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**Preparing for Success in Canada and the United
States: the Determinants of Educational
Attainment Among the Children of Immigrants**

Garnett Picot
Statistics Canada

Feng Hou
Statistics Canada

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Preparing for Success in Canada and the United States: The Determinants of Educational Attainment Among the Children of Immigrants

by Garnett Picot* and Feng Hou**

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Statistics Canada
Social Analysis Division
*Telephone number: 613-951-8214
**Telephone number: 613-951-4337
Facsimile number: 613-951-5403

Email: garnett.picot@statcan.gc.ca
feng.hou@statcan.gc.ca

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Abstract

This paper reviews the recent research on the determinants of the educational attainment among the children of immigrants (the 2nd generation) in Canada and the United States. The focus is on the gap in educational attainment between the 2nd and 3rd-and-higher generations (the children of domestic born parents), as well as the intergenerational transmission of education between immigrants and their children.

On average, the children of immigrants have educational levels significantly above their counterparts with domestic born parents in Canada. In the U.S., educational levels are roughly the same between these two groups. In both countries, conditional on the educational attainment of the parents and location of residence, the children of immigrants outperform the 3rd-and-higher generation in educational attainment. Parental education and urban location are major determinants of the gap in educational attainment between the children of immigrants and those of Canadian or American born parents. However, even after accounting for these and other demographic background variables, much of the positive gap between the 2nd and 3rd-and-higher generations remains in Canada.

In Canada, parental education is less important as a determinant of educational attainment for the children in immigrant families than among those with Canadian-born parents. Less educated immigrant parents are more likely to see their children attain higher levels of education than are their Canadian-born counterparts.

Outcomes vary significantly by ethnic/source region group in both countries. In the U.S., some 2nd generation ethnic/source region groups, such as those with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American backgrounds, have relatively low levels of education, even though conditional on background characteristics they outperform their 3rd-and-higher generation counterparts. In contrast, in Canada, children of the larger and increasingly numerically important immigrant groups (the Chinese, South Asians, Africans, etc) register superior educational attainment levels to those of the 3rd-and-higher generation. This result is partly related to the high levels of parental education and group-level “ethnic capital” among these immigrant groups.

JEL Code: J15 and J24

Keywords: Second Generation, Children of Immigrants, Education, Canada, United States

Executive Summary

Many immigrant groups have a long tradition of turning to education as the mechanism best suited to promote success for their children. From the host countries perspective, the level of education achieved by the children of immigrants is one critical measure of the long-term, multi-generational integration of immigrants. As children of immigrants are a significant component of the total population in Canada and the US, it is important to know whether and why immigrant groups, and their children, are performing at levels above or below that of the native population, or of their parents.

This paper reviews existing research on the educational attainment achieved by the second generation (the children of immigrants) in Canada and the US, and its determinants. Relevant literatures from both sociology and economics are reviewed. Educational outcomes in Canada and the US are addressed separately, and from two perspectives. First, how does second generation educational attainment compare to that of the third-and-higher generations (i.e. the children of domestic-born parents), and what are the determinants of the educational attainment gap between these two groups. The second perspective is intergenerational. How are the children of immigrants doing compared to their parents?

On average, the children of immigrants have educational levels significantly above their counterparts with native born parents in Canada. In the U.S., educational levels are roughly the same between these two groups (unconditional comparisons). In both countries, conditional on the educational attainment of the parents and location of residence, the children of immigrants outperform the 3rd-and-higher generation in terms of educational attainment. Parental education and urban location are major determinants of the gap in educational attainment between the children of immigrants and those of Canadian or American born parents. However, even after accounting for these and other demographic background variables, much of the positive gap between the 2nd and 3rd-and-higher generations remains in Canada.

In Canada, parental education is less important as a determinant of educational attainment of the children in immigrant families than among those with Canadian-born parents. Less educated immigrant parents are more likely to see their children attain higher levels of education than are their Canadian-born counterparts. In the US, the extent to which the parents' advantage (or disadvantage) in educational attainment is passed on to their children appears to be about the same among immigrant as among American-born families.

Outcomes vary significantly by ethnic/source region group in both countries. In the U.S., some 2nd generation ethnic/source region groups, such as those with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American backgrounds, have relatively low levels of education, even though conditional on background characteristics they outperform their 3rd-and-higher generation counterparts. This result is in part related to the low levels of education among their immigrant parents. An increasing share of immigration since the 1980s has been from Central and South America, particularly Mexico. Hence, the (unconditional) educational attainment gap between the 2nd and 3rd-and-higher generation in the U.S. may turn negative in the future.

In contrast, in Canada, children of the larger and increasingly numerically important immigrant groups (the Chinese, South Asians, Africans, etc) register superior educational attainment levels to those of the 3rd plus generation. This result is partly related to the high levels of parental education and group-level "ethnic capital" among these immigrant groups. The educational attainment among entering immigrants has been rising since the 1980s in Canada. These trends may result in a growing positive (unconditional) educational attainment gap between the 2nd and 3rd-and-higher generations in Canada.