

**Maryland Institute for Policy Analysis and Research  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County**

**FINAL REPORT  
SUMMARY**

**FAMILY SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION AS A FACTOR IN THE  
EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN**

**For the SPENCER FOUNDATION**  
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## **Family separation and reunification as a factor in the educational success of immigrant children**

### *Executive Summary*

One in five children of school age in the United States is an immigrant or child of immigrants. We examine a factor that contributes to the difficulties many immigrant children face in school—separation from parents during migration. For many immigrants, especially those from Central America and Mexico, it is common for a mother or father (or both) to migrate to the United States and leave their children behind, in the care of relatives or friends. Then, after the parent(s) have achieved some degree of stability in the United States, the children follow. Previous studies found that up to 80 percent of Latin American immigrant children in U.S. schools have been separated from parents because of migration.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, we examined the hypothesis that separation during migration results in problems at school after reunification. We collected qualitative data in three ways: focus groups of parents of Latin American immigrants in Maryland; in-depth, non-structured interviews of school counselors and psychologists; and an on-line survey of teachers in Maryland schools. The qualitative analysis guided the design of our quantitative analysis, provided insights into the interpretation of the quantitative result, and provided examples of existing policies and suggestions for new policies to address the challenges faced by immigrant students who have experienced family separation. In the quantitative analysis, we used data from the New Immigrant Survey, a nationally representative survey of new legal immigrants collected by the Office of Population Research of Princeton University.

We find that family separation during migration has a negative impact on the educational success of immigrant children in U.S. schools. Children separated from parents during migration are more likely to be behind others their age in school and are more likely to drop out of high school. The negative impact of separation during migration on educational success is largest for children separated from their mothers (in contrast to fathers), for those whose parents have lived in the United States illegally, and for those who reunited with parents as teenagers (rather than at younger ages).

Our results suggest that school counselors need to be aware that children separated during migration and later reunited with parents are more likely than other students to have academic and family relationship difficulties. Teachers and parents argued that is important that school counselors speak the language and are comfortable with the culture of the immigrant child. Counseling interventions suggested include individual and group counseling, as well as support groups that include peers who have experienced family separation but have been in the United States for several years.

We find that the negative impact of separation during migration is largest for children who immigrate as teenagers. Because older immigrant students often face strong pressure to work to help out their extended families, initiatives to lower high school drop out rates should allow high school students to take classes at times when they are not working (at night or on the weekend), and to continue to receive free public school education at older ages (because it may take them longer to complete high school as part-time students).

In terms of national immigration policy, our results suggest that policies of family reunification should concentrate on reuniting families while the children are still young.

## **Final Report to the Spencer Foundation: Family separation and reunification as a factor in the educational success of immigrant children**

### **I. Focus of the research:**

One in five children of school age in the United States is an immigrant or child of immigrants. Immigrant children face special challenges and opportunities in school. On the positive side, immigrant children recognize the sacrifices they and their parents make for their benefit, and are therefore highly motivated to succeed in school. On the other side, challenges that immigrant children face include lack of English proficiency, culture shock and the low socioeconomic status of many immigrant parents.

We hypothesize that another factor common to the migration experiences of many recent immigrant children may also contribute to the difficulties some immigrant children face in school—separation from parents during migration. For many immigrants, especially those from Central America and Mexico, it is common for a mother and/or father to migrate to the United States and leave their children behind, in the care of relatives or family friends. After the parent(s) have achieved some degree of stability in the United States, the children follow. Previous studies have found that in some U.S. schools over 80 percent of immigrant children were separated from parents because of migration.

We examine the hypothesis that separation during migration will result in problems at school after reunification. Further, we test whether the negative impact of family separation is larger for Latin American immigrant children, for children who migrate as teenagers, for children with parents who entered the United States illegally, and for children separated from mothers (as opposed to fathers).

### **II. Research Status—Conclusions and Policy Recommendations:**

We studied this issue using a mixed qualitative-quantitative methodology. The focus of our qualitative work is Latin American immigrants in Maryland. We began by conducting two focus groups of eight and six parents of Latin American immigrant children who have been separated during migration, and in-depth, non-structured interviews of school counselors and psychologists. The insights gained from these focus groups and interviews then guide our quantitative analysis. From July 2007 to September 2008 we conducted the quantitative analysis. In the quantitative analysis we made use of data from the New Immigrant Survey, a nationally representative survey of new legal immigrants (Latin American and others) conducted by the Office of Population Research of Princeton University.

We tested whether there is evidence from this survey that the insights gained from the qualitative analysis of Latin American immigrants in Maryland can be generalized to the broader immigrant population in the country as a whole. Specifically, we tested whether separation during migration has an impact on four measures of educational success: whether children are substantially older than others in their grade (an “education gap”), high school drop-out rates, grade repetition and standardized achievement test scores. In the final qualitative stage of our research, in November of 2008 we conducted an additional focus group of nine Latin American immigrant parents in Maryland, as well as an on-line anonymous survey of 75 teachers in Maryland schools. The focus groups of parents and teacher surveys provided insights into the interpretation of the quantitative results, examples of existing policies and suggestions for new policies to address the challenges faced by immigrant students who have experienced family separation.

The results of our qualitative and quantitative analyses confirm that family separation during migration has a negative impact on the educational success of children that goes beyond the problems experienced by all migrants. The negative impact of separation during migration on educational success is largest for Latin American immigrants, for children separated from their mothers (as opposed to fathers), for those whose parents have lived in the United States illegally, and for those who were separated from their parents at older ages and reunited with parents as teenagers.

Family separation during migration matters, and should be taken into account in schools. School counselors in particular should be aware that, compared with non-immigrants and immigrants who migrate with their parents, children separated during migration are more likely to be depressed, to have difficulty adapting to the popular and school culture in the United States (and therefore may be more likely to be attracted into gangs), to have had traumatic experiences during the process of migration, and to have strained relationships with parents and siblings from whom they have been separated. The teachers and parents we surveyed argued that it is also important that school counselors (although not necessarily classroom teachers) speak the language and are comfortable with the culture of the immigrant child. If not, students are less likely to trust or accept help from counselors. Useful programs would provide immigrant students with help adjusting to American schools and teen culture, as well as foster a feeling of belonging through connections to peers who model positive behavior.

One successful program directed toward teenage immigrant students who have been separated from their parents during migration can be found in Northwestern High School, in the school district where we conducted our teacher survey, Prince George's County, Maryland. This program was developed jointly by the Northwestern High School ESOL Intervention Specialist and the Prince George's County Immigrant School Counseling Office specifically to ease the transition to U.S. schools for immigrants separated during migration. The program includes individual counseling, group counseling sessions, and support groups that include peers who have also experienced family separation but have been in the U.S. for several years. Participants in the support groups, or "reunification groups," compare personal stories, and discuss the differences between U.S. school culture and that of the immigrant's home country, difficulties of acculturation, and strategies for success in high school.

We find that the most significant negative impact of family separation on school performance is that children separated during migration are more likely to be older than others in their grade. Children separated during migration are also more likely to drop out of high school. These two results are probably related; children who are older than others in their grade are often less motivated to succeed at school, more likely to face pressure to enter the work force, and less likely to complete high school before they reach the maximum age at which they are eligible for free public education (they "age out" of the public school system before they graduate from high school).

Immigrant children separated from their parents during migration are more likely to be older than others in their grade for a variety of reasons: they may have repeated a grade either before or after migration; they may have interrupted schooling in their home country in order to work or take care of family members; they may have lost a year or more of schooling because of the trauma of migrating or because of inconsistencies in the timing of the school year between their home country and in the United States; or they may have been assigned to a lower grade than other children their age when they entered school in the United States. When asked which of these was most important, the most common response we received from parents and teachers

was that students were assigned to a lower grade in U.S. schools than they had completed in their home country. Most often this was due to a low level of English proficiency. In Prince George’s County Public Schools, for example, the assignment to a grade level in high school is based almost exclusively on English language proficiency. Once students are assigned to a lower grade they remain behind—students generally are not allowed to skip a grade to catch up to their peers. Assigning students to a lower grade level than others their age is more common in high schools and middle schools than in elementary schools. In Prince George’s County Public Schools, for example, elementary age immigrants are assigned to the age-appropriate grade independent of their English proficiency.

We also find that the negative impact of separation during migration is largest for children who immigrate as teenagers. In the statistical analysis, we find consistent evidence that immigrant students who were separated as teenagers from parents are behind others their age in middle school and high school. However, we find no evidence that younger immigrants who have been separated from parents are behind others of their age in the elementary grades. Therefore, in an era of tight budgets, we suggest that programs that address family separation would be most effective if applied in middle and high school rather than elementary school.

In particular, our results suggest that it is important to help children who immigrate when they are middle school or high school age to stay in school. Older immigrant students face strong pressure to work to help out their extended families (both family members in the United States and by sending remittances to family members abroad). This suggests that one important set of programs to lower high school drop out rates should allow high school students to take classes at night or on the weekend (so as to not interfere with part-time work), to attend high school part time (around work schedules), and to receive free public school education at older ages (it can take immigrant students longer to finish high school both because they may be working and because they lost years of schooling when they migrated to the United States).

Several school systems in the immigrant-rich Washington, D.C. suburbs have programs in high schools that are focused on educating older students during non-traditional school hours. Younger students (up to 21 or 22 years old) who attend regular high schools can generally transfer and attend these night high schools tuition free, while older students are required to pay tuition. In Prince George’s County, there are four evening high schools, including one at Northwestern High School. In Fairfax County (Virginia) the High School Continuation Program at Arlington Mill High School, although begun in 1929, currently tailors its teaching style to the needs of its primarily immigrant student body. Students at Arlington Mill High School may take special classes for English language learners (HILT), making for an easier transition for recent teenage immigrants into regular high school classes taught in English. Fairfax County (Virginia) public schools offer evening programs at four “transitional ESOL high schools” to provide instruction to older ESOL students (18 and older) who want to earn a high school diploma (the schools are Bryant Alternative High School, Mountain View Alternative High School, Summit Hills Alternative High School or Woodson Adult High School). The Transitional High School programs do not offer a diploma, but offer a way to transition into English language high school classes at these alternative high schools.<sup>1</sup>

In the focus groups and teacher surveys the most frequent policy interventions mentioned were programs to help the parents of students understand the structure and expectations of the

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<sup>1</sup> The transitional high school program appears to have a good reputation among teachers in the area. Several teachers from Prince George’s County in Maryland pointed to the transitional high school program in Northern Virginia as effective, and a program that should be replicated in their school district.

schools system in the United States (which can be very different from the school systems in their home countries). One frequent problem that arises in this context is that parents may have very poor English proficiency. Helpful programs mentioned by parents and teachers included “mommy and me” English classes at local schools, and after hours English classes for parents at schools (taught by teachers at those schools so that parents become comfortable with their children’s teachers).

Teachers and parents also agreed that, in order to facilitate the participation of parents in the education of their children, it is important to have at least some school staff that speak Spanish and are comfortable in the culture of the immigrant parents. One specific program identified as helpful and successful in our qualitative analysis of the Prince George’s County public school system was the parent liaison program, where schools hire a Spanish-speaking staff member (often a current or past parent of a student in that school) that parents of immigrant children can consult when they have questions about the school, and teachers can use as go-between to communicate with parents who have limited English skills.

Another area of concern that was mentioned consistently in the focus groups of parents and teacher surveys was homework. Teachers believe that Hispanic immigrant parents are not involved enough in making sure that their children successfully complete homework assignments. Teachers in the survey often attributed this to cultural differences between Hispanic immigrants and those born in the United States. The parents in our focus groups also identified completing homework successfully as a problem, but pointed to a lack of English proficiency on the part of parents as the primary reason for this. Parents found it difficult to know how to help and to understand what was required when the homework, instructions, textbooks and related materials are all in English only. A common request from parents with limited English proficiency was to have the homework, instructions and related materials translated into Spanish; without this translation many immigrant parents find it impossible to help their children with homework. Many parents and teachers also suggested that immigrant students benefitted greatly from after school programs where regular classroom teachers provide homework help in “extended day” programs.

In terms of national immigration policy, our results suggest that policies of family reunification should concentrate on reuniting families while the children are still young. Our evidence suggests that young children, even if they have been separated from parents, are better able to adapt to school culture in the United States, and do as well as those born in the United States or those who migrate with their parents. On the other hand, if children are not reunited until their teenage years, adapting to and succeeding in the school system in the United States is much more challenging.