

# The Integration of Immigrants into **AMERICAN SOCIETY**

## ISSUE BRIEF: Health and Health Care

The United States prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, and it has a long history of absorbing people from across the globe. Today, one of every four members of the American population is either an immigrant or has a parent who is an immigrant. How well they are successfully integrating is an important and pressing question.

A panel of experts appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined the available evidence to assess how immigrants are integrating into U.S. society in a range of areas—education, employment and earnings, language, and health, among others. The committee’s findings are presented in its report, *The Integration of Immigrants Into American Society* (2015). The report concludes that across all measurable outcomes, current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society.

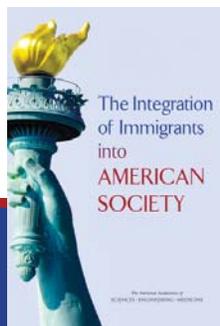


**One facet of integration examined in the study was health. Immigrants tend to have better infant, child, and adult health outcomes than the native-born, as well as longer average lifespans. Over time and generations, however, immigrants’ health advantages decline, and their health status converges with the native-born. For immigrants, health is an area where greater integration does not appear to lead to greater well-being.**

### Immigrants Generally Healthier than Native-Born

Research using eight national datasets shows that immigrants have better infant, child, and adult health outcomes than the native-born in general and than native-born members of the same ethnic and racial groups. Compared to the native-born, immigrants are less likely to die from cardiovascular disease and all cancers combined and have a lower incidence of all cancers combined. They have fewer chronic health conditions, lower infant mortality rates, lower rates of obesity, fewer functional limitations, and fewer learning disabilities. Other studies show that immigrants have a lower prevalence of depression, the most common mental disorder in the world, and of alcohol abuse than the native born.

Immigrants also live longer, on average, than do those born in the U.S. A study that examined death records up to 2010 found that immigrants had a life expectancy of 80 years—3.4 years higher than the native-born population.



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This pattern does not suggest that immigrants are free from health problems, but rather that they show a general health advantage compared with the native born. The reasons for this are not well-understood. One possibility is that immigrants are a selected group, stronger and healthier than people who do not choose to migrate. Another possibility is return migration—that older and less healthy immigrants are more likely to return to their native countries than those who are healthy. Yet even studies that attempt to control for selection find differences in health and health behaviors between immigrants and natives.

## **Over Time and Generations, Immigrants' Health Declines**

While immigrants may have an initial health advantage when they first arrive in the United States, this tends to decline over time and over generations. Research has documented that as length of residence increases, immigrants experience higher rates of health problems including hypertension, chronic illness, smoking, diabetes, and heavy alcohol use, and their health status converges with that of the native born.

No definitive explanation exists for why immigrants' health eventually declines. Evidence suggests that it may be a combination of factors—such as lack of adequate health care (see below), poor working conditions, limited language proficiency, and adopting U.S. norms and practices that may be less healthy over the long term, such as frequent fast foods, heavy alcohol and substance consumption, and less involvement in family life. Further research should be done to identify the causal links between integration and health outcomes.

## **Immigrants Have Less Access to Adequate Health Care**

Unlike their overall health advantage, immigrants are at a distinct disadvantage compared to the native-born when it comes to receiving adequate and appropriate care to meet their health needs. This is a consistent finding of research that has assessed physical and mental health care among Asian, black, and Latino immigrants.

Lack of health insurance is often cited as a main reason many immigrants lack access to care; immigrants have consistently lower rates of health insurance coverage than native-born populations. In addition, some hospitals and clinics may not have the capabilities to adequately communicate with and serve some immigrant groups. Undocumented immigrants—who represent about 26 percent of all immigrants—may avoid contact with medical personnel and settings because they fear they will be reported to the authorities and eventually deported.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), passed in 2010, creates major opportunities to increase health insurance coverage among legal-status immigrants, including noncitizens. The ACA makes millions of “lawfully present” immigrants eligible for the health exchanges and federal tax credits on the same terms as citizens. However, the undocumented are specifically excluded from coverage under the law, limiting their ability to access adequate care.

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