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Editorial

Their Future Is Ours

There are 16 million children in immigrant families in the United States, one of the fastest-growing segments of the population. It's an old American story made new in the age of globalization, when waves of human displacement in recent decades have led to immigration on a scale not seen since Ellis Island. But a country that has been so good for so long at integrating new Americans is stumbling under the challenge.

That is the conclusion of Professors Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco, fellows at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and co-directors of immigration studies at New York University. They have done basic research in immigration for more than 20 years, five of them studying 400 children from China, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Central America and Mexico.

The results of their research, released this month, show the stark effects of what Marcelo Suárez-Orozco calls "the age of global vertigo." Dislocation breeds a host of difficulties, starting with family separation. Nearly half of the children in their sample had at some point lost contact with one or both parents, either through migration directly or through divorce or death. The absent parent was most often the father for long stretches or permanently. For 49 percent of the Central American children, separations lasted more than five years.

The children from separated families were, perhaps unsurprising, more likely to show signs of

depression. Those symptoms were often accompanied by poverty, isolation and — despite an early period of hopefulness and engagement — a downward academic slide. Immigrant children lagged in mastering standard academic English, the passport to college and to brighter futures. Whereas native-born children’s language skills follow a bell curve, immigrants’ children were crowded in the lower ranks: More than three-quarters of the sample scored below the 85th percentile in English proficiency.

There is clearly a need for policies and programs to support immigrant parents and children, but the reality is as haphazard and tenuous as these children’s lives often are. Millions are growing up in mixed families, with some members here illegally, others not. Bills to help immigrant families with a path to legalization have died repeatedly in Congress, and small-scale reforms like the Dream Act, a path to college or the military for children of illegal immigrants have been stymied for years. New investments in language education, citizenship preparation and after-school and preschool programs have been derailed by economic crisis, harsh immigration politics and a general lack of attention.

This is the great challenge that is forgotten in the heat of the immigration debate. The children of immigrants are Americans. “They” are “us,” a cohort of newcomers who will be filling the demographic void left as the baby boomers start fading away. Their future is our country’s future. The job of integrating them is not only unfinished but in many critical ways has hardly begun.

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