

THE MEANING OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

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The language we use to describe the process of immigrant integration into a new society is both descriptive and normative. Changes occur over time, and usually over several generations, to produce a new social equilibrium. Our words, therefore, can describe both the changes and the outcome. Throughout American history, terms such as “adaptation,” “acculturation,” “Americanization,” “assimilation,” “incorporation,” and the now common “integration” have been used. It’s hard for policy makers to promote immigrant integration as a goal, unless they have a clear understanding of what is meant by the term. This research brief attempts to give some clarity to the phrase, acknowledging, however, that the normative meaning of the phrase is contested and somewhat obscure.

- There is more agreement among academics and policy analysts on the indicators of successful integration than on the nature of integration as a long-range goal. **Key indicators may include native language acquisition, education levels, workforce participation and income levels, homeownership, military service, naturalization, civic participation, and intermarriage.**
- A sophisticated measurement system using over 100 benchmark indicators has been implemented in the European Union.¹
- The terms “Americanization” and “assimilation” are used infrequently today because they imply that the process is largely one-way, i.e. immigrants and their descendents need to conform to the host culture, and that the end result over time should be the disappearance of immigrant/ethno-cultural communities. In 2008, the term “Americanization” was revived by the federal Task Force on New Americans which issued a report calling for a new “Americanization movement for the 21st Century.” However, the Task Force defined Americanization as allegiance to the political principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and saw no incompatibility between Americanization and cultural and ethnic diversity.²
- Current definitions of integration often stress that it is a two-way process. Here is one such definition that has been proposed by a funder’s collaborative: **“Immigrant integration is a dynamic, two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities.”** Elaborating further, the authors state that integration “transforms both newcomers and the receiving society, creating a new whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.”³
- A less sweeping definition, without implications for broad societal change, is provided by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, which understands integration to be **“the process of inclusion of immigrants in the institutions and relationships of the host society.”**⁴
- The attacks of September 11 in the United States, along with the London and Madrid bombings, have drawn attention to the national security implications of immigrant integration. Some observers believe that an effective immigrant

integration policy, often including efforts to maintain national identity and core societal values, will reduce the threat of “homegrown terrorism” among immigrants and their descendents.⁵

- The crucial test for the success of integration may indeed be circumstances of the second generation – the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Much of the current research is focused on how well the second generation is doing.⁶
- Immigration integration may also be understood by what it is not – the formation of a large and disadvantaged underclass of immigrant groups or communities of immigrant descent, sometimes described as a “rainbow underclass.” In Europe, the phrase “parallel (but unequal) society” is often used.
- Immigrant integration in the United States today has been described as “skeletal, ad hoc, and under-funded,” even though it is the “ultimate test of whether immigration succeeds” in any country.⁷ The current state of integration contrasts sharply with an earlier period in our history when a national campaign was mounted to “Americanize” European immigrants.⁸
- In Europe, where immigrant integration has become a hot issue in recent years, there is continuing tension between the British “multicultural model” and the French “Republican model.” The former classifies people by race or ethnicity, assuming that people from certain groups face special barriers, and tracks their progress over time in overcoming these barriers. The latter considers people to be individuals first and tries to ensure that people are not prejudged based on group affiliations. Although the “racial” classification system in the United States was not designed to track the progress of immigrants and their children, it resembles the British model more than the French and permits the tracking of employment outcomes for Asians and Hispanics, two groups with large immigrant cohorts.

¹ Information about the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) may be found at: <http://www.integrationindex.eu/>.

² The report of the Federal Task Force on New Americans is available at: <http://www.uscis.gov/files/nativedocuments/M-708.pdf>.

³ Daranee Petsod, ed., Investing in our Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration, a Tool Kit for Grantmakers, Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees, 2006, 25-26.

⁴ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, “Integration of Migrants: Contributions of Local and Regional Authorities,” 2006, 1.

⁵ Michael Chertoff, Director of Homeland Security during the Bush Administration, has stressed the connection between national security and immigrant integration. See, for example, his January 1, 2010, blog post: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-01-01/our-homegrown-terror-threat/p/>

⁶ One of the most important American studies is the “Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study,” involving young people in Miami/Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and San Diego, California, areas. For an overview of the study, go to: <http://cmd.princeton.edu/data%20CILS.shtml>.

⁷ Michael Fix, ed., Securing the Future, US Immigrant Integration Policy: A Reader, (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2007), i.

⁸ One of the best studies of the earlier integration effort is: Edward George Hartmann, The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant (New York: 1948).