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Coming of age before the great expulsion: the story of the CILS-San Diego sample 25 years later

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

California was transformed by immigration in the 1980s. In 1991, a representative sample of children of immigrants and refugees was drawn from 8th/9th graders in San Diego’s public schools. These CILS respondents were followed for nearly 25 years, from early adolescence to their late thirties, combining surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews. The educational and cultural integration of this segment of the new second generation has been largely positive. These adult children of immigrants – from Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, China, India and elsewhere – have above average educational attainments and mainly think of themselves as mainstream Americans, outcomes produced in an inclusive multiethnic context with a strong and accessible public higher education system. But in the current national context of accelerated deportations and exclusions, and a continuing retreat from investments in public education, the future for the next generation of immigrants’ children is far from certain.

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\textbf{KEYWORDS} Second generation; children of immigrants; integration; ethnicity; education

The study of “the new second generation”, arguably the most consequential legacy of contemporary immigration to the United States, is now more than a quarter century old, and has generated a vibrant field of study. The incorporation trajectories of the adult children of the new immigration have been the subject of vigorous debate: are they not only “assimilating” into the American “mainstream” but exhibiting a “second-generation advantage” relative to native-born peers, or experiencing “downward assimilation” or “second-generation decline”? (e.g. Alba and Nee 2003; Gans 1992; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Zhou 1993). Previous studies have provided insight into the socio-economic trajectories and cultural adaptations of the growing second generation population in adolescence and early adulthood (Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 2008). However, existing research is limited because studies have focused mainly
on children of immigrants in their teens (in the 1990s) or mid-twenties (in the early 2000s), even as it is taking longer than in the past to complete higher education and other adult transitions (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005). Existing studies were also largely carried out prior to the punitive “age of deportation” that has come to mark the present period.

In this study, we draw from our latest follow-up to the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) in San Diego, which provides a unique longitudinal view spanning nearly 25 years of the life course of our respondents (1991–2016), from their early teens to their late thirties. It enables us to more fully analyze processes of socioeconomic attainment and cultural incorporation among children of immigrants born in the late 1970s, who grew up during a notably inclusionary period for immigrants and refugees in San Diego and in the U.S. (which contrasts sharply with the context under which many children of immigrants throughout the country are coming of age today); in a state (California) that had invested in a well-planned system of accessible and affordable public colleges and universities; in an era of widening income inequalities in which the prospects of social mobility of immigrants’ children have hinged on their levels of education more than ever before; and who navigated the Great Recession just as they were turning 30. As an indicator of socioeconomic attainment, we focus on educational attainment, arguably the most important indicator of long-term socioeconomic success (Tamborini, Kim, and Sakamoto 2015). While prior studies have examined educational attainment in early adulthood (e.g. Borgen and Rumbaut 2011; Rumbaut 2008), we note that over half of our respondents were still attending school in their mid-twenties, and 39 per cent attended postsecondary school into their thirties. As indicators of cultural incorporation, we examine the degree to which respondents identify as American and consider themselves part of the American mainstream. Finally, we consider whether and to what degree the current era of immigrant exclusion and expulsion has impacted them.

**California and the new second generation**

Waves of international migrants since the 1960s have transformed and will continue to transform the United States, and especially California. Indeed, recent estimates indicate that almost all of the growth of the U.S. working-age population between now and 2060 will consist of immigrants and their children (Vespa, Armstrong, and Medina 2018). In Southern California, the importance of children of immigrants for the overall workforce cannot be overstated. Even with recent immigration shifts to “new destinations”, since the 1970s more immigrants have settled in Southern California than in any other metropolitan region of the world. Southern California is home to the largest concentrations of Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Filipinos,
Koreans, Japanese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Iranians outside of their respective countries of origin, and to sizable contingents of many others (Rumbaut 2004, 2008). More than half of the nearly 40 million people living in California today are immigrants or their US-born children.

The demographic transformation of California has proceeded so rapidly that it is hard to recall that Southern California itself had only relatively recently become a “new destination”. From 1920 to 1960, “Los Angeles was the whitest and most Protestant city in the United States” (Wiener 2008). By the end of the 1980s, however, fully a third of all the 19.8 million immigrants in the U.S. had settled in California – and immigrants from eight of the top 10 origin countries had established their primary settlements in California, a pattern that remains – with Los Angeles the principal destination. Indeed, by 2000 California (the largest of the 50 states by far) had already become a “majority-minority” state. From 1980 to 2017, California’s Asian population grew from 5 per cent to 15 per cent, and the Latino population grew from 19 per cent to 39 per cent. Thus, our respondents came of age in a context that became increasingly diverse and multicultural throughout their lives.

The newcomer population is enormously diverse in terms of both national and social class origins. By far the most and the least educated groups in California and the United States today are immigrants, and the highest and the lowest poverty rates are similarly found among immigrants and refugees. Group characteristics interact with external contexts of reception to form the conditions within which immigrants’ children adapt to American society (cf. Portes and Rumbaut 2001). But thus far studies have not been able to fully explore the adaptation of children of immigrants as it unfolds over the life course from adolescence to middle adulthood, even as the size of the adult second generation has grown, in sharply different and changing contexts of incorporation. This generational succession will continue to expand in the coming decade – during a quasi-revanchist period which has been marked by nativist backlash and growing xenophobia (cf. Kanstroom 2007). Since 2001, over 5 million people have been deported, leaving behind several million spouses and children, many of whom are U.S. citizens.

**The context: a great inclusion?**

The period spanning approximately the quarter century from 1965 to 1990 has been arguably the most inclusive era in American immigration history, certainly when focused on the governmental context of reception at the federal level. Immigrants and refugees during this “Great Inclusion” – which saw a sharp shift in their national origins to Asia and Latin America – benefited from the 1965 Immigration Act (whose chief strength was its appeal to egalitarianism in the spirit of the Civil Rights movement, and its
repeal of the blatantly racist immigration policy that had been in place for decades); the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Cold War refugees from Cuba after the 1959 Revolution, and even more from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia after the end of the Indochina War in 1975, for whom the U.S. assumed a historic responsibility; the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 (which finally conformed US law with the UN’s definition of “refugee”) – 1980 was the peak year of US refugee resettlement in US history, and more refugees were resettled in the US during the decade of the 1980s than in any other; the amnesty provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (which legalized the status of 2.7 million undocumented immigrants); and the tripling of immigrant visas to the highly skilled by the 1990 Immigration Act.

Two Supreme Court decisions during this period strongly affirmed an inclusive context of reception: Lau v. Nichols (1974) and Plyler v. Doe (1982). In Lau, the Court unanimously ruled that the lack of supplemental language instruction in public school for students with limited English proficiency violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act; the school district was required to provide LEP students with “appropriate relief”. The Lau ruling was followed by the passing of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, which required school districts to take “appropriate action” to overcome barriers to equal participation of all students. In another landmark case in 1982, the Court ruled in Plyler v. Doe that public schools were prohibited by the Fourteenth Amendment from denying the children of undocumented Mexican immigrants access to a public education. Plyler specifically forbade public schools from adopting policies that would deny students the right to a public education based on their immigration status or that of their parents (Olivas 2012). It was during this era that our respondents’ parents immigrated to the United States.

To be sure, the “Great Inclusion” was not uniformly so throughout our respondents’ formative years, and “contexts of reception” are not one-size-fits-all; they vary by national origin and immigration status, by states and localities, by accessible opportunity structures and the “warmth of the welcome”, by historical contexts. Many of these newcomers, for example, had no co-ethnic communities formed by previous migrations to the U.S. or California (such as the refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), but received significant public assistance as refugees. The Mexican case has always been unique, and the experiences of this group are shaped by its long and deep history in the United States – from the annexation of nearly half the territory of Mexico (including California) in a war of aggression by the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century to their racial segregation for a century afterwards, including forced mass “repatriations” (Balderrama and Rodríguez 2006). This history has shaped “generations of exclusion” among Mexican-Americans (Telles and Ortiz 2008) as well as the “Latino threat
narrative”, fuelling fears about Mexican immigrants, long a staple of U.S. public discourse (Chavez 2008). The threat narrative contributed to the landslide passage, in November 1994, of California’s anti-Mexican-immigrant Proposition 187. This was followed in 1998 by Proposition 227, a California initiative which eliminated bilingual education in the public schools, despite the Supreme Court’s decision in Lau v. Nichols.

Yet Proposition 187 was never implemented (it was found unconstitutional, in part because it violated the Supreme Court’s ruling in Plyler), Proposition 227 was later repealed, and Republicans became a minority party in California. In the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump by more than 4 million votes in California alone. State legislation in the twenty-first century has helped create a far more inclusive climate in California – for all immigrants, undocumented or not – than in the rest of the country.

After 2000, California passed the most far-reaching laws in the country aimed to assist with immigrant integration, particularly those whose undocumented status blocks them from opportunity. This “California package” of state laws on immigrant integration “goes well beyond any benefits envisioned in federal proposals on immigration reform, and toward a new conception of de facto state citizenship that operates in parallel with formal citizenship at the national level” (Ramakrishnan and Colbern 2015). Those changes occurred with relatively little political rancour – remarkable given the heated national debate about illegal immigration (Mason 2015). In a March 2018 PPIC survey, a solid majority of Californians (61 per cent) supported the state taking action to protect undocumented immigrants. While immigration continues to divide partisans, it unites most Californians across the state (Bonner 2018).

The setting: San Diego, California

Paradoxically, San Diego is California’s oldest city, founded in 1769, yet it feels new, reflecting the fact that it started growing rapidly only after World War II (the site of the largest U.S. Navy and Marine Corps bases in the Pacific, many returning veterans settled there after the war), and notably after the 1960s with accelerating internal and international migration. It is California’s second largest city, surpassing Detroit in 1982 to become the 6th largest city in the U.S., yet it was also known as “the largest small town in America” for its overwhelmingly White, Navy-town feel, conservative politics and relative lack of ethnic diversity. No longer.

San Diego County’s population has grown steadily in recent decades, and numbers more than three million people. The foreign-born population in the region grew very rapidly during the 1980s, and increased by another 41 per cent in the 1990s. Situated on the Mexican border, the
San Diego-Tijuana corridor has been the largest international border crossing in the world, as well as a principal path for undocumented migration from Mexico (until the militarization and fencing of the border after 1993). The location of the U.S. Navy base there long ago led to the formation of one of the three largest Filipino communities in the country (the other two are also in California), given the exceptionally high rate of Filipinos in the U.S. Navy (indeed, by the 1970s there were more Filipinos in the U.S. Navy than in the Philippine Navy). The selection of Camp Pendleton (Marine Corps) as one of four military camps for the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees who fled after the fall of Saigon in 1975 helped make San Diego a principal area of Vietnamese as well as Cambodian, Lao and Hmong refugee resettlement, peaking during the 1980s. And the establishment of the University of California campus in San Diego in the mid-1960s and the region’s subsequent economic expansion also attracted many professional immigrants, especially from Asian countries, greatly diversifying the area’s ethnic composition (Rumbaut 2008).

For the children of immigrants and refugees, socioeconomic success hinges on access to public colleges and universities – which are affordable and available in San Diego, with many community colleges, the flagship state university campus, and the UCSD campus. California’s system of public higher education is based on a three-tier “master plan” adopted by the legislature in 1960. Under the plan, the top eighth of the state’s graduating high school seniors would be able to enter one of the University of California (UC) campuses, the top third would be able to enter one of the California State University (CSU) campuses, and the community colleges would accept all applicants – a crucial springboard for lower income students, many of whom are children of immigrants. Today, more than 2.1 million students are enrolled in the state’s 115 community colleges; eligible students can transfer to the CSU or UC systems to complete bachelor’s degrees. The 23 CSU campuses, which annually award about half of the state’s bachelor’s degrees and a third of its master’s degrees, enrol more than 480,000 students. And nearly 240,000 students are enrolled in the 10 UC campuses, which award most of California’s doctoral degrees.

In view of the striking population transformations described above, it is accurate to say that California’s future – and San Diego’s – will be shaped by how the second generation of adult children of immigrants is incorporated in its economy and society. Virtually every aspect of that process will be affected by the extent of their attainment of post-secondary education. Immigrants and their children will be key to the growth of the U.S. labour force in the coming decades, with the fastest growing occupations requiring college degrees; in California, there are already not enough eligible college graduates to meet demand (Johnson and Reed 2007; Pastor 2018).
**The study: the children of immigrants longitudinal study (CILS) in San Diego**

We analyze survey and qualitative data drawn from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) in San Diego, a unique panel study which has followed for almost 25 years a representative sample of young people from immigrant families, from the end of junior high school through their late thirties. The baseline sample consisted of children attending 8th or 9th grades in all San Diego public schools in 1991–92 who were either foreign-born (coming to the United States before age twelve), or of foreign parentage (born in the U.S. of immigrant parents) – i.e. either 1.5- or second generation. The study used a school-based sampling frame to accurately capture the population of immigrants’ children in San Diego before they could legally drop out of school. Reflecting their proportions in the larger community, the largest ethnic groups were of Mexican, Filipino and Vietnamese origin, with smaller groups of Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, Chinese (from the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan), Asian Indians, and other Latin American and Asian nationalities. Almost half were U.S. citizens by birth; most others had become naturalized citizens. Because the data are limited to a sample drawn in Southern California in fall 1991, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this. However, San Diego was and remains a principal site of contemporary immigrant and refugee settlement.

**Data collection and sample**

Respondents were surveyed four times (T1, T2, T3, and T4). The first survey was carried out in 1992 at the end of junior high (14.2 years old on average); the second in 1995 toward the end of senior high (17.2 years old); the third in 2001–03 (24.2 years old). That third phase of data collection obtained surveys from 1,480 respondents (in 2001–02) from whom a representative sub-sample of 134 was drawn with whom in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted about a year later. More than twelve years later (2014–16), this subsample of 134 was systematically tracked, and a full fourth wave of surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 112 respondents, who averaged 37.2 years old. Logistic regressions comparing the 112 interviewed at T4 and the full T1 baseline sample showed no sample attrition bias on any key characteristic (age, gender, generation, GPA, family SES, etc.).

The third and fourth data collection periods took longer due to the difficulties of tracking, locating and surveying this very mobile population, most of whom were no longer residing in their parents’ homes. At T4, they were located not only in California (86 per cent) but all over the country, from Alaska to Texas, New York City, Chicago, Baltimore and Atlanta, as well as Mexico. Three were homeless; two were in group quarters (a state prison, a rehab centre).
The flexible interview format at T4 allowed us to delve deeply into the most important aspects of each person’s experiences, while collecting standard survey data comparable to earlier survey responses. We combined data collected through closed-ended responses with existing CILS longitudinal data, analyzing it using descriptive statistics. We analyzed the interview data in Dedoose, a software programme for analyzing qualitative and mixed-methods data, using the constant-comparison method, in which we coded responses into conceptually similar categories, and compared within and across groups by key attributes to discern patterns (Boeije 2002).

**Background characteristics of the sample**

The sample’s national origins reveal much about their parents’ class origins and time of arrival. The two largest groups, Mexicans and Filipinos, came earlier than the others, most arriving in the 1970s. The refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos arrived predominantly in 1980 (the peak year of refugee resettlement in U.S. history) or in the early 1980s – with the Vietnamese also reflecting a sizeable first wave who arrived in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. The Chinese and Indians arrived mainly in the 1980s. The pre-1982 years of arrival for the overwhelming majority of the Mexican immigrants and the passage of IRCA in 1986 ensured the legalization of their status before the CILS sample was drawn. As a result, our sample has virtually no undocumented respondents or parents – a crucial characteristic.

Half of the respondents’ mothers and 40 per cent of their fathers had less than a high school education; the least educated were the Hmong, Cambodian, Lao and Mexican parents. Only 14 per cent of the mothers and 23 per cent of the fathers had college degrees; the most educated came from India, the People’s Republic of China, and the Philippines. In between were Vietnamese refugees and immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In San Diego, their children grew up in neighbourhoods that varied sharply by poverty rates, and closely tracked the parents’ levels of education. A third lived in areas of concentrated poverty (census tracts where the 1990 poverty rates exceeded 50 per cent); only a third lived in tracts with poverty rates below 15 per cent. Over half were homeowners.

Over half of our respondents were foreign-born – i.e. members of the “1.5” generation (although the majority of them came as pre-school age children). The rest were born in the U.S. of two foreign-born parents (32 per cent) or of one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent (13 per cent). Slightly more than half of the respondents are women (54 per cent), slightly less than half are men. When they were growing up in San Diego, 71 per cent lived in 2-natural-parent homes. Less than half of the Cambodians lived in 2-natural-parent families (a legacy of the “killing fields” of the late 1970s), as did 58 per cent of the Mexicans and 66 per cent of the Vietnamese, compared to
over 90 per cent of the Indian, Chinese, Hmong and Filipinos and 83 per cent of the Lao.

Findings

The T4 CILS survey and in-depth interviews collected data on a wide range of outcomes, including language, religion, political views and behaviours, ethnic identities, transnational ties, family formation, arrests and incarceration, cultural practices, occupation and work histories, earnings and household income, student debt, and much more. We consider here only a few selected outcomes.

Bachelor’s degree attainment

To show how the immigrants’ children in middle adulthood have fared socio-economically, we focus on a key indicator: the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. We focus on education, rather than occupational or other economic outcomes, because degree attainment maps so strongly onto other measures of SES. For example, 95 per cent of respondents who attained a bachelor’s degree and all respondents who attained a graduate or professional degree were employed in middle-to-high status occupations in middle adulthood, compared with only one-quarter of those with less than a bachelor’s degree. Moreover, as we discuss below, the process of educational attainment can be followed through the life course and linked to the opportunity context in California.

Table 1 presents data on the percentage of respondents in our sample who earned a bachelor’s degree or more, by national origin. We also include comparisons to a similar sample of adult children of immigrants (aged 30–39) from

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<th>Table 1. Percent with bachelor’s degree or higher, by national origin.</th>
<th>CILS-San Diego, T4 sample</th>
<th>Current Population Surveya</th>
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<tr>
<td>BA/BS or more</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>BA/BS or more</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>112</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White 3rd+ generationb</td>
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<td>Mexicanb</td>
<td>39.4</td>
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<td>Filipino c</td>
<td>51.9</td>
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<td>Vietnamesec</td>
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<td>Cambodian-Lao-Hmongc</td>
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<td>Chinenc</td>
<td>84.6</td>
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<td>Indianc</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other 1.5/2nd/2.5c</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>6</td>
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aPercentages below are weighted population estimates based on a combined dataset from the years 2010–2015, for those ages 30–39; n is the sample size.
bCPS estimate is for San Diego County.
cCPS estimate is for the Southern California 6 county region.
the Current Population Survey, for San Diego County and the Southern California region, at about the same time period. These comparisons are important because Southern California, and San Diego in particular, has a more highly educated population than the United States overall, stemming from the availability of relatively affordable public higher education (historically), and an economy reliant on high-skilled workers. We also note that the educational attainment of Mexican-origin respondents, in particular, is notably greater in San Diego than in the greater Los Angeles region, suggesting that San Diego is a destination for more selective immigrants than enclaves such as East Los Angeles and Santa Ana. A similar positive selectivity appears to be the case for Vietnamese in San Diego, compared to enclaves like Westminster and Garden Grove in Orange County.

Table 1 shows that our respondents fare favourably in terms of educational attainment, relative to the similar non-Hispanic White population in San Diego. Overall, 53 per cent of our sample had completed at least a bachelor’s degree by their late 30s (this includes 20 per cent who had completed an advanced degree). By comparison, only 43 per cent of similarly-aged non-Hispanic Whites in San Diego completed a bachelor’s degree.

However, educational attainment varies widely by national origin. Although sample sizes in both the CILS and, for many groups, the CPS, are small, patterns of group difference are clear. Adult children of immigrants from China, India, and Vietnam earn bachelor’s degrees at extraordinary rates, and Filipinos and others also surpass the national average. None of the Cambodians had earned a bachelor’s degree by their late 30s, nor had two-thirds of the Lao – not surprising given their low socioeconomic origins – although the Hmong did much better than expected. Given their similarly low SES origins, however, the attainment of a bachelor’s degree or more by Mexican-origin respondents (39 per cent) is notable as this percentage is only slightly lower than that among native-parentage Whites of comparable age in San Diego (43 per cent) or nationally (40 per cent).

For most CILS respondents, but especially for those who attained bachelor’s degrees or higher, public higher education was key. In fact, 72 per cent of those who attained a bachelor’s degree or higher earned their highest degree (whether a bachelor’s, master’s, or professional degree) at a California public university. Delving further into the often complex educational paths taken towards higher degrees, we found that a remarkable 95 per cent of those who attained a bachelor’s degree or higher attended at least one public institution of higher education (including California community colleges) along their journey to their eventual highest degree. For example, Leo,7 who migrated at age 3 from Mexico, and now works as a systems engineer, earned a master’s degree from a California State University at the age of 30. His journey through higher education began at a community college, which he perceived as more accessible for him than today:
I got awarded [a grant]—this was back when money was a little bit more available—and ... I mean, it was just like, wait a minute, I get to go to school ... it gets paid for, and plus they give me a little stipend for books ... And then, the first two or three years got me through ... the grants, the job on campus ... I just thought, okay I can do this. And that's when counselors and mentors at my JC started saying, hey, you gotta really think about what you're gonna do ... and I ended up transferring to [CSU] ...

Leo later reflects on whether economic opportunities have improved since the recession:

I think it’s gotten worse ... Cause like I said, the key is education. To me. And ... education has been just gutted. In the sense of like grants and subsidies ... like when I was going ... I ended up paying like $900, $1000 ... for like a quarter. And now ... I hear stories where it's like a couple thousand.

Like nearly all of our upwardly mobile respondents, Leo’s experience and perspective illustrates how the educational attainment of the CILS respondents was inextricably linked to the accessible California public higher education system during the time they were attaining their degrees. This finding points to positive outcomes along a main dimension of socioeconomic achievement. We further discuss its implications below. But we turn next to cultural indicators of integration.

**Identifying as American**

We have focused elsewhere on our findings showing a range of ethnic self-identifications among immigrants’ children in middle adulthood, varying between and within national-origin groups (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2018, 2019). While the majority of immigrants’ adult children express ethnic self-identities reflecting attachments to their home countries/origin culture (69 per cent), a significant minority (30 per cent) indicate no real connection to their ethnic background – with some indicating they were really “just” American and others indifferent towards ethnic or national identity labels altogether. Notably, we see a similar breakdown in the percentages who maintain linguistic connections: 71 per cent considered themselves bilingual, while another 29 per cent reported speaking only English.

Among the largest group of respondents (37 per cent) who expressed a strong ethnic identity as central to their sense of self, most also identified as American. For example, thirty-six-year-old Isabella emphasized her American identity along with her Mexican identity:

[My identity as Mexican American] is very important because my family is from Mexico and ... they came here to be better, you know, for that American Dream ... I’m proud ... to say that I’m Mexican, but I was born here, so I am American.

Similarly, 1.5- generation Anh recognized her dual identities: “[Identifying as Vietnamese] is very important because it’s a huge part of me ... [being
Vietnamese American] is really important too … I do all the stereotypical American things”. Respondents who were actively trying to maintain aspects of their national-origin culture also saw no contradiction in ethnic maintenance and Americanism. For example, Houa, a 1.5 generation Hmong-American woman explains:

I want [my children] to have a conscious of, okay, my parents are these type of people. They come from here … so I mix the culture, a little bit here, a little bit there … But then now we are … American … we’re trying to fit in like everyone else. Trying to make a living, like everyone else. We’re also American.

Similarly, 1.5 generation Noi explains that she began to feel more American after the 9/11 attacks. “But I don’t feel like I’m less … Lao. But I feel like I’m more American … I mean, I’m really happy that I’m an American. A Lao-American”.

As is clear in the excerpts above, respondents often brought up their Americanness organically. These findings indicate that ethnic and American identities are not zero-sum. Respondents who maintained identities rooted in their home countries also identified as American and saw no contradictions in maintaining both identities.

**Part of mainstream America**

Respondents were asked explicitly whether they considered themselves part of mainstream America, and most responded affirmatively (69 per cent). Feeling part of the American mainstream did not vary substantially by education, family socioeconomic background, or immigrant generation. However, the few non-citizens (n = 8) felt more outside of the American mainstream than their U.S. citizen peers. Also notable is that almost all of the respondents who had married White Americans considered themselves fully part of mainstream America.

As suggested above, we found no relationship between feeling part of the American mainstream and having a strong ethnic identity rooted in the home country. For example, Nancy, a pre-school teacher, maintains a strong identity as Mexican-American, has married a Mexican-American man, and maintains several Mexican cultural practices, including bilingualism (although she speaks English with her children), but also sees herself in the American mainstream:

We celebrate a lot [on] Fourth of July, Labor Day, we usually … put up a flag, and it means a lot to us. Especially now that my brother’s in the military … that makes us really proud that he’s serving his country …

Others defined the American mainstream as American cultural practices: because they did what most Americans do, they felt part of the mainstream. For example, Emma who is married to a White American man and has an
infant daughter, uses her Chinese immigrant mother’s cultural practices as a counterpoint to explain why she is a mainstream American:

... we cook American or Mexican ... But my mom at home ... she only cooks Asian. She ... doesn’t like burgers or fries or any of that stuff so. And she shops at the Asian markets and I shop at Von’s ...

A small minority (n = 10) indicated that they were decidedly not part of the mainstream, though not because of their ethnic or national origins. Some deemed themselves outsiders because of unique situations, such as homelessness (n = 2) or incarceration (n = 1), or simply because they did not keep up with the latest American trends.

Respondents who provided a qualified response – they felt partly in and out of the mainstream, in some ways but not others (22 per cent) – often noted that mainstream America varied by context. Vietnamese-born Kim Cuc, for example, states astutely that in San Diego she is part of the American mainstream, but not everywhere:

I’ve been to states like Texas and Florida where they see you as like an alien ... as though they’ve never seen an Asian person in their life. Where here ... you see people from all walks of life ... [In] big urban areas, I feel more mainstream but in isolated areas I don’t.

Similarly, second-generation Gloria notes, “I think in certain parts I wouldn’t be part of the mainstream. Just because there’s not a lot of ... Mexican population there. So you kinda feel out of place ...”

Gloria’s perspective was more common among Mexican-origin respondents than those from some other backgrounds. Moreover, among the Mexican-origin respondents, most who did not feel fully part of the mainstream referenced culture or race/ethnicity as factors, which was less common for those from other national-origin groups. Mexican-born Claudia, for example, asserts, “I just think we should be part of mainstream Amer ... we are part of the mainstream America, but we’re underrepresented”.

Yet it was not only Mexican respondents who suggested that minorities were not currently accepted as mainstream Americans. Rina, who was born in Panama and identified as Afro-Latina, put it this way: “I definitely don’t consider myself part of the American mainstream ... when I think mainstream, I still think ... White Anglo Saxon Protestant ... and everything outside of that ... is not”. This view, while not the most common, suggests a feeling of not being fully accepted as American, akin to that expressed by racial minorities in other studies (Waters 2001).

**Deportation knowledge and experiences**

We asked respondents in middle adulthood whether they had any knowledge of anyone who had been deported or nearly deported. Overall, more than half
of the sample (54 per cent) knew of no one who had such experiences. But 20 per cent did know of a close family member or friend who was deported, and another 26 per cent of a more distant relative or acquaintance. In one rare instance, a deportation resulted in a violent outcome, as one respondent’s sister was murdered in Mexico after she was deported. Not surprisingly given recent deportation patterns, over one-third of Mexican-origin respondents had close relatives or friends who had been deported – as did half of the Cambodians and a third of the Lao. By contrast, none of the Vietnamese, Chinese or Indians reported that they knew of any close family member of friend who had been deported, and substantial majorities of these groups, as well as Indians and Filipinos, knew no one, even distantly, affected by deportation.

The qualitative data reveal a principal pattern of disengagement with the issue of deportation, even among those who had distant knowledge of deportation cases, as illustrated by Vanna, who was born in the U.S. of Cambodian parents:

I’ve heard friends that have family members that are afraid of [deportation]. But I’ve never really personally known anyone … it’s not something that really crossed my mind to really get involved with knowing about.

In another example, the way second-generation Mexican-origin Ana recounts one deportation case suggests a lack of concern with the issue, “The only person I can think of is one of my best friend’s former coworkers. That’s about it … I know he was caught driving under the influence … and so he got deported (laughs)”. However, a few who were aware of distant stories felt strong sympathy for deported immigrants and their families. For example, Mexican-American Nancy, mentioned above, explains:

I’m putting myself in the shoes of the mother, the children, [often] it’s the husband that is deported. And this affects the whole family … especially the children. They miss their father. The whole family’s torn apart … He’s probably the main breadwinner. And now the mom has to go out and … look for employment. However, she has no experience … it’s really sad.

Cambodian-born Sena had several close friends and family members who were deported. Her reactions to each situation varied based on whether she thought their infractions warranted such a penalty. Regarding the deportation of a few friends prior to 9/11, she states, “I don’t like it, but, what they did was uncalled for and unacceptable”. However, she perceived more recent deportations as unfair:

Everything just changed [after 9/11] … It was heartbreaking … to know that your friends and relatives are back over there for something they didn’t do majorly … They didn’t kill nobody … It was over little minor stuff …
These deportations, which included her son’s father and a cousin, led to fears that this could happen to her:

you don’t know what else gonna happen … They’ll probably like, uncitizenize me and send me back … if I do something stupid, you know? … now they’re saying that they can change your status from citizen to non-citizen and send you back to where you come from. I’m like, ‘that’s not right.’ You can’t do that … Why?

Sena’s case illustrates that even among adult children of immigrants who came of age in more inclusive contexts, the current era of deportation – which began well before Trump’s election – can deeply influence their sense of security, depending upon their social location. However, most adult children of immigrants in our sample (none of whom are undocumented) are detached from the most affected communities, contributing to their own feeling of inclusion.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The latest outcomes of the adult children of immigrants in our study, born in the late 1970s and coming of age in San Diego in the 1990s, must be considered within a particular historical, social, political, economic, demographic and geographic context – a context that was far more inclusive than that in which many children of immigrants throughout the country today are coming of age. The socioeconomic and cultural integration of this segment of the new second generation, who were part of arguably the most inclusive immigration era in U.S. history, in a state in which more than half of the state’s population consists of immigrants and their children, has been largely positive.

In terms of educational attainment, the higher than average educational attainments among these adult children of immigrants are particularly remarkable given the modest class backgrounds and harsh migration histories of many of their immigrant and refugee parents. This positive outcome was shaped by the accessibility of affordable public higher education in San Diego and in California, and is illuminated by recent national studies. The Commission on the Future of Undergraduate Education (2016) completed a comprehensive portrait of U.S. postsecondary education, including public and private universities. Educational attainment is increasing over time across all income quartiles, but the gap in educational economic inequality is widening. In the 1979–1982 birth cohort (born at about the same time as the CILS respondents), only 9 per cent of students from families in the lowest income quartile had completed college, in contrast to 54 per cent of those in the upper income quartile. The 54 per cent achieved by the children of the more affluent families is almost identical to the 53 per cent achieved by the T4 CILS sample during 2014–2015, despite the much lower socioeconomic background of the CILS parents.
If higher education is the central pathway to intergenerational mobility, do different colleges shape upward mobility outcomes differently? Using data from 1999 to 2013, Chetty et al. (2017) show that the colleges promoting the most intergenerational income mobility – measured by both access and success outcomes – were mid-tier public institutions, including UC/CSU California colleges and universities, precisely the institutions attended by our most educated respondents.

The logical policy conclusion from such robust data is to invest in public higher education, not to disinvest. Yet state funding in public higher education since the financial crisis (from 2008 to 2016) has gone in the opposite direction: a national reduction in funding of −18 per cent. Of the largest 15 states, California shows the lowest negative change in per-student funding of higher education (−3 per cent) – well below the national average. But other large states have disinvested massively in public higher education, deeply cutting per-student funding by half or more. Our CILS findings in California point to the crucial role of public colleges and universities in providing a structure of educational opportunities for an economy that increasingly demands more college-educated workers.

In terms of cultural measures of integration, a key outcome that has been the subject of contentious debate is whether immigrants’ children consider themselves American. Our findings show that respondents with the strongest ethnic attachments also identify as American. Moreover, a large majority consider themselves fully part of the American mainstream. Some respondents were keenly aware of the role of context in shaping their perceptions, indicating that they would not be accepted as fully American outside of the super-diverse multicultural California context in which most still live. But the main pattern that emerges, as it did with language (over two-thirds are bilingual), is that at least for this California sample, identity and belonging are not either/or zero-sum games, but additive rather than subtractive adaptations.

Even within the largely inclusive context of Southern California, contexts of reception vary by national-origin. While a minority even among the Mexican-origin respondents, more of the Mexican respondents than other groups felt that they could not fully be accepted as part of the American mainstream – reflecting historical legacies of racial exclusion (Telles and Ortiz 2008) as well as the persistence of a “Latino threat narrative” (Chavez 2008) that, while noticeably louder today under the Trump administration than it was during the formative years of our respondents, has long pervaded U.S. society. Further, while most adult children of immigrants across national-origin groups, including Mexicans, have largely been insulated from the threats of the current deportation regime, Mexicans (as well as Cambodians) more often had significant others or friends who were deported. These experiences shaped them in different ways. Some who saw loved ones or friends deported for minor infractions felt vulnerable themselves, even as U.S.
citizens, while others who deemed deportation as a suitable punishment for a serious criminal offense were unaffected. Existing studies suggest that the rising number of deportations, especially for non-violent offenses, lead to fear and insecurity among a broader swath of children of immigrants coming of age today (Dreby 2015).

Overall, while our California-based study of a sample of children of immigrants and refugees drawn over a quarter century ago suggests that the story of the new second generation is largely one of successful integration across a number of dimensions, a key question moving forward is whether similar outcomes are likely to be repeated in the future, in different contexts of inclusion and opportunity. We argue that an inclusive multiethnic context with a strong and accessible public higher education system was key to shaping the positive integration of the CILS respondents. However, with a current national context characterized by a Great Expulsion of immigrants and a Great Exclusion of refugees and asylees, and a continuing retreat from investments in public education by most states, the future for the next generation of children of immigrants is far from certain.

Notes

1. Proposition 187 would have denied health care, public education, and social services to undocumented immigrants and their children in California and required government employees to report suspected undocumented immigrants to authorities.
2. The “California Package” is the term used by Ramakrishnan and Colbern (2015) for an array of policies giving undocumented immigrants access to in-state tuition and child health benefits, professional and driver’s licenses, and low-cost auto insurance. Most recently California declared itself a “sanctuary state.”
3. The larger CILS study included a South Florida sample (followed through T3) not used here.
5. The sole exception was national origin, which was by design. The T3 in-depth interviews intentionally included a larger Chinese sample to facilitate ethnic comparisons.
6. Middle to high status occupations are those that rank above the median according to the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI).
7. All names are pseudonyms.

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