



AP Photo/Steven Soter

Assimilation Tomorrow

How America's Immigrants Will Integrate by 2030

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Introduction and summary

The revival of immigration to the United States since 1970 has been accompanied by substantial social change. Immigration was initially focused in states such as California, Florida, and New York, but it spread across the country beginning in the 1990s.

Many questions remain about the newcomers with such a rise in immigration and new immigrant destinations: Will they learn English? Are they locked in poverty? What are their prospects for success in America? Most importantly, will today's immigrants fully integrate to become tomorrow's Americans?

This report attempts to answer these questions. It examines the future outlook for the nation's immigrants, projecting their gains from today through 2030. Policy options exist to diminish or enhance the integrative trajectories of immigrants. Nevertheless, our projections assume no change—either positive or negative—from the historical patterns of attainment or the historical policy environment.

The report is the second part of a project on immigrant assimilation conducted by the University of Southern California in partnership with the Center for American Progress, with funding support from the MacArthur Foundation. In the first part, “Assimilation Today,” the authors described the process of immigrants' assimilation as it unfolded over the last two decades. In that report we found that immigrants are following the path of their predecessors and assimilating just as rapidly today as they did in the past.

In this report we carry that analysis forward to 2030 to see what immigrant integration will look like in the next few decades. In particular we focus on the cohort of immigrants who arrived in the 1990s—part of the largest wave of immigrants to come to the nation. We further break down the achievements for adult immigrants and their children, and between all immigrants and Hispanic immigrants.

We reached three major findings:

- 1. Immigrants are assimilating into American life, like their predecessors.** They are on track to achieve great successes by 2030. (see Exhibit A)

Most impressive is the fact that the percentage of immigrants who own rather than rent their homes is projected to rise from 25.5 percent in 2000 to 72 percent in 2030. Furthermore, the percent speaking English well or very well is projected to rise from 57.5 percent to 70.3 percent and the percent living in poverty is projected to fall from 22.8 percent to 13.4 percent.

- 2. Hispanic newcomers show very positive rates of advancement by 2030.** (see Exhibit B) This is contrary to assertions of nativist scholars such as Samuel Huntington who argue that Hispanic immigrants are not assimilating by dint of their large numbers and proximity to their home country.¹ Hispanic immigrants' advancements mirror that of all immigrants, albeit from a lower starting point. Their anticipated increase in homeownership is particularly noteworthy, from 21 percent in 2000 to 67 percent in 2030.

- 3. Immigrant youth (age less than 20 on arrival, roughly 20 percent of all immigrants) also show positive gains and dramatic changes between generations.** These changes illustrate just how much an early arrival helps in the integration process.

High school attainment is greatest for immigrants who arrive the earliest. College completion travels along a similar trajectory. Fluent English language acquisition increases even more dramatically for children arriving before the age of 10 compared to teenagers or young adults.

The Great Recession of the late 2000s set back immigrants. But we find that they are surprisingly resilient. Despite the downturn they still ended the decade better off than they were in 2000.

These immigrant advances are substantial and entirely to the benefits of longer settlement and deepening roots in America. Yet such broad gains should not be taken for granted because past rates of immigrant advancement depended at least in part on economic growth and public investments in education and other supports—all of which are now threatened.²

EXHIBIT A All immigrants

Overall progress of the 1990s immigrant wave from 2000 to 2030

	All immigrants	
	2000	2030
Speak English well	57.5%	70.3%
Homeownership	25.5%	71.9%
High school completion	60.8%	74.0%
Four-year college completion	22.6%	31.1%
Naturalization	13.2%	70.6%
Living out of poverty	77.2%	86.6%
Earning better than low income	55.7%	70.3%

Note: Data in 2000 are for adults ages 20 and older; Data in 2030 are a weighted average of projections carried out separately for child-aged arrivals and adults, but with status observed at their ages in 2030.

EXHIBIT B Hispanic immigrants

Overall progress of the 1990s immigrant wave from 2000 to 2030

	Hispanic immigrants	
	2000	2030
Speak English well	36.8%	57.1%
Homeownership	20.9%	66.7%
High school completion	37.6%	56.4%
Four-year college completion	6.7%	12.4%
Naturalization	7.9%	57.2%
Living out of poverty	72.7%	81.6%
Earning better than low income	43.2%	59.0%

Note: Data in 2000 are for adults ages 20 and older; Data in 2030 are a weighted average of projections carried out separately for child-aged arrivals and adults, but with status observed at their ages in 2030.

Why immigrant success is important

We should pay attention to immigrants' future achievement because we will greatly depend on their human resources in coming decades. The coming retirement of the large generation of baby boomers, for example, is expected to create urgent labor needs among private and public employers, and falling labor force growth opens many opportunities for new workers.³

Likewise, immigrants help shore up programs such as Social Security, and losing them would mean a significant shortfall.⁴ The housing market also depends increasingly on immigrant households, who disproportionately own their own homes. Without their buying power homeowners would find it harder to sell their properties.⁵

The coming decade is a pivotal period in the nation's economic history and deserves to be closely monitored. The findings of this study demonstrate how rapidly the new immigrant residents are likely to advance. Their success will be a vitally important contribution to the new economy.

What we as a nation do in the future—whether we pass an immigration reform package that allows all immigrants living in the shadows to become legal and become full and productive members of society or not—will have a great impact on our progress going forward.

This report demonstrates the great potential of immigrant residents. Immigrants do not remain mired in their status as newcomers but surge ahead on many scores. Their progress has been extraordinary and it could become even greater but for the growing number of obstacles placed in the path of many immigrants.

One of the main criteria that should be considered in debates over comprehensive immigration reform is how might we maximize the great potential of our new immigrant residents so that they can contribute even more to our nation.

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Will immigrants integrate?

Long-time residents who live in new destinations for immigrants may worry about the future prospects of newcomers. Will they remain as they are today or advance to greater social and economic achievements as they settle in? As with every group of newcomers—from the Irish in the mid-19th century to Latinos today—questions arise about how and whether they will assimilate to American life.⁶

We know that there are more immigrants living in the United States today than there were 10 or even 20 years ago.⁷ These numbers, along with changes in technology—such as the telephone and the Internet, which make keeping in touch with life in the old country instantaneous—and patterns of settlement make questions about immigrant integration all the more important.

Immigrant settlement in the United States is a gradual process that happens one day at a time, then one year at a time, with progress accumulating over decades. During this process how much do new immigrant residents advance their skills and achievements, such as learning to speak English well, earning a better income, and becoming homeowners? In short, how well are they doing?

The brief answer is that immigrants are integrating into American life, learning English, and becoming homeowners. They on average, will be much better situated by 2030 than when they first arrived.

How this study was conducted

Even with evidence that immigrants are integrating into American life—for example, our 2010 study “Assimilation Today”⁸—doubts still persist about their future: Will tomorrow’s immigrants look like today’s? Will the Great Recession hurt the progress of today’s immigrants?

To separate fact from fiction, we need to track the integration of immigrants over time. Observations of immigrants’ settlement and achievement are a snapshot in

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time or progress from very recent experience. And new arrivals have not resided long enough to show advancement. Only by reaching backward to the progress of previous immigrants can we gain an idea of how much they change after a decade or two.

Each decade's cohort, or wave of immigrants since 1970 will have a different record of achievement. We therefore separately examine the rates of advancement by the cohorts that arrived in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s to determine the differences or similarities for each wave in similar stages of settlement. We then use this information to construct a projection of the future attainments of today's immigrants.

Using available data we can construct several indicators of immigrant achievement, including homeownership, rates of citizenship, and English acquisition.

Simple reliance on current information or political rhetoric is not a reliable base for judgment. Instead, this study provides a credible analysis based on past data and an empirical basis for projecting what immigrant residents' lives will be like after they have been living in the United States for 20 years.

Complicating our analysis, however, is the fact that the nation is struggling to recover from its most severe recession since the Great Depression. Immigrants and native-born residents alike suffered setbacks. We embed the outcomes of the Great Recession in our projections but we assume that there will be an eventual full recovery.

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