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Author(s): Richard Alba, Philip Kasinitz and Mary C. Waters

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# The Kids Are (Mostly) Alright: Second-Generation Assimilation

## *Comments on Haller, Portes and Lynch*

Richard Alba, *CUNY*

Philip Kasinitz, *CUNY*

Mary C. Waters, *Harvard University*

The overall well-being and integration of second-generation immigrant youth constitute an important topic for researchers and policy makers, one that has generated a great deal of empirical research. While the article by Haller, Portes and Lynch organizes that research into two competing camps—segmented assimilation vs. other theories of assimilation—we think that these theories are better seen as complementary rather than antagonistic. We also believe that empirical findings on the second generation from various studies are not far apart, but in our view they do not show that “downward” assimilation is as widespread as Portes and his colleagues assert.

Researchers using different theoretical lenses reach quite similar conclusions about today’s children of immigrants. In general, the second generation is doing much better than its parents in educational attainment and is less concentrated in immigrant jobs (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Park and Myers 2010; Smith 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2008). The overwhelming majority of the second generation is completely fluent in English and integrated in many ways in American society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Bean and Stevens 2003). Yet most of its members have not reached parity with native whites, and many experience racial discrimination. A minority of the second generation does not make a successful transition to adulthood, dropping out of high school and/or failing to find employment, and some members of the second generation become involved in criminal activity including gangs and drugs (Rumbaut 2005). This was also, we must point out, the experience of an earlier second generation of European origins, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Foner 2000).

### Where Our Perspectives Are Complementary

We believe that segmented-assimilation and mainstream-assimilation theories are complementary in that both approaches have overlapping explanations for the varying levels of success of the second generation, but contribute insights that are distinct. We have argued that the second generation should be seen as generally successful in its integration into American society, but we also have been very clear that some individuals experience lateral, and sometimes downward, mobility, and that this is more prevalent in some groups than others. The context of reception facing different national origin groups most definitely influences outcomes for the second generation, which vary among individuals and among groups. In part, the seeming disagreements reflect matters of emphasis, rather than different empirical findings. *Inheriting the City* stresses the overall mobility of the second generation, compared to its parents and to native groups of the same racial/ethnic

background. Yet Kasinitz et al. (2008) conclude that there is much cause for concern about the future trajectory of Dominican second-generation men, and they find much downward mobility among Puerto Ricans (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Portes and associates, while stressing the dangers of downward assimilation and finding that most of the second generation do not do as well as native whites, nevertheless have done much to document and explain the success of the second generation, which has overcome difficult odds at times (Fernández-Kelly 2008; Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 2008; Smith 2008).

The mechanisms explaining outcomes are also quite similar across the different theoretical perspectives. The Haller, Portes and Lynch article identifies three important factors influencing outcomes among the second generation—parents' socio-economic status, modes of incorporation among different groups and family structure. These three factors are also the main ones identified in the New York Second Generation Study (Waters et al. 2010). To these three, Kasinitz et al. (2008) added cultural creativity—the ability to combine norms and scripts from parents as well as American society. They point to the advantage the second generation has over natives in being able to draw from multiple frames of reference and cultural traditions to fashion strategies to deal with issues that confront young adults. While segmented-assimilation theory also notes that young people can gain strength from their parents' strong ethnic communities, the New York Second Generation Study specified a path by which a specific ethnic heritage and integration into American society can combine to create advantageous outcomes.

Segmented assimilation stresses the advantages and disadvantages stemming from the immigrant community and the context of reception, and the disadvantages that the second generation faces from being identified as and sharing institutions with racial minorities. The New York Second Generation Study also argues that there are sometimes advantages to the second generation from being classified as racial minorities (Kasinitz et al. 2008). The immigrant optimism identified by many researchers (Kao and Tienda 1998) as well as the selectivity of the parental generation in terms of ambition and other hard-to-measure characteristics position black and Hispanic second-generation youth to take advantage of programs and institutions developed in post-civil rights America, such as diversity outreach programs and affirmative action. While segmented assimilation is right to stress the barriers to inclusion in mainstream American society that race continues to impose, the mainstream assimilation model is also right to stress the growing presence of racial minorities in the middle and upper class and the ways in which this provides role models, institutional support and mobility for new immigrants and their children. The claim that the second generation may experience downward assimilation when mainstream American society characterizes them as nonwhite underestimates the extent to which the civil rights movement has changed the meaning of race since the 1960s. The use of blanket categories such as black or Hispanic to enforce the Voting Rights Act and other civil rights-era legislation means that immigrants and their children have access to institutions facilitating social mobility precisely because they are considered non-white. Assimilating into "black America" or "Latino America,"

while creating many negative encounters with North American racism, thus does not have universally negative consequences for the contemporary second generation (see also Neckerman, Carter and Lee 1999).

A mainstream-assimilation perspective adds something missing in segmented-assimilation theory when it comes to the possibilities for future change to ethno-racial boundaries. The main thrust of segmented assimilation theory is about the integration of the second generation into an existing ethno-racial socioeconomic hierarchy. As Portes and Zhou (1993:82) state concisely, “the question is into what sector of American society a particular immigrant group assimilates.” Because the sectors conceptually come prior to the assimilation, segmented assimilation cannot easily address the potential changes in the American ethno-racial hierarchy and their consequences for the second generation. In effect, segmented assimilation takes race as an exogenous constraint on assimilation trajectories. It cannot readily consider changes to the larger society such as those that occurred in middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the mass assimilation of second- and third-generation Catholic and Jewish ethnics.

Recently, Alba (2009) working within a neo-assimilation framework, has developed a theory of large-scale, ethno-racial boundary change, founded on a re-analysis of this critical period. A key factor is the condition of “non zero-sum mobility,” a situation that obtains when many members of disadvantaged minorities can ascend socially without appearing to threaten the position of the established majority. Alba argues that non-zero-sum mobility is likely to arise over the next quarter century because of the exodus from the labor market of post-World War II baby-boom birth cohorts, disproportionately composed of highly educated, occupationally well-placed, native-born whites. Because there will not be as many whites entering the labor market during this period as are leaving it, minorities, including the second generation, should enjoy enhanced mobility prospects. There are important contingencies that will affect how many minorities are able to take advantage of these opportunities, but almost certainly, there will be much more ethno-racial diversity in the middle, and even the upper, levels of American society. This diversity will affect the boundaries between groups, probably blurring them to a significant extent and furthering socially intimate, cross-ethnic ties, such as intermarriage, which continues to rise (Lee and Bean 2007; Passel et al. 2010).

## Where Our Perspectives Differ

### *The Empirical Significance of Downward Assimilation*

We disagree with Haller, Portes and Lynch over the empirical extent of downward assimilation. Understanding our disagreement requires some conceptual preliminaries. We want to be clear that we see the downward-assimilation concept as a significant theoretical contribution, designating a phenomenon that must be considered in any analytical inventory of second-generation outcomes. To define it, Portes and Zhou (1993:82) equated downward assimilation with “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass.” According to Portes, Fernandez-Kelly and Haller (2009), a downward trajectory is especially likely to befall those immigrant youth who reject “the prospect of toiling

at low-wage, dead-end jobs all their lives” – in other words, who face economic prospects not much different than their parents.

Although the concept has theoretical appeal, the question is: how common is downward assimilation? We find that the empirical measurement of downward assimilation, in the current article as elsewhere, has been exaggerated by a decidedly upper-middle-class bias. Portes and his collaborators suggest that, in the current “hourglass”-shaped U.S. labor market, anything short of a leap into the university-trained, upper-middle class in a single generation risks downward mobility or at least stagnation, which could potentially consign the second generation to an “underclass” outside the economic and social mainstream. As Portes, Fernández Kelly and Haller (2009:1080-81) write:

“For new entrants into the labour force, including the children of immigrants, this stark bifurcation means that they must acquire in the course of a single generation the advanced educational credentials that took descendants of Europeans several generations to achieve. Otherwise, their chances of fulfilling their aspirations would be compromised as few opportunities exist between the low-paid manual occupations that most immigrant parents occupy and the lofty, highly paid jobs in business, health, the law and the academy that these parents earnestly wish for their offspring. Without the costly and time-consuming achievement of a university degree, such dreams are likely to remain beyond reach.”

One problem with this formulation is that if graduation from a four-year university and admission into the professions or other “lofty” positions are needed to enter the mainstream, then *most* Americans, including most *white* Americans, are not part of it. Obviously, income and wealth inequality has increased in the United States in recent decades, and the gap between the middle and the top (particularly the very top) of the class structure has grown markedly. But the starkly dualistic depiction of the labor market in the quotation is not realistic. In fact, the distribution of jobs (according to, say, income) does not have an hour-glass shape, but bulges in the lower middle (see Alba 2009). Even if the changes in the labor market are pushing it gradually in the direction of an hour-glass shape (i.e., generating growth at the top and bottom, along with some shrinkage in the middle), the distribution of existing jobs still matters a lot because most of the hiring in coming decades is going to take place as new workers replace exiting ones (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010).

Most of the children of non-white immigrants, like most of the children of white natives, are not bound for elite universities and professional careers, although a significant minority is (see Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008). Yet neither are they mired in lives of poverty and despair. Most have made significant progress relative to their parents, as happens when the children of, say, janitors become automobile mechanics, electricians or medical technicians. On average they occupy a social and economic space somewhere between that of native minorities and native whites. That might not be everything their parents wished for (but then again sometimes it is). But it does not suggest the social and economic isolation implied by the notion of downward assimilation, nor does it indicate the formation of an underclass.

Most of the indicators Haller, Portes and Lynch use in their DAI measure of downward assimilation seem to reflect this upper-middle-class bias. We agree that incarceration and not finishing high school are strong indicators of trouble in adulthood. But the other measures are more ambiguous, especially for a sample with the youth of CILS respondents, whose average age is 24. It is not clear that unemployment or low income is very predictive for individuals in their early 20s, who may be just starting out in the labor market or still in school and combining part-time work with school work (Newman 2006). Mixing part-time education and training with part-time work is increasingly common among working-class Americans in their 20s, and the evidence suggests that this pattern often leads to an upward trajectory (see Attewell and Lavin 2007). The indicator of early child bearing is also ambiguous, but for another reason. Among Mexicans and Central Americans, higher fertility can be seen as an ethnic pattern, an adherence to the norm. Because Portes has argued elsewhere that the maintenance of ethnic patterns by the second generation can be protective against the risk of downward assimilation, it is difficult to accept early child bearing as a valid component of the DAI index (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Perlmann 2011).

Having been arrested—as opposed to incarcerated—is also not very telling. Getting arrested is actually a fairly common experience for young American males and not one universally associated with downward mobility, if former President George W. Bush is an example. CILS does not include a native comparison group, so it is not possible to make a direct contrast to the experience of natives. However, in the New York data the number of native white males who were arrested was actually higher than that of most second-generation groups (Kasinitz et al. 2008).

Even with respect to incarceration, we urge caution about conclusions from CILS. Without wishing to downplay the significance of gang involvement and incarceration for Mexican-American and other Hispanic communities (such as Puerto Ricans and Dominicans), we are skeptical about the conclusion of Haller, Portes and Lynch that the Mexican-American rate of incarceration almost matches that of blacks. There are risks in drawing such a conclusion from the kinds of data that Portes and his colleagues can marshal, where the third wave of CILS blends survey data (with a substantial dropout rate) and computer-based “retrieval methods” to locate respondents “who had died, were in prison, were fugitive from justice” and whose incomplete data were then included in the analysis (Portes and Rumbaut 2005:993-94). The two data sources undoubtedly are associated with different rates of inclusion of the target individuals, and this can distort percentages.

In any event, the apparent parity of incarceration between Mexicans and blacks is not supported by other data sources. For example, Rumbaut (2005:1052-53), using 2000 U.S. Census data, finds that 6 percent of U.S.-born Mexican-American men ages 18-39 are incarcerated, worrisome to be sure but clearly lower than the 12 percent rate for black men (see also Perlmann 2005). A recent Pew Hispanic Center report (Lopez and Light 2009) on sentences handed down in federal courts, where record keeping about citizenship and ethno-racial background is probably optimal (for a criminal

justice system), also suggests a similar disparity. That report found for 2007 that the number of black Americans sentenced was roughly twice the number of U.S.-citizen Hispanics. Yet, in the age groups most prone to drug offenses (20-34), one of the major categories of crimes prosecuted in federal courts, these two groups are roughly equal.

In sum, we argue that the modest but significant upward mobility of most of the children of immigrants found in all of the major studies of the second generation represents important progress. Even the current deep recession does not appear to modify this conclusion, to judge from the data reported by the Pew Hispanic Center (2009) for young-adult Hispanics for the second half of 2009. The move out of poverty and the low-status manual positions filled by so many of the immigrants into the working- and lower-middle-class jobs held by most of their children is an achievement and is seen that way by many in the second generation. This modest mobility, quite consistent with the experiences of many of the southern and eastern European immigrant groups of a century ago, contradicts the hysterical predictions of many contemporary opponents of immigration (e.g., Huntington 2004).

### *On Methods*

Portes, Lynch and Haller argue for the superiority of the longitudinal CILS sample design over the cross-sectional approaches used in the New York and Los Angeles surveys. In general, survey and sampling methods have their strengths and weaknesses. None—certainly none that we have ever been involved with—is perfect. We agree that there is much to admire in CILS. It is a well designed and executed survey and a valuable basis for assessing second-generation situations, and we have learned a great deal from it. We also agree that because the processes involved in second-generation incorporation unfold over time, in an ideal world they should be studied longitudinally. We also find the decision to locate the original sample in schools during the 8<sup>th</sup> grade—the last point at which we can assume school attendance is fairly close to universal—to be ingenious.

However, in the real world there can be disadvantages to a longitudinal design as well. Portes, Lynch and Haller correctly point to the substantial, non-random sample attrition that CILS had experienced by the third wave. Further, a study that starts with 14 year olds, but intends to be about how young adults are incorporated into U.S. society, requires a lot of waiting time. Unfortunately the requirements of careers and funders make it impossible to wait that long. In the case of the CILS study, the major empirical report, as well as the conceptual framing including the notion of downward assimilation, came in *Legacies* (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), which was based on only the first two waves of CILS, at which time the respondents were still only 18. That was a very early point at which to try to discern adult outcomes, and it required basing conclusions on such imperfect indicators as high-school grades.

CILS is further limited by the lack of native comparison groups. This strikes us as a serious matter when it comes to evaluating the extent of downward assimilation, which requires a comparison to direct measures of native performance on the same variables

in the same cities. The example of arrest frequency indicates how the absence of native comparison groups can muddy inferences.

### *On What We Have Said*

In making the case that segmented assimilation is the superior theoretical approach, Portes and his colleagues significantly misrepresent our work. Emblematic of this tack is the claim in the current article (and elsewhere) that Alba and Nee's (2003) conception of the mainstream allows it to "be practically anything—from the upper-class to the minority poor." This claim is false. It rests on a misreading that Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller (2005:1003) give to one phrase in *Remaking the American Mainstream*, detaching it in the process from the larger context of the argument. In the midst of a discussion of their conception of the mainstream, Alba and Nee (2003:12) state, "it [the mainstream] contains a working class and even some who are poor." The claim by Portes and his co-authors involves an unwarranted extrapolation from the last five words, which perhaps in retrospect deserved more explication at the time: the phrase was intended to accommodate the findings of Massey and others that many poor whites are residentially (and undoubtedly socially) integrated into middle-class communities, but poor blacks tend to be spatially concentrated (see Massey 1990). In the event, Portes et al. (2005) recognize that the operational conception of the mainstream in the remainder of the book does not accord with their reading of this phrase, so it is unclear why the claim is restated in the current article. Nothing in *Remaking the American Mainstream* or other writings by Alba and/or Nee supports the notion that they think of the *minority poor* as members of the mainstream, and much speaks against such an idea (e.g., the concluding chapter of Alba and Nee 2003 or of Alba 2009).

In recent essays, Alba (2008) has attempted to give more empirical precision to the mainstream conception by defining its social spaces as encompassing those settings where the presence of whites (with the appropriate demographic and socio-economic characteristics) is unproblematic or taken for granted. The cultural spaces of the mainstream can be defined in an analogous way. The idea is that, in an ethno-racially stratified society, the mainstream (a term that could be put in the plural to acknowledge the heterogeneity in the mainstream society) is defined by where the members of the majority group, including its working class, are "at home." Members of minority groups can enter the mainstream, as they do for example when they participate as parents in the sports and school groups that loom so large in white-dominated suburbs. From the perspective of an assimilation theory appropriate to the multi-racial United States of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a key advantage of such a definition is that assimilation does not then require individuals to become members of the majority group itself—in other words, to become white—as did the canonical assimilation theory of Gordon (1964).

Moreover, we do not "dismiss the possibility of downward assimilation to posit a uniform path embraced by all or most children of immigrants" as Haller, Portes and Lynch assert. When we (Kasinitz and Waters) began the New York Second Generation Study, we were very much expecting to find downward mobility among the second



generation for many of the reasons outlined by Gans (1992) and Portes and Zhou (1993). We were surprised at what we found. Because we compared the second generation to natives and found that Russians and Chinese were doing better than native whites, Dominicans were doing better than Puerto Ricans, and West Indians were doing better than blacks, and all of the second-generation groups were doing better than their parents, we discerned a pattern of second-generation advantage, which we tried to unpack and explain. At the same time, we were troubled by the downward mobility we did find among some Puerto Ricans and blacks. We described the high arrest rates of Dominican men and their lower high school completion rates. While they are doing better in terms of educational achievement than their immigrant parents, we pointed out that Dominican immigrants had very low educational levels and that their children were clearly at risk going forward.

We should also note that *Inheriting the City* did not “exclude” Mexican Americans, Haitian Americans, and second-generation Laotians and Cambodians, any more than the analysis of the CILS data excludes Dominicans and Russians. These groups were either simply not present in New York in sufficient numbers or, in the case of Mexicans, were too recently arrived in New York to yield a sample of *second-generation* respondents.

*Inheriting the City* is indeed a study of New York, and there are aspects of the study that may not be generalizable to the rest of the nation. The lack of Mexicans—by far the largest immigrant group in the United States—is clearly one of these aspects. Nevertheless, CILS is a study of San Diego and Miami. All of these locales have their distinct histories and specific attributes, and none of them generalizes facily to the nation as a whole. In stressing the local particularities more in our book than had been done in the other studies, we hoped to highlight the specific elements of the local context of reception that were important in shaping outcomes. That is a limitation perhaps, but we do not see it as a flaw.

### **In Conclusion: The Social Science of the Second Generation in Public Discourse**

The final section of the article by Haller, Portes and Lynch suggests that research using a mainstream-assimilation perspective is masking the dire situation of a substantial portion of the contemporary second generation, which is at risk of gang membership, incarceration and membership in the underclass. This discussion implies that the assimilation-related research is giving false reassurance to the majority of Americans that all is well, when in fact a clarion call for urgently needed policy interventions should go out.

We caution however that overstated or overemphasized claims about downward assimilation present an equal if not greater risk. While Haller, Portes and Lynch seem to think that most Americans will react to news of second-generation downward assimilation by advocating vigorous assistance to disadvantaged immigrant families, we believe that reaction is highly unlikely. The opposite response seems more likely. Portes and his co-authors cite *Generations of Exclusion* by Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz (2008) as research strengthening their case about downward assimilation. However, when this book appeared, the main reaction in the public domain came from conservative com-

mentators, who took it as a demonstration that Mexican Americans, in the main, are not assimilating, even after their families have lived three and four generations on this side of the border. In his commentary in *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, Robert Samuelson concluded that we could address this problem by refashioning “immigration policy to favor skilled over unskilled immigrants, because they contribute more to the economy and assimilate faster.” Rich Lowry (of *The National Review* and *The New York Post*) was blunter: “If we have a population of Americans of Mexican origin who are having trouble getting a firm grasp on the rungs of upward mobility, the last thing we should be doing is importing poorly educated Mexicans...”

No social scientist is responsible for every use of his or her work made in the public sphere, and Telles and Ortiz are not to blame for the uses to which their work has been put. There are no easy formulas when it comes to successfully making the public case for progressive policies, other than doing the best one can to get the story right. When presenting work on topics of public controversy, however, it is particularly important to put the emphasis in the right place, to get the “headline” right. While acknowledging that downward assimilation is an important part of the story for some children of today’s immigrants, our research and the other studies of the second generation including CILS consistently show that it is a minority experience and that real, if often modest, upward mobility is much more common. That is an important message for Americans to hear.

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