

## Family Separation and the Educational Success of Immigrant Children

by T.H. Gindling and Sara Poggio

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Issue

One in five children of school age in the United States is an immigrant or child of immigrants. For many immigrants, especially those from Central America and Mexico, it is common for families to become separated for extended periods as parents migrate to the United States with children following later. Previous studies found that up to 80 percent of Latin American immigrant children in U.S. schools have been separated from parents because of migration. In this paper we examine the hypothesis that separation during migration results in problems for the children at school after reunification.

We find that family separation during migration has a negative impact on the educational success of immigrant children in U.S. schools. Children separated from parents during migration are more likely to be behind others their age in school and are more likely to drop out of high school. The negative impact of separation during migration on educational success is largest for Latin American immigrants, for children separated from their mothers (as opposed to fathers), for those whose parents have lived in the United States illegally, and for those who were separated from their parents at older ages and reunited with parents as teenagers.

### Background

Because of the recent surge in immigration to the United States, immigrant children are one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. school-age population (The Urban Institute, 2006). Special challenges and opportunities face immigrant children in school. On the positive side, immigrant children recognize the sacrifices they and their parents make, and are highly motivated to succeed in school (Rumbaut, 2005). On the other side, challenges that immigrant children face include lack of English proficiency, culture shock and the low socioeconomic status of many immigrant parents (Suarez-Orozco, et. al., 2008).

A factor common to the migration experiences of many recent immigrant children—separation from parents during migration—may also contribute to the difficulties some immigrant children face in school. For many immigrants, especially those from Central America and Mexico, it is common for a mother and/or father to migrate to the United States and leave their children behind in the care of relatives or family friends. Then, after the parent(s) have achieved some degree of stability in the United States, the children follow (Suarez-Orozco, Todorava and Louie, 2002). The trauma, grief and disruptions caused by separation, migration and reunification of families have profound negative psychological effects on children and their parents (Schen, 2005 and Smith, Lalonde and Johnson, 2004).

### Methodology

We studied this issue using a mixed qualitative-quantitative methodology with three stages. The first stage was qualitative, and focused on the state of Maryland. We began this stage by conducting two focus groups of eight and six parents of Latin American immigrant children who had been separated during migration, and in-depth, non-structured interviews of school counselors and psychologists. The insights gained from these focus groups and interviews then guided our quantitative analysis.

The second stage was a quantitative analysis of data from the New Immigrant Survey, a nationally representative survey of new legal immigrants (Latin American and others) conducted by the Office of Population Research of Princeton University. We tested whether there is evidence from this survey that the insights gained from the qualitative analysis of Latin American immigrants

in Maryland can be generalized to the broader immigrant population in the country as a whole. Specifically, we tested whether separation during migration has an impact on several measures of educational success including whether children are substantially older than others in their grade (an “education gap”) and are more likely to be high school drop-outs.

In the final qualitative stage of our research, we conducted an additional focus group of nine Latin American immigrant parents in Maryland, as well as an on-line anonymous survey of 75 teachers in Maryland schools. The focus groups of parents and teacher surveys provided insights into the interpretation of the quantitative results, examples of existing policies and suggestions for new policies to address the challenges faced by immigrant students who have experienced family separation.

## Key Findings

The parents in our focus groups, as well as the psychologists we interviewed, believed that separation from parents, particularly mothers, has negative psychological effects for both mothers and children during separation and after reunification. The mothers in our focus group were keenly aware of the emotional burden of separation and reunification experienced by their children at home, but not all mothers recognize the connection between family and school problems. Mothers were more concerned about the possibility that children would rely on gangs as a refuge from emotional problems. Psychologists and school counselors recognized that the negative psychological effects of separation affected the performance of children in school. All agreed that emotional and discipline problems are most noticeable for children who arrive as teenagers, compared with children that arrive at younger ages.

The data collected in the focus groups and interviews led us to the following hypotheses to guide our quantitative analysis: immigrant children separated from parents during migration have less educational success compared to (a) children who immigrated with their parents, and (b) U.S.-born children of immigrants. Further, our qualitative research led us to suspect that the impact of separation is larger for: (a) those who migrated at older ages (especially teenagers), (b) undocumented immigrants, and (c) separation from mother (compared with separation from father).

Using data from the New Immigrant Survey, Table 1 presents the distribution of children of recent legal immigrants who were born in the U.S., migrated with their parents, or were separated from at least one parent during migration. Slightly over 50 percent of the children of immigrants in our sample were born the United States, 34 percent migrated with their parents and 15 percent were separated from their parents during migration. There are substantial differences in these patterns depending on region of origin. Latin American children are much more likely to have been born in the United States while Asian and others are much more likely to have migrated with their parents.

While Latin American children are more likely to have been born in the United States, immigrant children from Latin America are more likely than immigrant children from other parts of the world to have been separated from their parents during migration. Of the Latin American immigrant children in our sample, 45 percent were classified as separated from parents during migration, compared with less than 30 percent of Asians and others.

**Table 1: Immigration Experiences of Children, By Region of Origin**

| Immigration Experience                  | Percent of all Children of Immigrants |                |       |        |
|---|---------------------------------------|----------------|-------|--------|
|   | All                                   | Latin American | Asian | Others |
| Born in U.S.                            | 50.7%                                 | 72.6%          | 17.7% | 20.1%  |
| Migrated with Parents                   | 34.0%                                 | 15.2%          | 59.1% | 62.9%  |
| Separated During Migration <sup>1</sup> | 15.3%                                 | 12.2%          | 23.2% | 17.0%  |

| Immigration Experience                  | Percent of Immigrant Children |                |       |        |
|---|-------------------------------|----------------|-------|--------|
|   | All Immigrants                | Latin American | Asian | Others |
| Born in U.S.                            | -                             | -              | -     | -      |
| Migrated with Parents                   | 69.0%                         | 55.5%          | 71.8% | 78.7%  |
| Separated During Migration <sup>1</sup> | 31.0%                         | 44.5%          | 28.2% | 21.3%  |

1. Constructed by comparing the year of the most recent entry of immigrant parents to the first year the child entered the U.S. (for biological children of the immigrant respondents who are living in the U.S. with an adjustee immigrant parent and who are between 6-18 years old). Children who were separated from at least one parent for 2 years or more are considered separated during migration.

Source: New Immigrant Survey, a sample of all immigrants who received lawful permanent status (a “green card”) between May-November of 2003. We use data on the biological children of the adjustee immigrants, who live with their biological parent, and are between 6-18 years old. Adjustee immigrants are those who had been living in the United States before receiving their green cards (as opposed to immigrants who arrived in 2003).

**Table 2: Percent of Children Significantly Older Than Other Children in Their Grade (Education Gap) by Immigrant Status and Region of Origin**

|   | U.S.-born | Migrated with Parents | Separated During Migration |
|---|-----------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Percent of children (6-18) with an education gap</b> |           |                       |                            |
| <i>All Children of Immigrants</i>                       | 4.7%      | 4.9%                  | 12.1%                      |
| <i>Latin Americans</i>                                  | 5.3%      | 6.4%                  | 16.7%                      |
| <i>Asians</i>   | 0.0%      | 2.1%                  | 9.5%                       |
| <i>Others</i>   | 2.5%      | 5.7%                  | 6.2%                       |

Note: A child is considered to have an education gap if he or she is significantly older compared with other children in their grade. Specifically, we classify a child as having an education gap if they are at least 8 years old and attending the first grade, at least 9 years old and attending the second grade, etc.

We find that the most significant negative impact of family separation on school performance is that children separated during migration are more likely to be older than others in their grade, termed an “education gap.”

Table 2 presents the percent of children in our sample who have an education gap. A child is considered to have an education gap if he or she is significantly older than other children in the same grade. Specifically, we classify a child as having an education gap if he or she is at least eight years old and attending the first grade, at least nine years old and attending second grade, etc. Children separated from parents during migration are much more likely to have an education gap than are children of immigrants born in the United States or those who migrated with their parents. On average, 12.1 percent of children separated from parents during migration have an education gap, compared with 4.7 percent for those born in the U.S. and 4.9 percent for those born abroad but who migrated with their parents.

Children separated during migration are also more likely to drop out of high school. Table 3 presents the percent of 18-22 year old biological children of adult immigrants in our sample who are not in school and have less than a complete high school education. For immigrants from any region of the world, dropout rates are higher for those separated during migration than for those who migrated with their parents. For example, dropout rates of Latin American children separated during migration are 40 percent, compared with 17 percent for those who migrated with parents and 20 percent for those born in the United States to immigrant parents.\*

These two results—education gap and drop out rate—are probably related; children who are older than others in their grade are often less motivated to succeed at school, more likely to face pressure to enter the work force, and less likely to complete high school

before they reach the maximum age at which they are eligible for free public education (they “age out” of the public school system before they graduate from high school).

Immigrant children separated from their parents during migration are more likely to be older than others in their grade for a variety of reasons: they may have repeated a grade either before or after migration; they may have interrupted schooling in their home country in order to work or take care of family members; they may have lost a year or more of schooling because of the trauma of migrating or because of inconsistencies in the timing of the school year between their home country and in the United States; or they may have been assigned to a lower grade than other children their age when they entered school in the United States.

We also find that the negative impact of separation during migration is largest for children who immigrate as teenagers. In the statistical analysis, we find consistent evidence that immigrant students who were separated as teenagers from parents are behind others their age in middle school and high school. However, we find no evidence that younger immigrants who have been separated from parents are behind others of their age in the elementary grades. This suggests that programs that address family separation would be most effective if applied in middle and high school rather than elementary school.

Our results suggest that it is important to help children who immigrate when they are middle school or high school age to stay in school. Older immigrant students face strong pressure to work to help out their extended families (both family members in the United States and by sending remittances to family members abroad). This suggests that one important set of programs to lower high school drop out rates should

**Table 3: High School Drop-Out Rates by Immigrant Status and Region of Origin**

|  | U.S.-born | Migrated with Parents | Separated During Migration |
|--|-----------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Percent of children 18-22 years old who have less than a complete high school education</b> |           |                       |                            |
| <i>All Children of Immigrants</i>  | 34.4%     | 12.6%                 | 40.8%                      |
| <i>Latin Americans</i>   | 20.0%     | 17.2%                 | 40.0%                      |
| <i>Asians</i>  | 20.0%     | 9.4%                  | 50.0%                      |
| <i>Others</i>  | 59.5%     | 9.4%                  | 37.5%                      |
| <b>Percent of children (16-18) who have repeated a grade (1-12)</b>                            |           |                       |                            |
| <i>All Children of Immigrants</i>  | 3.7%      | 2.4%                  | 3.5%                       |
| <i>Latin Americans</i>   | 4.0%      | 1.3%                  | 6.4%                       |
| <i>Asians</i>  | 0.0%      | 4.1%                  | 0.0%                       |
| <i>Others</i>  | 2.5%      | 2.0%                  | 0.0%                       |

allow high school students to take classes at night or on the weekend (so as to not interfere with work), to attend high school part time (around work schedules), and to receive free public school education at older ages (it can take immigrant students longer to finish high school both because they may be working and because they lost years of schooling when they migrated to the United States).

Several school systems in the immigrant-rich Washington, D.C. suburbs have programs in high schools that are focused on educating older students during non-traditional school hours. Younger students (up to 21 or 22 years old) who attend regular high schools can generally transfer and attend these night high schools tuition free, while older students are required to pay tuition. In Prince George's County (Maryland), there are evening high school programs at Crossland, Largo and Northwestern High Schools. In Fairfax County (Virginia) the High School Continuation Program at Arlington Mill High School, although begun in 1929, currently tailors its teaching style to the needs of its primarily immigrant student body. Students at Arlington Mill High School may take special classes for English language learners (HILT), making for an easier transition for recent teenage immigrants into regular high school classes taught in English. Fairfax County (Virginia) public schools offer evening programs at four "transitional ESOL high schools" to provide instruction to older ESOL students (18 and older) who want to earn a high school diploma (the schools are Bryant Alternative High School, Mountain View Alternative High School, Summit Hills Alternative High School and Woodson Adult High School). The Transitional High School programs do not offer a diploma, but offer a way to transition into English language classes at these alternative high schools.

In the focus groups and teacher surveys the most frequent policy interventions mentioned were English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction for students and programs to help the parents of students understand the structure and expectations of the school systems in the United States (which can be very different from the school systems in their home countries). One frequent problem that arises in this context is that parents may have very poor English proficiency. Helpful programs mentioned by parents and teachers included "mommy and me" English classes at local schools, and after hours English classes for parents at schools (taught by teachers at those schools so that parents become comfortable with their children's teachers).

Teachers and parents also agreed that, in order to facilitate the participation of Latin American immigrant parents in the education of their children, it is important to have at least some school staff that speak Spanish and are comfortable in the culture of the immigrant parents. One specific program identified as helpful and successful in our qualitative analysis of the Prince George's County public school system was the parent liaison program, where schools hire a Spanish-speaking staff member (often a current or past parent of a student in that school) that parents of immigrant children

can consult when they have questions about the school, and teachers can use as go-between to communicate with parents who have limited English skills.

Another area of concern that was mentioned consistently in the focus groups of parents and teacher surveys was homework. Teachers believe that Hispanic immigrant parents are not involved enough in making sure that their children successfully complete homework assignments. Teachers in the survey often attributed this to cultural differences between Hispanic immigrants and those born in the United States. The parents in our focus groups also identified completing homework successfully as a problem, but pointed to a lack of English proficiency on the part of parents as the primary reason for this. Parents found it difficult to know how to help and to understand what was required when the homework, instructions, textbooks and related materials are all in English only. A common request from parents with limited English proficiency was to have the homework, instructions and related materials translated into Spanish; without this translation many immigrant parents find it impossible to help their children with homework. Many parents and teachers also suggested that immigrant students benefitted greatly from after school programs where regular classroom teachers provide homework help in "extended day" programs.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of our qualitative and quantitative analyses confirm that family separation during migration has a negative impact on the educational success of children that goes beyond the problems experienced by all migrants.

The negative impact of separation during migration on educational success is largest for Latin American immigrants, for children separated from their mothers (as opposed to fathers), for those whose parents have lived in the United States illegally, and for those who were separated from their parents at older ages and reunited with parents as teenagers.

Family separation during migration matters, and should be taken into account in schools. School counselors in particular should be aware that, compared with non-immigrants and immigrants who migrate with their parents, children separated during migration are more likely to be depressed, to have difficulty adapting to the popular and school culture in the United States (and therefore may be more likely to be attracted into gangs), to have had traumatic experiences during the process of migration, and to have strained relationships with parents and siblings from whom they have been separated. The teachers and parents we surveyed argued that it is also important that school counselors (although not necessarily classroom teachers) speak the language and are comfortable with the culture of the immigrant child. If not, students are less likely to trust or accept help from counselors. Useful programs would provide immigrant students with help adjusting to American schools and teen culture, as well as foster a feeling of belonging through connections to peers who model positive behavior.

One successful program directed toward teenage immigrant students who have been separated from their parents during migration can be found in Northwestern High School in Prince George's County, the school district where we conducted our teacher survey. This program was developed jointly by the Northwestern High School ESOL Intervention Specialist and the Prince George's County, Immigrant School Counseling Office specifically to ease the transition to U.S. schools for immigrants separated during migration. The program includes individual counseling, group counseling sessions, and support groups that include peers who have also experienced family separation but have been in the U.S. for several years. Participants in the support groups, or "reunification groups," compare personal stories, and discuss the differences between U.S. school culture and that of the immigrant's home country, difficulties of acculturation, and strategies for success in high school.

In terms of national immigration policy, our results suggest that policies of family reunification should concentrate on reuniting families while the children are still young. Our evidence suggests that young children, even if they have been separated from parents, are better able to adapt to school culture in the United States. On the other hand, if children are not reunited until their teenage years, adapting to and succeeding in the school system in the United States is much more challenging.

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\* In the full report we present econometric results that control for other factors that might cause these differences between children separated from parents during migration and other children of immigrants. Specifically, we control for: parents' education and occupation, parents' English proficiency, length of time separated from parents, years of residence in the United States, family structure, gender, age, whether parents were undocumented before receiving their green cards, age of migration and region of the world from which the parents migrated. The econometric results confirm that children separated from parents during migration are significantly more likely to have an education gap and to drop out of high school than are children of immigrants born in the United States or those who migrated with their parents.

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