Part 1: A Level Playing Field for New York's Children in Immigrant Families

Landed on Ellis Island

A Rosy-cheeked Irish Girl the First Registered— Room Enough for All Arrivals

The new buildings on Ellis Island constructed for the use of the Immigration Bureau were yesterday formally occupied by the officials of that department. The employees reported at an early hour, and each was shown to his place by the Superintendent or his chief clerk. Col. Weber was on the island at 8 o'clock, and went on a tour of inspection to see that everything was in readiness for the reception of the first boatload of immigrants.

There were three big steamships in the harbor waiting to land their passengers, and there was much anxiety among the new-comers to be the first landed at the new station. The honor was reserved for a little rosy-cheeked Irish girl. She was Annie Moore, fifteen years of age, lately a resident of County Cork, and yesterday one of the 148 steerage passengers landed from the Guion steamship Nevada. Her name is now distinguished by being the first registered in the book of the new landing bureau.

When the little voyager had been registered Col. Weber presented her with a ten-dollar gold piece and made a short address of congratulation and welcome. She was accompanied by her two younger brothers. The trio came to join their parents, who live at 32 Monroe Street, this city.

Excerpt from the New York Times, January 2, 1892

This statue of Annie Moore and her brothers is on display in County Cork Ireland.
A statue of her image is also displayed at Ellis Island.
Annie eventually married and was the immigrant mother of eleven children of her own.

A Level Playing Field for New York's Children in Immigrant Families

Introduction

The story of Annie Moore is distinct in that she was the first immigrant to pass through the then, newly constructed Ellis Island. However, the experience she had in 1892 is one that is shared by many immigrants who enter the United States today in that New York City remains a prominent gateway for newcomers. Another similarity is that Annie and her brothers faced many of the same hardships encountered by their current day peers where families have low household incomes, parents have low levels of education and children spend their childhood in poverty.

In New York State, almost one in every three children lives in an immigrant family—the third highest percentage in the nation. Although many of these families have parents working full-time, the wages they earn often do not adequately provide the economic security needed for basic living expenses, which means almost half of New York's children in immigrant families live at or below 200% of the poverty level.

Clearly, the scenario outlined here compels us to consider the types of policies and programs that could level the playing field, promote overall well-being and lead to eventual self-sufficiency for children with immigrant parents. A widely recognized means to equalize opportunities for children in poverty is participation in early learning programs. For children in immigrant families, participation in such programs has dual benefits in that the programs develop important literacy skills necessary for success in school while also familiarizing families with their new communities.

Regardless of immigrant status, many factors influence parents' decisions to enroll their children in early learning programs. For instance, parents take into account child characteristics, such as age, as well as family circumstances that may include the number of children in the family, whether a family member is available to care for children at home, number of parents in the household, whether both parents work and ability to pay for early learning programs. Additionally, these factors and the decision to enroll children in early learning programs can be tempered by whether programs are available within the communities where families reside. Beyond these factors, immigrant parents have additional considerations that may weigh into their decisions of whether to enroll their children in early learning programs and these tend to involve the degree immigrant parents have assimilated into their communities and their new culture. For instance, parents' ability to speak English; whether parents are naturalized citizens; the number of years parents have been in the United States; and whether parents and children or parents only are newcomers (i.e., child is first- or second-generation) can all factor into immigrant parents' decision to enroll their children in early learning programs.

> **Early learning programs play a pivotal role in leveling the playing field and increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes for children in immigrant families.**

Early learning programs play a pivotal role in leveling the playing field and increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes for children in immigrant families, many whom must overcome the challenges associated with living in poverty. It is evident a better understanding of how various factors play into enrollment decisions is needed to help program and policy planners on two fronts. First, knowledge about enrollment decisions increases our ability to develop culturally sensitive outreach strategies that take into account cultural preferences. Second, it allows us to design and target programs for immigrant parents that could increase the likelihood they will enroll their children in early learning programs. Our understanding of this matter requires appropriate attention in light of the fact that three in ten children in our state live in immigrant families where either one or both parents are immigrants.

Approach Used

Using Census data (1), a series of analyses were conducted to better understand how multiple factors play into immigrant parents' decision to enroll their child in early learning programs. Parents' decision to enroll children in early learning programs is based on their response to the Census question 'What grade does your child [family member] attend?' Parents who selected 'prekindergarten or nursery school 'as their response were included as parents who decided to have their child participate in early learning programs. The results presented here focus on children four years of age whose mother is foreign born. This focus was taken given the important role of mothers in children's early learning and literacy development as well as current efforts of the Governor's Children's Cabinet to make universal pre-kindergarten available for all four year old children.

Four questions were addressed to gain a better understanding of factors influencing immigrant parents' decision to enroll their young child in early learning programs:

1. Who are New York's young children in immigrant families?

2. How do characteristics regarding family structure; family economic status; mother's nativity and degree of assimilation; and family's geographic location in the state influence a mother's decision to enroll her child in early learning programs?

3. How would enrollment in early learning programs change if factors influenced by policies and programs were improved, including such factors as family poverty level; mother's ability to speak English, her educational attainment and workforce participation?

4. What accounts for the enrollment gap observed between children in immigrant and non-immigrant families?

New York's Young Immigrant Children & Early Learning Enrollment

Who are New York's Young Children in Immigrant Families?

Approximately one in four of New York's four-year old children has a mother who is an immigrant. Typically, children have both parents in the household (76%) and in limited circumstances, grandparents are also members of the household (15%). Most children with an immigrant mother live in New York City (75%) or areas located nearby (11% on Long Island; 9% in down-state region) while about 5 percent live in the upstate region.

Economic hardship is the norm for half of these children in that one in two lives at or below 200% of the poverty level (26% at 100% poverty level; 24% at 200% of poverty level) with a median family income of $37,000.

Three in ten children have a mother with less than a high school diploma (30%) and about one in four has a mother who does not speak English well or at all (26%). Children tend to have mothers who have been in the United States for a number of years with over half the children having mothers with 10 or more years in the United States (56%).

About two in three children with immigrant mothers were born in the United States (68%), yet the majority of them do not have mothers who are naturalized citizens (59%). While mother's nativity is quite diverse, most children have mothers from Central and North America (Figure 1).

Overall, children with immigrant mothers tend to be enrolled in early learning programs (69%) although this varies when we review enrollment by mother's country of origin, where we seen enrollment ranging from a high of about 83 percent among children whose mothers are from Jamaica, which is an English speaking country, to 61 percent among children whose mothers are from Mexico (Figure 2). It is important to note that the

> 1 in 4 of New York's four -year-old children has a mother who is an immigrant.
>
> 3 in 4 live in two parent households.
>
> 1 in 2 lives at or below 200% of poverty level.

geographic region of the state also may influence enrollment rates.

For example, children in the upstate region who have immigrant mothers from Mexico have an enrollment rate of 74 percent compared to the statewide rate of 61% while children with mothers from China have an enrollment rate of 35% compared to the statewide rate of 69%. These variations are due, in part, to the types of supports available to parents (e.g., community cultural centers, migrant programs).

Figure 1. Children with Immigrant Mothers by Mother's Country/Region of Origin

Country/Region of Immigrant Mother	Percent of Children with Mother from Country/Region
Dominican Republic	16.1%
Jamaica	6.9%
Mexico	6.1%
Haiti	3.6%
Rest of North & Central America	13.9%
China	4.3%
India	3.1%
Rest of Asia	12.3%
Ecuador	3.8%
Guyana & British Guyana	4.0%
Rest of South America	5.8%
Europe	11.9%
Africa	4.1%
Oceania & elsewhere	4.2%

Figure 2. Early Learning Enrollment of Children by Immigrant Mother's Country/Region of Origin

Country/Region of Immigrant Mother	Probability Children Enrolled in Early Learning Program
Dominican Republic	63.0%
Jamaica	82.7%
Mexico	61.2%
Haiti	77.4%
Rest of North & Central America	69.6%
China	69.0%
India	67.2%
Rest of Asia	64.1%
Ecuador	63.9%
Guyana & British Guyana	64.8%
Rest of South America	72.4%
Europe	70.2%
Africa	79.9%
Oceania & elsewhere	72.9%

How Do Family Factors Influence the Likelihood Immigrant Mothers Enroll Their Children in Early Learning Programs?

Parents often weigh many factors when deciding whether to enroll their children in early learning programs. These include such characteristics as family structure; family economic status; mother's nativity and degree of assimilation; and family's geographic location in the state. Specifically, the following elements were examined:

Regarding Family & Mother
- Family household structure (one- or two-parent family)
- Number of siblings in household
- Household poverty level
- Presence of grandparent(s) in the home
- Mother's educational attainment
- Geographic location of family

Regarding Family Assimilation
- Mother's years in the United States
- Mother's ability to speak English

- Mother's citizen status (naturalized citizen)
- Mother's country/region of origin
- Mother's participation in the workforce
- Child is first- or second-generation

Overall, New York's four-year-old children with immigrant mothers are enrolled in early learning programs (69%) and the factors regarding family, mother and family assimilation explain a modest amount of variation between those children who are enrolled and those who are not enrolled. However, when we review the influence of the factors described above, we learn that mother's level of education, the number of siblings and whether the child is first- or second-generation will contribute most to our understanding of whether a child is enrolled in early learning programs. Specifically, children are more likely to be enrolled when they have fewer siblings; they were born in the United States (second-genera-

tion); and their mother has higher levels of education. In fact, children whose immigrant mothers have a college degree are twice as likely to be enrolled in an early learning program as those whose mother s have a high school education or less. As might be expected, children living in poverty are less likely to be enr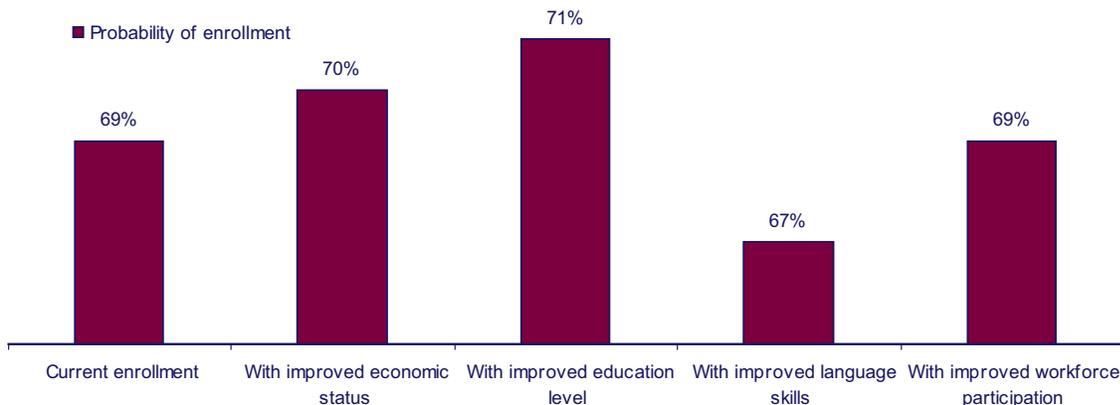olled in early learning programs but, when taken into account with other factors, poverty level was not highly related to enrollment. Mother's ability to speak English did not influence her child's likelihood of being enrolled in early learning programs. As described earlier, children with mothers from Jamaica, Africa and Haiti were most likely to be enrolled in early learning programs.

How Would Enrollment Rates Change with Enhancements to Economic Status of Family and Mother's Education Level, Language Skills and Workforce Participation?

*T*he differences in family circumstances among immigrant families contribute, in part, to differences in children's enrollment in early learning programs. However, it is well recognized that certain policies and programs have been shown to improve parents' levels of education, their language skills, workforce participation and family economic status. Therefore, we estimated the improvement in enrollment that might be realized if mothers had optimal situations. That is, we looked at changes in enrollment if mothers had the highest level of education, excellent language skills, lived above 200% of poverty and participated in the workforce. For children with the lowest enrollment rates, this best case scenario would shift enrollment rates from 61 to 85 percent. However, it is unrealistic to expect any program or policy to have the maximum effect on circumstances. Therefore, we examined the probability of enrollment if programs and policies could enhance individuals' circumstances one level. For instance, how would enrollment improve if mothers with no high school education gained a diploma and those with some college gained a college degree?

How would enrollment rates improve if those currently living at 100% of the poverty level were moved to 200% poverty and those at 200% were moved above 200% poverty? Figure 3 shows the probability of enrollment if mothers were given the opportunity to improve their present economic status (poverty level); educational level; language skills and workforce participation. These factors were selected given our ability to further change them through known policies and programs. Overall, improvement of one level in education or poverty status reflects a modest improvement in the probability of enrollment; the probability of enrollment remains the same for workforce participation. A change in language skills shows no change in enrollment. Of course, in reality, these factors do not operate in isolation and it is expected that an improvement in one's education status might also improve one's poverty status as well as the type of job available. Despite the modest changes, this information is useful in that it reflects the possibility of improvement given a minimum change in current circumstances.

Figure 3. Could Targeted Strategies Improve Enrollment?

- Probability of enrollment

	Current enrollment	With improved economic status	With improved education level	With improved language skills	With improved workforce participation
	69%	70%	71%	67%	69%

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What Accounts for the Enrollment Gap Observed Between Children in Immigrant and Non-immigrant Families?
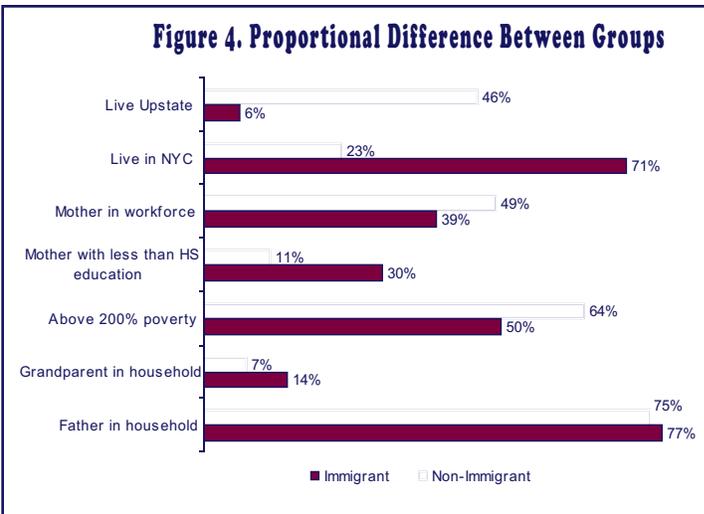
Although most four-year-old children in immigrant families tend to be enrolled in early learning programs (69%), they are enrolled at a moderately lower rate than their non-immigrant peers (74%). One reason for the difference could be that the groups had different proportions for each of the factors observed. For example, 49 percent of children with non-immigrant mothers had mothers in the workforce compared to 39 percent with immigrant mothers. The differing proportions between children in immigrant and non-immigrant families are presented in Figure 4. While some factors are quite similar (e.g., father in household), other factors show marked differences (e.g., live in New York City vs. Upstate region). However, upon analyses, these proportional differences only account for about one-third of the gap (37%) in enrollment (2, 3). That is, the differences in proportions shown here account for 2 of the 5 percentage points in the enrollment gap. With respect to the remaining 3 percentage points, it was found that the geographic location of families in high enrollment rate regions of the state is not comparable for children in immigrant and non-immigrant families. That is, children in immigrant families do not have the expected enrollment benefit from living in these locations.

> The expected benefit of family geographic location in high enrollment areas is not realized by children in immigrant families.

Figure 4. Proportional Difference Between Groups

	Immigrant	Non-Immigrant
Live Upstate	6%	46%
Live in NYC	71%	23%
Mother in workforce	39%	49%
Mother with less than HS education	30%	11%
Above 200% poverty	50%	64%
Grandparent in household	14%	7%
Father in household	77%	75%

> The proportional differences observed here account for only 2 of the 5 percentage point difference in enrollment rates between children with immigrant and non-immigrant mothers.

Summary

The information presented here provides a further understanding of contributing factors related to the modest but real difference in early learning enrollment between children in immigrant and non-immigrant families. Two factors that require further examination are the role of mother's educational level as well as differing enrollment rates among geographic regions of the state. Additionally, focus groups are being conducted with immigrant parents to learn about factors other than those explored here that may influence parents' decision to enroll children in early learning programs, with particular attention to quality characteristics of early learning programs.

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New York kids Count

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