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POLICY BRIEF

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Embracing American Society Miami's Immigrants are Anxious to Integrate

A recent study by the University of Florida confirms that immigrants in Miami are assimilating into American society faster than ever before. For scholars, a rise in earnings, English proficiency, and integrated communities indicate immigrants are anxious to fit in.

Miami's Appeal

Known for its racial and ethnic diversity, Miami, Florida, has become one of the most international communities in America. According to social scientists, immigrants in Miami are flourishing more than ever before. These experts believe that although certain cultural barriers still exist for many newcomers, the importance of assimilating into American society pushes immigrants to excel.

Several Big Questions

To better understand the realities surrounding Miami's assimilation phenomenon, the University of Florida performed a study in Miami-Dade County, an area with a high concentration of immigrants. In the study entitled "Six Big Questions¹," several aspects of cultural integration were looked at, such as the rise of citizenship rates, English proficiency, wages, and racial segregation.

The authors' interpretation of "assimilation" does not mean the complete resignation of one's ethnic identity, but instead an increased social commonality over time. The authors suggest that the degree to which a particular immigrant group integrates in to American society is based primarily on three factors: 1) the reason for immigration; 2) the resources immigrants bring with them from their home countries; 3) and the initial reception they receive in the U.S.

Rising Citizenship Rates

Becoming American citizens is a significant sign of putting down roots. Immigrants must generally reside in the U.S. at least five years before they can apply for naturalization. Experts say the process of assimilation into American society is greatly enhanced when a foreigner renounces all loyalties to their previous country, which is required for U.S. citizenship.

The data gathered in Miami-Dade County supports this theory, by showing an average of 56.9 percent citizenship rate for immigrants who arrived within the last 25 years. The overwhelming historical tendency of foreigners to naturalize suggests that immigrants are not against integration. The decision to become a U.S. citizen is simply a matter of time.

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Do You Speak English?

With so many foreign speaking communities in Miami-Dade County, some government officials worried that immigrants were not learning to speak English very well. In order to properly evaluate the English proficiency of immigrants in that area, researchers polled a large number of foreign-born to determine proficiency levels. Once tallied, the data reflected that of those polled 66 percent considered their ability to speak English was either “well” or “very well.”

In a similar survey conducted in Miami-Dade County in 1992, 2,843 school-age children of immigrants were surveyed and approximately 80 percent of those students preferred to speak English with their friends rather than their native tongue.

Ironically, many parents are concerned that their children are not learning to speak good Spanish. Because English has become the primary language for many second-generation children, parents fear that their kids may lose the ability to conduct business in Spanish, or worse yet, speak with relatives. Researchers were startled by how quickly immigrants seem to be learning English, while neglecting their native language.

Residential Segregation

Where people live seems to be another indicator of assimilation. Because ethnic groups tend to establish their own communities, researchers selected five counties throughout the state to accurately determine whether or not immigrants were settling in areas where there was less of their own cultural presence. The racial composition within a neighborhood often times give scientists an indication of how well immigrants are integrating into foreign society.

In Miami and Tampa, Hispanic populations were quite substantial, indicating that a large portion of these counties’ residents had not left to reside elsewhere. On the other hand, in the remaining three counties, residential segregation was almost non-existent. The diverse racial composition living in these particular areas allowed researchers to surmise that assimilation was taking place beyond the boundaries of established ethnic communities.

The Generation Gaps

Another indicator of assimilation, similar to the rise in English proficiency, was the increase in wages among immigrants. In both of these areas a generational study was implemented to properly account for the boost. Scholars believe the rise in socioeconomic status among younger immigrants to be the result of greater social integration and adaptation. Most second-generation children surveyed were raised speaking English and had greater access to educational opportunities. Not only did wages increase but so did access to jobs outside of the production sector.

In Miami-Dade County the mean earnings for first-generation immigrants of \$27,312 has increased by 20% for second-generation workers to \$32,028, and the totals increased for the third. In the same survey, researchers discovered a decline in poverty levels, the percentage of immigrants who have earned a bachelors degree or higher has nearly doubled from 19.3%, to 30.3%. Social scientists view these statistics, along with several other socioeconomic achievements, as a reflection of the generational progress immigrants have made in assimilating.

Conclusion

A recent study by the University of Florida suggests that immigrants residing in Miami-Dade County are assimilating into American mainstream very well. Scholars credit an increase in naturalization rates, English language proficiency and wages as solid indicators that Miami immigrants are successfully integrating. Substantial declines in poverty rates and community segregation can be attributed to generational perseverance.