

Immigrant Education: All Younger Generations Enjoy Notable Improvement, But Wide Disparities Among Ethnic Groups Remain

The sons and daughters—and grandsons and granddaughters—of California’s immigrant population are consistently attaining higher levels of educational achievement than their parents and grandparents did. But some immigrant groups in these younger generations, notably those from Mexico, still lag significantly behind others—in part because they have had so much more ground to make up. Policymakers in the state may wish to consider specifically targeting youth whose parents have low education levels, to raise their educational prospects and further strengthen the skills of the state’s workforce.

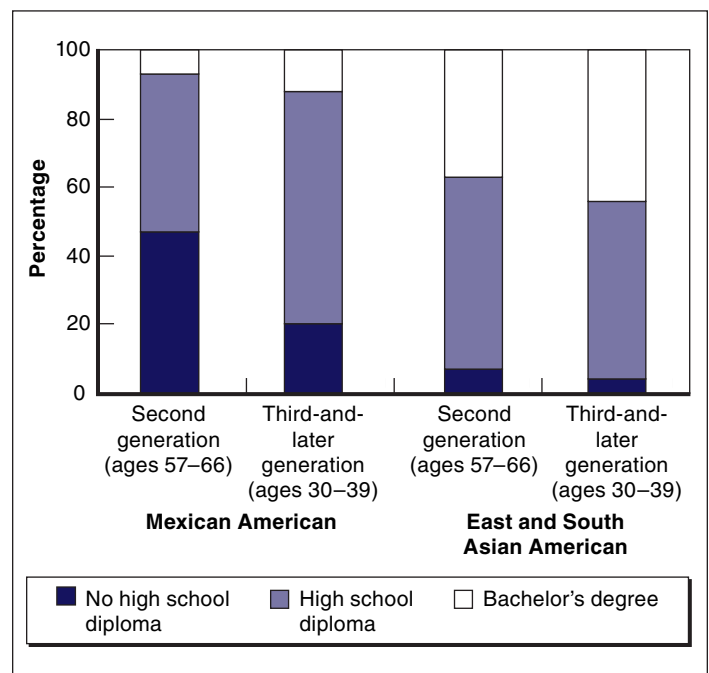
These findings from a recent report on the educational advances of the second and third generations of California’s immigrants, *Educational Progress Across Immigrant Generations in California*, by PPIC researchers Deborah Reed, Laura E. Hill, Christopher Jepsen, and Hans P. Johnson, shed new light on California’s immigrant population and on its educational successes. The authors found that across all immigrant groups, second- and third-generation Californians consistently attain higher educational levels than their own parents or those in their parents’ generation did.

“We find strong intergenerational progress in education,” the researchers write. “Across all generations for all groups, we consistently find that children acquire more education than their parents. This is true for U.S.-born children of immigrants (the second generation compared to the first generation), as well as for third-generation descendants of immigrants.”

This education success story is good news for the state as a whole because of the enormous influence immigration plays in California life: Immigrants and the children of immigrants comprise nearly half of California’s population. It is also good news for the individuals making educational advances,

because higher education is clearly linked to higher economic opportunities.

However, low educational attainment among Mexican Americans, even by the third generation, remains cause for concern (see the figure).



Younger generations of California immigrant groups made noticeable progress in educational attainment, albeit at different rates

Unequal Levels of Success

Although educational progress for succeeding generations is clear, it is equally clear that different ethnic groups still show wide differences in overall educational achievement.

At one end of the spectrum, among the grandchildren and subsequent descendants (third-and-later generation) of immigrants from East Asian and South Asian countries—such as the Philippines, China, and India—a remarkable 44 percent of young adults attain a bachelor’s degree. This is 13 percentage points higher than college completion among third-and-later-generation whites. At the other end of that spectrum, only 12 percent of third-and-later-generation immigrants from Mexico attain a bachelor’s degree.

In their study of Mexican Americans, the authors show that contrary to the findings of some previous research, educational progress does in fact continue from the second to the third generation. Previous research had seemed to indicate that progress stalled between these two generations: Among young Mexican American adults, those in the second generation were more likely than those in the third-and-later generation to complete a bachelor’s degree. However, when compared to their own parents or to those in their parents’ generation, the educational attainment of Mexican American youth does in fact show an increase from first to second and then from second to third generation. But the PPIC researchers also showed that even if this intergenerational progress were to continue at the same rate, only 17 percent of the grandchildren of today’s Mexican immigrants would attain a bachelor’s degree.

Mexican Americans tend to have lower educational attainment than other groups in large part because of the very low educational attainment of the first-generation immigrants from Mexico, many of whom have come to the United States to work in low-skilled agriculture, production, and service-sector jobs. Of first-generation Mexican immigrants ages 57 to 66, only 4 percent have bachelor’s degrees, and 78 percent did not graduate from high school. For the younger, second generation of Mexican American immigrants, ages 30 to 39, the improvement in educational attainment is dramatic: 15 percent have bachelor’s degrees and only 18 percent have failed to graduate from high school.

The researchers also examined intergenerational progress among Asians, who make up about 11 percent of California’s youth population. Among Southeast Asians (from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), many entered the United States as refugees, and their socioeconomic status—a

significant factor in every group’s educational progress—is more precarious. Of this group, 19 percent of older first-generation immigrants but 41 percent of the younger second generation are college graduates. Among other Asians, those from East and South Asia, the older first-generation immigrant group has 44 percent college graduates, and its younger second generation has 58 percent.

Closing the Gap

Without improvements in intergenerational progress, future generations of California’s Mexican Americans will continue to lag behind other ethnic groups in educational attainment and will therefore be more likely to miss economic and other opportunities. This would have a significant effect on California’s future, given that 27 percent of California youth are either from Mexico or are the children of Mexican immigrants.

Why the gap? Educational attainment of parents strongly influences the education of children; when compared to non-Hispanic whites whose families have comparable parental education levels, family income, and other characteristics, Mexican Americans reach similar levels of education. The research indicates that children most at risk of low educational achievement are those with parents who did not graduate from high school.

These findings suggest opportunities for policymakers. Children whose parents have low education could be targeted for mentoring and other educational support. Education programs in the workplace to improve language, literacy, and the vocational skills of working immigrants could improve their family income and their children’s educational opportunities. Continued investments in community colleges, particularly to raise low transfer rates, would also improve educational outcomes for Latinos, because the community college system serves almost 80 percent of California’s Latino freshman enrolled in public higher education. Furthermore, as the value of education and skills in the labor market continues to grow, English language, remedial, and vocational courses in community colleges and in adult education programs will become increasingly important to workforce training, especially for those who do not go on to complete college.

This research brief summarizes a report written by Deborah Reed, Laura E. Hill, Christopher Jepsen, and Hans P. Johnson, Educational Progress Across Immigrant Generations in California (2005, 108 pp. \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-091-4). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, non-partisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This study was supported with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.
