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Ethnic inequalities in education: a UK-US comparison

Public report of the *Children of Immigrants in Schools* project
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The United Kingdom and United States of America have become more ethnically diverse societies as a result of immigration throughout the second half of the twentieth century. A key question for social scientists is how the children of post-war immigrants to these societies have been faring educationally.

This briefing outlines a study of the educational achievement and progression rates of the children of immigrants in the UK and US. Some second-generation immigrant groups have been faring well relative to their third-plus generation white British and white American peers, but other groups continue to experience educational disadvantage.



Executive summary

This large-scale quantitative study explored the comparative educational performance and progression of the children of immigrants in the UK and US. The study found that the children of immigrants from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds in the UK, and from black Caribbean, Mexican, and Puerto Rican backgrounds in the US, performed less well than their third-plus generation white peers at age 16, but were more likely to complete upper secondary education after taking into account differences in performance at age 16.

In the UK but not also the US, the children of immigrants were also more likely to complete university. However, in both countries, immigrant-origin young people were less likely to access elite universities.

The project findings were reported in a book published in 2013 entitled *The Children of Immigrants at School*, which has been described as providing “American scholars a variety of European mirrors to further their understanding of the American experience with immigration” (Fibbi, 2016).

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Research objectives

The *Children of Immigrants in Schools* project set out to improve our understanding of the role of educational institutions and policies in the integration of the children of immigrants in the US and Europe. The wider project involved internationally comparative research focusing on the UK, France, the Netherlands and Spain in comparison with the US. The UK-US comparison examined four crucial points in the educational career: performance scores at age 16, completion of secondary education, completion of tertiary education, and type of university attended among those who progressed to university.

A major objective of the wider project was to consider what countries could learn from each other about the factors that promote or inhibit the successful educational inclusion of young people from immigrant families.

In this regard the wider project set out to advance our understanding of the prospects of immigrant-origin young people in different educational contexts.

Research questions

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the children of immigrants fare in terms of academic performance at age 16 relative to their third-plus generation white peers?
2. Are the children of immigrants as likely as third-plus generation white students to complete upper secondary school?
3. Are the children of immigrants as likely as third-plus generation white students to complete higher education?
4. How well-represented are young people from immigrant origin backgrounds in elite universities?
5. How do patterns of educational achievement and progression compare in the UK and USA?

Methodology

The UK-US component of the project drew on a range of large nationally representative datasets.

For the UK we made use of data from the Youth Cohort Study for 2001 to explore patterns of achievement in GCSE examinations at age 16 and rates of completion of upper secondary school; Labour Force Survey data for 1991-2001 to explore rates of degree completion; and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data for 2001 to examine rates of enrolment in elite Russell Group universities.

For the US we drew on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health for 2001 to examine vocabulary test scores at age 16 and rates of upper secondary school and degree completion; and data from the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York study conducted in 1999 to explore enrolment rates in US universities ranked in the top third nationally.

The aim of the data analysis was to distinguish between the influence of school attainment and continuation factors on the educational careers of young people from immigrant families.

Ethnic inequalities in education in the UK & US

Findings

The study found that the children of immigrants from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds in the UK, and the children of black Caribbean, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent in the US, performed significantly worse in education at age 16 than their third-plus generation white peers. In contrast, second generation Chinese youth performed significantly better than their third-plus generation white peers in both countries.

Raw rates of upper secondary school completion were lower for some second-generation immigrant groups than for the third-plus white generation in both countries. However, after taking into account differences in performance at age 16, the children of immigrants in both countries were found to be more likely than their third-plus generation white peers to complete upper secondary education. This indicates that although some immigrant-origin groups may be hampered in their educational careers by lower academic achievement, they are more likely to persist in education.

Only in the UK were the children of immigrants also more likely than their third-plus generation counterparts to complete university. However, in both countries, the third-plus generation white groups were found to be more likely than the children of immigrants to enrol at higher status universities. This finding is consistent with the predictions of the “effectively maintained inequality” hypothesis (Lucas 2001), which posits that more advantaged social groups will tend to dominate higher status forms of education at any given level.

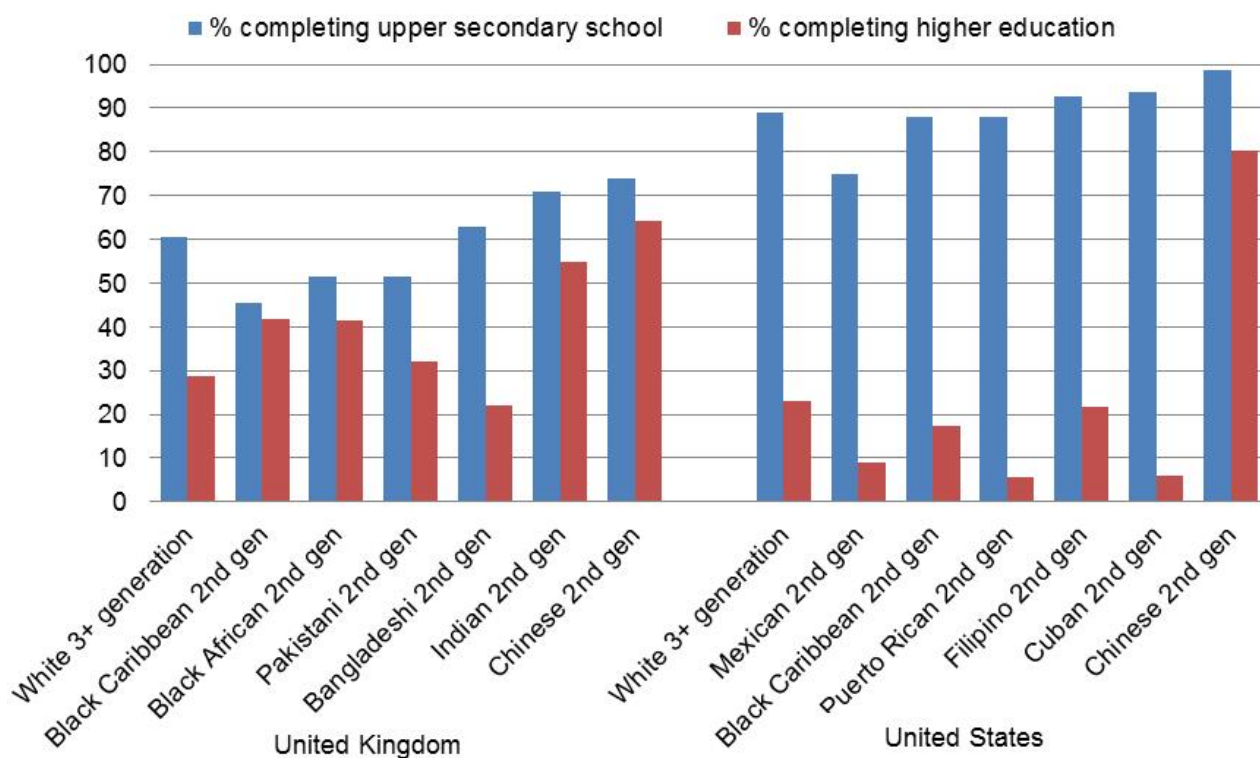
Policy implications

The project findings indicate that additional measures are needed to support the academic achievement levels of young people from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds in the UK, and young people of black Caribbean, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent in the US. In both the UK and US, policy efforts are also needed to improve access to elite universities

Next steps

The project highlighted the need for further research to explore why some immigrant-origin groups tend to be poorly represented in elite universities in both the UK and US, despite a high propensity to continue in higher education in the UK case.

Follow-up research has explored this issue with a focus on ethnic inequalities in access to higher status Russell Group universities in the UK. Analysis of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data has shown that British applicants to prestigious Russell Group universities (Boliver 2013 and 2016) from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds are less likely to be offered places that comparably qualified applicants from the white British group. This work has prompted the UK government to call for universities to look into the possible influence of unconscious bias on undergraduate admissions decisions.



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The study

The UK-US project team included Mary C. Waters (Harvard), Anthony Heath (Oxford), Sherri-Ann P. Butterfield (Rutgers-Newark), Marco J. Gonzalez (Harvard) and Vikki Boliver (Oxford).

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