact that remains consistent across the nation, regardless of whether they came from Mexico and Central America or from other countries.

In the pages that follow, this report documents in detail what President Kennedy described so elegantly a half century ago—the ever ongoing process and growth of immigrants’ advancement and integration in the United States through citizenship, education, learning English, work, and fulfilling the “American Dream” of home ownership. The longer immigrants are here, the more they assimilate, resulting in even greater levels of achievement for their children and sowing the seeds of progress for generations to come.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

