The Adaptation of Children of Immigrants: Barriers and Paths to Integration and Well Being

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Today, the 43 million immigrants in the United States represent 13.4 percent of the U.S. population, which is slightly lower than it was 100 years ago. The U.S.-born children of immigrants, the second generation, represent another 37.1 million people, or 12 percent of the population. Thus, together the first and second generations account for one out of four members of the U.S. population. An estimated 11.3 million of these immigrants are undocumented. The successful integration of these immigrants and their children is necessary for the overall success of our society. The well-being of a quarter of our population ought to be one of our highest public policy priorities. As a society that has successfully integrated generations of immigrants and their children throughout its history, the US ought to be a model for societies around the world who face similar challenges in the age of unprecedented human migration. In this paper I review recent empirical trends in the US with the aim of addressing these questions: How well are we doing in integrating the children of immigrants? What policies facilitate or impede that integration? How does integration affect the well-being of the second generation? And, how might the US do much better?

Recently I chaired a National Academy of Sciences Panel reviewing the integration of immigrants and their children across a wide array of social, political and economic indicators (Waters and Pineau 2016). 18 social scientists worked for two years to review the pace and direction of integration of the first and second generations into the American economy and society. In this paper I review some of the major findings of that report on both the integration and the well-being of the children of immigrants. I highlight the three major impediments to successful integration and greater well-being that the NAS panel identified—income inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination and legal status. The first two, income inequality and racial and
ethnic discrimination, are key aspects of American society that influence all Americans, whether they are immigrants or second generation. They are best ameliorated through universal social policies designed to help all Americans—policies to redistribute income and to establish a robust safety net, and policies to prevent racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity. Legal status, however, is a new impediment to immigrant integration, one that is much more widespread and consequential now than at any time in our nation’s history. It is also a policy arena that only affects immigrants, their citizen children and other family members, and is not shared by other natives. In this sense then the specific problems of the undocumented and their families are separated from that of other Americans and require a specific immigrant targeted policy intervention.

Achieving these policy changes has proved impossible for legislators in the US since 1986, and has just become much more difficult to imagine with the 2016 election and the Republican control of the federal government. Social movements and political pressure will be necessary to improve and defend the situation of immigrants and their children, particularly the undocumented. In the conclusion of the paper I argue that the Civil Rights paradigm that is highly developed (although deeply contested) in the US is inadequate to addressing the problems caused by documentation status. These problems are better addressed by a Human Rights paradigm, one which is not as developed in American as opposed to European political culture, but which holds strong moral authority and potential for claims making. The Catholic Church and other religious organizations have the potential to contribute greatly to the moral underpinnings of the movement that is needed to keep immigrant families together and to strengthen the next generation. The Church has long been a leader in nongovernmental action in
immigrant integration. It has great potential to also be a moral leader in the kinds of policy
changes that are urgently needed in the US going forward.

We are at a crossroads in immigration policy in the United States. The numbers of
immigrants coming to the United States, the racial and ethnic diversity of new immigrants, the
increasing complexity of the immigration system, and the politically fraught issue of
undocumented migration has raised questions about whether the nation is being as successful in
absorbing current immigrants and their descendants as it has been in the past.

The NAS panel defined integration as the opportunities for immigrants and their
descendants to achieve their goals in a society through participation in major social institutions,
as well as to gain social acceptance. Greater integration implies parity of critical life chances
with the native-born American majority. Integration is a two-fold process: it happens both
because immigrants experience change once they get here, and because native born Americans
change in response to immigration. We also assessed the well-being of immigrants and their
children, which is a different metric than integration. Convergence with native born Americans
may make immigrants and their children better off, which is no doubt a major objective of the
immigrants themselves. But it may also make them worse off. Many uneducated immigrants
see their children achieve a higher level of education. Yet many immigrants who arrive in very
good health see their children’s health deteriorate as they adopt American health behaviors and
diet. The process of integration takes time and it can be measured in two ways: for the first
generation, by examining what happens in the time since arrival; for second and third
generations—the children and grandchildren of immigrants--by comparisons across generations.
Overall, the panel found that current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society. When taken as a whole, the fact that today’s immigrants come from different regions of the world and have different racial and ethnic backgrounds than earlier immigrants have not been insurmountable barriers to integration. However, this general picture masks important variation between and within groups and across domains. I briefly review here patterns of outcomes for the second generation in education, occupations, family form, crime and health. In all five realms the children of immigrants are integrating—in that they are converging with native born Americans in outcomes over time. In terms of their educations and occupations there is an improvement overall in the well-being of the second generation. In terms of family form, crime and health, the second generation experiences a decline in their well-being compared to that of their parents as they become more like later generation native born Americans. After reviewing these empirical patterns I discuss the policy environment and its effect on the second generation, arguing that we need different kinds of policies to facilitate the integration and the well-being of the second generation.

**Education**

The educational progress of the children of immigrants depends greatly on the starting point of their parents and on conditions they face in the US. Immigrants are over-represented at the bottom of the educational distribution, but a sizeable proportion come with advanced educational credentials. These differences in educational attainment also map onto source
countries, with Asia and Africa sending immigrants with high educational attainment, and Latin America and the Caribbean sending immigrants with low attainment.

Among men, Mexicans have the lowest average educational attainment (9.4 years), and 55% of the first generation have less than a high school degree and only 5% have a college degree. The average educational attainment of Central Americans is also very low in the first generation (9.8 years), and 48% of men have less than high school, while only 9% have a college education. Dominicans are less disadvantaged but still have overall low levels, averaging 11.8 years of education; 27% with less than high school, and 16% with a college degree.

The highest educational attainments among first generation men are among immigrants from Asia, followed closely by Africa, Canada and Europe. Indians are the most educated with an average of 16.3 years of education, and 83% have a college degree. They are followed by Japan, Korea, and the Philippines with very high average levels of education, extremely low levels of people with less than high school (less than 1% of Koreans and Japanese) and very high levels of college and beyond. Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants contain high levels of those at the top of the educational distribution (58 and 30% with college degrees) but also relatively high levels of immigrants at the bottom of the distribution (11 and 15% less than high school).

The patterns for women are quite similar to men in all groups with the average levels of education somewhat lower for women among the Asian and African groups, and a modest amount higher for women among the Latino groups.

Overall, the educational profiles of these groups vary a lot by source country and could be associated also with undocumented status, which is not measured in census data. Mexicans and Central Americans have both the lowest educational attainments in the first generation and the highest proportion of undocumented people. Among Asian immigrants, the profile of high
education among immigrants bodes well for the second generation, as the best predictor of a child’s educational outcomes is their parents’ educational attainment.

The very good news is that the second and later generation shows remarkable educational progress compared to the first generation. The second generation as a whole and second generation members of most contemporary immigrant groups meet or exceed the schooling level of the typical third- and higher- generation Americans. This is true for both men and women.

Overall, the average educational attainment for men goes from 12.1 years in the first generation to 13.9 in the second, surpassing the average educational attainment of third+ generation whites of 13.8 years. For women the second generation has an average attainment of 14.0 years, also surpassing third+ generation whites, who average 13.9 years.

For the groups with overall low levels of education in the first generation, both men and women gain education from the first to the second generation. Among Mexican American men for instance, average education rises from 9.4 years to 12.6 years in the second generation. Among women the average education rises from 9.5 to 12.8 years. The percent with less than high school falls from 55 percent in the first generation to 15 percent in the second for men, and from 54 percent to 15 for women. The same strides are made by Central American men who improve their average attainment from 9.8 to 13.4 and women who improve from 10.2 to 14.0. The percentage without high school among Central American men falls from 48 percent to 8 percent and for women from 43 percent to 5 percent. This is an impressive amount of educational mobility in one generation.

Among the Asian groups with exceptionally high educational attainment in the first generation, the Indians, Koreans and Japanese show a decline in those with above a college degree between the first and second generations. This likely reflects the selectivity among the
first generation, as well as differing patterns of immigration over time. The second generation among Japanese for instance contains elderly people whose parents came before World War II as well as the children of more recent, highly selected immigrants. In other words, these cross-sectional generations do not represent true generational cohorts. Most of the other groups show modest increases in education by generation to equal or exceed those of native born third plus generation whites.

Figures 1 and 2 plot the average education in years of first and second generation men and women respectively restricting the first generation to people age 50-59 and the second generation to people age 25-34. The regression line expresses the linear relationship between the education of the first and second generation in each national origin group. The R-squared statistic for each regression line suggests that the parents’ cohort educational attainment predicts the child’s attainment, quite well for men (.58) and somewhat less well for women (.39). The dotted horizontal and vertical lines represent the average educational attainment for non-Hispanic third+ generation whites in the younger age cohort, 13.7 years for men and 14.2 years for women.

The groups with the lowest educational attainment among the young second generation men are Mexicans, Central Americans, and Dominicans. Among the women, the Mexicans and the Dominicans are still below third+ generation whites, but Central American women are almost equal to them. Overall this analysis suggests that the second generation of all groups are doing well and that the remaining deficits among the three Latino second generation groups are primarily due to the very low starting point of their immigrant parents. All of this is very positive evidence of rapid educational integration.

Other research highlights three promising trends in the education of the second
generation, especially among Hispanics who start out so low in the first generation. The first trend is rising high school completion rates of U.S.-educated Hispanics from 1990 to 2010, with particularly large gains during the second half of this period (Murnane 2013). The drop out rate in 2012 fell to a record low of 15 percent (Lopez and Fry 2013). Second, there has been steady and substantial improvement from 2003 to 2013 in how Hispanic fourth- and eighth-graders score on standardized math tests (Pane 2014). Finally, among recent high school graduates, for the first time a greater share of Hispanic graduates (49 percent) than whites graduates (47 percent) are enrolled in college (Lopez and Fry 2013). All of this points to rising educational levels for young Hispanics.

**Occupation**

The occupational distributions of the first and second generations reveal a similar picture of intergenerational change and stability as the one for education. The groups that are concentrated in low-status occupations in the immigrant generation improve their occupational position substantially in the second generation, although they do not reach parity with third- and later-generation Americans. The second generation from immigrants from Mexico and Central America makes a large leap in occupational terms: 22 percent of second-generation Mexican men and 31 percent of second-generation men from Central America are in professional or managerial positions. The latter figure is not much less than that for all later-generation men. Second-generation men are, like their immigrant fathers, overrepresented in service jobs, though they have largely left agricultural ones.

The job situations of the second generation improve in other ways. Second-generation Mexican men are less likely than their immigrant parents to take jobs in the informal sector, and they are more likely to receive health and retirement benefits through their employment,
although not as often as later-generation men. The robust representation of the first and second
generations throughout the occupational spectrum implies that the U.S. workforce increasingly
welcomes immigrants and their children into higher-level jobs. This pattern of workforce
integration is likely to continue to increase as the baby boom cohorts complete their retirement
over the next two decades.

**Health**

In health, immigrants show better infant, child, and adult outcomes than the U.S.-born
population in general and better than U.S.-born members of their ethnic group. In comparison
with native-born Americans, immigrants are less likely to die from cardiovascular disease and all
cancers combined, have a lower incidence of all cancers combined, fewer chronic health
conditions, lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of obesity, a lower percentage who are
overweight, fewer functional limitations, and fewer learning disabilities. Immigrants also have a
lower prevalence of depression, the most common mental disorder in the world, and of alcohol
abuse. U.S. immigrants live longer, too. They have a life expectancy of 80.0 years, 3.4 years
higher than that for the native-born population. Across the major ethnic categories (non-
Hispanic whites, blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics), immigrants have a life
expectancy advantage over their native-born counterparts.

Unfortunately the second generation adopts health behaviors similar to other Americans
and loses the health advantages their parents had. For example, second generation Hispanic and
Asian adolescents have shown much higher rates of obesity than the first generation (Singh et.al
2013). Children of recent immigrants have encountered weight problems across socioeconomic
(SES) status, and this was especially so for sons of non English speaking parents (Van Hook and
Baker 2010). Rates of smoking and drinking also rise with generation as the children and grandchildren of immigrants converge with native born Americans.

Crime

Immigration is linked to lower crime rates, the opposite of what many Americans fear. Among men age 18-39, the foreign born are incarcerated at a rate of one fourth of that of the native born. Areas, especially neighborhoods, with greater concentrations of immigrants have much lower rates of crime and violence than comparable non-immigrant neighborhoods. This phenomenon of lower rates of crime and violence for neighborhoods with high concentrations of immigrants is reflected not only across comparable areas, but also over time. Immigrants also become integrated in U.S. society in ways that are less welcome. Although they have much lower levels of crime in the first generation, the second and third generations have crime rates more similar to the native born.

Family Form

Another arena in which well-being declines from the first to the second generation is in family formation patterns change over time: their divorce rate and out-of-wedlock birth rates increase, while the likelihood of their living in extended families with multiple generations under one roof declines. Among all families headed by first-generation immigrants, children are concentrated in two-parent families in the major racial and ethnic groups, which provide them with a number of important contextual advantages. These families are associated with lower risks of poverty, more effective parenting practices, and lower levels of stress. The prevalence of two-parent families continues to be high in the second generation, but the percentage of children in
two-parent families declines substantially between the second and third generations, similar to other native born families. Since single-parent families are more likely to be impoverished, this is a cause for concern.

**Pathways and Impediments to Integration and Well Being**

The empirical patterns in integration identified by the NAS panel all point to rapid integration into American society—with immigrants coming to share both the positive and negative aspects of that society. The second generation shows educational and occupation progress, but within a society that is becoming more socioeconomically unequal over time. The second generation shows differential progress in outcomes that are highly stratified by race. As immigrants and their children become Americans they are increasingly stratified by race as well—and share in both the ongoing discrimination and the legal apparatus that attempts to combat that discrimination. But there is one area that the second generation faces that is specifically tied to immigration—the lasting legacies of undocumented status of their parents. I review each of these impediments to integration and well-being in turn.

**Income Inequality**

Immigrants and their children are overrepresented among American households with low education and low incomes. Although many Americans think nostalgically about the experiences of their immigrant and second-generation parents raising families in the mid-20th Century, when income inequality was declining and an expanding economy provided many routes for upward mobility, current immigrants face very different circumstances. Immigrants from Italy and Poland who arrived in the US in the early 20th Century saw their children and
grandchildren come of age in an era of declining income inequality when a rising economic tide lifted all boats, especially workers at the bottom of the income distribution. This social mobility was a major factor in the integration of America’s white ethnic immigrants (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Today, immigrants who start at the bottom of the socioeconomic distribution share with all poor Americans the challenges of declining real wages and limited opportunities for social mobility in an increasingly unequal society (Noah 2012; Piketty 2013). Real hourly earnings for men without a high school education dropped 22% between 1980 and 2012; for high school graduates they dropped by 11%. Only those with a college degree or higher have seen increases (Autor 2014). And while real wages for women with less than a college degree did not decline over this period, they experienced very modest growth.

Programs designed to help all families in these circumstances can provide support for the successful integration of immigrant families. In other words, immigrants with low skill and low education face declining wages over time, but it is not because they are immigrants, but because of the dynamics of the labor market. Universal social policies to redistribute income and to pay a living wage to workers would help all Americans in this labor market position, not just immigrants. Programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), increases in the minimum wage, support for unions and collective bargaining, and programs such as the Affordable Care Act that provide universal access to health insurance are all programs that disproportionally aid immigrants because they are concentrated in the low end of the labor market, but they are universal in that they help all Americans in those economic circumstances (Danziger et al 2016; Cancian and Danziger 2009).

Race
A second concern is race. The US has a long history of shameful racial discrimination and prejudice, as well as a more noble history of mass resistance to that discrimination in the form of the Civil Rights Movement and legal vigilance in prosecuting and preventing that discrimination since the mid 1960s. These two trends continue and are now complicated by the growing racial and ethnic diversity that immigration has fueled. Immigration has transformed American society through the growth in racial, ethnic, and religious diversity in the U.S. population, which has resulted in increased intergroup contact and the transformation of American communities and institutions. In 1970, 83 percent of the U.S. population was non-Hispanic white; today, that proportion is about 62 percent, and immigration is responsible for much of that change. Hispanics have grown from just over 4.5 percent of the total U.S. population in 1970 to about 17 percent today. Asians are currently the fastest-growing immigrant group in the country: they represented less than 1 percent of the population in 1970 but are 6 percent today. Black immigration has also grown: in 1970, blacks represented just 2.5 percent of immigrants; today, that number is 9 percent.

Ethnic and racial diversity resulting from immigration is no longer limited to a few states like California and New York that have histories of absorbing immigrants; today new immigrants are moving throughout the country, including such areas as the South that have not previously witnessed a large influx of immigrants. This has changed the landscape of immigration. The states with the fastest growth rates of immigrant population today are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia. The growth of immigrants, largely Hispanics, in new localities and in nonmetropolitan areas raises new challenges of integration and incorporation for many communities and small towns that are unaccustomed to minority and immigrant populations. At
the same time, there are many localities in new destination areas that have adopted welcoming strategies to encourage immigrant workers and integrate them better into localities.

Some racial trends owing to immigration are encouraging. In urban areas across the country, immigrants and their offspring have been dubbed “pioneer integrators” of previously all-white or all-black spaces. The result is that many neighborhoods are more diverse than they have ever been, and the number of all-white census tracts has fallen. Yet racial segregation is still quite prevalent throughout the United States, with blacks experiencing the most segregation from whites, followed by Hispanics and then Asians.

Immigrants have also contributed enormously to America’s shifting patterns of racial and ethnic mixing in intimate and marital relationships. Today, about one of every seven new marriages each year is an interracial or interethnic marriage, which is more than twice the rate a generation ago. The overall picture suggests that marriages between U.S. natives and immigrants have increased significantly over time. Perhaps as a result, the social and cultural boundaries between native and foreign-born populations in the United States are much less clearly defined than in the past. Moreover, second- and third generation immigrant minority populations are far more likely to marry the native born than are their first-generation counterparts. These intermarriages also contribute to the increase in mixed-race Americans.

An additional important effect of intermarriage is on family networks, which are becoming more mixed than they have been in the past. A recent survey reported that more that 35 percent of Americans said that one of their “close” kin is of a different race. Immigration is a major contributor to this large degree of intermixing. In the future the lines between what we think of as separate ethno-racial groups today may become much more blurred.
Other racial and ethnic trends are much more troubling. The NAS panel found that patterns of immigrant integration are shaped by race. While there is evidence of integration and improvement in socioeconomic outcomes for blacks, Latinos, and Asians, their perceived race still matters, even after controlling for all their other characteristics. Black immigrants and their descendants are integrating with native-born non-Hispanic whites at the slowest rate. Asian immigrants and their descendants are integrating with native-born non-Hispanic whites most quickly, and Latinos are in between. The panel found some evidence of racial discrimination against Latinos and some evidence that their overall trajectories of integration are shaped more by the large numbers of undocumented in their group than by a process of racialization. It was not possible with the data available to the NAS panel to definitively state whether Latinos are experiencing a pattern of racial exclusion or a pattern of steady progress that could lead to a declining significance of group boundaries. What can be reasonably concluded is that progress in reducing racial discrimination and disparities in socioeconomic outcomes in the United States will improve the outcomes for the native-born and immigrants alike. Again, this points to universalist policy solutions that improve conditions for all non-white Americans, not specifically targeting immigrants per se.

**Undocumented Status**

An immigrant’s legal status is a key factor in the individual’s integration trajectory. Immigration statuses fall into four rough categories—permanent, temporary, discretionary, and unauthorized. These statuses lie on a continuum of precariousness and security, providing different rights to remain in the United States, rights to benefits and services from the government, ability to work, susceptibility to deportation, and ability to participate fully in the
economic, political, social, and civic life of the nation. In recent decades, because of changes to immigration policy, these statuses have multiplied, creating different paths and roadblocks towards integration into American society.

Unlike many countries with large immigrant populations, there is no explicit federal policy for immigrant integration in the US, nor one government agency tasked with coordinating integration efforts. Instead, since the mid 1990s the main focus of federal immigration policy has been on trying to hinder the integration of undocumented immigrants—through increased border enforcement, rising deportation, and policies designed to prevent the undocumented from being hired. Yet this approach fails in two major ways. First, it does not meet its first objective of preventing long-term integration since an estimated 11.3 million undocumented immigrants live and work in the country and many are raising children. Indeed, the average length of stay among the undocumented has grown over this time, making them a more settled and partially integrated population. Second, these policies create obstacles to successful integration, not only to the undocumented people themselves, but also to their children who are citizens and to other members of mixed-status households and to the wider communities they inhabit.

Undocumented status itself carries a substantial wage penalty, perhaps as much as 17 percent for men and 9 percent for women. There are also large differences in returns to human capital by legal status. The shift in recent years to a more intense regime of border and internal enforcement of immigration laws coincided with a drop in the economic returns to a variety of forms of human and social capital, constraining both occupational attainment and earnings. This means that undocumented parents are working longer hours for less pay to provide for their children, inflicting more of the problems of poverty on their children. In addition,
undocumented students themselves are less likely than other immigrants to graduate from high school and enroll in college, which then undermines their future earnings capacity.

In the US state and local institutions and the private sector perform the bulk of what would be considered traditional integration functions, such as language and civics education, job training, and assistance to access public benefits and institutions. Across the federal, state, and local levels there are a variety of policies and laws designed both to facilitate the integration of immigrants, and to restrict the integration of certain segments of the immigrant population, primarily the undocumented. Sometimes federal and state policies work together, but they sometimes function at cross purposes. Some states and localities are providing in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants, some provide driver’s licenses to such immigrants, and some are even declaring themselves sanctuary cities: these approaches are at odds with federal enforcement policies and priorities. In other localities, there are restrictive laws, such as prohibiting renting to undocumented immigrants, and authorizing local enforcement of federal immigration laws in ways that overreach federal legislation, that are also at odds with federal government policies and priorities.

The confusing situation of legal status is further complicated by the fact that families can contain members with different legal statuses. Most consequential are families where some members are undocumented and others are U.S. citizens. Today, 5.2 million U.S. children reside with at least one undocumented immigrant parent. The vast majority of these children—4.5 million—are U.S.-born citizens. Included in this total are almost 7 percent of K-12 students, a situation that presents important challenges for schools. Because of mixed-status families, policies designed to halt the integration of undocumented immigrants or individuals with a temporary status can have the unintended effect of halting or hindering the integration of citizens
and lawful permanent residents. Laws are often designed to apply to individuals, yet they often take effect through households and families, with measurable long-term negative impacts on children who are citizens. Thus, laws and practices intended to halt the integration of undocumented parents can have the unintended effect of depressing the integration of their children in U.S. society.

The experiences of these families with undocumented members include many violations of the human rights laid out in the UN’s (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right of families to stay together (Article 16), the right to be treated equally before the law (Article 7), the right to work and to be paid fairly (Article 23), the right to political participation (Article 21), and the right to social services to provide a decent standard of living (Article 25). The citizen children of undocumented parents live with the knowledge that their parents can be deported at any time. Meanwhile, the children who are themselves undocumented face an additional looming U-turn in their integration experiences. Fully incorporated in elementary and high school, they “awaken to a nightmare” in young adulthood when they do not have the right to work, face possible deportation, and, in many parts of the country, do not have financial aid to attend college (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). The “cruel experiment” that we are conducting involves denying full equality to these young people while at the same time teaching them that they are Americans in a land founded on the principle that all people are created equal (Smith, 2013, p. 250).

Since 1996 the circumstances of the undocumented have become harsher. Both the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act laid the legal groundwork for mass deportations of undocumented
immigrants and greatly increased the deportations of legal immigrants who are convicted of a felony. Furthermore, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, popularly known as Welfare Reform, broadened the restrictions on public benefits for undocumented immigrants. These laws have combined with administrative changes that also increased the integration of everyday policing and immigration data systems, leading to a sharp rise of what is called “internal enforcement.” The administrative integration of immigration status into federal and state databases means that everyday activities of the undocumented now expose them to the very real danger of deportation. A routine traffic stop for a broken headlight or an expired inspection sticker will trigger an alert about immigration status in the onboard computer in a patrol car. As a result, Immigration and Customs Enforcement increasingly deports people who are settled immigrants, not just those apprehended at the border.

Deportations of undocumented immigrants have soared from an average of 20,000 per year before the mid-1990s to 400,000 per year since 2008. Between July 2010 and October 2012, more than 200,000 undocumented parents with US-born children were deported (Vicens, 2014). The new Trump administration has vowed to deport millions more, including young people who had been given relief from deportation by the Obama administration through DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

The insecurity and stress that undocumented families experience are harming children (Yoshikawa, Suarez-Orozco and Gonzalez 2016). Research has shown that children of undocumented parents are less likely than their peers to receive benefits for which they are legally eligible (Yoshikawa, 2011). They are also more likely to experience anxiety and depression in adolescence and have lower levels of educational attainment in middle childhood.
Undocumented immigrants and their relatives live in constant fear of being apprehended, and families are often separated by the deportation process (Dreby, 2012; Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011). Recent research suggests that for children living in high-poverty and violent neighborhoods, elevated levels of toxic stress can create long-lasting adverse health effects that can even affect future generations through epigenetic changes (Fox & Shonkoff, 2011; Thompson, 2014). While no systematic research yet exists, it would not be surprising if future studies find the same adverse health outcomes for children living with the anxiety that their undocumented parents could be deported. Undocumented status of parents, like poverty, is a risk factor for children’s emotional well-being, cognitive development, and educational attainment.

Many scholars have compared the experience of undocumented immigrants to the denial of rights to blacks in the period between the Civil War and the civil rights movement in the 1960s (e.g., Rodriguez, 2013). In addition, the DREAMers movement of undocumented young people is modeled after the civil and gay rights movements (Nicholls, 2013). These young people have held demonstrations and sit-ins, modeled on the civil rights movement (Altschuler, 2011), and have “come out” as undocumented, modeled on the gay rights movement.

Yet, the civil rights movement demanded civil rights for African Americans who, as citizens, were entitled to protection from discrimination and to civic participation—most crucially the right to vote. As Gunnar Myrdal (1944) pointed out, this was an “American Dilemma,” because blacks were included as Americans yet denied these American rights. In contrast, though many undocumented immigrants have assimilated into US society, they are legally defined as “not Americans” and cannot, by definition, lay claim to civil rights. When
opponents of unauthorized immigration carry signs with slogans such as “What part of illegal do you not understand?” and define people as “illegal aliens,” they are stressing the bright legal barrier between “us” and “them.” In sum, discrimination against unauthorized immigrants is not only legal; it is in many ways required by the law.

As such, we need a new model for a movement to champion the rights of undocumented immigrants in American society—one that stresses their human rights, not their civil rights (Waters and Kasinitz, 2016). The United States has little experience with movements based in the human rights tradition; yet, a legal human rights framework can provide a strong basis for challenging laws that discriminate against people based on citizenship status and the denial of access to health care, public housing, higher education, and the labor market. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the civil rights framework that has not been able to protect these undocumented families and recognize their basic human right to inclusion in the society we all share. It is with that hope that I welcome Pope Francis’s support for migrants and the social teaching of concern for basic human rights. The US is a very religious society and it may be that we need to actively involve religious traditions in America to organize on behalf of the human rights of the undocumented.
References


Autor David (2014)


Figure 1: Average Education (in Years) of First- and Second-Generation Men

Source: Duncan and Trejo 2015 p age 120
Note: The first-generation samples include foreign-born men ages 50-59, excluding those born abroad of an American parent. The second-generation samples include U.S.-born men ages 25-34 who have at least one foreign-born parent. Sampling weights were used in the calculations.
Figure 2: Average Education (in Years) of First- and Second-Generation Women

Note: The first-generation samples include foreign-born women ages 50-59, excluding those born abroad of an American parent. The second-generation samples include U.S.-born women ages 25-34 who have at least one foreign-born parent. Sampling weights were used in the calculations.