

Stepping Stone or Sink Hole? Immigrants, Poverty, and the Future of Metropolitan America

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Introduction

While analysts and pundits often note the dramatically changing face of America, there is a bit of constancy in what is imagined to be the face of urban poverty: largely African-American, frequently jobless, and often struggling with the social and economic obstacles that confront parents raising children on their own. While this is certainly a key feature of the poverty challenge – and it is one sure to rightly receive attention in this symposium – it is also the case that the poor in America increasingly hail from the ranks of newer and non-citizen immigrants.

Figure 1 illustrates this shift by charting the foreign-born share of the population, both naturalized and non-citizen, and the foreign-born share of the poor, again naturalized and non-citizen, for the period 1970 to 2009.¹ Two trends become immediately clear. The first is that the shares of the foreign-born in the overall and poverty populations were roughly similar in 1970 but have diverged sharply since – immigrants are now well overrepresented among America’s poor. The second trend to note is that this divergence is particularly acute for the non-naturalized; indeed, naturalized immigrants are actually significantly underrepresented in the poverty population, pointing to the gains that citizenship and secure immigration status can bring.

Of course, the fact that immigrants, particularly the non-naturalized, tend to be poorer could just be a function of the recency of arrival -- immigrants expect to start at the bottom rungs of the labor market and then climb the ladder over time. This would conveniently suggest that a “wait and see” approach is the best course of action, since time might, in this view, heal all (economic) wounds. However, this bit of rosy optimism does not square with the data. As noted above, non-citizen immigrants have become increasingly poor over time – and, as Figure 2 illustrates, this happened as the immigrant population became much more settled (less recently-arrived) in the last two decades.

What this suggests is that addressing immigrant poverty is an important part of addressing overall poverty. We cannot assume that a low-income status for a migrant is a temporary stepping stone to an inevitably better life – as mobility has stagnated in the United States, the immigrant as well as the non-immigrant populations have been impacted. Moreover, a large share of our children have at least one immigrant parent – up from around 6 percent in 1970 to around 23 percent today – and the poverty rate for that next generation is, as we will see, quite high.

¹ Unless noted in the text, all figures are calculated from a pooled data set consisting of the Public Use Microdata Samples from 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000, and a pooled five-year sample of the American Community Survey (2007-2011, which we designate as representing the mid-year 2009). The 1970 PUMS is a 1 percent sample and so somewhat less reliable; the others are 5 percent samples. All samples taken from Ruggles et al. (2011).

Immigrants, Mobility and Poverty

Traditional perspectives have tended to see immigrants as inevitably slated for better times. After all, those who choose to cross borders may be more educated, more urban and more motivated than those who remain in their home country. While we expect them to receive subpar rewards in the labor market upon arrival to the U.S., acquiring English language skills, local work experience, and country-specific education should move immigrants to higher incomes over time.

Moreover, we certainly expect their children – the second generation – to improve their economic and social fortunes as they are able to more fully integrate into the social fabric of the United States and take advantage of widespread educational opportunities. This notion of economic and social mobility has its geographic component, too: the so-called “spatial assimilation” perspective suggests that immigrants and their offspring will generally leave central city entry points and move on to suburban and, presumably, more middle-class locales (Massey and Denton 1985).

While there are some who suggest that intergenerational assimilation is still ongoing – or at least that concerns about it are overstated (Park and Myers 2010) – there seems to be a general consensus that it may be harder for immigrants to rise out of poverty now than it was for previous immigrants. Perlmann (2005), comparing Mexican immigrants of today to low-skilled European immigrants from the last major migration experience (1890-1914), primarily looks at educational attainment and wage ratios in the context of shifting education premiums and wage inequality. Perlmann (2005:117) suggests that for today’s immigrants, it will take “four or five generations rather than three or four to reach parity with the native-white mainstream” (see also Clark and King 2008; Raijman and Tienda 1999).

Part of the reason is that immigrants themselves seem to be spending a longer time in poverty, something not quite accounted for in Park and Myers (2010) in which the comparison is between immigrants in 1980 with their likely offspring in 2005 (more nuance on that periodization later). Figure 3 shows that the share of recent migrants of working age living below 150 percent of the poverty level has increased steadily and dramatically over the last three decades; the share of U.S.-born residents in the same poverty category started at around 17 percent in 1970, fell to around 14 percent by 2000 and was back up to 17 percent in 2009, remarkably low given the Great Recession.²

How are their children faring? In 1970, children who had either both parents or a single parent who was U.S.-born had a poverty rate of around 15.5 percent; those who had at least one parent who was a non-citizen immigrant had a poverty rate at roughly the same level (15.7

² We use 150 percent of the poverty level because it is a somewhat more reasonable marker of poverty.

percent). However, in 2009, the poverty rate for those with either both parents or a single parent who was U.S.-born was about 18 percent; for those with at least one parent who was a non-citizen immigrant, the poverty rate was around 31 percent (and nearly half of those children were living below 150 percent of the poverty rate).

All this suggests that past progress may be an uncertain predictor of the future. Moreover, previous models of spatial mobility and spatial assimilation may be poor guides to the future. While much has been made of new immigrant gateways, particularly in the South (Singer 2004; Winders 2013), the existing within-metro pattern is changing as well. It is certainly the case that some immigrants are moving up and out – but it is also the case that immigrants are now landing directly (and more quickly) into the suburbs (e.g. Bohn 2009; Gouveia, Carranza, and Cogua 2006; Marcelli 2004; Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008).

Unfortunately, this rise in immigrant suburbanization is not necessarily the sign of progress it may have signaled in the past: while the suburbs certainly include some ethnically diverse up-scale communities as well as an emerging mix of well-off “ethnoburbs,” one of the fastest growing categories of suburbs is distressed inner-ring areas whose economic conditions can be worse than central cities they border (Li 1998; Pastor 2012, 2013; Singer et al. 2008).

So while the new suburbanization might be seen as an opportunity – immigrants are fleeing the challenges of central cities – the suburbs “of choice” seem to be more distressed and generally lack the social services, civic, and community organizing infrastructure often viewed as necessary to raise immigrant concerns (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013; Jones-Correa 2008). Meanwhile, within the central cities, the geographic expansion of immigrant communities has often been into historically Black areas, again not a place with significant pre-existing infrastructure to facilitate immigrant integration (Pastor 2012).

What explains the high levels of poverty and constrained economic and geographic opportunities? One key factor is education but it is important to recognize the bifurcated educational profile of immigrants: as Figure 4 indicates, Asian immigrants have long boasted rates of college completion that are even higher than those of non-Hispanic native-born whites but Latino immigrants have been bringing up the rear in terms of educational achievement. While there has been a slight improvement in the last decade, nearly 60 percent of non-citizen Latino immigrants of working age lack a high school degree. Given the shifting economy, the penalty paid for this lower level of educational achievement is higher than ever – and this is exacerbated by a shift in the nation’s social welfare regime in a way that disadvantages and/or excludes non-citizen immigrants (Fix 2009).

Another key factor, more difficult to quantify but one to which we return in the conclusion, is the racialization of immigrants. In 1970, roughly 85 percent of both the U.S.-born and naturalized immigrants were non-Hispanic white, with 52 percent of non-citizen immigrants being non-Hispanic white. By 2009, 71 percent of the U.S.-born were non-Hispanic white, a

drop of 14 percentage points – but non-Hispanic whites comprised only a quarter of the naturalized immigrants and less than 15 percent of the non-citizen immigrants. Indeed, of the non-citizen immigrants, nearly 60 percent were Latino and the ability to see immigrants as the “other” has had, we think, a significant impact on the public will to make the investments necessary for immigrants and their offspring to make progress (Myers 2008).

A final factor impacting economic and social outcomes of immigrants is their legal status. To investigate this, we utilized a procedure pioneered by our colleague, Enrico Marcelli, to estimate a likelihood of being undocumented for every Latino non-citizen immigrants in the Census data we have for California for the year 1990, 2000, and 2009.³ As Figure 5 shows, the poverty experience of working age Latinos in California is significantly worse for those lacking documentation as compared to those who may be lawful permanent residents, naturalized citizens, or U.S.-born – and the gradient has been worsening over time (the economic outcomes for Latino naturalized citizens increasingly approximate those of U.S.-born Latinos while those of undocumented Latinos hold roughly constant with about 50 percent living below 150% of the poverty level).

A lack of formal status is surely a problem – and it is a widespread dilemma since approximately 38 percent of all Latino immigrants of working age in California are not documented, according to our estimates. On the other hand, this share has fallen sharply from a figure of nearly 50 percent in California in 1990. This suggests that a simple argument about individual undocumented immigrants overcrowding the labor market and thus dragging down collective outcomes for all other undocumented immigrants may not suffice as an explanation of what seems to be a high level of working poverty; there are also characteristics of the market which may have changed, are negatively affecting the immigrant experience and may make mobility harder now than it was for prior generations (Borjas 2006).

Of course, the raw differences in the experiences between those who are documented and those who are not are also driven by other factors: those without documentation are also younger, less educated and less English-fluent workers. Improving outcomes therefore requires moving the needle on multiple fronts, a topic we take up in the policy recommendations. Still, legalization with a path to citizenship could yield an economic boost on the order of 15 percent –

³ The basics of the method are explained in Pastor and Marcelli (2013) and involve taking coefficient estimates from small sample surveys and applying those to the underlying individual answers in the Public Use Microdata Sample and the pooled American Community Survey. We use coefficients from appropriate vintage surveys for each year, reflecting the fact that the characteristics of those who are undocumented shift slightly over time. Recall that when we say 2009 here, we mean the pooled 2007-2011 sample.

and it would also open access to training programs, health care, and many other factors that could improve human capital.⁴

Moreover, the ripple effect from legalization could go far past the adults that might be directly affected. For the most recent time period, we have been able to estimate population characteristics of non-Latino undocumented immigrants as well for California: we find that roughly two-thirds of the state's children with at least one undocumented parent are living below 150 percent of the poverty line. Perhaps most significant: While the children of the undocumented comprise about 16 percent of the state's total children, they comprise nearly one-third of those children living below 150 percent of the poverty line.⁵

Comparing the mobility paths of two Mexican-origin second-generation members, Zhou and colleagues note that “legal status upon migration is perhaps the single most powerful structural difference” that distinguished them even as parents in both cases had little formal education and worked low-paying jobs (2008:51). Yoshikawa (2011) suggests that the tenuous position of undocumented parents harms their children's development, including cognitive skills in early childhood. Problems accrue partly because of the usual problems of poverty, long work hours, and limited social networks but also because of the stress of possible deportation as well as lack of access to and sometimes fearful avoidance of government programs for which the children, the vast majority of whom are U.S.-born, are actually eligible.

In short, addressing immigrants in general and undocumented immigrants in particular would help immigrants help themselves – and it could also have a big impact on reducing child poverty and spurring intergenerational mobility.

⁴ That was the approximate gain after the previous mass legalization conducted as part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (Cooper and O'Neil 2005), and recent estimates suggest that such a ballpark figure remains reasonable (Pastor et al. 2010). For a perspective that suggests that gains would be less, primarily because such workers are already more or less fully blended into the market, see Hill et al. (2010). In our view, that work, while technically proficient for what it investigates, may not represent the potential gains from mass legalization. This is partly because the authors look at individuals who obtained legal status in 2003 after either crossing the border or overstaying their visa; this may be different than a legalization which fundamental lifts up the entire bottom end of the labor market in which individuals compete. Moreover, Hill et al. (2010) are only able to look at short-term impacts because the data they use on economic and occupational mobility is from interviews conducted only 4 to 13 months after obtaining legal status. Where we do concur is that while there may be a legalization effect, most of the gains come from shifts in human capital – something that legalization may make easier and that might not be detected in the very short term.

⁵ The method for calculating all undocumented in the state is reported in Pastor and Marcelli (2013). There, we utilized a three year pooled sample of the ACS. Here, we apply the method to a pooled five year sample of the ACS. The estimates are nearly identical but differ slightly at the margins.

What is to Be Done?

To summarize the discussion above: immigrants are an increasing share of the poor, past mobility may not predict future mobility, there is a spatial reconfiguration of immigrants that may make service delivery more challenging, education is a key factor (for both immigrants and their children), racialization has been an impediment to progress, and insecure immigration status is a major problem.

So what policies flow out of this analysis? Let us begin with a few important caveats and contexts. First, our recommendations below do not focus on the children of immigrants *per se*; like many other participants in this seminar, we believe that expanded pre-K, improved schooling, and increased opportunities for college or other forms of post-secondary education will improve life chances. However, it will be hard to get there if immigrant parents remain poor, live in challenged neighborhoods, and fail to participate in parent engagement activities because of long hours at low-pay jobs or fear of inadvertently becoming known to a system in which deportations have reached an all-time high. In short, we focus below – and we think policy should focus as well – on immigrant adults.

Second, while we think family formation has important impacts on economic outcomes, we do not emphasize strategies like the promotion of marriage. The reason why can be discerned by examining the shifting nature of poor U.S.-born and immigrant families over time. We do this in Figure 6 for children living in poor (below 150% of the poverty level) households with at least one parent present: here, the takeaway is that the share of poor children in households with U.S.-born single-parents has been steadily increasing over time while non-naturalized immigrants living below poverty seem to have more successfully held the line in terms of dual parent households for the first few decades but have most recently begun to follow the pattern of their U.S.-born counterparts. This suggests that the shifting household pattern may be less a cause of poverty than a consequence; while encouraging families to stay together is important in its own right and can have economic benefits, we spend no time on it here since it does not seem to be a main driver of immigrant poverty (and also lands us into a whole other set of debates and prescriptions).

Finally, it is important to note that many poor immigrants are actually working but do not receive good pay. Figure 7 shows the work experience for household heads living below 150 percent of the poverty line by nativity for 1980 and 2009. The takeaway is that for U.S.-born residents, one is increasingly likely to be poor if one is not working or hardly working (note that the line is downward sloping in both periods, and much more so in the second). For non-naturalized immigrants, the pattern was more or less flat – that is, that the share of poor householders who worked full-time was just below the share not working or hardly working –

but the pattern has now flipped contrary to that for the U.S.-born: the most common experience in poverty in 2009 for a non-naturalized immigrant was that of being a full-time worker.⁶

Looked at another way: in 1980, the (150%) poverty rate for householders who were U.S.-born full-time year-round workers was nearly identical in 1980 and 2009, actually falling slightly from 6.6 % in the first period to 6.4% in the ending period. However, for non-naturalized immigrant householders, the poverty rate for full-time, year-round workers rose dramatically, from 14.9 % in 1980 to 24.2 % in 2009. Insuring that work is decently rewarded, as well as charting new paths of labor market mobility, is clearly a major gainer for immigrants who seem to be attached to the labor force, keeping families intact, and still not making it.

So what do we recommend? We include a series of potential policies under several categories:

- **Make Work Pay:** Part of the secret of past mobility was that low-skill work paid decently enough that parents could provide for children in a way that allowed for intergenerational mobility. The widening income divide in America is now well-known (Stiglitz 2012) – including absolute slippage for those in the lower deciles, with immigrants overrepresented in those income categories.

With decent pay being more of the problem than labor force participation, a series of policies could be helpful here: raising the minimum wage (which would also have a benchmarking impact on the informal markets in which some undocumented immigrants work), reforming labor law to facilitate unionization (to which immigrants have proved remarkably open, see Milkman 2006), targeting the elimination of wage theft (to which the undocumented are particularly susceptible), and generally enforcing labor rights.

- **Make Mobility Possible:** Simply lifting up the bottom of the labor market is not enough – we need to facilitate immigrant progress over time. As noted, it is not enough to concentrate on intergenerational mobility; while that might have its political appeal (little kids are generally considered cuter than day laborers), potential upward trajectories can and should be enhanced for adults as they create and support the households in which children live.

⁶ We define “hardly working” as employment for less than three months *and* at less than 20 hours a week in that period in the previous year. We start the analysis at 1980 because of some issues with the work variable in 1970; moreover, the 1970 sample is smaller, as noted earlier, and finer and finer cuts at that data reduce the reliability of our calculations. Finally, there is a shift in the ACS in 2008 to a categorical measure of weeks worked rather a specific number of weeks worked. Since this is necessary to define full-time year round work (full-time is 35 hours a week or more), we have to blend the series with slightly different cut-offs or there is a dramatic shift in the series which does not match the parallel movements in the Current Population Survey (which continues to ask actual weeks).

In this regard, the single largest boost for immigrant income (and also helpful for parent engagement in schools) is a very specific form of education: English language skills acquisition. So then, the widespread underfunding of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes for adults is a major problem. Likewise, workforce development programs need to be rethought: they are often aimed at the jobless but immigrants are often working full-time and need training opportunities that are available in the evening, include childcare, and are closer to mass transit.

- **Serve the New Geography:** As noted above, one of the dramatic shifts in recent years has been the migration of immigrants to new states and metros as well as to new locations within metros. In some states, such as Arizona, this has resulted in a significant political backlash while other areas, including the unexpected state of Utah, have been relatively more welcoming. In general, the suburbanization of the immigrant population has been little appreciated, particularly the reconfiguration of services that is now necessary.

Groups like Welcoming America help metro areas experiencing large immigrant influxes to more gracefully address change – and lessons from metros across the nation have started coming in (Pastor and Mollenkopf 2012). However, very little attention is being paid to the suburban dimension and there is a need for more philanthropic and other dollars to address the growing social challenges, including immigrant poverty, in our older suburbs (Kneebone 2014). Immigrant groups can help by developing new suburban outreach programs as well, particularly to organize immigrants to lobby for local services.

- **Legalize Undocumented Immigrants:** Park and Myers (2010) have offered an important, influential and optimistic vision of intergenerational progress based on a careful cohort analysis of immigrants and their children. But the timing of the cohort group is, we think, important: they look at immigrant parents in 1980 and then their kids in 2005. A lot happened in that period but one policy shift was critical: the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 that legalized millions of (particularly Mexican-origin) immigrants and gave them a path to both stability and eventually citizenship.

Remarkably, in 2013, right after a hard-fought election, a polarized Senate was able to agree on a comprehensive reform of the immigration system – before sending a bill to the House of Representatives where progress has stalled. It is hard to understate what a transformative effect legalization and citizenship would have on immigrant economic outcomes – and not just for those who are

undocumented but also for those legal immigrants in most direct competition for employment (Lynch and Oakford 2013).

Since this last recommendation is so crucial, it is worth noting one proposal that has been part of the political debate: legalization without a path to citizenship (Skerry 2013). Such a strategy is likely to reduce the possible economic benefits as well as create a permanent second class of U.S. residents (see Pastor and Scoggins 2012). Another alternative, just passing some version of the so-called DREAM Act, which focuses on undocumented children brought to the U.S. at an early age, would unleash potential mobility for the next generation – but, again, the parents should not be left behind.

It is likely that the national effort for immigration reform will remain stuck. In the meanwhile, we will have an interesting set of natural experiments as places like California back away from local implementation of federal immigration enforcement, work to provide mobility by licensing drivers, and otherwise ease the conditions negatively impacting the daily lives of undocumented immigrants. Studies that compare the results of these experiments with more restrictive approaches in other states could be useful in the years ahead.⁷

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the intersection between immigrants and urban poverty. Before offering a few final thoughts, we should stress that we do not mean for this focus to take away from other efforts targeted at other populations also experiencing poverty. In particular, some authors have sought to contrast an immigrant (or Latino) agenda with that of African Americans (Vaca 2004). This is not only unwise politically; it also ignores the increasing proximity of Black and immigrant populations in our major urban areas as well as shared economic and other interests (Pastor and Carter 2009).

That said, an immigrant lens on poverty reduction does point to a different set of emphases: more stress on addressing low wages, training for those already working, and achieving broad reforms in legal status for those who are undocumented. These sorts of policies could not only significantly improve the lives of adults but they could have huge impacts on the next America, particularly given the high share of children who have at least one immigrant parent. They would restore some of the stepping stones out of poverty.

⁷ By way of a parallel, the cross-state comparison of changing minimum wage laws by Card and Krueger (1995) took advantage of that “natural” experiment to demonstrate that there was no significant negative employment from modest wage hikes. The study launched several others and fundamentally shifted the policy viability of increasing the minimum wage. Demonstrations about whether states do better when they ease the lives of undocumented residents could have a similar impact, one way or the other, on both state and national policy.

What's holding us back? One factor we think is important has been the racialization of immigrants, a process that casts recently-arrived immigrants as a sort of permanent "other." Of course, we who operate in the rational worlds of public policy and university research like to suppose that such passions can be set aside in the spirit of designing more effective interventions. But consider the fact that while young, healthy adults are considered the key to making the Affordable Care Act successful, one group of such adults – undocumented immigrants – have been explicitly prohibited from even buying insurance (even at full price) on the new exchanges. The result is higher costs both in the insurance pool and at the emergency rooms – and it's hard to explain this outcome without taking into account the heated emotions that seems to surround the debate about immigrants and immigrant integration.

The truth is that policy is political in both the narrow and broad sense. Moving society to pay attention to immigrant poverty – or really anything to do with poverty – will require a combination of communicative framing, social movement organizing, and electoral change.

Fortunately, a fundamental shift seems to have occurred in the confidence of at least one set of actors – immigrants themselves. Previously accustomed to operating at the margins of policy, mass marches and Congressional lobbying have instead become the order of the day. Indeed, undocumented youth – those you would think would be the most voiceless given their age and immigration status – have managed to mainstream the DREAM Act, and persuade the President to adopt a Deferred Action strategy at a time when Congress refuses to act.

Immigrant rights activists, often led by the DREAMers, have worked with allies in faith, business, labor and social service communities to set a new agenda for immigration reform. They will likely be critical in setting a new table for addressing poverty and workforce development in ways that will include all our urban populations. In so doing, together we will work to restore the immigrant and intergenerational mobility that have long been thought to be an essential part of the American story.

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Figures and Charts

Figure 1.

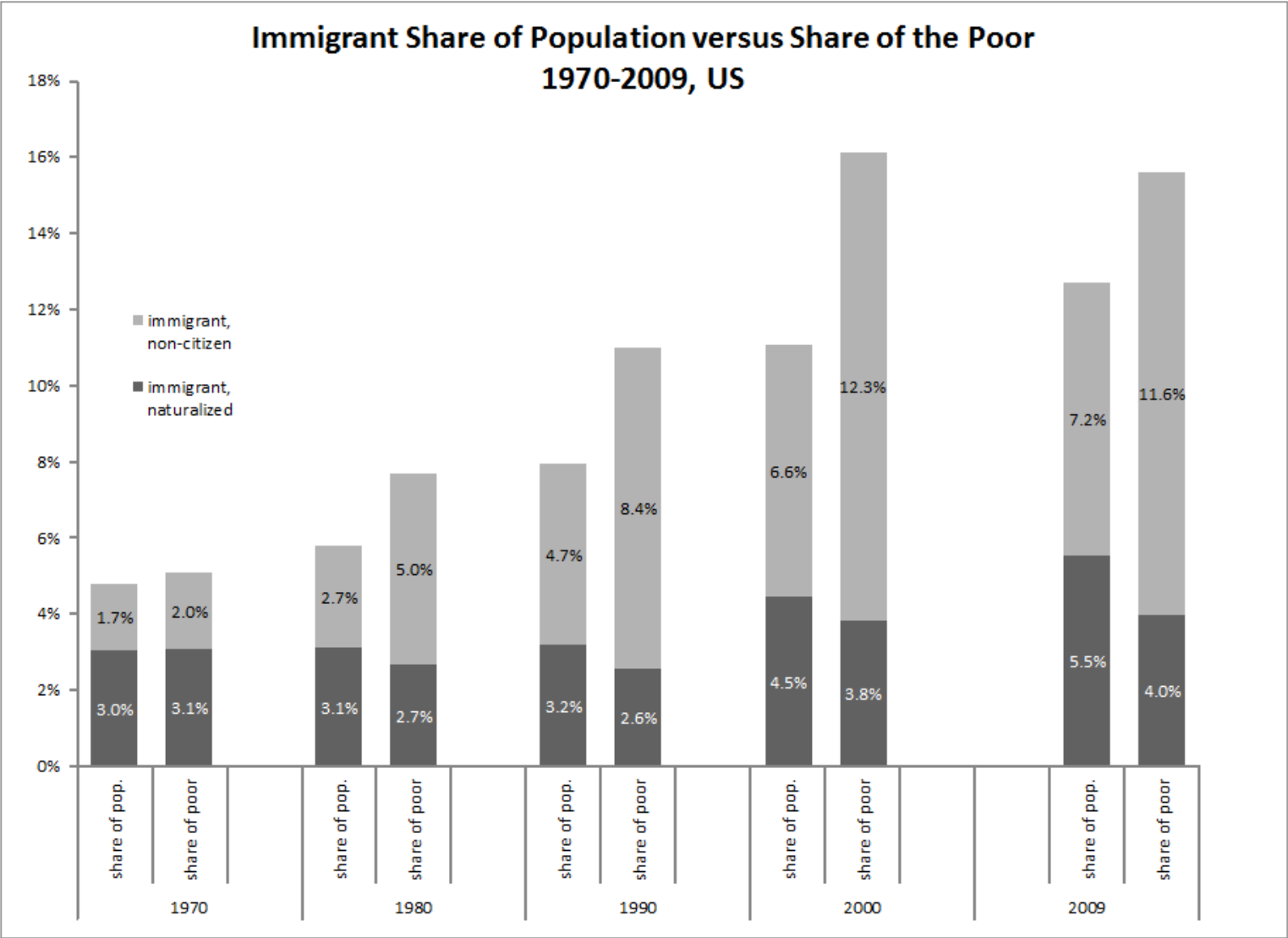


Figure 2.

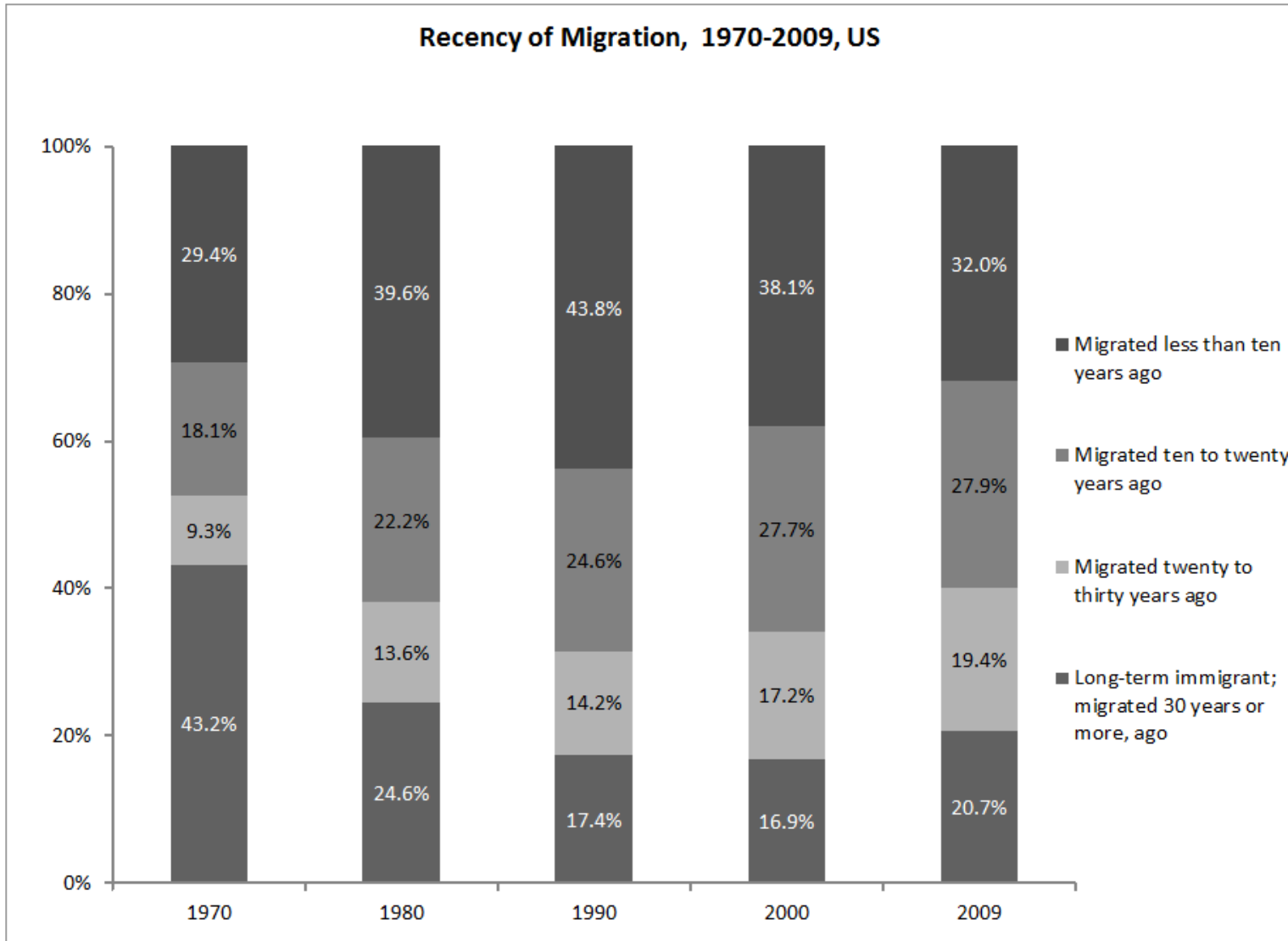


Figure 3.

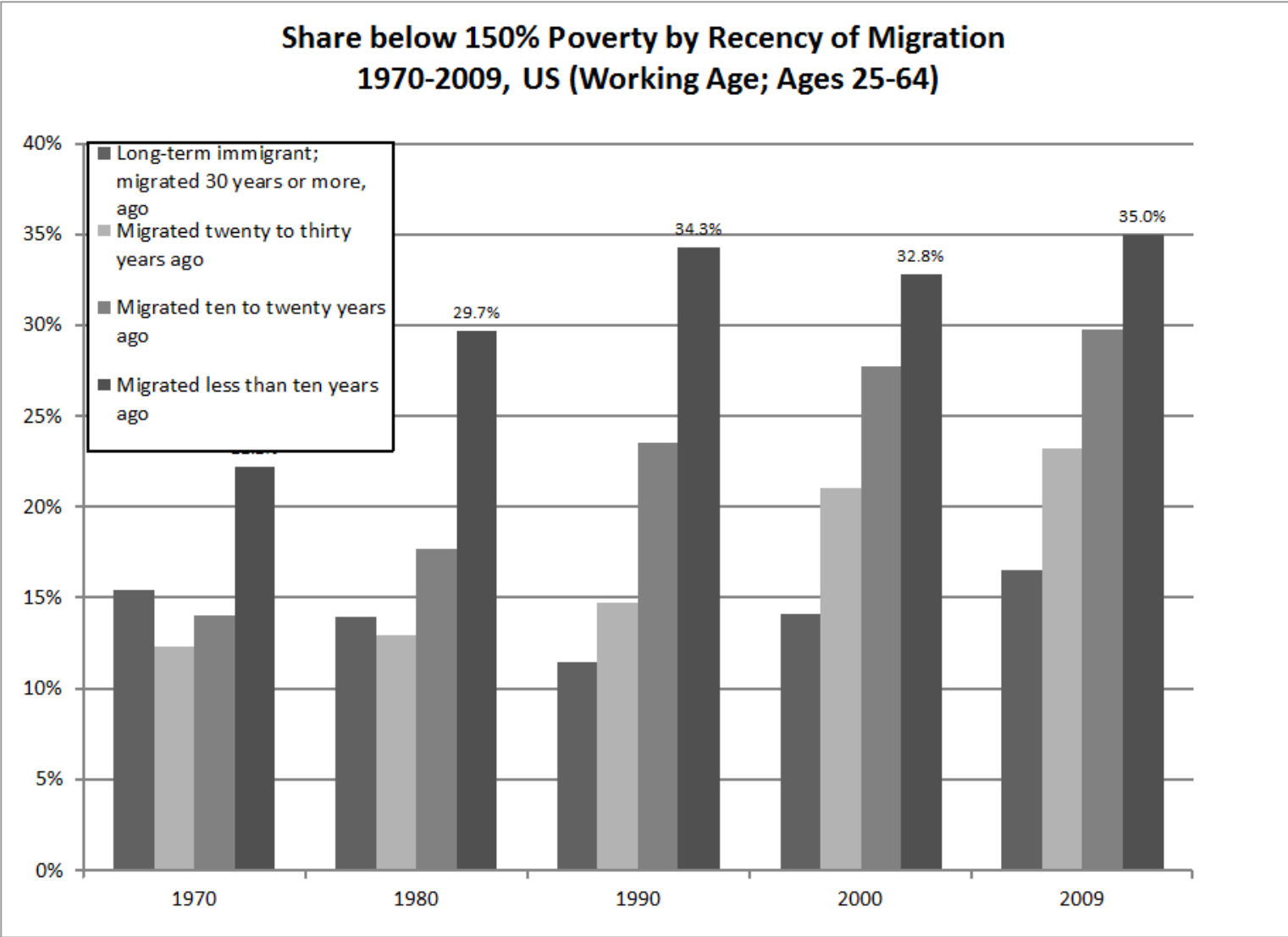


Figure 4.

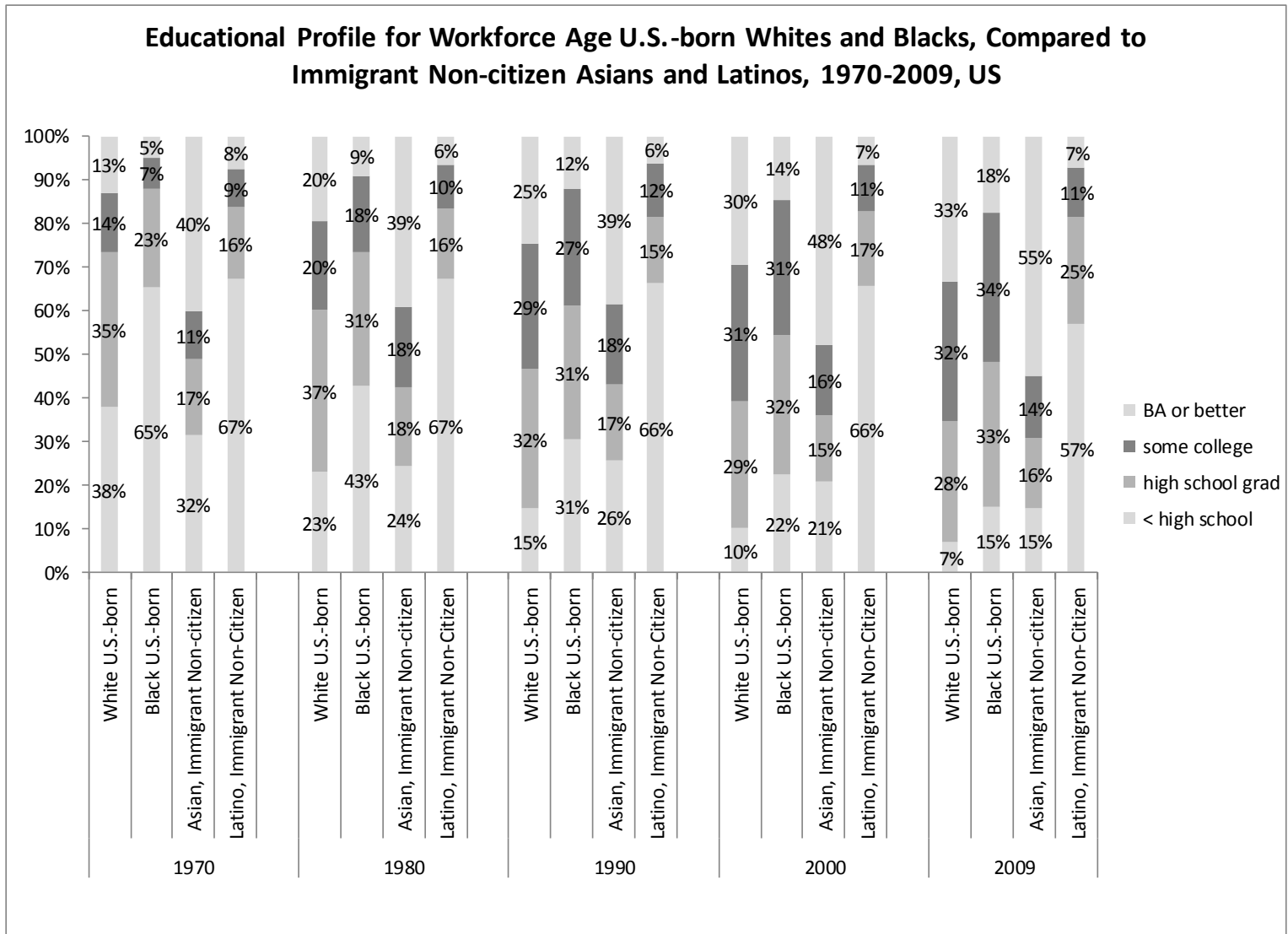


Figure 5.

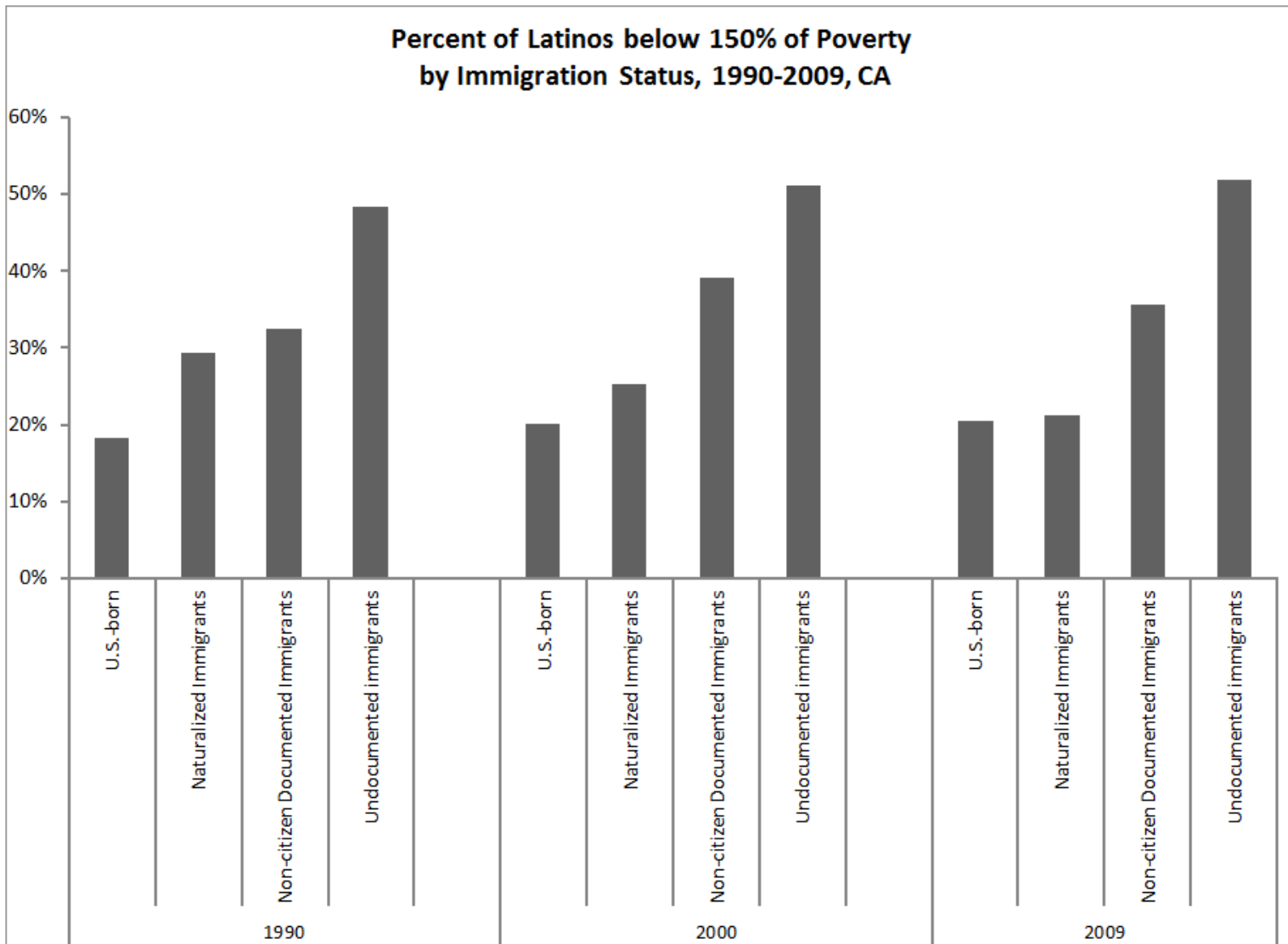


Figure 6.

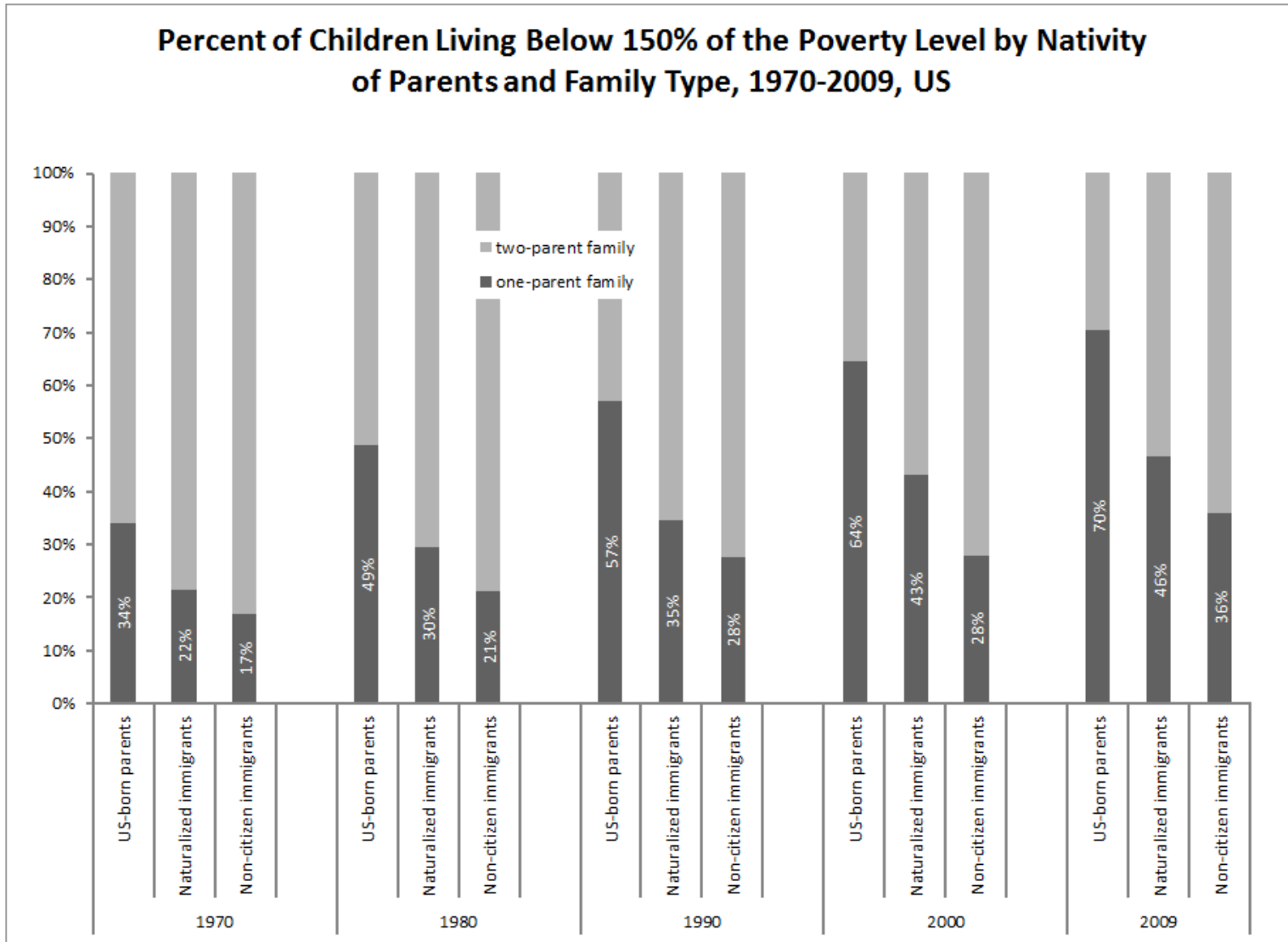


Figure 7.

