

DEFINING IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

Immigrant integration is a complex concept that is fundamentally tied to the ongoing debate about the role of immigrants in our society and our different visions of a thriving America. GCIR's Immigrant Integration Framework builds on the vision that the United States, to remain strong and prosperous, must continue to be the land of opportunity where people of all colors, cultural backgrounds, and walks of life can put down roots, build a better life, and become contributing members of society.

Guided by this vision, GCIR defines immigrant integration as a dynamic, two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities. We believe that integration should be an intentional process that engages and transforms all community stakeholders, enriching our social, economic, and civic life over time. Mutual responsibility and benefits, multi-sector involvement, and multi-strategy approach are the cornerstones of GCIR's

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Immigrant Integration Framework. We believe these elements are critical to any effort to integrate immigrants.

GCIR utilizes the term “integration” and not “assimilation” to emphasize respect for and incorporation of differences and the need for mutual adaptation. “Integration” also reflects an appreciation of diversity instead of the homogeneity that “assimilation” has come to connote.¹ In addition, the literal meaning of integration—combining and coordinating separate elements to create a harmonious, interrelated whole—captures our belief in the importance of immigrant integration to our society.

1. Fix, Michael, Wendy Zimmerman, and Jeff Passel. 2001. *The Integration of Immigrant Families in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

THEORIES ON IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION: A LOOK AT THE RESEARCH

GCIR's definition of immigrant integration builds on the rich but sometimes conflicting social-science theories on how immigrants become members of U.S. society. “Assimilation” theory, first developed in the 1920s, originally posited that newcomers both absorb and influence elements of the receiving society, with the two becoming more like each other over time. The concept later became known as the “melting pot.” Although developed in part to counteract the “Americanization” movement of the 1920s, this theory over time became criticized for assuming that the subordinate immigrant group could only achieve upward mobility by becoming more like the dominant group.²

Beginning in the 1960s, a number of scholars began trying to explain the incomplete assimilation of many groups, documenting that lingering

discrimination and structural and institutional barriers to equal access to employment constituted obstacles to complete assimilation. This approach became known as the “ethnic-disadvantage” model.³

Most recently, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut have advanced a more nuanced approach: “segmented assimilation.” Combining elements of the assimilation and ethnic-disadvantage models, this theory suggests that while many immigrants will find different pathways to mainstream status, others will find such pathways blocked and come to view themselves as members of disadvantaged and racialized groups as a result.⁴

Frank Bean and Gillian Stevens, however, point out that segmented assimilation may inadvertently overemphasize negative outcomes. They note the transformation of the United States from a largely biracial, white majority-black minority society into

a multiracial, multiethnic society. This diversity may render racial and ethnic boundaries more permeable and less susceptible to stereotyping in the future, at the same time that economic mobility increasingly proceeds ahead of traditional measures of cultural assimilation.⁵

This movement, propelled by suspicion and fear, sought to induce newcomers to assimilate American speech, ideals, traditions, and ways of life.

2. Bean, Frank and Gillian Stevens. 2003. *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation and Alba and Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

3. Ibid.

4. Portes, Alejandro and Ruben Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Second Generation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

5. Bean and Stevens, 2003.