

# Immigration and Aging: The Nexus of Complexity and Promise

By *Fernando Torres-Gil and Judith Treas, guest editors*

The United States is in the midst of a remarkable demographic transition. Largely as a result of immigration, it is becoming increasingly diverse. At the same time, it is aging rapidly. These trends will dramatically transform the nation by the year 2030, when we will look, speak, and feel differently. The arrival of foreign individuals from across the globe is a crucial component of these changes. In the absence of dramatic and effective immigration reform, we can expect the United States to face continued immigration—legal and undocumented—for many decades. What does this mean for a nation that is also aging? What are the connections between demographic changes, continued immigration, and increased diversity?

Heretofore, the fields of gerontology and geriatrics have generally ignored discussions of immigration and, with rare exceptions, have made few sustained intellectual and theoretical contributions to our understanding of the nexus of aging and immigration. Although immigration reforms proposed in 2007 targeted older immigrants in calling for caps on the admission of aging parents, advocates for older adults were virtually silent in the debate. Issues of immigration are inherently visceral, complex, and divisive. Whether the issue is affirmative action,

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*Implications of a remarkable  
demographic transition.*

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bilingual education, driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, or the sudden influx of young, non-English-speakers into rural communities of older, white,

English-speaking residents, the debates are often emotional. With few exceptions, age-based advocacy groups and professional societies on aging have avoided becoming entangled in these divisive issues by sidestepping the opportunities for research and policy analysis on immigration. Meanwhile, unfortunately, the enormous literature on immigration has neglected aging, most likely because immigration scholars have understandably been preoccupied with the needs of working-age immigrants and their children.

This issue of *Generations* proceeds on the assumption that demographic realities now require that the fields of gerontology and geriatrics, as well as individual practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts, delve into these twin phenomena to explore the intersection of aging and immigration. With growing numbers of older people living in communities with growing numbers of immigrants, it is imperative to begin the conversations that can lead to constructive programmatic interventions, proactive policy prescriptions, and a movement

toward coalitions that are more intergenerational, interracial, and interethnic.

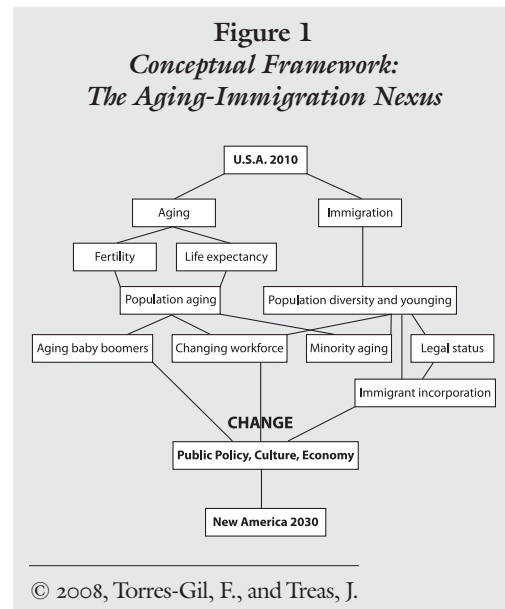
Moving toward these lofty goals is not easy. Moving forward forces a more in-depth and determined investigation of the myriad and complex factors, myths and realities, associated with immigration, diversity, and race, as well as the robust array of aging-related issues and concerns. For those of us interested in aging, finding our feet in the immigration debate is complicated by the lack of consensus, not only in the general public, but among researchers. The empirical support on various points of debate is strong. For instance, immigrants assimilate in American society, not only becoming competent in English but often speaking no other language by the second or third generation. Yet, there exist enclaves of immigrants who can spend their entire lives in the U.S. speaking only their native language. The impact of immigrants on the wages of U.S.-born workers is still a matter of scholarly dispute, with data supporting both views. Sorting through conflicting claims, some strategically presented for political purposes, is a challenge. Thus, this issue of *Generations* mobilizes experts in the issues of immigration and aging to set the record straight on what is known.

**A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

As an introduction to what follows, we offer a conceptual framework to clarify how various elements of aging and immigration are linked. As Figure 1 shows, we view the nexus of aging and immigration as posing a dynamic challenge to the U.S. The causes of population aging are well known. Increasing life expectancy and declining fertility are tilting the population age structure toward retirees and away from workers, taxpayers, and caregivers. The visible outcome of population aging in the U.S. is large numbers of graying baby boomers. The implications for immigration form a more subtle dynamic. Population aging prompts immigration, if only because a shortage of U.S.-born workers creates a demand for immigrant workers. Being younger, immigrants slow the pace of population aging.

Figure 1 shows that immigration brings greater diversity in the population. Given the

Latin American and Asian origins of today’s immigrants, this means greater racial and ethnic diversity, but minority aging is also a result of the aging of U.S.-born minorities. Diversity, however, extends beyond the traditional markers of race and ethnicity. Legal status (e.g., citizen, refugee, employment-based or family-based, permanent resident, or undocumented immigrant) has significant implications for individual lives, whether we consider English-speaking ability or eligibility for public programs. Other variations are based on immigration cohort—the



characteristics of a group that immigrated during the same period of time. Long-term immigrants are more fully incorporated into American society than are newcomers, and the timing of immigration determines the warmth of the American reception. Some undocumented workers were able to legalize under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA); others, having arrived too late, still live and work in the shadows. To date, in gerontological circles, immigration has remained a sidebar to the broader topic of diversity—swept into more general conversations about minority aging with a nod to the need for cultural competence with ethnic populations. A focus on broad categories of African Americans, Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans has meant lumping together people with very different ori-

gins (e.g., as pan-Hispanics). Similarly, there is a failure to recognize nativity differences that set U.S. members of an ethnic group apart from newcomers, or generational differences that distinguish young immigrants from old. Our framework and the articles in this issue argue for a greater appreciation of these differences.

Following the Figure 1 schema, the upshot of these two demographic developments—the aging of baby boomers and immigrant-led diversification—implies extraordinary pressures for changes and accommodations in our economy, culture, and public policies. In short, the U.S. will change drastically between 2010 and 2030. Being both predominantly white and rapidly graying, the baby boomers have a major stake in immigration and these changes. Let us take one example. While only a small proportion of the elderly population is expected to live in an institutional setting, most of these older adults will, at some point, need some form of home care, whether for home health and rehabilitation, personal assistance, companionship, or basic household help. But who will provide this help? We do not raise our children to be long-term-care workers. Very few native-born Americans today want to work in a nursing home or provide home care and in-home supportive services. Thus, we find those workers among the ethnic, racial, and immigrant groups who lack better-paid alternatives or belong to cultures that still value serving older people. Baby boomers will find that their quality of old age may depend on immigrants and minorities. The political, cultural, and economic rapprochement between this aging population of U.S.-born Americans and the diverse, younger population with immigrant roots may well be the challenge that will define a new America by 2030. However, the question that remains is this: What will we evolve into between 2010 and 2030, a period when we can expect profound demographic changes in the United States?

#### MORAL DIMENSIONS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

From our perspective, cultural, economic, and public policy accommodations will need to engage at least two significant constituencies. First, there are older adults and aging baby

boomers, their families, and advocates. Second, there are ethnic communities and immigrants, their employers, and advocates. As demonstrated by, say, the nursing home director who employs immigrant nurses, there is considerable common ground for these constituencies. The public dialogue about immigrants, however, is all too often framed in visceral debates over specific issues such as driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants, bilingual education for non-English-speaking children, and penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants. The nexus of aging and immigration highlights not only pragmatic, but also philosophical and ethical, concerns.

The larger issue is about rights and responsibilities. Immigrants are expected to “play by the rules.” The formal laws and social expectations are often in dispute, however. Should one illegal border crossing permanently disqualify an immigrant for legal status after a lifetime of hard work and good behavior in the U.S.? Should immigrants be required to speak English? U.S.-born older people who expect immigrants to obey immigration laws and “become Americans” are sometimes dismissed as bigots. There is scant attention to the genuine ethical questions raised when they complain, “I have spent my lifetime paying taxes, saving and preparing for my old age, but immigrants can get benefits when I myself do not qualify!” Such statements send a crucial message about the potential for perceptions of injustice to sow discord and resentment.

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (the Welfare Reform Act) provides a political example of the tensions, dilemmas, and pushback in a nexus of aging and immigration. This dramatic restructuring of our welfare system was a shot-across-the-bow for our views about aging and immigration. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 not only revamped welfare (the act required work, limited benefits to five years, placed restrictions on teenage single mothers, mandated stricter paternity enforcement, and more), but it also restricted immigrants' eligibility for federal benefits—with some exceptions for refugees, naturalized citizens, and those with a decade of employment in the U.S. Liberals and ethnic communities mobilized to argue

that it was unfair to withhold benefits from needy elderly immigrants. Yet the genesis for this draconian measure was the growing perception by many Americans, particularly older citizens, that elderly immigrants were somehow “gaming the system.” In fact, there was anecdotal evidence of immigrants bringing their elders under the family reunification laws, signing documents agreeing to support them, and then breaking this pledge by enrolling their elderly parents in the Supplemental Security Income (S.S.I.) and Food Stamp programs. Whether these were isolated instances or represented a pattern of abuse, the perception became a reality in the minds of those who vote and pay taxes, and the Congress acted on these concerns with tougher welfare and immigration rules. At the urging of immigrant-advocate groups, welfare restrictions have been modified, for example, to “grandfather in” immigrants who were already receiving S.S.I. before the reforms passed. The view remains, however, that older immigrants, whether legal or undocumented, somehow require extra scrutiny. In fact, surprisingly little is known about older immigrants, their lives and circumstances, a neglect addressed by a number of articles in this volume.

Of course, the suspicions focusing on expectations for immigrants highlight the underlying question of how much we are obligated to help newcomers to make their way in American society. The U.S. places the responsibility on individuals and family. Our government offers few of the language classes or job training and settlement programs that other countries have developed to facilitate the incorporation of immigrants into their societies. Nor, as we have seen, does the U.S. any longer provide much of a safety net against unanticipated hardships. The nexus of aging and immigration requires us to come to terms with what we can reasonably expect of Americans, including those who immigrate to the U.S. Going forward, this holds especially for aging baby boomers, who, as we note above, have a pragmatic stake in the outcome of immigration reform even as they too are caught up in difficult moral questions and divisive political debates.

Undeniably, the nature of immigration has changed. Because jet aircraft and e-mail are more

efficient than the ships and letters of the nineteenth century, immigrants maintain closer ties to a homeland. Being larger and constantly replenished by new immigrants, ethnic enclaves allow for maintaining language and customs. Note that Los Angeles has the largest populations of Armenians, Mexicans, Koreans, and Persians outside their countries of origin. Furthermore, the rise of multiculturalism and ethnic politics offers political influence and power to well-organized ethnic lobbies.

As baby boomers age, as the nation becomes more diverse, and as the political system is forced to address problems with current immigration policies, we will no doubt find more active and influential ethnic, racial, and immigrant groups. Already, politicians in places like California cater to immigrants, promote naturalization and voter registration, and pursue immigrant-related political agendas. This scenario engenders an exotic blend of interest-group politics and strange political bedfellows. Labor unions, once anti-immigrant, now focus on immigrant-membership drives. Old-age interest groups, a catalyst for old-age public policies in the past century, will be forced to incorporate the politics of immigration and diversity in the twenty-first century. The AARP, historically skittish about immigration, looks to immigrants and Hispanics for future membership growth. Yet, as immigrants become a part of the political equation, there is also a pushback reflecting fear and resentment, as well as sincere concern about fairness, rights, and responsibilities.

#### MAPPING THE NEXUS OF IMMIGRATION AND AGING

This issue is organized to open a conversation on the societal context of aging and immigration, the situation of older immigrants, and the policy issues and political dilemmas that confront us. We begin with an overview by demographers Susan K. Brown, Frank D. Bean, and James D. Bachmeier. Their article charts the history of U.S. immigration and the principles that have guided it from colonial times to the present day. Two articles examine how the aging of the American population is driving immigration. Dowell Myers argues that retiring baby boomers will need to be replaced by

immigrant workers who will help pay for their Social Security benefits and buy their houses when they are ready to cash out. Turning to the healthcare needs of an aging population, Susan Reinhard, Donald Redfoot, and Brenda Cleary examine our reliance on foreign workers such as nurses.

Although there is an obvious connection between immigration processes and population aging at the societal level, other contributors remind us that there are also aging immigrants. Mark A. Leach offers a demographic profile of older immigrants, pointing to the differences between foreign-born long-term residents of the U.S. and newcomers. Judith Treas gives voice to elderly newcomers who, as she argues, are little known outside their families and ethnic communities. Addressing the health of older immigrants, Kyriakos S. Markides, Jennifer Salinas, and Kristin Sheffield explicate one fascinating paradox of aging and immigration: Older immigrants live longer than the U.S.-born population despite having lower socioeconomic status, poorer access to healthcare, more mental health problems, and higher rates of disability. Jeffrey A. Burr, Kerstin Gerst, Ngai Kwan, and Jan E. Mutchler expand on the economic status of older immigrants. Although they find that older immigrants are not as well off as other older Americans, the immigrant population is very diverse—for instance, in terms of eligibility for public-benefit programs. The reality of immigration and aging is most often found at the local level. The connection of immigration and aging makes it all the more important that workable political fixes be devised for a system of immigration that most people now regard as broken. Frederick R. Lynch looks at the political role older adults and aging baby boomers are apt to play in shaping the immigration agenda. Jeanne Batalova cogently frames this debate by pointing to the difficult trade-offs and critical choices the nation must make in moving forward with immigration reform. To be sure, the U.S. is not unique in being faced by the twin challenges of aging and immigration. As Bum

Jung Kim and Fernando Torres-Gil report, South Korea confronts an immigration imperative with an even more rapidly aging population, but without the historical experience of immigrant incorporation that characterizes the U.S. To a debate that will inevitably focus on reforms that are feasible, effective, and fair, ethicist Andrew Sabl explores the moral issues that underpin the nexus of immigration and aging.

The reality of immigration, however, is most often found at the local level. To that end, each section of this issue provides a community case study that frames the humanitarian elements of aging and immigration. Elham Mireshghi, Amy Trang, and Tomás R. Jiménez illustrate the complexity and richness of diversity through their essays about Iranian, Southeast Asian, and Mexican American elders. Through their lenses, service providers and practitioners can gain insights for developing culturally compatible services from diverse elders.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In a nation growing older, relying on immigrants, and becoming more diverse, we can expect many issues engendering debate, conflict, and politics. Yet what distinguishes the United States from all other nations grappling with these challenges is that we have a long and sustained tradition of facing and tackling immigration issues in order to resolve them. The national and civic values of acceptance, tolerance, and integration, while not always practiced, create a social and political climate conducive to working toward solutions. That is what makes us different from other nations. That will, in time, and with effort, allow us to adapt to, and benefit from, our diversity. With this issue of *Generations*, we hope to engage the aging community in this challenge. Although we do not presume to offer solutions to the complex issues arising from the nexus of immigration and aging, the articles in this journal issue do offer a solid introduction to the perspectives and empirical findings that must inform this debate. ☪