

# Children of immigrants have advantage in academics, school engagement

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Children of immigrants are outperforming children whose family trees have deeper roots in the United States, learning more in school and then making smoother transitions into adulthood, according to sociologists at The Johns Hopkins University.

Researchers Lingxin Hao and Han S. Woo tracked nearly 11,000 children from as young as age 13 into their early 30s, coming from families with diverse backgrounds. When comparing children with similar socioeconomic status and school conditions, Hao and Woo found that the best students, and later the most successful young adults, were born in foreign countries and came to the United States before reaching their teens. American-born children whose parents were immigrants followed closely in terms of achievement.

Hao and Woo found that the advantages were comparable for both Asian and Hispanic children. Their study, "Distinct Trajectories in the Transition to Adulthood: Are Children of Immigrants Advantaged?" appears as part of a special section on children from immigrant families in the September/October 2012 edition of the journal *Child Development*.

The study affirms the ideal of the American immigrant success story at a time when immigration is often seen as a problem. Today, almost one quarter of American children are the children of immigrants, based on Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2009, so this study suggests good things for the quality and skill level of the U.S. labor force

down the line, said Hao, the study's lead author.

"Our findings challenge the view that children of immigrants are lagging behind children of native-born parents in the transitioning to adulthood," said Hao, a professor of sociology in the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins. "Given the same backgrounds, children of immigrants are actually more likely to follow the best trajectory leading to positive early adult outcomes."

Hao and Woo, a graduate student, followed data linked to individual children from ages 13 to 17 up to ages 25 to 32. The researchers set out to see which groups of children followed the best trajectory in terms of academic achievement, which Hao and Woo measured by the level of difficulty in the math and science courses the students completed. They also looked at school engagement, or the proportion of courses each high schooler passed in an academic year, assuming that if students were engaged in their work, they should pass every class.

To measure success when the subjects reached their 20s and 30s, Hao and Woo looked at the level of the highest academic degrees attained and general psychological well-being using a scale based on feelings of social belonging, control of life circumstances and confidence in handling personal problems.

What explains the more positive trajectory for children of immigrants? Hao suggests that there is a greater sense of community among immigrants out of necessity: Newcomers often need a lot of assistance when they first arrive in the United States. But Hao, who is from China, thinks there is also a great deal of inspiration to be found among the immigrant community. Parents, she says, might be working multiple low-level jobs and encourage their children to seek a better life for themselves. The success stories of immigrants who have "made it" are also held up as role models for immigrant children, something children

of native-born parents might be lacking, Hao says. To that end, this research can inform education and labor-force policy makers when it comes to new plans to help lower socioeconomic groups move ahead, she says.

"With 24 percent of all American children from immigrant families, our findings provide fresh evidence for policymakers who are concerned with the quality of immigrant generations and the skill composition of the future labor force," Hao said. "My hope is that policymakers will look at our findings and work on ways to create similar 'protective factors' for all racial minority children, because these factors allow children from immigrant families to do well and be resilient despite their lower socioeconomic and racial-minority backgrounds."

Hao and Woo analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and the Adolescent Health and Academic Achievement study, both funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The current study was funded by an NICHD training grant to the Johns Hopkins University Population Center, founded in 1971 to stimulate and facilitate interdisciplinary population research throughout the university.

Provided by Society for Research in Child Development

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