

# Our Guest Editors

## Talk about Immigration in an Aging Society



JUDITH TREAS

A worldwide demographic revolution, heated national debates about entitlement reforms, and accelerating economic and social change in cities and towns across the country inspire this examination of the intersection of aging and immigration. The distinguished guest editors of the issue are Judith Treas and Fernando Torres-Gil. Together, they bring the political, scholarly, and grassroots experience required for a thoughtful and pragmatic look at the implications of immigration for an aging society.

**Judith Treas** is a leading sociologist and demographer whose achievements reflect her commitment to study of the many facets of aging, gender, and the life course. She is a professor of sociology at the University of California at Irvine, and directs the university's Center for Demographic and Social Analysis. She is a prolific author and has served on the U.S. Census Advisory Committee of Professional Associations, among other scientific advisory roles. However, she is perhaps best known by gerontologists for her quantitative and qualitative studies illuminating the lives of older adults in America's immigrant families.

"Attention to older people in immigration research and community services for immigrant families is rare," Treas says. The focus instead is on workers and children and the extent to which they will become integrated and succeed. "People who arrive in old age have a very different experience. They have few opportunities, and they don't incorporate."

The paradox, she says, "is that these elders are invisible, but they matter very much. They are an integral part of families, with the success

"Success in immigrant families is often due to the efforts of the grandparents."

of children and grandchildren in many ways due to their efforts. Without their support, it would be hard for the families to gain a toehold. They exemplify the benefits of intergenerational relationships. We U.S.-born elders are not nearly as engaged in the lives of our children."

Research on immigrant families can influence policy priorities in immigration reform, says Treas. "There is now a movement to shift from family unification to labor recruitment as the nation's immigration priority. This doesn't bode well for 70-year-old grandmothers who want to come to the U.S., but the research shows the important contributions that elders make to the success of younger family members. And it shows that the elders remain very much the responsibility of the family. The public safety net does not exist for older immigrants who have not lived many years in the U.S. or become citizens."

Research findings are also crucial to educate communities and service providers and "to put a human face on the numbers," Treas says. She is now working on a book about elder newcomers that will rely on the interviews she and her students have conducted over the years. "Many of my students are from immigrant families," she says, "and their 'subjects' are the people at home. I see these successful students and I hear of the huge contributions their grandparents have made and their own commitment to their older relatives. I have to believe that our public policy will fall into place with these wonderful developments."

**Fernando Torres-Gil** also favors a multifaceted approach to understanding aging and immigration, as is apparent in his career. Torres-Gil is associate dean of academic affairs and professor of social welfare and public policy at UCLA and director of its Center for Policy Research on Aging. His academic interests range from healthcare and long-term care to the politics of aging, social welfare, and disability. President Clinton appointed him to be the first Assistant Secretary for Aging at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and he has also served in numerous other public policy and government roles.

But bringing together the policymakers and professionals in aging with those in immigration to address their many common challenges will not be easy, Torres-Gil says, though the need seems obvious. “The interrelationship is not new,” he says. “Immigration has been the basis of our country for more than 200 years, and aging a recognized policy concern for more than sixty years. Yet immigration studies and policy virtually ignore aging, and within the field of aging, the subject of immigration has been taboo.” Partly, Torres-Gil says, these attitudes stem from “the visceral nature of the topic,” with focus on high-profile controversial issues like immigrant workers taking nursing home jobs. Partly, he says, it’s differences between current elders, whose generational viewpoint is not seen as politically correct, and professionals and advocates in aging, who are more liberal. “It’s just easier to leave it alone.”

Torres-Gil says that it would be a mistake to approach the challenges of immigration and aging from an ideological perspective. “For a pragmatic approach, we must keep in mind the responsibilities we all have—immigrants and native-born. Those who come must make a commitment to vote, to learn English, to be fully engaged. Those of us who have been here, including advocates and workers in the community, must first understand the culture and language of those in our midst and use constructive approaches so they feel included and have opportunities for social mobility?”

Drawing on his personal background—his parents were migrant workers in Salinas, Calif.—as well as his academic and policy experience,



FERNANDO TORRES-GIL

“This time, we can turn from visceral debate to a pragmatic approach.”

Torres-Gil says: “The U.S. has always been a society in constant metamorphosis, like a beautiful butterfly. We have a constant influx of immigrants from around the world who continue to help us shed our skin to become a richer, better America. It’s enlightened self-interest. We benefit from their work and other contributions to our economy, and from their values of filial respect and compassion, because we tend to lose these in a capitalist society.”

The current economic crisis raises the specter of even less tolerance for immigrants, legal or illegal. “That has been the case whenever the economy has had a downturn, since the 1930s,” Torres-Gil says. “But this time, it could be different. With efforts like this issue of *Generations*, we want to reframe the discussion. This time, we can turn from visceral debate. We can change the focus from exclusion to figuring how to invest in the immigrants of all ages and the role they can play. If we are to grow, it depends on them.”

—Mary Johnson

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