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Immigration and Adult Transitions

Rubén G. Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie

Summary

Almost 30 percent of the more than 68 million young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four in the United States today are either foreign born or of foreign parentage. As these newcomers make their transitions to adulthood, say Rubén Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie, they differ significantly not only from one another but also from their native-parentage counterparts, including blacks and whites. The authors document the demographic changes in the United States over the past forty years and describe the ways in which generation and national origin shape the experiences of these newcomers as they become adults.

Rumbaut and Komaie point out that immigrant groups experience gaps in social, economic, and legal status that are even greater than the gaps between native whites and blacks. By far the most-educated (Indians) *and* the least-educated (Mexicans) groups in the United States today are first-generation immigrants, as are the groups with the lowest poverty rate (Filipinos) *and* the highest poverty rate (Dominicans). These social and economic divides reflect three very different ways immigrants enter the country: through regular immigration channels, without legal authorization, or as state-sponsored refugees. For many ethnic groups, significant progress takes place from the first to the second generation. But, say the authors, for millions of young immigrants, a lack of legal permanent residency status blocks their prospects for social mobility. Having an undocumented status has become all the more consequential with the failure of Congress to pass comprehensive federal immigration reforms.

In the coming two decades, as the U.S. native-parentage labor force continues to shrink, immigrants and their children are expected to account for most of the growth of the nation's labor force, with the fastest-growing occupations requiring college degrees. Rumbaut and Komaie stress that one key to the nation's future will be how it incorporates young adults of immigrant origin in its economy, polity, and society, especially how it enables these young adults to have access to, and to attain, postsecondary education and its manifold payoffs.

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Immigration, a transformative force, has produced striking demographic changes in the American population over the past few decades, especially among its young adults. As recently as 1970, only 4 percent of the approximately 48 million young adults (aged eighteen to thirty-four) in the United States were foreign born. That proportion was the lowest since the U.S. Census Bureau began keeping records on nativity in 1850. But by 2008, when the number of young adults had grown to more than 68 million, almost 30 percent of them were either foreign born or of foreign parentage. These new first and second generations of immigrant origin are steadily growing and changing the ethnic composition and stratification of the nation's young adult population. What is more, their transitions to adult roles—leaving the parental home, finishing school, entering into full-time work, getting married, having children—not only differ significantly by generation and ethnicity, but often stand in marked contrast to patterns observed among their native counterparts who are conventionally assumed to set societal standards.

In this article we sketch a comparative portrait of young adults in the United States in the first years of the twenty-first century, focusing on new patterns of ethnic diversification and of widening socioeconomic and legal inequalities in early adulthood. We analyze data from the latest Current Population Survey and review recent research on young adults of immigrant origin. We focus particularly on generational differences between the foreign-born first and “one and a half” generations and the U.S.-born second generation (of foreign parentage), who are mainly of Latin American and Asian origins, compared with native-parentage young adults, who are overwhelmingly non-Hispanic blacks and

whites. We consider structural barriers faced by sizable segments of immigrant youth, especially the undocumented and the less-educated poor, in their transitions to adulthood and discuss possible policy options.

Young Adults in an Age of Migration

No assessment of adult transitions in the United States can fail to pay heed to the ways in which contemporary young adulthood has been increasingly shaped by international migration. After four decades of accelerating migration flows, by 2008 about 41 million foreign-born men and women were living in the United States, most of them having arrived after 1990, primarily from Latin America and Asia. That population has been growing by about 1 million annually, in both legal and unauthorized statuses. *These immigrant flows consist primarily of young adults and their children.* Of the 41 million foreign born, 44 percent arrived in the United States as young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, and another 40 percent arrived as children under the age of eighteen, in due course to “come of age” and make their own transitions to adulthood in their adoptive society.¹

Moreover, given the youthful age structure and higher fertility rates of the immigrant population, a new second generation—the U.S.-born children of the immigrants—has been growing rapidly. By 2008, the U.S.-born second generation (with one or two foreign-born parents) totaled more than 32 million; 20 percent of them were young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four, and nearly half (46 percent) were under eighteen—that is, they were still mainly children and teenagers. As this new second generation reaches adulthood in large numbers within the next decade or two, its impact will be increasingly

and widely felt throughout the society—in higher education, the labor market, sports and popular culture, criminal justice and religious institutions, the mall, and the ballot box—all the more so in the urban centers where they are concentrated.²

As this new second generation reaches adulthood in large numbers within the next decade or two, its impact will be increasingly and widely felt throughout the society.

These new Americans are not a homogeneous population. They differ greatly in their national origins and cultural backgrounds, in their areas of geographic concentration, and in their patterns of socioeconomic mobility and legal status. Before turning to an examination of their transitions to adult roles, we consider briefly their ethnic diversity, ethnic geography, and ethnic inequality.

The Ethnic Diversity of Early Adulthood Contemporary immigration has led to the formation of new U.S. ethnic groups. Their extraordinary ethnic diversity is belied by the fact that newcomers from more than 150 countries with profoundly different cultures and histories have been officially classified, through the use of one-size-fits-all pan-ethnic categories, as “Hispanics” and “Asians,” similar to the older broad racial classifications of “blacks” and “whites.” Still, the advent of these newcomers is clearly reflected in the changing ethnic and generational makeup of young adulthood. Among all young adults,

non-Hispanic blacks and whites are overwhelmingly native-stock populations, while Hispanics and Asians are overwhelmingly foreign-stock groups: about 90 percent of whites and blacks are native-born of native-born parents (third or higher generations), but about 80 percent of Hispanics and 94 percent of Asian ethnics are either foreign born or of foreign parentage (first or second generation). This sharp divide reflects the recency of the migration of the latter groups, and underscores the central importance of nativity and generation in the experience of ethno-racial groups in contemporary America. The magnitude of the ethnic shift will become more pronounced as a result of continuing international migration (especially from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia), the higher fertility of immigrant women in the United States, and the aging and lower fertility of the white native population. For instance, Hispanics, who according to the U.S. Census Bureau surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States in 2003, now account for one of every five young adults nationally—and much larger proportions in states and counties of Hispanic concentration, including California, Texas, New York, and Florida.³

Lumping millions of newcomers into “Hispanic” and “Asian” pan-ethnic categories, however, conceals fundamental differences between the scores of nationalities that are bound and glossed by those labels. Of the 19 million first- and second-generation young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, more than half come from the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America, but fully 35 percent from a single country: Mexico. Salvadorans and Guatemalans together add 5 percent more, Puerto Ricans 4 percent, and Dominicans and Cubans 2 percent each. Together, this handful of Latin

American groups makes up nearly 50 percent of all first- and second-generation young adults in the United States. Similarly, despite far greater diversity among a score of Asian-origin groups, five of them make up another 16 percent of first- and second-generation young adults: Filipinos, Chinese, and Indians account for 4 percent each, and Vietnamese and Koreans for 2 percent each. Those ten ethnic groups thus constitute nearly two-thirds of all eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds of foreign birth or parentage.

Their countries of origin are the largest sources of immigration to the United States, and they represent the principal types of migration flows (undocumented laborers, professionals, refugees). More than half of all Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan immigrants in the United States today are undocumented; those groups make up 70 percent of the estimated 11.6 million unauthorized immigrants (Mexicans alone account for three-fifths of the total).⁴ Indians, Chinese (including Taiwanese), Koreans, and Filipinos have predominated among the “brain drain” flows of professional immigrants. And Cubans and Vietnamese are by far the two largest groups admitted as state-sponsored political refugees. Accordingly, although they by no means exhaust the extraordinary diversity of contemporary immigration, those ten groups (five “Hispanics,” five “Asians”) will be considered separately in the analyses that follow.

The Ethnic Geography of Early Adulthood

The nearly 30 percent of all young adults in the United States who come from immigrant origins (whether first or second generations) are not distributed evenly across the country; rather, they are highly concentrated in particular states and localities, especially in California, where 55 percent of *all* its young

adults are first or second generation, and in a handful of metropolitan regions. For example, nearly three-fifths of *all* persons eighteen to thirty-four in Southern California (59 percent), the San Francisco Bay Area (58 percent), and the New York metropolitan area (56 percent) are of foreign birth or parentage, as are fully two-thirds of the young adults of greater Miami and of Texas cities along the Mexican border from El Paso to Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville. By contrast, outside of that handful of regions, the proportion of young adults in the rest of the United States who are of immigrant origin is less than one-fifth. Thus, studies of young adults in New York, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Miami encounter very different populations than are found in areas less touched by contemporary immigration.⁵

Those areas of immigrant concentration, in turn, differ greatly by the ethnic composition of the young adults who settle there. Consider the top ten groups noted earlier. Of the 6.5 million first- and second-generation Mexican young adults in the United States, more than a fourth are concentrated in Southern California alone (primarily along the corridor from Los Angeles to San Diego)—as are more than a fourth of all Salvadorans and Guatemalans between eighteen and thirty-four and a fifth of all Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Koreans. More than two-thirds of all Dominican young adults in the United States reside in metropolitan New York, as do nearly a third of Puerto Ricans and a fifth of the Chinese. Greater Miami alone accounts for well over half of all Cuban young adults. The Indians are more dispersed, but still 15 percent are found in greater New York.

Ethnic Inequalities

Until recently, social inequalities among Americans (and among young adults in

particular) have been seen through a prism of black-white differences. Although major socioeconomic differences persist between native whites and blacks, the social and economic divides between immigrant-origin groups, who are overwhelmingly Hispanics and Asians, are even larger. The ethnic diversity of contemporary immigrants pales in comparison with the diversity of their social class origins. By far the most-educated (Indians) *and* the least-educated (Mexicans) groups in the United States today are first-generation immigrants, as are the groups with the lowest poverty rate (Filipinos) *and* the highest poverty rate (Dominicans)—a reflection of the fundamentally different ways they enter the country: through regular immigration channels, without legal authorization, or as state-sponsored refugees. And their differing legal status interacts with their human capital to shape distinct modes of incorporation.

“Brain drain” professionals mainly enter under the occupational preferences of U.S. law, which favor the highly skilled and educated. Also found among the first waves of refugee flows, these professionals are more likely to become naturalized citizens and, usually within the first generation, homeowners in the suburbs. The undocumented consist disproportionately of manual laborers with less than a high school education, whose legal vulnerability makes them economically exploitable and likely to be concentrated in central cities. Their children in turn tend to grow up in neighborhoods and attend schools where they are exposed disproportionately to peer groups involved with youth gangs and intergroup violence. Indeed, an unauthorized status can affect virtually every facet of an immigrant’s life—especially during the transition to adulthood.⁶ The size and concentration of this vulnerable young adult population

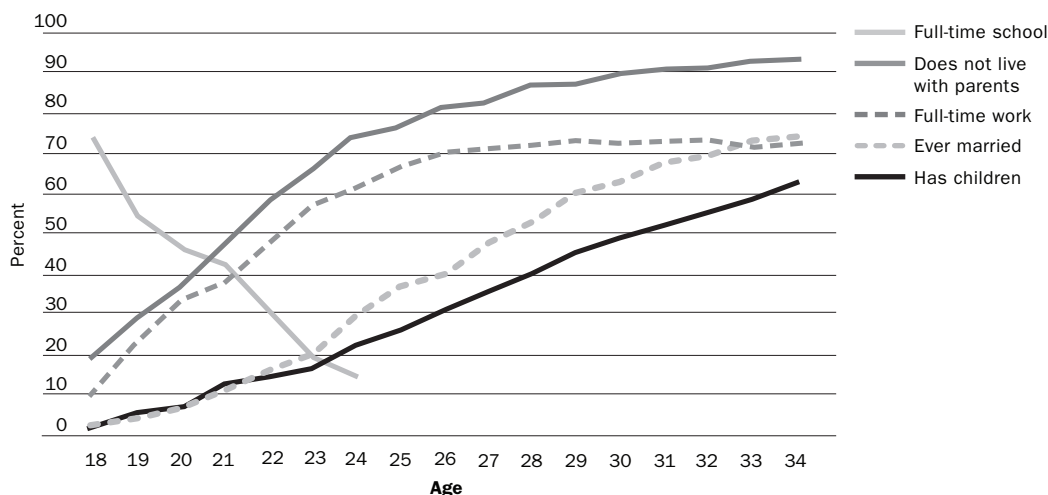
is significant. By 2008, more than a quarter of the foreign-born population—an estimated 11.6 million people—were undocumented immigrants, by far the largest number and share in U.S. history. Half (49 percent) of the undocumented were young adults eighteen to thirty-four, and another 13 percent were children under eighteen.⁷ We turn now to examine generational and ethnic differences in the transition to adulthood and how adult transitions are affected by patterns of socioeconomic and legal inequality among immigrant-origin groups.

Generational Differences in Adult Transitions

The exit from adolescence and entry into adult roles and responsibilities typically entails status transitions from school to work and from one’s family of origin to the formation of new intimate relationships, notably via marriage and parenthood. Nationally, relative to patterns observed several decades ago, normative timetables for accomplishing such adult transitions have been prolonged.⁸ Postsecondary schooling has lengthened for young people, and the exit from the parental household, the entry into full-time work, and decisions about marriage and children have been delayed. For example, data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth show that, between 1985 and 2003, the proportion of young adults aged twenty to twenty-two still living with their parents increased from 45 percent to 57 percent.⁹ And census data show that from 1950 to 2008 the median age at first marriage rose from twenty-three to twenty-eight for men and from twenty to twenty-six for women—the oldest on record for both.

Figure 1 graphs the percentage of young adults in the United States who are not living with their parents, are enrolled in school full

Figure 1. Transitions to Adulthood in the United States: Young Adults 18 to 34



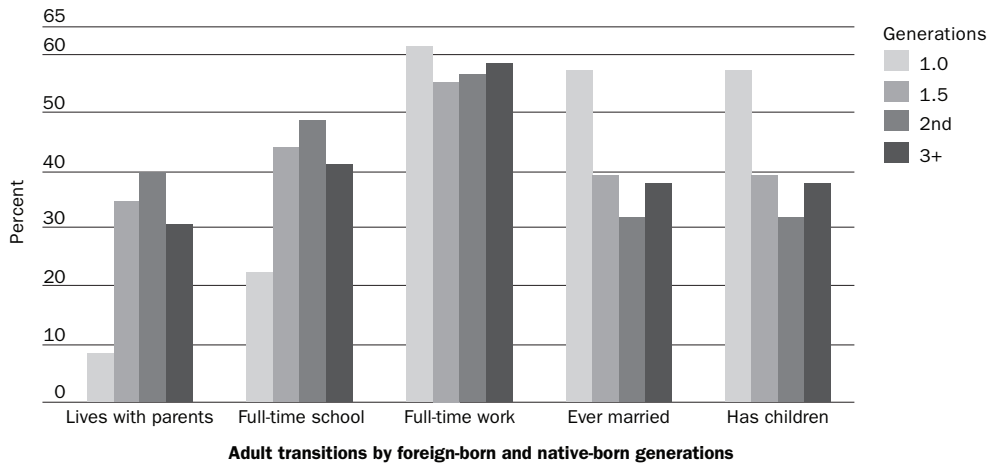
Source: Current Population Survey, 2008 (Annual Social and Economic Supplement).

time, are working full time, are married, and have children, for every year from age eighteen to thirty-four. The data again come from the 2008 Current Population Survey. Nationally, these data show that the most rapid shifts in the school-to-work transition, and in leaving the parental fold, occur between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four; the major changes in marriage and parenthood take place from age twenty-five to age thirty-four. For example, among all eighteen-year-olds in the United States, 80 percent were living with their parents, 75 percent were attending school full time, and only 10 percent were working full time. By age twenty-four, those figures had reversed: only 25 percent were still living with their parents and only 15 percent were attending school full time, while 62 percent were working full time. But among all twenty-four-year-olds, less than a quarter had had children (23 percent), and less than a third had ever married (29 percent); by age thirty-four, two-thirds had children and three-fourths had married.

Do these patterns hold for both immigrants and natives, or do they differ by generation? Figure 2 looks at each of these five measures for all young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four, broken down by generational cohorts. Within the foreign-born first generation, there are significant differences between immigrants who arrived in the United States as children and those who arrived as teens or young adults.¹⁰ Thus, we distinguish the “1.0” (those who immigrated at age thirteen or older) and the “1.5” cohorts (those who immigrated as children under thirteen) from the second generation (native born with one or both parents foreign born) and the third and later (“3+”) generations (native born with native-born parents).

As figure 2 shows, the first generation clearly stands out in their greater propensity to have completed the five major transitions to adulthood. Not surprisingly, the 1.0 generational cohort is the least likely to be living with their parents (only 8 percent)—who are most often left in the country of origin—and the least likely to be attending school (22 percent), the

Figure 2. Transitions to Adulthood by Generational Cohorts: Young Adults 18 to 34



Source: Current Population Survey, 2008 (Annual Social and Economic Supplement).

most likely to be working full time (61 percent), and by far the most likely to be married (57 percent) and to have children (42 percent).

In contrast, the U.S.-born second generation is the least likely to have achieved those conventional markers of adult status—leaving home, finishing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children. It is the second generation that stands out in every instance, rather than the first (1.0 or 1.5) or the third and later (3+), that is, U.S.-born children of U.S.-born parents. Indeed, second-generation young adults are by far the most likely to live with their (immigrant) parents (40 percent), as will be elaborated below; they are also the most likely to be attending school (49 percent) and by far the least likely to be married (32 percent) and to have children (25 percent).

The 1.5 generation, classic in-betweeners, falls in between the 1.0 and the second generations in virtually every indicator, but more closely resemble the latter (their U.S.-born counterparts, with whom they share the

circumstance of being raised in immigrant families while being educated and reaching adulthood in the United States). The native 3+ generations—who by definition set and reflect societal norms—in turn fall in between the first and second generations in these measures.

As noted, second-generation young adults are the least likely to have left the parental home. This trend is most pronounced during the *earliest* years (eighteen to twenty-four) of the transition: more than three out of five (61 percent) second-generation eighteen-to twenty-four-year-olds continue to live at home with their immigrant parents. As we will show, for young adults in immigrant families, staying at home helps to pool resources and minimize expenses, especially given the high cost of housing in major immigrant destinations like New York City, Miami, and Southern California.¹¹

Despite general observations often made to the contrary about immigrants, it is worth underscoring that the 1.0 generation of young

Table 1. Adult Transitions among Young Men and Women, by Ethnicity and Generation, by Percent

Percent		Men and women, 18–24 only			Women only, 18–24 and 25–34			
Ethnicity	Generation *	Living with parents	Full-time school	Full-time work	Marriage		Children	
		18–24	18–24	18–24	18–24	25–34	18–24	25–34
Native parentage								
Black	3+	49.2	35.2	33.5	8.9	40.0	30.2	65.5
White	3+	53.0	42.4	40.2	18.7	71.4	16.3	56.8
Foreign parentage								
Mexican	1.0	12.4	4.7	57.4	59.2	81.7	47.0	77.1
	1.5	43.8	23.1	46.9	35.9	73.9	35.7	75.2
	2nd	57.1	32.5	40.8	25.4	67.9	28.7	65.8
Salvadoran/ Guatemalan	1.0	9.6	5.5	59.6	44.4	72.5	34.7	67.5
	1.5	46.5	23.8	52.2	42.4	62.4	39.0	60.5
	2nd	64.1	43.4	33.5	13.8	48.3	15.2	51.8
Puerto Rican**	1.0	24.2	22.9	39.9	38.3	69.6	43.1	68.9
	1.5	45.6	29.2	42.6	20.3	49.1	29.7	68.0
	2nd	59.9	30.5	35.8	13.8	53.7	30.4	70.7
Dominican	1.0	31.6	23.3	43.4	31.2	71.2	30.0	74.7
	1.5	57.4	43.3	33.9	8.1	54.5	18.9	64.2
	2nd	66.9	48.4	25.7	7.6	54.8	13.9	52.7
Cuban	1.0	40.7	12.9	52.3	33.2	72.1	20.3	58.2
	1.5	56.1	32.1	44.9	23.8	75.6	20.2	64.7
	2nd	59.7	46.7	39.1	10.0	70.2	11.1	57.6
Vietnamese	1.0	37.6	46.6	28.5	24.8	78.3	8.5	56.0
	1.5	52.1	59.9	22.8	13.0	56.7	15.0	41.4
	2nd	53.9	60.5	30.4	6.2	38.8	6.1	31.9
Filipino	1.0	47.5	28.1	37.0	31.9	76.1	22.9	53.4
	1.5	55.5	55.7	36.6	8.9	56.6	9.9	45.6
	2nd	65.6	55.0	29.5	9.6	55.7	15.3	44.8
Korean	1.0	33.5	60.9	15.2	14.3	75.5	<1%	47.0
	1.5	58.9	57.9	29.1	6.7	56.6	4.4	36.5
	2nd	58.0	61.4	21.0	10.2	39.3	4.3	26.0
Chinese	1.0	27.2	68.4	20.4	10.9	71.5	2.9	37.9
	1.5	59.6	67.4	21.9	1.7	45.4	5.4	26.8
	2nd	66.7	65.7	21.5	3.5	46.0	1.3	25.5
Indian	1.0	19.1	41.4	30.8	53.6	92.0	8.8	63.0
	1.5	71.7	73.5	16.9	15.3	65.4	8.6	52.1
	2nd	75.0	71.0	18.1	2.7	51.0	1.4	25.8

Source: Current Population Surveys, 2003–2008 (Annual Social and Economic Supplement).
* The first generation (foreign-born) is divided into two cohorts: 1.0 (13 or older at arrival) and 1.5 (12 or younger at arrival); the second generation is U.S.-born with one or both parents foreign-born; the third or higher (3+) generations are U.S.-born of U.S.-born parents.
** For Puerto Ricans, 1.0 and 1.5 are born on the island; 2nd is born on the mainland of island-born parents.

adults (but not the 1.5) is by far the least likely to reside with their parents; generally, the parents of most of those who immigrated as young adults (or even in their late teens)

still reside in their countries of origin. For those who were the protagonists of the decision to migrate—to leave home, radically—immigration itself is a definitive adult

transition. But for the children of immigrants raised in American communities, for whom the migration of their parents is an inherited circumstance, the process of “coming of age” has different meanings and obligations and evolves in fundamentally different contexts.

Ethnic Differences in Adult Transitions

Generational status, as determined by age at migration and by the nativity of self and parents, clearly makes a major difference in the modes of adult transitions. What about ethnicity? In previous analyses of young adults in the United States we found that Hispanics collectively (two-thirds of whom are of Mexican origin) were the most likely to have moved out of the home of their parents, to be married, have children, and be working full-time, while Asian-origin young adults as a whole were the most likely to be attending school and least likely to have children.¹² But as noted, such pan-ethnic categories often conceal more than they reveal.

Table 1 takes a closer look at ethnic differences and provides data on adult transitions for the ten largest ethnic groups of foreign parentage in the United States, broken down by generational status (1.0, 1.5, and second), compared with native-parentage white and black young adults. Because the greatest changes in the school-to-work transition and in the exit from the parental household occur from age eighteen to twenty-four, the left panel of table 1 focuses on that earlier phase for those transitions; then, with respect to the entry into marriage and parenthood, the right panel of the table compares women only in two age groups, eighteen to twenty-four and twenty-five to thirty-four.

Between age eighteen and age twenty-four, native-parentage whites and blacks exhibit

relatively minor differences in the first three of these status transitions: whites were only slightly more likely than blacks to be living with their parents (53 to 49 percent), 7 points more likely to be attending school full time (42 to 35 percent), and 6 points more likely to be working full time (40 to 34 percent). With respect to marriage and children, however, differences are very sharp: between age eighteen and twenty-four, white women were two times more likely to have married (19 to 9 percent), while black women were two times more likely to have had children (30 to 16 percent). By age twenty-five to thirty-four, white women remained far more likely to have ever married (71 to 40 percent), while the childbearing gap had narrowed significantly (57 to 66 percent).

Intergroup and intergenerational differences in adult transitions among the ten foreign-parentage Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups are much more pronounced. For example, among 1.0-generation immigrants eighteen to twenty-four years old, only 5 percent of Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans were attending school full time (while almost 60 percent were working full-time—characteristic of low-wage labor migrants). By comparison, for the same 1.0 cohort of eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, full-time school attendance ranged from less than 25 percent for Cubans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans, to less than 50 percent for Filipinos, Indians, and Vietnamese, to more than 60 percent for Koreans and Chinese.

By the 1.5 and especially the second generation, within the span of one generation, full-time school attendance increases tremendously for most of these groups, indicative of rapid educational mobility. Among eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, for example, the share of Mexicans going to school full time

increased to 23 percent in the 1.5 generation and 33 percent in the second generation; the respective rates for Salvadorans and Guatemalans were 24 percent and 43 percent; for Cubans, 32 percent and 47 percent; for Dominicans, 43 percent and 48 percent; and for all of the Asian groups, well above 50 percent in both the 1.5 and second generations, including two-thirds of the Chinese and nearly three-fourths of the Indians. In turn, the proportion of these groups who lived with their parents roughly corresponded to the proportions that attended school full time, and was inversely related to the proportion that worked full time.

Pursuing higher education leads many young adults to postpone marriage and children. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the groups most likely still to be in school full time (for example, second-generation Filipinos, Indians, Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese) are also the least likely to be married and to have children. But as was the case between native-parentage whites and blacks, the interethnic and intergenerational group differences are striking in these respects. As table 1 shows, the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were by far the most likely to have had children in early adulthood (eighteen to twenty-four years old), but Mexican women were much more likely to be married than the Puerto Ricans (for whom the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing increases notably from the 1.0 to the 1.5 and second generations). The likelihood of both marriage and early parenthood among Mexican young women decreases notably from the 1.0 to the 1.5 and second generations. Salvadoran and Guatemalan young women also exhibit high rates of marriage and early childbearing in the first generation, but sharp decreases in the second generation. In contrast, Dominican, Cuban, and Filipino

women exhibit moderate and declining levels of childbearing from the first to the second generations, with the Cubans more likely to be married.

The Vietnamese, Korean, Indian, and Chinese women, in turn, exhibit very low levels of early childbearing (all in single digits), and very sharp declines from the first to the second generation in the proportion who get married. By ages twenty-five to thirty-four, only a fourth of second-generation Korean, Indian, and Chinese women and less than a third of the Vietnamese have had children, compared with more than half of the Cubans, Dominicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans, and two-thirds of the Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. These differences in adult transitions, in turn, are rooted in and reflect wide differences in socioeconomic inequality and mobility among these groups. We now turn to those considerations.

Socioeconomic Inequality and Mobility in Early Adulthood

Table 2 examines key indicators of educational and economic inequality. The data are again presented for the ten largest ethnic groups of foreign parentage in the United States, broken down by generational status (1.0, 1.5, and second), compared with native-parentage white and black young adults. The left panel of the table presents data on those at the two poles of educational attainment—college graduates and high school dropouts—and the ratio of the two. The right panel of the table presents the percentage of young adults who are low-wage laborers, below the poverty line, and lacking private health insurance (itself a reflection of job instability in early adulthood).¹³

As the data make clear, these diverse groups of newcomers, who account for a substantial

Table 2. Socioeconomic Inequality among Young Adults 18 to 34, by Ethnicity and Generation

Percent		Educational attainment			Economic status		
Ethnicity	Generation*	College graduate**	High school dropout	Ratio of college graduates to high school dropouts	Low-wage labor***	Below the poverty line	Lacking private health insurance
Native parentage							
Black	3+	17.9	17.8	1.01	40.1	25.6	48.9
White	3+	35.2	10.8	3.26	32.0	10.7	27.2
Foreign parentage							
Mexican	1.0	4.2	61.4	0.07	79.2	27.5	76.4
	1.5	7.4	41.8	0.18	54.6	19.8	63.0
	2nd	14.8	23.6	0.63	37.0	15.4	49.8
Salvadoran/ Guatemalan	1.0	5.0	64.1	0.08	75.6	19.9	74.9
	1.5	11.2	37.8	0.30	47.0	13.8	55.7
	2nd	32.0	19.8	1.62	29.1	9.9	48.6
Puerto Rican	1.0	14.9	23.9	0.63	45.4	30.9	51.2
	1.5	11.2	28.0	0.40	33.2	23.0	51.6
	2nd	13.1	23.6	0.56	32.2	21.6	51.8
Dominican	1.0	11.9	27.5	0.43	53.6	21.7	56.1
	1.5	17.8	28.1	0.63	34.0	22.8	60.0
	2nd	27.4	22.6	1.21	29.1	19.6	59.0
Cuban	1.0	16.5	17.2	0.96	44.7	16.9	53.1
	1.5	22.3	14.3	1.56	18.5	11.4	42.0
	2nd	47.6	10.6	4.48	17.8	10.9	33.5
Vietnamese	1.0	27.1	18.4	1.47	58.6	11.6	46.3
	1.5	47.8	8.8	5.45	29.0	10.3	41.7
	2nd	51.7	8.6	6.04	24.4	15.0	37.2
Filipino	1.0	54.5	3.5	15.45	26.4	4.6	28.0
	1.5	37.4	7.8	4.79	26.7	6.7	28.9
	2nd	46.5	7.6	6.14	21.8	7.2	24.9
Korean	1.0	66.6	4.1	16.10	15.1	23.7	39.7
	1.5	58.0	5.2	11.09	17.2	8.6	30.0
	2nd	59.0	7.5	7.83	18.8	14.5	39.1
Chinese	1.0	65.6	8.4	7.85	22.2	20.8	35.2
	1.5	64.2	9.5	6.74	21.7	11.8	34.5
	2nd	79.1	7.6	10.37	14.1	7.3	23.0
Indian	1.0	88.4	2.0	44.03	7.2	8.2	15.9
	1.5	70.3	7.1	9.94	18.9	7.8	28.7
	2nd	86.2	7.0	12.33	4.2	8.9	18.7

Source: Current Population Surveys, 2003–2008 (Annual Social and Economic Supplement).

* The first generation (foreign-born) is divided into two cohorts: 1.0 (13 or older at arrival) and 1.5 (12 or younger at arrival); the second generation is U.S.-born with one or both parents foreign-born; third or higher (3+) generations are U.S.-born of U.S.-born parents.

** College graduation rates are reported only for 25- to 34-year-olds.

*** Employed in jobs with Duncan socioeconomic index (SEI) scores below 25.

share of all young adults in the United States, are situated at the polar ends of the opportunity structure. Educational, occupational, and economic inequalities between native-

parentage whites and blacks—the quintessential “color line” in American life—seem narrow compared with the gulf that now separates most Asian and Hispanic young

adults. For example, native whites are twice as likely to have college degrees as blacks (35 to 18 percent), while dropout rates among blacks are 7 points higher (18 to 11 percent). The ratio of college graduates to high school dropouts among whites is more than 3 (there are three times more college graduates than dropouts), while the ratio among blacks is 1 (there are as many college graduates as there are high school dropouts). A third of whites (32 percent) are employed in low-wage jobs at the bottom of the occupational structure, compared with 40 percent of blacks. A quarter (26 percent) of black young adults are below the poverty line, compared with 11 percent of whites. And nearly half (49 percent) of blacks eighteen to thirty-four lack private health insurance, compared with 27 percent of whites.

In sharp contrast is the profile that emerges of foreign-parentage Latin American and Asian young adults. Many Asian young men and women enter at the top of the educational hierarchy from the get-go: in the 1.0 generation, an extraordinary 88 percent of the Indians had bachelor's or advanced degrees (more than 50 points above the proportion of native whites), while only 2 percent failed to complete high school (their ratio of college graduates to dropouts is an astronomical 44). Also in the 1.0 generation, two-thirds of the Chinese and Koreans are college graduates, as are more than half of the Filipinos, and 27 percent of the Vietnamese (who entered mainly as refugees), while their proportions with less than a high school diploma are in the single digits (the sole exception are the 1.0 Vietnamese, at 18 percent). By the second generation, those high levels of educational attainment remain very high (all well above the level of native whites), or, as in the case of the Chinese and Vietnamese, increase significantly (to 79

percent and 51 percent, respectively), while their high school dropout rates remain in single digits, well below that of native whites.

Latino young adults enter at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, although wide differences exist between ethnic groups. In the 1.0 generation, only 5 percent or fewer of the Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans had college degrees, while over 60 percent had not finished high school. However, significant progress takes place from the first to the second generation, with college graduation rates increasing to 15 percent for Mexican Americans and 32 percent for Salvadorans and Guatemalans, and high school dropout rates decreasing to between 20 and 25 percent (still higher than that of African Americans). The Puerto Rican profile largely stays flat: from the 1.0 to the 1.5 to the second generation the rate stays about the same, with the dropout rate (around one in four) nearly double the proportion that earns college degrees (around one in eight). For the Dominicans the share of college graduates increases from the 1.0 (12 percent) to the second generation (27 percent), but their dropout rates remain very high (around one in four). The Cubans show significant progress in college graduation levels (tripling from 16 percent in the 1.0 cohort to 48 percent in the second generation) and moderate declines in high school dropouts (from 17 to 11 percent, matching the rate for whites).

In the 1.0 generation, the Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans (the groups with the largest proportion of undocumented immigrants—an issue to which we will return) also enter at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, with more than three out of four mired in the lowest rungs of the U.S. labor market, and a nearly identical proportion lacking health insurance. About

half of 1.0-generation Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Vietnamese also work in low-wage jobs. Their poverty rates are correspondingly high, and more than half of all of them lack private health insurance. However, most noticeably for the Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans (who, in the second generation, are U.S. citizens by birthright), again intergenerational progress is rapid, as table 2 indicates.

Although the process of intergenerational change is only hinted at with these data, the formation of new patterns of urban ethnic inequality in early adulthood seems evident.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, reflecting the patterns of educational attainment already noted, the economic situation of the various Asian young adult ethnic groups is significantly better, as measured by the indicators listed in table 2. Groups that start out economically advantaged in the 1.0 generation (for example, the single-digit poverty rates seen among the Filipinos and Indians) maintain that advantage; others show intergenerational progress into the second generation (for example, decreasing poverty rates among the Chinese and decreasing low-wage employment among the Vietnamese). Poverty rates and lack of health care coverage for the Vietnamese and Koreans remain above those of native whites, but below the levels of African American young adults. Although the process of intergenerational change is only hinted at

with these data, the formation of new patterns of urban ethnic inequality in early adulthood seems evident. And as we will elaborate, that inequality is widened further still by the fact that millions of young immigrants lack legal permanent residency status, blocking their prospects for social mobility.

Leaving Home and “Giving Back” among Young Adult Children of Immigrants

By most any measure, coming of age is taking longer these days. In the process, parents are also assisting their adult children longer. Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross recently calculated how much material support parents provide for their grown-up children, using data from the 1988 special Time and Money Transfers Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and decennial census data from 1970 to 1990.¹⁴ The PSID is a longitudinal, nationally representative sample—but it was drawn in 1968, before the new era of large-scale immigration to the United States, and thus the sample is representative of a predominantly native-parentage population. Specifically, the authors examined how much time and money the sample of 6,661 young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four received from their families over the study period. It found that parents provided roughly \$38,000 in material assistance for food, housing, education, or direct cash assistance throughout the transition to adulthood, or about \$2,200 a year from age eighteen to age thirty-four. Of course, the amount of material assistance depended greatly on parental income. For example, parents (especially middle-income parents) used their financial resources to help their children pay for college, help them with the down payments for their first homes, or to defray some of the costs associated with having children. In addition, the authors

estimated that the number of young adults still living at home with their parents had led to a 19 percent increase in parental contributions. In short, the overall trend has been for parents to assist their children well into their thirties.

Are these trends and patterns equally applicable to the first and second generations of foreign-born or foreign-parentage young adults today? Earlier we noted that the 1.0 generation was by far the least likely to live with their parents—indeed, young adult immigrant workers in the United States frequently send remittances to support their parents and families “back home,” all the more as their economic prospects improve.¹⁵ In sharp contrast, the 1.5 and most notably the second generations of particular ethnic groups are living in the parental home longer than young adults of native parentage, especially white natives. Yet a series of studies of young adults of immigrant origin in Southern and Northern California, Miami, New York City, and elsewhere suggest that the pattern of support in immigrant families more often flows reciprocally or even in the opposite direction than that indicated by data on preponderantly native-parentage families. Such results have been reported since the 1980s by studies based on both structured surveys and qualitative interviews.

For example, a longitudinal study in the San Francisco Bay area led by Andrew Fuligni followed a sample of about 1,000 adolescents of both immigrant and non-immigrant families from middle school through high school and into young adulthood; the majority had immigrant parents from Mexico, Central America, the Philippines, China, Taiwan, and other countries. It found a greater sense of obligation and indebtedness to the family (measured by three multiple-item scales)

among Latin American and Asian youth, which was significantly associated with high levels of academic motivation; moreover, high school graduates from immigrant Latin American families were significantly more likely than their peers from non-immigrant families to provide financial assistance to their parents and siblings.¹⁶

The Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York (ISGMNY) study, led by Philip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, and Mary Waters, compared five foreign-parentage groups (Chinese, Dominicans, South Americans, West Indians, and Russians) with native-parentage white, black, and Puerto Rican young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two.¹⁷ They conducted a telephone survey of a sample of 3,415 during 1998–2000, as well as follow-up open-ended interviews with 333 of those respondents. The high cost of housing in New York City presented a major hurdle to achieving some of the traditional benchmarks of adulthood, including leaving the parental home; but the 1.5- and second-generation groups were more likely to live with their parents than natives. Of all the groups in the sample, the Chinese stayed at home the longest, followed by Russians, South Americans, and West Indians. Native-parentage whites were the most likely of all the groups in their sample to move out of the parental home, either living alone or with roommates throughout most of their twenties. The authors note that living at home has important implications for socio-economic mobility. Those living at home were more likely to be enrolled in school, and those attending college while living with their parents were able to avoid incurring heavy debt. By living with their immigrant parents, the 1.5 and second generations were less likely to be working yet able to save money to buy a home, benefiting them in the long run.

In a related analysis based on qualitative data from the ISGMNY project, Jennifer Holdaway illustrates how the high cost of housing in New York City has affected the transition to adulthood. Given the high cost of real estate and rents in Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs, many young New Yorkers cannot afford to leave the parental home. One-fourth of New York renters carry a “severe rent burden” of more than 50 percent of household income.¹⁸ The high housing costs lead many young New Yorkers to postpone moving out of their parents’ homes. Although nationally about half of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds were living independently of their parents, only 17 percent were doing so in the New York metropolitan area. Among thirty- to thirty-four-year-olds, only 55 percent were independent, compared with more than 90 percent nationally. Even at the higher age range, many more New Yorkers continue to live with their parents than elsewhere in the nation; again, this finding is especially true for the children of immigrants.

Holdaway shows how the disposition of many second-generation young adults to stay at home makes it much easier for them to attend and finish college and get a foothold in the New York housing market. In contrast, “native-born minorities, who share with whites the idea that becoming an adult means moving out of their family home but rarely have the resources to do so, find themselves at a disadvantage compared with most of the second generation in this respect.”¹⁹ In fact, a small but significant number of 1.5- and second-generation respondents were engaged in “multi-generational living.” Some families chose to live on different floors in the same building or purchase large homes that can accommodate multi-generation families. By living together, it was possible to combine

parenthood with continuing education or full-time work; while young parents went to work, grandparents assisted with child care. This practice was most common among Chinese, West Indian, South American, and Russian families. Very few native-parentage whites, blacks, and Puerto Ricans engaged in such living arrangements even though many would have benefited from them.²⁰

In addition to being able to save money and pool resources by living together, second-generation youth provide significant financial and social support to their immigrant parents. For instance, in a study of young adults (mostly Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Chinese) participating in the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) in San Diego, Linda Borgen and Rubén Rumbaut found that many of them seek to “take care of” their immigrant parents and even contribute financially to their parents’ future retirement.²¹ In-depth follow-up interviews with 134 CILS respondents (a one in ten systematic sample ranging in age from twenty-three to twenty-seven) found that 39 percent were supporting their parents financially (giving them money directly or paying their mortgage, rent, food, and other bills), another 6 percent were planning concretely to contribute financially to their parents, and 5 percent were contributing their labor in their parents’ business. Of the remaining half who were not making payments to or otherwise supporting their parents, 10 percent were living on their own without any assistance from their parents (including 4 percent who were putting themselves through college while working and living independently), and 9 percent had strained or severed relations with the parents (involving a history of family conflict or dysfunction, alleged abuse, drug addiction, prison). Only in a third of the cases

(31 percent) were the immigrant parents supporting their young adult children financially, either partially (27 percent) or fully (4 percent).

For some of these young adults, financial independence coincides with a sense of family financial security, not just their own individual security. A prominent theme in the CILS study, seen across ethnic groups, concerned the family's concerted efforts to minimize expenses, pool resources, and accumulate capital. Just over half of the families in CILS were homeowners by the mid-1990s, a rate of homeownership that had been aided by opportunities to get cheaper mortgages on real estate during the economic slump of the early 1990s, especially for the more advantaged immigrant professionals, or military personnel (mostly Filipino).²² But in other cases, the young adults themselves strove to become the family's first-time homeowners, with plans to shelter their parents.

The arrangements of San Diego's immigrant parents and their young adult children differed in several ways from conventional American adulthood norms of departing the parental household and setting up a separate home. First, there was no insistence that grown children leave their parents' home after age eighteen or twenty-one or even after marriage. Second, shared bedrooms and familial living space were common. Third, the children often embraced a range of responsibilities to assist their immigrant parents. And fourth, as in New York, given the costly affordability quotient in the region for single living, shared familial habitation made economic sense even for those who felt the "Americanized" urge to live independently. In San Diego, immigrant parents often shared their homes with their adult children, but as often as not, the children purchased or

contributed substantial sums securing shelter for their parents or for their parents and themselves together.

For some of these young adults, financial independence coincides with a sense of family financial security, not just their own individual security.

In some cases young adult children look at their earnings as part of the family's income, as documented by the Southeast Asian Refugee Youth Study in the late 1980s in San Diego.²³ The research combined qualitative and survey data to produce detailed case histories of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong young adults. One was Van Le, then a twenty-six-year-old medical student at the University of California and one of ten children of a Vietnamese refugee family whose father had died soon after arriving in the United States in 1976. In their family, as the children grew up and entered the work world, each was required to give a "tax" back to the mother. Van gave the money he earned as an undergraduate in work-study employment to his mother, and he expected to pay a "tax" when he became a practicing physician. The down payment for the house she lived in was given by the two employed oldest sisters, who also made the monthly house payments. His mother's low-paying job in electronics assembly was just enough to cover food and daily living expenses, but it would have been impossible for her to live in that house without the family tax system. Those who remained in his mother's house were

expected to pay half of their salary to her. The tax was seen as “generosity,” given without resentment, and treated as a filial obligation of child to parent. In fact, whenever a child married, one condition was that the new spouse accept the tax system, as did the American-born husband of Van’s eldest sister. This system of taxing was flexible enough that if grandchildren were born, the tax would be reduced.

A recent study based on forty in-depth interviews with 1.5- and second-generation middle-class Mexican young adults in the Los Angeles area illustrates three patterns of “giving back” to their immigrant families: providing total financial support of their parents or younger siblings, or both; becoming the “safety net” for their parents, siblings, and relatives during times of hardship; and providing regular financial support to supplement their parents’ incomes.²⁴ The authors found that about one-fifth of the respondents fully supported their immigrant parents—as did Adrián, a second-generation Mexican-American teacher with a master’s degree: “Ever since I started working when I was 14 I have given them everything I could. Now it’s at about \$1,000 a month...just to help them out.” He also paid all of the household bills. María, a second-generation entrepreneur with two young children, similarly supported her mother: “I pay her rent, I give her money, I take her to the doctors, I buy her prescriptions. I take care of my Mom.”

The most common form of giving back by the children of Mexican immigrants was providing monthly supplemental income to their parents. Half of the respondents in this study gave their parents between \$200 and \$1,000 every month for household expenses and also helped them in non-financial ways: translating documents, drafting letters,

making phone calls, accompanying them to work-related and medical appointments. The more successful often came to the rescue of their immigrant parents in times of economic crisis—like Lupe, a second-generation thirty-four-year-old vice president of a national financial services institution, who gave her parents \$5,000 to make their mortgage payment and cover their household bills. Even when she was in college Lupe had financially rescued her father, whose landscaping business was in jeopardy, by giving him \$10,000 from her school loans, which she was still paying back. She also agreed to co-sign for the loan used to purchase her father’s new truck, which he could not obtain on his own because of his credit record. The authors note that those who grew up poor (but were not poor now) were more likely to “give back” to their parents, relatives, and the co-ethnic community, and to display a “collectivist orientation,” while those who grew up middle-class exhibited an individualistic orientation resembling conventional American norms.

Immigration, Legal Status, and the Transition to Adulthood

In 2008, of the more than 68 million young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four in the United States, nearly one in five (18 percent) was foreign-born; astonishingly, almost half of those immigrant young adults, or nearly 6 million, were estimated to be unauthorized (most “entered without inspection,” while as many as 40 percent entered legally but then overstayed their visas).²⁵ The undocumented immigrant population has more than tripled since the early 1990s; one-fourth is in California, although increasingly it has been dispersing to new destinations. For foreign-born young adults, an undocumented status blocks access to the opportunity structure and paths to social mobility. It has become all the more consequential since the passage

of draconian federal laws in 1996, the advent of the “war on terror” after September 11, 2001, and the failure by Congress to pass comprehensive federal immigration reforms. Undocumented young adults are coming of age amid a hostile political backlash and rising animus toward immigrants. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants have been deported (“removed”) over the past decade, separating families and leaving behind, as of 2005, at least 1.6 million spouses and children, many of whom are U.S. citizens—a figure that has significantly increased since 2005, with the expansion of the enforcement budget for Immigrations and Customs Enforcement under the newly created Department of Homeland Security.²⁶ Federal raids of workplaces and private homes and other enforcement campaigns have been intensified. Hundreds of new laws and ordinances seek to achieve social control at the local level—restricting access to drivers’ licenses, education, employment, housing, even library cards. States such as South Carolina have banned all undocumented young adults from the state’s community colleges. Not surprisingly, the 2007 National Survey of Latinos found that 53 percent of all Hispanic adults in the United States (about a fourth of whom are undocumented immigrants) feared that they, a family member, or friend would be deported.²⁷ Federal, state, and local enforcement actions have continued since that survey was taken, throughout 2008 and into the Obama administration.

Adult transitions in these circumstances, most saliently the entry into higher education, are invariably shaped by young adults’ legal residency status. Undocumented youth do not qualify for federal financial aid or, in forty states, for in-state tuition.²⁸ In Arizona, for example, the passage in 2006 of Proposition 300, which restricts in-state

tuition and financial aid to legal residents, quickly resulted in a drop in enrollment at local community colleges and public universities. Some 300 students were estimated to have dropped out of the University of Arizona in Tucson, and as many as 1,000 students from Pima Community College were affected by the passage of this new legislation.²⁹ In California, one of ten states where undocumented students are allowed to pay in-state tuition, only 1,620 undocumented students were estimated to have enrolled in the University of California and California State University systems in 2005—a minuscule fraction of the 630,000 students enrolled in the UC and CSU systems, let alone the 2.5 million in all of California’s public higher education, including community colleges.³⁰ The severe economic recession since late 2007, exacerbated by bank failures, home foreclosures, and the state’s deep budget deficit, had by 2009 seriously undermined California’s “master plan” of universal access to public higher education—and those bearing the brunt have been the poor and the most vulnerable.

Consider the case of Karina de La Cruz, an eighteen-year-old undocumented student from San Pedro in Los Angeles County, who struggles to remain a full-time student at University of California–Los Angeles. Born in Mexico, Karina crossed the border illegally into the United States with her family when she was four years old. The family settled in San Pedro, where her mother worked in a fish cannery seven days a week to make ends meet. Karina graduated from San Pedro High School and was accepted to UCLA. She is the first in her family to attend college (as is typically the case with students in these circumstances) and hopes one day to get a job as a psychologist. Without legal status, however, she is ineligible for most forms of state and

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federal financial aid. UCLA costs about \$17,500 a year for in-state fees, books, transportation, and living expenses. Karina won a scholarship from a College Bound program that also held a fundraiser on her behalf, but those funds could cover fees and tuition for only two quarters. Moreover, Karina lives in a cramped apartment with her two brothers, sister-in-law, aunt, and infant niece; she must make an eighty-mile round-trip commute by bus to attend her classes, has few friends at UCLA, and has no safety net. She is not optimistic about her future job opportunities: she realizes that even if she is able to earn her bachelor's degree, most companies will not hire someone who is undocumented.³¹ Karina's story illustrates just how difficult it is for undocumented students to remain in school full-time, even when they can pay in-state tuition (as in California) and even when they are highly motivated and academically engaged (as is Karina). For undocumented students in states where in-state tuition is not available, the chances of graduating from college are slimmer still.

Roberto Gonzales' research in the greater Los Angeles area, based on more than a hundred in-depth interviews with undocumented young adults who were born in Mexico and came to the United States as children with their parents, shows how legal status shapes the adult transitions and life chances of 1.5-generation unauthorized immigrants,

including schooling, full-time employment, and marriage.³² Ramón Betancourt, one of the respondents, exemplifies the difficulties that undocumented youth face in even the most routine day-to-day activities. Ramón migrated to the United States with his mother at the age of ten. Although he has spent most of his life in the United States, he cannot legally work, drive, or vote. Ramón has not finished high school, struggles to find work, and is constantly looking over his shoulder. Without a diploma and a legal means to work, Ramón has spent most of his adult life piecing together odd jobs to support his girlfriend and two children. He started working for himself doing landscaping and painting, but work is not always steady. Child care is expensive, so Ramón's girlfriend stays at home with the children. She too is undocumented and faces the same fears and blocked mobility as Ramón. After spending five years—and having two children—together, they want to get married, but have been advised not to, as their marriage may cut off any possibilities for either of them to regularize their status. Ramón's younger brother, José, who was born in Santa Ana, California, stands in sharp contrast. He is twenty-four, married, and the father of three children. The two brothers grew up in poverty, but José earned his high school diploma through a local continuing education program, passed the tests for his California driver's license after several unsuccessful attempts, and opened up a bank account with hopes of establishing credit and saving money. Although his path to adulthood has been problematic and he too struggles to make ends meet, José remains optimistic and hopes for a good life for his family; his optimism is bred by the circumstance that unlike his older brother, he was born in the United States and is a citizen by birthright.³³

Of the nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be in the United States today, about 13 percent are children under age eighteen who have been raised in and acculturated to American contexts. They cannot be denied access to public elementary or secondary education under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, as the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982). But when they complete their secondary education—from the moment they reach early adulthood—they confront formidable barriers. They are subject to detention and deportation regardless of how old they were when they arrived, how they have conducted their lives, or how remarkable their school or community ties and accomplishments. An estimated 65,000 (who have lived in the United States for more than five years) graduate from high school each year, yet perhaps only 5 percent of them ever go to college. As they commence their transitions to adulthood, they face huge economic as well as legal obstacles. A large proportion lives below the poverty line (39 percent versus 17 percent for native-born children).³⁴ Without a means to adjust their legal status—which is derived from their parents, and they generally have no right to legal permanent residency through any other route—they are ineligible for most forms of college financial aid, cannot apply for a driver's license, and are excluded from the legal workforce, creating a growing pool of acculturated young adults who are being forced further underground instead of forging educational credentials and occupational skills.³⁵

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, a bipartisan bill introduced in Congress in 2001 and reintroduced repeatedly since (most recently in 2009), would permit undocumented students

to apply for legal permanent residency if they remain in school through high school graduation and go on to college or military service. As proposed in the bill, before the date of its enactment into law, an applicant must have: entered the United States at the age of fifteen or younger and be under age thirty; must have been continuously present in the United States for at least five years; must have earned a high school diploma or its equivalent; and must have demonstrated good moral character. Undocumented young adults who meet these conditions would then be able to apply for a six-year “conditional” legal permanent status that would allow them to work, go to college, or join the military. If during this period they complete at least two years toward a four-year college degree, graduate from a two-year college, or serve at least two years in the U.S. armed forces, they could change their conditional status to permanent and become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship. Estimates made in 2006 suggested that the bill could make 360,000 undocumented high school graduates aged eighteen to twenty-four eligible for conditional legal status (enabling most of them to enroll in college or the military), and make another 715,000 undocumented youth between the ages of five and seventeen eligible for conditional and then permanent legal status.³⁶ The act would give students like Karina an opportunity to pursue a postsecondary education, with full access to financial aid, as well as the means to enter the legal workforce and ultimately gain a pathway to citizenship.

Conclusion

Immigration in the United States is quintessentially the province of the young. Six out of seven immigrants arrive in early adulthood or as children accompanying their young adult parents. Relative to natives, their youthful age structure and higher fertility have

combined to produce a rapidly growing, U.S.-born second generation, with median ages still in the teens, who will enter adulthood by the millions in the coming decade. As this process plays out, the transition to adulthood will become more significantly a generational story—made more complex by the much greater ethnic diversity and social inequalities that exist among young adults. Social scientists who study this period of the life course must take these new dynamics into account.

Before the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the foreign-born population of the United States surpassed 40 million, an unprecedented total that reflected the evolution of a new era of migration since the 1960s. Fifty years ago young baby boomers, overwhelmingly of native stock, were beginning their transition to adulthood in a society undergoing rapid social change. Today as those baby boomers approach retirement, eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds are increasingly a foreign-stock population of diverse Latin American and Asian origins. Nationally, nearly 30 percent of American young adults already are of foreign stock—and that proportion doubles to 60 percent in key areas of immigrant concentration, notably in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. The transitions to adulthood of all these newcomers do not play out in the same way or in the same contexts.

Generational status matters. For the newcomers, adult status transitions—leaving the parental home, exiting (or prolonging) formal education, entering into full-time work, marriage, and having children—differ sharply between the first and second generations, and both differ in turn from conventional U.S. norms. Those patterns also vary by ethnicity and by socioeconomic and legal status. The new immigration has brought highly

skilled professionals, labor migrants with little education, and refugees escaping harrowing circumstances. Some 1.5- and second-generation groups have made extraordinary strides in early adulthood, outdistancing middle-class natives both educationally and occupationally. But a significant segment of these young adult newcomers is falling behind. Most vulnerable—accounting for almost half of all young adult immigrants—are those who lack legal permanent residency.

The DREAM Act, a legislative initiative aimed at the most successful portion of that population, offers at best a partial policy remedy to a much larger social problem. That a divided Congress has allowed it to languish for nearly a decade, along with other measures aimed at comprehensive immigration reform, is shortsighted. As the native-parentage labor force continues to shrink in the United States in the coming decades—a process that will accelerate as the baby boom generation reaches retirement age—immigrants and their children are expected to account for most of the growth of the U.S. labor force, with the fastest-growing occupations requiring college degrees. California already lacks enough college graduates to meet demand.³⁷ A key to the future of California—and to that of a nation being transformed by immigration—will be how the rapidly expanding generation of young adults of immigrant origin is incorporated in its economy, polity, and society. Virtually every aspect of that incorporation will be affected by their access to and attainment of postsecondary education and the manifold payoffs to that education. For a sizable proportion of the nation's immigrant population, that access is now blocked. The predictable result of political inaction—exacerbated since 2007 by a deep and prolonged economic recession—will be enduring ethnic inequalities among young adults.

Endnotes

1. These estimates and those that follow are based on the 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement. The CPS is a household survey of representative samples of the civilian non-institutionalized adult population of the United States. It excludes persons living in group quarters (such as those in prison, nursing homes, or military barracks). For our purposes in this article, persons born in Puerto Rico (who are U.S. citizens) are classified as first generation, and those born in the mainland of island-born parents are classified as second generation. In 2008, about 1.1 million Puerto Rican young adults eighteen to thirty-four resided in the mainland; of them, 29 percent were first generation and 35 percent second generation.
2. Rubén G. Rumbaut, "The Coming of the Second Generation: Immigration and Ethnic Mobility in Southern California," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 620, no. 1 (2008): 196–236. See also Dowell Myers, *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007); and Marta Tienda and others, *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies: Hispanics and the American Future* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2006).
3. U.S. Census Bureau, "Census Bureau Projects Tripling of Hispanic Population in 50 Years," 2004, www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/001720.html; "Hispanic and Asian Americans Increasing Faster than Overall Population," 2004, www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/race/00eighteen39.html; Tienda and others, *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies* (see note 2).
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 18. Jennifer Holdaway, “If You Can Make It There ... The Transition to Adulthood in New York City,” in *Coming of Age in America*, edited by Waters and others (see note 5).
 19. Ibid.
 20. Similarly, an exodus of tens of thousands of Cubans who came to Miami in daily “freedom flights” during 1965–73 brought a disproportionate number of elderly (since young adults of military age were not allowed to leave) and led to the formation of more three-generation Cuban households in Miami with resident grandparents than among any other U.S. ethnic groups. The grandparents in turn served as built-in child care providers, allowing young Cuban women to enter the labor force in much larger proportions than other Latin American immigrant groups. That dynamic played a significant role in the Cuban family economic “success story.” See Lisandro Pérez, “Immigrant Economic Adjustment and Family Organization: The Cuban Success Story Reexamined,” *International Migration Review* 20, no. 1 (1986): 4–20.
 21. Linda Borgen and Rubén G. Rumbaut, “Coming of Age in ‘America’s Finest City’: Transitions to Adulthood among Children of Immigrants in San Diego,” in *Coming of Age in America*, edited by Waters and others (see note 5). The larger CILS study, carried out in the San Diego and metropolitan Miami areas, followed for a decade a panel of more than 5,000 1.5- and second-generation youth, representing seventy-seven different nationalities, from mid-adolescence to early adulthood. See Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, eds., *The Second Generation in Early Adulthood*, special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 6 (2005).

22. The foreign-born represented less than 5 percent of the 1.4 million active-duty personnel in the U.S. armed forces in 2008, including 8 percent of all navy personnel. Filipinos accounted for 23 percent of all foreign-born personnel, most of them serving in the navy and stationed in San Diego; Mexicans were a distant second, with 9 percent of the total. See Jeanne Batalova, "Immigrants in the U.S. Armed Forces," *Migration Information Source*, May 2008, www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=683.
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24. Jody Agius Vallejo and Jennifer Lee, "Brown Picket Fences: The Immigrant Narrative and 'Giving Back' among the Mexican-Origin Middle Class," *Ethnicities* 9 (2009): 5–31. The quotations from Adrián, María, and Lupe are from pages 15–16.
25. Hoefer, Rytina, and Baker, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States" (see note 4).
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35. Gonzales, "Wasted Talent and Broken Dreams" (see note 30).
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