

Immigrant Youth in Nevada Determinants of High School Dropout

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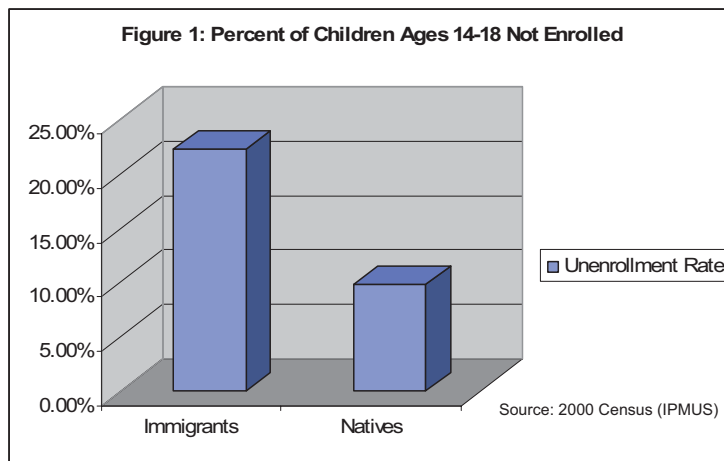
I. Introduction

Over the past decade, Nevada experienced a surge of immigration from foreign-born individuals. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2004 approximately 413,932 of Nevadans were foreign-born immigrants. The number is projected to increase to 618,518 by 2010 (Evenson and Schwer, 2005). This is not an uncommon trend among the states. The Census Bureau shows that in 2002, there were 32.5 million immigrants living in the U.S. Of those, 52.2 percent were born in Latin America, 25.5 percent in Asia, 14 percent in Europe, and the remaining 8.3 percent in other parts of the world.

As Nevada continues its robust growth, immigration is an element that cannot be overlooked by its citizens and legislature. The fact that immigrants are less likely to be educated and more likely to be in poverty has wide-ranging implications not only for the immigrants but also for Nevada as a whole. If immigrants are finding it extremely difficult to obtain middle-class income, it raises the question whether or not a significant proportion of immigrants may be unable to succeed in Nevada's current economy. Such a poverty trap, in the long run, could be a significant cost to Nevada. Furthermore, as Nevada's economy continues to experience service-sector job growth, the relative rise in uneducated foreign-born individuals may worsen long-term economic-growth prospects. Indeed, narrowing the disparities in academic achievement of foreign-born immigrants may play a critical role in ensuring Nevada's continued future success. An educated workforce will likely contribute more to future growth and the productivity of Nevada's economy. However, according to the 2000 Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), Nevada's foreign-born immigrants are more likely to drop out of

high school than their native counterparts (see Figure 1).

Child Trends (2006), using national data, reports that young people who drop out of high school are not likely to have the minimum skills and credentials needed to function



in today's increasingly complex society and technological workplace. In addition, high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed and receive government assistance. Without a doubt, the completion of high school is a minimum requirement for most jobs in Nevada.

This brief focuses on the current status of Nevada's foreign-born youth's educational status—more particularly, on their educational participation/high-school dropout rate. Given the school system's pressure to accommodate the sudden population growth in Nevada, issues such as retaining students, especially immigrants, who are more likely to drop out, present difficulties. This policy brief examines possible determinants that contribute to an immigrant youth dropping out of high school.

The next section reviews literature regarding determinants of the high school dropout rate and its relevance to the foreign-born immigrants in Nevada. This section is then followed by a discussion of policy implications and a conclusion.

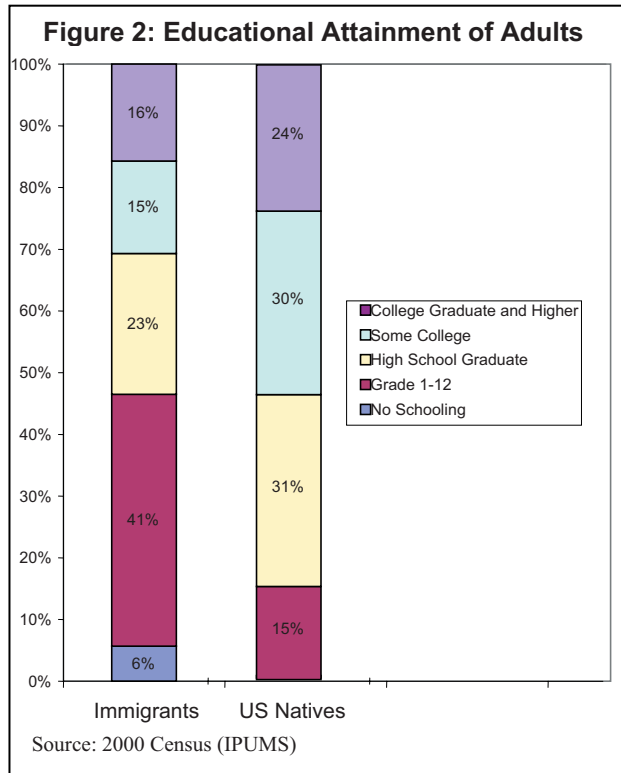
II. Determinants of High School Dropout and Their Relevance to Nevada's Foreign-Born Youth

Hood (2003) reported that six years ago, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani formed a task force to look at bilingual education in the New York City schools, there was an effort to curtail bilingual-education programs and direct students toward English-only classes at a much quicker pace. In the end, neither the task force nor the Board of Education opted for that route. This story is not uncommon—immigrant students' lack of success in most schools is largely attributed by most people to their inability to converse in English, but there are other elements that

play a huge role in determining a student's school success and participation. Family background, psychological factors, and patterns of behavior and activities within schools have been widely cited as causal factors in educational participation among children.¹

Perhaps the most widely studied factor is family background, which has proven to exert a strong influence on educational attainment in general (Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Several aspects of family background have been cited that affect the probability of a child dropping out of high school. The educational attainment of both parents is among the important factors (Hill, 1979). Better-educated parents could influence their children's educational aspirations by spending more time with their children, thereby increasing their children's ability and, ultimately, their likelihood of remaining in school (Hill & Stafford, 1980). Unfortunately, parents of Nevada's foreign-born children/youth are relatively uneducated.

Figure 2 depicts the educational attainment of both Nevada's foreign-born adult immigrants and natives, according to the 2000 Census (IPUMS). It is important to note that approximately 47 percent of the adults have no high school diploma or equivalent. Income is another influential aspect of family background. To be sure, families with more discretionary income may spend to enrich a child's/youth's life. Also, youth from poor families may feel pressure to contribute to their families' incomes and, as a result, they may be more likely to drop out of school and seek work (Lerman, 1972). Evenson and Schwer (2005) find that immigrant families in Nevada with lower levels of income are more likely to be below the poverty-level threshold (16% poverty rate for immigrants versus 10% poverty rate for natives). In addition, immigrants in



Nevada have a median income of \$44,000, whereas natives have a median income of \$50,400.

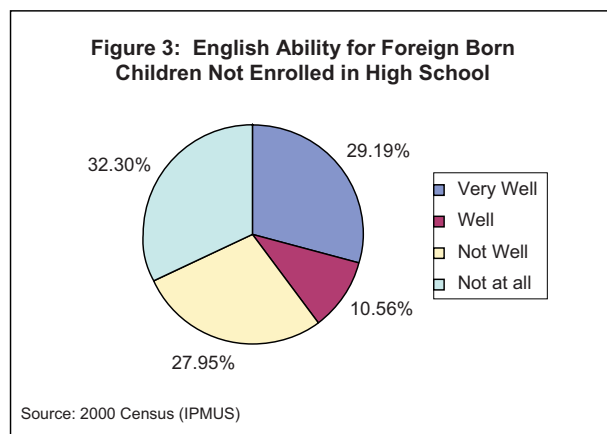
Family structure also plays an important role. Children/youth from broken families—where one or more parent is absent—may be less likely to find the support and encouragement needed to keep them in school (Howell & Frese, 1982). Yet the absence of natural parents in itself may be less important than the financial difficulties that arise with it. According to the IPUMS, approximately 14.34 percent of foreign-born youth between the ages of 14 and 18 in Nevada belong to a family where no adult works, which is higher than U.S. natives (4 percent).

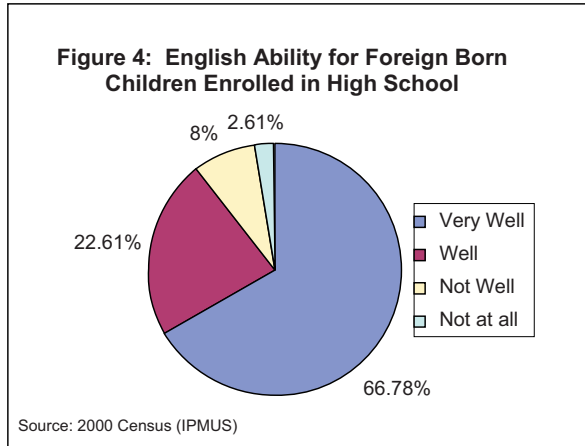
Family size, housing condition, and geographic location also affect the propensity to drop out of high school (Hill, 1979). Researchers believe that larger family sizes increase the need for a youth to start working early and the tendency to drop

out of school (Canagarajah and Coulombe, 1997). This may be caused by the need to support younger siblings. Immigrant households in Nevada tend to be larger than native households, with 4.4 persons per household, on average, relative to 3.6 persons for natives.

A student’s academic ability has been researched extensively and results suggest that dropouts demonstrate lower levels of ability than students who finish high school (Hill, 1979). A not-so-obvious factor to the likelihood is the student’s confidence and sociability. Psychological factors may affect the likelihood of a youth dropping out of high school. Combs and Cooley (1968) show that a student’s confidence can be associated inversely with dropping out. Immigrant students may lack the confidence needed to succeed in class. This is due to two factors. First, the inability to communicate with classmates due to inadequate English-speaking ability can diminish a youth’s confidence. Second, new environments tend to reduce a youth’s confidence. This is consistent with empirical findings in Nevada. Figure 3 shows the English ability of foreign-born youth ages 14-18 not enrolled in high school.

Figure 4 shows the English ability of foreign-born youth ages 14-18 enrolled in high school. The results certainly corroborate the





theory above. Immigrant youth who are not enrolled in school tend to have little or no English-speaking ability, whereas almost all of the immigrant youth enrolled in a high school have very good or good English-speaking ability.

There are other contributing factors that have been suggested. Early marriage and pregnancy is highly correlated with a youth dropping out of high school (Howell & Frese, 1982). Rumberger (1983) finds that more reading materials in the household reduce the likelihood of dropping out. Lastly, race is a significant determinant of dropping out of school.

Furthermore, researchers also believe that there are institutional and social factors that contribute to the likelihood of a youth dropping out. Several school characteristics play an important role. As suggested by Gamoran (1992), students in a school can influence student achievement apart from the effects of student characteristics at an individual level. The school's resources also, according to several studies, play an important role in preventing high school dropouts. Studies indicate that pupil/teacher ratio is positively correlated with high school dropouts even after controlling for a host of individual and contextual factors that might influence dropout rates (McNeal, 1997). Teacher quality, as perceived by students,

is also strongly and inversely correlated with high school dropout (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In addition, Rumberger (2001) suggests that a community's labor economy can affect a youth's decision to drop out. Relatively favorable employment opportunities for young adults increase the likelihood of dropping out, while better prospects for high school graduates decrease the likelihood. Nevada, especially its metropolitan areas, has plenty of opportunities for employment for individuals without a high school education.

III. Policy Implication and Suggestion

This section reviews the factors that contribute to a foreign-born immigrant dropping out of high school. A summary of the factors discussed above is listed in Table 1 with some suggested actions that might be considered.

Since the parents of Nevada's foreign-born students tend to be less educated, they may be less capable of providing academic support for their children/youth. Furthermore, these students may be less inspired to strive hard in school since they lack proper role models.

The Clark County School District (CCSD) program, which encourages the educational attainment for immigrants, could include a tutoring program for foreign-born immigrants that have less-educated parents and mentorship programs. These and other programs could help increase a student's aspiration to achieve higher educational attainment.

Approximately half of foreign-born students that drop out of high school are employed, giving credence to the view that foreign-born students are more likely to drop out of high school in order to support themselves and their families. For families with special

Table 1

Possible Determinants	Suggested Actions/Measures
(a) Less-educated parents	Implement programs that offer educational encouragement and support
(b) Low income	Vouchers for certain families
(c) Lack of confidence due to inability to speak English	Tailor a special curriculum for non-English speaking students
(d) High Student/Teacher Ratio	Decrease student-teacher ratio especially for foreign-born students
(e) Opportunity Cost	Increase awareness of the benefits of a high school education

financial needs it may be useful for the school district to evaluate the adoption of a voucher program that encourages these families to send youth of working age to school, as opposed to having them employed. This would decrease the opportunity cost of going to school and increase the likelihood of these youth going to school.

Foreign-born youth who do not speak English very well (or not at all) are more likely to drop out of high school than those who do, other things equal. CCSD currently has a year-long remedial program that helps foreign-born children who do not speak English very well. However, given the length of the program, most of these students may still not feel comfortable in their language ability. This lack of confidence could be remedied by tailoring a program that one would normally take in a regular (non-immigrant student) setting, especially for Spanish-speaking students. For example, special subjects could be tailored to allow ease of transition between Spanish and English. In addition to these classes, CCSD should decrease the student-teacher ratio since foreign-born students need more attention than native students.

Given Nevada’s robust economy and demand for low-skilled laborers, the opportunity cost for a lot of high school students is relatively high. Foreign-born students have a higher opportunity cost since they are less likely to be aware of the benefits of education. Programs that increase students’ awareness, especially to foreign-born immigrants, should be implemented. These programs could inform the students of career opportunities for high-school graduates. In addition, a need exists for increasing awareness of higher education (college) as an alternative to a career after graduating high school.

All in all, it is evident that Nevada’s foreign-born youth need relatively more attention. This need for attention warrants the development of new programs that may be a huge cost to the state. However, these benefits may outweigh the costs since today’s foreign-born students will clearly shape Nevada’s future workforce. Therefore, lawmakers should take the future of Nevada’s economic success into account when balancing between social needs and costs. In conclusion, in a social context, the benefit of “having no child left behind” clearly outweighs any costs.

END NOTES

¹ Under most of Nevada's school system, immigrants from foreign countries are still required to take English as a Second Language courses for the first year, together with other subjects. The second and third years are optional and students are encouraged to take regular classes.

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