

Research Briefing No. 8

School readiness of children of immigrants: How does the UK compare?

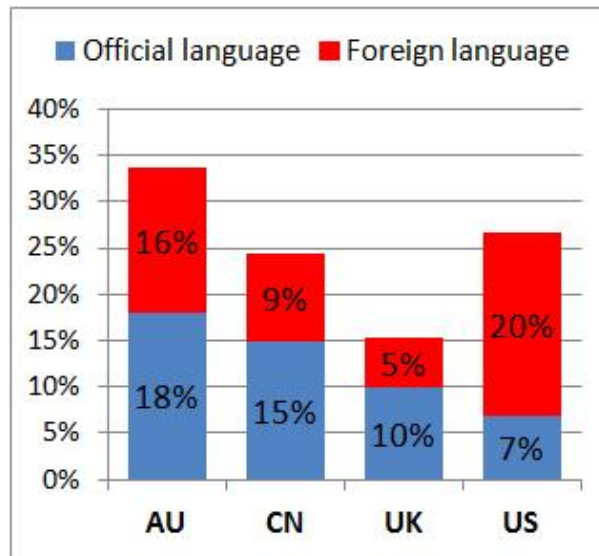
Key findings

- Disparities in skills between children of immigrants and the native-born when they start school follow a common pattern whether children are born in Australia, Canada, the United States or the UK. In all four countries, children of immigrants do as well on average as, or even better, than children of the native-born on non-verbal and behavioural assessments at age 5.
- The one area in which some immigrant parents struggle to provide an equal start for their children is in skill in the official language. Indeed, children raised in households where a foreign-language is spoken have large deficits in vocabulary when they begin school.
- This study provides the first evidence of the similarity of experiences of young children of immigrants in the four countries, a result that is perhaps surprising for countries that differ greatly in immigration selection rules, national policies, economies, and geography.



The research

Children born to immigrant parents leave school with very different qualifications depending on the country in which their parents settled. Second-generation immigrants in the United States do much worse than their counterparts with native-born parents in literacy, maths and science at age 15. The same is true to a lesser extent in the UK, but not in Canada or Australia, where children of immigrants do just as well as the rest. By focusing on preschool outcomes, our research throws light on the origins of these national differences that emerge by adolescence. The findings suggest the explanation lies not with the differences in immigrant families across the four countries, as their children begin school with similar strengths and disadvantages. It is more likely to lie instead with the ability of the school systems and societies in general to foster the development of these groups.



Percentage of children with at least one foreign-born parent born in Australia, Canada, the UK and the United States, by language spoken in the home

Research design

The study used nationally representative data on the developmental outcomes of over 40,000 children born in the host countries between 2000 and 2004. Children with at least one immigrant parent were divided into two groups: those who spoke only the official language of the host country at home and those who spoke a foreign language. Average outcomes for these groups were contrasted with the outcomes of children with native-born parents only. We compared performance on tests of vocabulary, non-verbal assessments like copying skills and measures of hyperactive and anti-social behaviour. Additional analyses explored the impact of differences in the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of foreign- and native-born parents on their children's test scores at school entry.

Further information

Our UK analyses used data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of around 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000-01. The study has been tracking the Millennium children through their early childhood years and plans to follow them into adulthood. See www.cls.ioe.ac.uk for more details.

Research paper:

Washbrook, E., Waldfogel, J., Corak, M., Bradbury, B. & Ghangro, A. (2012). The Development of Young Children of Immigrants in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. *Child Development*, 83(5):1591-1607.

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