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Children in Immigrant Families in Alaska

Fact Sheet

September 2009

PROMOTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES for children in immigrant families is critical given that they are among the fastest growing segment of the child population (ages 0-17). This brief is part of a series of 50 state-specific papers intended to provide information about the importance of reducing language and literacy barriers to ensure that children in immigrant families achieve success in school and work settings. The results presented here are combined from the American Community Survey for 2005, 2006, and 2007. Funding was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Children in immigrant families learning English are a key to Alaska's future

Children with at least one immigrant parent account for 11% of all children in Alaska, and 4% of Alaska's children live with English language learner parents only.

Children in immigrant families have diverse national origins

The largest proportion of children in immigrant families in Alaska have origins in East Asia (29%), but close behind are those with origins in the Philippines (21%). Many also have origins in Mexico, (13%) Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union (12%).

Children in immigrant families have deep roots in Alaska

This is reflected in their parents' length of residence and citizenship, their own citizenship, their parents' and their own English fluency, and their families' commitment to homeownership.

Most children in immigrant families have long-term resident parents

Four of every five (81%) children in

immigrant families in Alaska have parents who have lived in the United States 10 or more years.

Most children in immigrant families have American citizen parents

More than four-fifths (85%) of children in immigrant families in Alaska have parents who are U.S. citizens.

Most children in immigrant families are American citizens

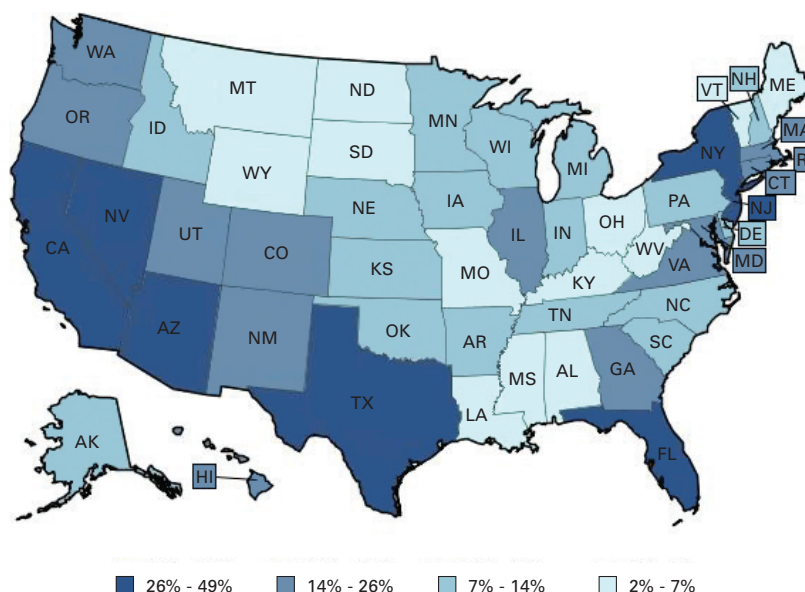
More than nine of every ten (92%) children in immigrant families in Alaska are U.S. citizens. The proportion is similar for children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only (96%), but even among those with English language learner parents only, 88% are American citizens.

Children in immigrant families have diverse language environments

Most children in immigrant families grow up in complex language environments that can help promote the development of English language skills. A smaller proportion lives in linguistically isolated households.



Children in immigrant families (Percent – 2007)



KIDS COUNT Data Center, www.kidscount.org/datacenter
A Project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The language skills of parents in immigrant families have important implications for language acquisition among children because parents provide the earliest environment in which children learn to speak. The English language skills of parents may also have important implications beyond the role in children's language acquisition. English language learner parents are less likely to find well-paid full-time year-round jobs and may be less able to help their children study for subjects taught in English.

Most children in immigrant families have an English fluent parent

Nearly four of every five (78%) children in immigrant families in Alaska live with at least one English fluent parent, while the others (22%) live with parents who are English language learners only. Of the 78%, about three-fourths live with English fluent parents only, and about one-fourth live with mixed-flu-

ency parents, that is, with one English fluent parent and one English language learner parent.

Four-fifths of children in immigrant families are English fluent

Ninety-two percent of children in immigrant families in Alaska speak English exclusively or very well.

One-third (35%) of children in immigrant families in Alaska speak another language at home and speak English very well.

Thus, many children in immigrant families are well-positioned to become fluent bilingual speakers, writers, and readers—if they receive formal training in both English and the native language of their parents.

But many children live in linguistically isolated households

About one of every eight (13%) children in immigrant families in Alaska lives in linguistically isolated households, in

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which no one over the age of 13 speaks English exclusively or very well.

Three-fourths of children in immigrant families live in family-owned homes

Seventy-four percent of children in immigrant families in Alaska live in family-owned homes.

Children in immigrant families experience important family strengths

These strengths include having two parents (and often other adult relatives) in the home who have a strong work ethic and are available to care for and nurture their children.

Most children in immigrant families have two parents in the home

Children in immigrant families in Alaska are more likely than children in native-born families to live with two parents. Among children in immigrant families, 87% live with two parents, compared to 76% of children in native-born families. More than four of every five children in immigrant families live with two parents if they have English fluent parents only (85%), which is similar to the proportion for Whites in native-born families (80%).

Children in immigrant families in Alaska are two-thirds more likely than Whites in native-born families to have another adult relative in the home (18% vs. 11%). This proportion is only 14% for children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only.

Children in immigrant families experience a strong family work ethic

Essentially all children living with a father have a father who works to support the family, among children in immigrant families and native-born families alike.

Seven of every ten (70%) children in immigrant families in Alaska with a father in the home have a father working full-time year-round, which is similar to the proportion for children in native-born families (67%).

Seven of every ten (72%) children in immigrant families in Alaska with a mother in the home have a mother working to support the family. This is somewhat less than the proportion for children in native-born families (77%). Children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only are also somewhat less likely than children in native-born families (70% vs. 77%) to have a working mother.

Two of every five (40%) children in immigrant families in Alaska with a mother in the home have a mother employed full-time year-round. Children in immigrant families are slightly more likely than those in native-born families to have a mother working full-time (40% vs. 37%).

Children in immigrant families experience important challenges

Many children in immigrant families experience the challenges associated with low parental education, low parental hourly earnings, and high family poverty, which, in turn, can lead to overcrowded housing and limited access to early education programs.

Some children of immigrants have parents with limited education

One of every ten (10%) children in immigrant families in Alaska has a father who did not graduate from high school, and the proportion is similar for mothers. There is no difference between children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only and children in native-born families (6% each).

More than four-fifths of children (85%) in immigrant families have parents who are U.S. citizens.

One-third of children in immigrant families in Alaska speak another language at home and speak English very well.

One in twenty (5%) children in immigrant families in Alaska has a father who has completed only 8 or fewer years of school.

Parents with little schooling may be less comfortable with the education system, less able to help their children with school work, and less able to effectively negotiate with teachers and education administrators.

Many children of immigrants have parents with low hourly earnings

One of every five (21%) children in immigrant families in Alaska with a father in the home has a father earning less than 200% of the minimum wage, that is, less than \$10.30 per hour. (The Federal Minimum Wage increased from \$5.15 to \$5.85 on July 24, 2007 and to \$7.25 on July 24, 2009.) This is almost two times greater than the proportion among those in native-born families (12%). The difference is somewhat smaller for children in native-born families and children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only (12% vs. 19%).

Some children in immigrant families live below the poverty line

One in ten (10%) children in immigrant families in Alaska is officially poor.

Overall, children in immigrant families in Alaska are about as likely as those in native-born families to be poor (10% vs. 11%), but they are almost two-thirds more likely than Whites in native-born families to live in poverty (10% vs. 6%). However, the official poverty rate for children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only is similar to the rate for Whites in native-born families (5% vs. 6%).

The official poverty measure is used most often to assess economic deprivation in the U.S., but more than a decade ago a

National Research Council (NRC) report urged that the official measure be revised because "...it no longer provides an accurate picture of the differences in the extent of economic poverty among population groups or geographic areas of the country, nor an accurate picture of trends over time" (Citro & Michael, 1995, p. 1). The proportion of families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line is often used in policy discussions.

More than one of every four children of immigrants in Alaska lives in a family with an income below 200% of the official poverty line. Children in immigrant families are just as likely as those in native-born families to have family incomes below 200% of the official poverty line (27% each). Children of immigrants with English fluent parents only are only slightly less likely to live below the 200% poverty line than children in native-born families (21% vs. 27%).

Many children in immigrant families live in overcrowded housing

Families with low wages and below-poverty-line incomes may live with other family members or nonrelatives to share housing costs and make scarce resources go further, leading to overcrowded housing conditions.

One of every four (26%) children in immigrant families in Alaska lives in overcrowded housing. Children in immigrant families are slightly more likely than children in native-born families to live in overcrowded housing (26% vs. 22%). Overcrowding for children in immigrant families with English fluent parents only is about the same as for children in native-born families (24% vs. 22%).

Children in immigrant families have low early education enrollment

Although data on early education

Children in immigrant families in Alaska are more likely than children in native-born families to live with two parents (87% vs. 76%).

enrollment among children in immigrant families in Alaska is not available, in the United States overall, children in immigrant families are less likely than children in native-born families to be enrolled in pre-k/nursery school at age 3 (28% vs. 35%) and at age 4 (56% vs. 60%). At age 3, the proportion of children in immigrant families enrolled in preschool programs declines from 40% for those with English fluent parents only to 25% for those with mixed-fluency parents and 19% for those with English language learner parents only. Similarly, at age 4, the proportion of children in immigrant families enrolled in preschool programs declines across the three language groups. Groups less likely than Whites in native-born families to be enrolled are children in immigrant families from Mexico and Central America, among others. Because a number of children in immigrant families in Alaska have origins in Mexico (13%), low enrollment in early education programs is likely a concern for this group of children.

Cultural preferences are sometimes cited as a reason for lower enrollment in early education programs among immigrant groups, especially among Hispanics. But recent research indicates that socioeconomic barriers can account for at least one-half and perhaps the entire enrollment gap in early education that separates children in immigrant families from Mexico, for example, and White children in native-born families (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, in press).

These results may be surprising, but it is important to note that these estimates are consistent with the strong commitment to early education in contemporary Mexico, where universal enrollment at age 3 is becoming obligatory in 2008–2009 (OECD, 2006). In fact, in Mexico where preschool is free, 81% of children

age 4 were enrolled in 2005, compared to only 71% of White children in U.S. native-born families and 55% of children in U.S. immigrant families from Mexico in 2004 (Yoshikawa et al., 2006).

Policies and programs to foster children's success

Alaska and its local governments, including counties, cities, and school districts, as well as the Federal Government, pursue many policies and programs to foster positive development among children. Such government activities are no less important for children in immigrant families than for those in native-born families, but particularly for children with English language learner parents only, special features may be required to assure that children in immigrant families have the same opportunities to succeed as all children.

Early education programs are important for all children, but may be particularly valuable for the cognitive and language development of children in English language learner families (Gormley, 2007, 2008; Gormley & Gayer, 2005; Gormley et al., 2005). Insofar as socioeconomic barriers play a critical role in limiting access of key immigrant groups to early education, additional resources would help these and other parents to achieve their hope of enrolling their children in early education programs.

There is a need for education policies, programs, and curricula that encourage fluency not only in English but also in the home languages of children and that foster bilingual spoken fluency and literacy (reading and writing). This need exists because language development is critical to the success of children in school, and research has shown that the development of bicultural language skills and identity is related to the successful

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educational and social integration of children in immigrant families (Espinosa 2007, 2008; Fuller, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Sam et al., 2006). Two-generation family literacy programs could also foster the educational, economic, and social integration of children and parents in immigrant families.

The successful integration of many children and parents in immigrant families in some communities may require active outreach in the home languages of families by schools, health care facilities, and other organizations and institutions serving children and families. The successful integration of these children and parents will also be fostered by the development of a culturally competent workforce in these organizations and institutions. ♦

About This Series

The Center for Social and Demographic Analysis (CSDA) of the University at Albany, State University of New York, collaborated with the Annie E. Casey Foundation on this project. The Center supports the efforts of population scientists at the University at Albany to conduct innovative research on such demographic topics as immigration, residential segregation, and health disparities. CSDA researchers Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D., Victoria L. Blanchard, M.S., Nancy A. Denton, Ph.D., and Suzanne E. Macartney, M.A. conducted the analyses on which the series is based and wrote the briefs while the Annie E. Casey Foundation edited, designed and disseminated them.

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