



Innovating to End Urban Poverty

STEPPING STONE OR SINK HOLE? IMMIGRANTS, POVERTY, AND THE FUTURE OF METROPOLITAN AMERICA

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Urban poverty in the United States still has a face: largely African American, frequently jobless, and often struggling with the economic and social obstacles of single parenthood. But that face is changing. The poor in America increasingly hail from the ranks of newer and non-citizen immigrants.

In 1970, the foreign-born were almost equally represented among poor Americans and the population as a whole. Now immigrants are overrepresented among America's poor, and this divergence is particularly acute for the non-naturalized. The share of foreign-born who are poor has skyrocketed because of high rates of poverty among the non-naturalized.

Immigrants are also staying poor longer. Traditional thinking had it that immigrants were inevitably slated for better times after they assimilated. But it is estimated that it will take today's immigrants four or five generations to reach economic parity with the native-white mainstream.

Education is among the contributing factors. While some immigrant groups fare well in educational attainment, nearly 60 percent of non-citizen Latinos of working age lack a high school degree.

Immigrants are also increasingly likely to land directly in older suburbs of metropolitan areas rather than in inner cities. These inner-ring suburbs lack the infrastructure necessary to aid disadvantaged immigrants and others who depend on social services to improve their economic standing.

Another contributor to poverty among the foreign-born is the racialization of immigrants. By 2009, nearly 60 percent of non-citizen immigrants were Latino and could therefore be viewed by the mainstream as "other," weakening the public's will to make investments on behalf of immigrants and their children.

The Innovating to End Urban Poverty policy brief series details policy recommendations from top researchers and practitioners on how to improve the quality of life for low-income urban residents. Topics include education, housing, health care, executive function, immigration and the role of place.

A final factor affecting the economic and social status of immigrants is their legal status. In California, for example, roughly 50 percent of undocumented Latinos earn below 150 percent of the poverty level. Those without documentation are also younger, less educated, and less likely to speak English. Work itself is no panacea. Indeed, the poverty rate for full-time, year-round non-naturalized workers rose dramatically, from 14.9 percent in 1980 to 24.2 percent in 2009.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- **Make Work Pay.** Part of the secret of past economic mobility was that low-skilled work paid enough for parents to provide for their children in ways that allowed intergenerational mobility. Boosting income for immigrants who are working but still mired in poverty could be accomplished by raising the minimum wage, reforming labor law to facilitate unionization, 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; immigrant progress must be facilitated over time. Potential upward trajectories for adults can and should be enhanced, with those gains benefiting subsequent generations. The single largest way to boost immigrant income (and parental engagement in schools) is to increase proficiency in English language skills. The widespread underfunding of English as a Second Language, or English as a New Language, for adults must be reversed. Rethinking the convenience of workforce development programs, which are often designed with the jobless in mind, would also help immigrants, many of whom are working full time but need enhanced or better job skills.
- **Serve the new geography.** The suburbanization of the immigrant population has been underappreciated, leaving suburbs poorly equipped to provide services. More resources, philanthropic and otherwise, must be devoted to addressing challenges in older suburbs. Immigrant groups can help by developing suburban outreach programs and by organizing immigrants to lobby for local services. More broadly, the influx of immigrants to states and metros not accustomed to dealing with them has produced mixed reactions. It is important to heed lessons learned in places such as Arizona, where immigration has been met with political backlash, and in Utah, which has been relatively more welcoming. Groups like Welcoming America, which helps metros address large immigrant populations, are also collecting important information about strategies that work.
- **Legalize undocumented immigrants.** The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized millions of (particularly Mexican-origin) immigrants and gave them a path to stability and citizenship. In the second decade of the 21st century, however, needed reforms are often hamstrung by political polarization. It is hard to overstate the transformative effect legalization and citizenship would have on immigrant economic outcomes. Proposals that fall short of citizenship, on the other hand, come with negative consequences. Legalization without a path to citizenship, for example, would reduce possible economic benefits and create a permanent second class of U.S. residents. Legalizing undocumented children could unleash economic mobility for the next generation but would leave adults behind.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on the intersection of integration and urban poverty should not detract from efforts to attack poverty among other populations. But addressing immigrant poverty requires a focus on low wages, training for those already working, and achieving broad reforms in legal status for the undocumented. These reforms could significantly improve the lives of adults and have a huge impact on the next America, particularly given the high share of children with at least one immigrant parent.

One thing preventing important reforms is the reclassification of the recently arrived as a permanent “other,” which has serious public policy ramifications in areas as crucial as health care. The Affordable Care Act, for example,

explicitly prohibits undocumented immigrants from even buying insurance.

Designing fair, effective interventions will require overcoming negative passions with a combination of communication, social movement organizing, and electoral change.

Fortunately, immigrants themselves are gaining a voice. Mass marches and Congressional lobbying have become the order of the day. Immigrant rights activists are working with allies in faith, business, labor, and the social service communities to set a new agenda for immigration reform.

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