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The New Immigrant Survey and Research on American Stratification

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In 1970, the foreign born percentage of the United States dropped below 5% for the first and only time in American history. Since that date a remarkable revival of mass immigration has transformed the nation. From a historical nadir of 4.7% in 1970, the percentage foreign born rose to 12.2% in 2009. Another 11% of all Americans in that year were the children of immigrants, meaning that nearly a quarter of the U.S. population is presently in its first or second generation of U.S. residence. Between 2000 and 2009, international migration accounted for 35% of U.S. population growth and the children of immigrants now comprise a quarter of all births. The nation is quickly moving toward a new demography where no racial or ethnic group will comprise a clear majority. Indeed, in 2010 only half of all American births were to non-Hispanic white mothers. Given the legacy of race in the United States, this radical transformation of American immigration and its attendant effects on the nation's racial and ethnic composition necessarily carry profound implications for patterns and processes of stratification.

DETERIORATING DATA

Ironically, just as the immigration boom was getting underway, the capacity of social scientists to measure and study it began to falter. In 1957, the United States abandoned record-keeping on emigration, thus rendering direct computation of net international migration impossible. After 1970 the U.S. Census Bureau eliminated the question on birthplace of parents from the census long form, abruptly ending a century-long statistical series and eliminating the ability to study second generation immigrants using a large national sample. This deficiency was only partially remedied by the addition a parental birthplace question to the Current Population Survey in 1996 (Massey 2010).

On top of these developments, changes in U.S. immigration law drastically curtailed the opportunities for legal migration from Mexico after 1965, causing unauthorized migration to begin its inexorable rise, thus putting a growing fraction of immigrants outside the reach of official statistics (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). The subsequent militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border not only failed to control undocumented migration; it backfired by driving down the rate of return migration while having little effect on illegal entries, thereby

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transforming what had been a circular flow of male migrants going to three states into a settled population of foreign born families living in 50 states (Massey and Capoferro 2008; Massey 2011). Finally, with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2001 and its assumption of authority over immigration statistics, the quantity of data published on immigrants decreased rather than increased. Whereas the 2000 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics contained 274 pages of information, for example, by 2009 the same publication had dropped to 105 pages, a reduction in content of 62%.

RISING STRATIFICATION

In sum, just as immigration was becoming increasingly important as a component of U.S. population dynamics, our ability to measure it was declining. This deterioration occurred in a context of rising inequality with respect to income (Piketty and Saez 2003) and wealth (Keister 2000) and growing pressures on foreign residents as a result of shifts in U.S. immigration and border policy (Massey 2007). The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, for example, criminalized the hiring of undocumented migrants and prompted a rise in discrimination against foreign looking people, especially Hispanics, and a massive shift toward subcontracting in the secondary labor market (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). In addition, legislation passed in 1996 and 2001 curtailed the civil liberties and limited access to entitlements for all non-citizens, even those legally present while radically scaling up enforcement efforts.

Since the anti-immigrant crackdown began in 1986, the Border Patrol's budget has increased by a factor of 23 while the number of Border Patrol Agents rose from 3,700 to 20,100, deportations increased from just 25,000 to nearly 400,000 per year, and the budget of what is now Immigration and Customs Enforcement rose from \$474 million to \$5.7 billion (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2009). Between 1992 and 2008 the number of immigrants in detention rose by a factor of five and from 2005 to 2009 the number of immigrant-related bills introduced within state legislatures went from 300 to 1,400 (Massey and Sánchez 2010). The rise in repressive force was directed against an immigrant population that was increasingly nonwhite and already marginalized in U.S. society. Among all foreigners living in the United States in 2009, 54% were from Latin America and 27% came from Asia, compared with just 12% from Europe. Mexico alone accounted for about a third of all immigrants present in the nation.

The rise in anti-immigrant enforcement combined with the shift toward nonwhite origins created new opportunities for discrimination and exclusion based on race and ethnicity, especially for groups stigmatized by a significant presence of undocumented migrants. By 2008 the undocumented population numbered around 12 million and constituted more than a third of all foreign born residents of the United States (Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker 2009). Among Mexicans, however, the figure was 60% whereas among Hondurans and Guatemalans it reached 66% and among Salvadorans and Brazilians 50%. These high percentages placed Hispanic immigrants at a growing disadvantage in the U.S. socioeconomic hierarchy, a trend visible in national statistics.

Whereas Hispanics historically had occupied a middle position in the American stratification system, with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom, during the 1990s and 2000s, the economic standing of Hispanics eroded to the point where on many indicators of socioeconomic well-being they lay at or below the position of African Americans (Massey 2007). In the labor force, for example, the real earnings gap between Mexican immigrant men and native white males grew from \$5.72 per hour in 1980 to \$13 per hour in 2007 (Massey and Gelatt 2010). At the same time, the wage premium historically enjoyed by immigrants disappeared and the economic returns to education, English language ability, and experience progressively stagnated (Gentsch and Massey 2011).

THE NEW IMMIGRANT SURVEY

Thus immigration is becoming increasingly important in the U.S. system of social and economic stratification; but understanding its changing role in American society places demands on the U.S. statistical system that neither the Census Bureau nor Homeland Security can satisfy. It was precisely to overcome these deficiencies in immigration statistics that the New Immigrant Survey was conceived and implemented. The idea for a nationally representative longitudinal survey of immigrants to the United States can be traced back to a 1985 evaluation carried out by the National Research Council (Levine, Hill, and Warren 1985). It was not until 1996, however, that concrete progress toward this goal was made with fielding of a pilot survey designed to test the feasibility of using administrative data on arriving permanent resident aliens to randomly sample, locate, survey, and re-interview a cohort of legal immigrants to the United States (Jasso et al. 2000).

The 1996 pilot survey established the technical feasibility of surveying and following a cohort of newly arrived legal immigrants over time. The pilot included a baseline survey, a three-month follow-up of half the baseline, and six- and twelve-month follow-ups of all original sample members. The sampling frame was a list of all persons admitted to legal permanent resident status during the months of July and August of 1996, obtained from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Baseline interviews were successfully conducted with 62% of those sampled, with follow-up rates of 92% after six months and 95% after 12-months. The final sample numbered 1,984 persons, of whom 1,839 were adults (Jasso et al. 2000).

The pilot survey set the stage for the full implementation of the New Immigrant Survey in 2003, a costly enterprise with funding from multiple sources, including the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the National Institute on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS), the Assistant Secretary for Policy Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Pew Charitable Trusts. With assistance from BCIS, the baseline survey sampled the records of legal U.S. immigrants admitted from May through November of 2003. The final sample included 8,573 adults surveyed with a response rate of 68.6%, along with 4,334 spouses, as well as 810 biological children aged 8 to 12 years, who were surveyed with a 64.8% response rate.

Interviews were conducted in whichever language the immigrant felt most comfortable. In addition to English, the questionnaire was translated into Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Polish, Russian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese and all of the foregoing translations were programed as Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (about 60% of the interviews) or Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (about 40%), both administered by bilingual interviewers. Interviews in Amharic, French, and Haitian Creole were also done by bilingual interviewers, with key concepts in the survey pre-translated for their convenience. Key concepts were also pre-translated for interviews done in Arabic, Croatian, Farsi, Gujarati, Hindi, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Urdu, though surveys in these and other languages were carried out by and English speaking interviewers with the assistance of translators.

The NIS constitutes the most comprehensive survey of immigrants ever conducted among immigrants to the United States. Adult immigrants were asked detailed questions about their childhood history and early living conditions, education, migration history, marital history, military history, fertility history, language skills, religion, social networks, and employment history in both the U.S. and abroad. Special attention was paid to sources and amounts of income, including wages, pensions, and government subsidies, along with the type and value of assets and debts. Respondents reported on their health conditions, providing information on symptoms, functional status, pain, depression, health-related behaviors, insurance, and use of health services. Detailed data were also collected on transfer payments that were given to and received by relatives and friends, both in the U.S. and abroad. In order to gather data on the respondent's children, a special roster was created to report their demographic attributes, health circumstances, education, language ability, work status, and migration experience. Information was similarly gathered about the parents and siblings of adult respondents as well as the type and ownership of housing and consumer durables. Data files and documentation are publicly available from the NIS project website at <http://nis.princeton.edu/>.

From the outset, the NIS was designed as a longitudinal survey and interviewing for the second round of the survey began in June 2007 and lasted through April 2008. The follow-up was initially intended to be conducted entirely by phone, but an in-person component was added in February 2009 in order to boost a lagging response rate. Fieldwork finally ended in October 2009 with a final completed re-interview rate of 45.5% for adults and 48.4% for children.

Respondents were thus re-interviewed between four to six years after the baseline survey, providing additional variance in the degree of exposure to the United States. The sharp decline in response rates relative both to the pilot and the first wave of the survey reflects the increasingly hostile environment that immigrants faced after 2003. In addition to rising anti-immigrant enforcement by state and local officials as well as federal authorities, anti-Hispanic hate crimes were rose between 2003 and 2008 and attitudes against immigrants and immigration hardened (Massey and Sánchez 2010). The second wave of the NIS is currently being cleaned and processed for public release.

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION AND STRATIFICATION

In the absence of NIS data from the second wave, the papers gathered here are necessarily based on data from the baseline survey. Together they offer a good look at the possibilities for research on immigration and stratification created by the NIS. A key step in the process of immigrant adaptation and assimilation is language acquisition, and to date most analyses of English language ability have relied on self-assessments provided by the immigrants themselves. A novel feature of the NIS is that in addition to the respondent's self-assessment, interviewers were asked to offer their own evaluation of the respondent's linguistic ability, thus enabling Ilana Akresh and Reanne Frank (this issue) to compare the two assessments to determine whether differences between the two assessments have any bearing on immigrant outcomes. They found that among non-native English speakers, those who over-estimated or under-estimated their English proficiency fared significantly worse in the labor market compared with those whose self-evaluations coincided with those of the interviewer and that the returns to English proficiency were greater when it was assessed by interviewers than respondents.

It is not immediately obvious whether differences in earnings by English ability reflect deliberate discrimination against immigrants (as a result of prejudice against people with accents or foreigners in general) or real differences in worker productivity owing to differences in the ability to communicate. Discrimination on the basis of skin color, however, has clearly been illegal in the United States since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and another novel feature of the NIS that permits a fresh look at racial discriminations is the development and implementation of a standardized skin color scale. Interviewers were provided with a range of human hands shaded to reflect different skin colors from lightest to darkest and numbered 1 to 10 (see <http://nis.princeton.edu/downloads/NIS-Skin-Color-Scale.pdf>). After completing the baseline survey, interviewers were asked assess the respondent's skin color using this scale and the resulting code was embedded in the data set for those respondents who completed a personal interview.

In her contribution to this volume, Joni Hersch finds significant and persistent effects of skin color on immigrant earnings even after controlling for background variables such as years of legal residence, education, English language proficiency, home country occupation, ethnicity, race, country of birth, and labor market conditions. Indeed, spouses with the lightest skin color earned 15%–23% more than otherwise comparable spouses with the darkest skin color. Moreover, the earnings premium associated with light skin did not diminish over time, suggesting their durability and pervasiveness in American society.

Beyond earnings, a critical dimension of stratification in the United States is wealth—the total value of a household's financial and material assets—which may not only generate a variety of forms of unearned income, but also provide a buffer or cushion to deal with unexpected threats to income and health as well as a basis for further investments in human and physical capital. Few surveys gather data on wealth, and the NIS is unusual in its systematic compilation of information on wealth held by immigrants both in the United States and overseas.

Ilana Akresh's detailed analysis (this issue) reveals a sizeable wealth gap between relatively privileged immigrants from Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand relative to immigrants from other regions. Whereas the former groups have median wealth comparable to non-Hispanic white natives, that latter display significantly lower levels of wealth even after accounting for permanent income and life course characteristics. Nonetheless, differences in measured characteristics between Western Europeans and other immigrants generally account for around three-quarters of observed wealth disparities, with the exception of immigrants from Asia and the Indian subcontinent, again suggesting the potential contribution of discrimination to immigrant stratification.

The analysis by Guillermina Jasso (this issue) not only draws upon new data available from the NIS on skin color and English ability to assess stratification, but also takes into account the structure and performance of the immigration system itself as a stratifying agent. The different visa categories by which immigrants enter the United States carry very different sets of rights and privileges and people become legal immigrants through a variety of different legal pathways (Massey and Malone 2003). Although some people arrive directly from abroad and settle into the country as new immigrants, most of those who acquire legal permanent residence have prior U.S. experience, many in illegal status (Jasso et al 2008). Indeed, according to data presented in Jasso's tabulations here, 58% of all legal immigrants admitted in 2003 were "adjustees" and 40% had previous illegal experience in the country.

In her analysis, Jasso documents sharp differences in background characteristics between immigrants by class of admission, with widespread and often sharp differences in age, gender, education, English language ability, and U.S. experience. Thus, different visa categories select for very different kinds of migrants with widely varying endowments of human capital that can be expected to bear on processes of stratification in the United States. Although illegal status in the United States may itself be a detriment to socioeconomic mobility, Jasso finds that upon legalization, the children of previously illegal parents are more likely to be fluent in English compared with other immigrant children, perhaps giving them a small leg up in the U.S. socioeconomic hierarchy.

In sum, Jasso's work clearly shows how the U.S. immigration system acts as a filter, channeling different people with different characteristics to different positions in the U.S. socioeconomic order, with long term effects on their prospects for mobility and well-being. However, the immigration system is more than a passive filter. Indeed, it plays an active role in the process of stratification itself by allocating rewards and penalties to immigrants as they leave the starting gate. According to Jasso's results, immigrants who adjust status and go through the visa process in the United States are more likely to have their documents lost and as a result are at greater risk of suffering depression, especially male immigrants, thus undermining not only their immediate health but their longer term earning capacity.

Although dark skin color may be associated with lower earnings, Jasso finds that black immigrants from Africa arrive with abundant human capital compared both with native African Americans and black immigrants from the Americas, and she argues that this abundance of skill may in the long run help offset the penalties traditionally associated with race and skin color in the United States. In addition to human capital, migrants may also

compensate by using other forms of capital to adapt to the challenges of life in the United States. A great deal of attention has been paid to social capital in recent years, for example, with studies demonstrating how access to friends and relatives with prior migratory experience increases wages and occupational status among men and provides access to survival resources among women (Mouw 2006; Massey and Aysa-Lastra 2011).

In addition to social capital, immigration researchers have recently developed the concept of spiritual capital—the resources, assistance, and support that immigrants may enjoy by virtue of their religious beliefs and participation (Cadge and Ecklund 2006). Indeed, Smith (1978) argued that immigration was itself a “theologizing experience,” in which the vicissitudes of the migration experience caused immigrants to turn to religion as a source of succor and support to help them deal with barriers encountered in American society, yielding concrete benefits in the form of refuge, resources, and respect (Hirschman 2004).

Prior to the NIS most studies of immigration and religion were based on small case studies of specific communities and congregations. Owing to the traditional separation of church and state in the United States, questions on religion are not included on the census, CPS, or ACS and are not tabulated in data sets put together by officials in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. As a result, until now there have been few alternatives to such small, purposive studies. Although local samples may reveal how religious faith and participation assist particular immigrants in adapting to challenges in the United States, they cannot address the broader issue of how religious belief and practice change in the course of migration or how religiosity affects socioeconomic well-being in the United States because they generally lack a comparison group of non-religious people from the same immigrant group.

With special support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the NIS included a special module on religious belief and practice specifically to address these larger questions and avoid the selectivity biases inherent in much prior research. In their analysis of religious participation before and after immigration, Douglas Massey and Monica Higgins (this issue) find that migrating to the United States is a disruptive rather than a theologizing experience and that in most immigrant groups the frequency of service attendance falls after arrival. They show that immigrants who join congregations in the United States are highly selected and unrepresentative of the broader foreign born population, though the degree of selectivity varies by religion and nationality.

In addition, although prior work generally points to a positive association between religious activity and immigrant economic success, Phillip Connor (this issue) suggests that this finding may be an artifact of the selective nature of congregational samples. Indeed, he finds that degree of religious participation across all groups is negatively associated with the likelihood of employment and generally uncorrelated with earnings. Hypotheses derived from small purposive samples of immigrant congregations thus appear to be incorrect. Religious participation falls rather than rises in the course of international migration, and participation itself appears to yield few, if any, economic benefits to most immigrants.

POTENTIAL OF THE NIS A DATA RESOURCE

The studies presented here barely scratch the surface of the NIS's potential to support studies of immigrant adaptation, assimilation, and stratification; and this potential can only be enhanced when the second wave of survey data becomes available. The handful of studies just reviewed already lead to some startling conclusions and re-considerations of prior work. Thanks to the NIS we have come to know that people are not very good at assessing their own linguistic abilities and that reliance on self-assessments of English fluency likely understates the connection between proficiency and economic outcomes. Future investigators may wish to switch to interviewer assessments rather than respondent assessments of linguistic ability.

The NIS also offers a new interviewer-assessed scale of skin color, giving researchers a more reliable means of studying skin color stratification in the United States. As Portes and Rumbaut (2006) have theorized, the context of reception indeed appears to be highly "segmented" on the basis of skin color, with darker skinned immigrants being channeled downward in the socioeconomic hierarchy compared with their lighter skinned counterparts. In addition, the careful attention paid by the NIS to legal status and class of admission enables researchers to see how the immigration system itself functions as a key component of the "context of reception" theorized by Portes and Rumbaut, yielding a multiplicity of pathways to legal status and a diversity of subsequent trajectories in the United States and, hence, divergent outcomes with respect to wealth and income.

Finally, the New Immigrant Survey's addition of items on religion for the first time enables researchers to study the effects of belief and practice on social and economic outcomes in a large, nationally representative sample that is not subject to the selection biases of prior studies. Already this work has produced strong challenges to widely held beliefs about the presumed "theologizing effects" of international migration and the economic benefits of "spiritual capital." As use of the NIS spreads and studies continue to accumulate, we can expect more such revisions and re-considerations as well as the generation of new insights about the complex interplay between immigration and stratification in the United States today.

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