Inheriting the City

The Children of Immigrants
Come of Age

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Introduction:
Inheriting the City

Immigration is squarely on the American political agenda. With the influx of migrants continuing at high levels, it is destined to remain there. Although its salience as an issue may rise and fall, immigration poses fundamental questions about what it means to be an American and whether the nation can deliver on its historic promise to provide upward mobility to newcomers and their children.

Scholars usually frame the debate in terms of the economic and demographic impacts of high levels of immigration. Yet the broad passions excited by the issue point to deeper concerns about the ways in which mass migration is reshaping American society and culture (Zolberg 2006). Many wonder what sort of Americans the latest immigrants will become and what sort of America will be their legacy—and ours. Even those who think that immigration has a generally benevolent economic impact often worry that the huge numbers of largely nonwhite immigrants who have come to the United States since the mid-1960s will not “assimilate” or will put native born minorities at a further disadvantage.

The answer to the question of what large scale migration will mean for American society, however, lies less with the immigrants themselves than with their ambivalent American children. The March 2005 Current Population Survey (CPS) reported that this new “second generation”—the children of at least one immigrant parent born in the United States or who arrived by the age of 12—accounted for one out of six 18- to 32-year-olds in the nation and one out of four of all Americans under 18. In many ways, they will define how today’s immigrant groups become tomorrow’s American ethnic groups. In the process, they will not only re-shape American racial and ethnic relations but define the character of American social, cultural, and political life.

This book is about their lives. It is the culmination of a decade-long
research project by a large team of researchers who interviewed members of the second and 1.5 generations in and around New York City. (We define the second generation as those born in the United States to at least one immigrant parent and the 1.5 generation as those born abroad but who arrived by age 12 and then grew up in the United States.) By looking at what life is like for them and those who will follow them, the project sought to understand the longer term consequences of immigration for American society. Over time, however, it also became a study of what it is like to be a young adult in New York today. We learned about the struggles and joys experienced by young adults coming of age in a tough town, a place of ever-present dangers, of backbreaking competition, but also of extraordinary possibilities.

As such, it is also a book about New York City. This city of “eight million stories” houses many adult immigrants and more children of immigrants than any other city in the United States and its metropolitan area more than anywhere else but Greater Los Angeles. Yet while large scale international migration to Los Angeles did not take place until well into the twentieth century, it has a much longer history in New York. Indeed, the children of immigrants, past and present, have often been seen as the quintessential New Yorkers. Today’s second generation grows up among local institutions and attitudes that were shaped by the region’s long, deep, and diverse immigrant traditions.

Writing this book has made us more aware of how difficult it can be to grow up in New York, yet how the city can still welcome newcomers. These qualities will no doubt lead some readers to think our research and conclusions apply only to New York. The city’s enthusiasts and detractors alike tend to exaggerate its difference from the rest of the United States—an “island off the coast of America,” in the words of Spalding Grey. Yet the problems faced by the second generation in New York are pretty much the same as those anywhere else. If New Yorkers have forged distinctive answers to those problems, they may offer positive or negative lessons to the rest of the nation.

Why is it important to assess how New York and the nation are incorporating this new second generation? One reason is sheer numbers. Immigrants and their children now form a majority of the population in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. According to the March 2005 CPS, 35 percent of all New Yorkers were foreign born, and their native born children constituted another 17 percent. Their presence is even greater among the city’s 18- to 32-year-old residents, more than a fifth of whom were born here to immigrant parents; another fifth arrived by age 12 and grew up here, and a final fifth arrived as young adult immigrants. In short, most young adult New Yorkers are of immigrant origin. These trends are even more pronounced among those who are under 18. Thus, even if immigration were to end magically tomorrow, the question of how the children of immigrants will fit into U.S. society would be with us for decades. Simply put, the children of immigrants are the future of New York and many other parts of the nation.

A second reason to study the children of immigrants involves the future of American ethnic and racial relations. Before 1965, immigrants to the United States were overwhelmingly European. Since then, most have come from other parts of the globe. Given how the United States has historically constructed racial categories, they are not generally regarded as “white.” Yet they are not African Americans either. Since the cleavage between the “white” descendants of immigrants and the “black” descendants of American slaves has so strongly marked big cities, the emergence of a large and rapidly growing group that does not fit easily into either of these categories has enormous potential consequences. To a degree, the arrival of this group was presaged by New York’s large Puerto Rican population, which is also neither unambiguously white nor unambiguously black. Glazer and Moynihan (1963) suggested that this large “intermediate” group would temper the city’s race relations. Since that largely turned out not to be the case, we must be careful about any conclusions we draw from the experience of the new immigrants.

New York City is a rich site for studying how immigration is affecting race relations. Its immigrants are staggeringly diverse, and newcomers have altered the makeup of every racial category. No one group dominates the flow of immigrants to New York as Cubans have in Miami or Mexicans in Los Angeles. About 45 percent of the city’s black population are immigrants or the children of immigrants, as are 40 percent of the white population. The same is true of 59 percent of the Hispanic population and 95 percent of the Asian population. Most native Hispanics with native parents are Puerto Ricans who were born on the mainland but whose parents or grandparents migrated from the island, so even they have a strong immigrant heritage, though they are all American citizens.

Immigrants are having a huge impact on the city’s labor market. Like other American cities, New York incorporated the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants in part because their arrival coincided with, and fed, the growth of its manufacturing sector, which provided jobs and a living to people with limited education or who did not speak English. Today, many wonder whether a service sector economy that places a pre-
mum on education and communication can accommodate new immigrant workers. As the top of the city's household income distribution pulls away from the bottom, others worry that while immigrants may find low wage jobs, their children will lack opportunities for upward mobility in an "hourglass"-shaped economy.

Unlike their predecessors, the children of the current immigrants are becoming American in the midst of continuing immigration. Our understanding of assimilation has been largely shaped by the experience of the descendants of the southern and eastern European immigrants who came to the United States between roughly 1882 and 1924 (Foner 2000, 2005). Their incorporation took place after legislative changes in the 1920s, the Depression, and World War II sharply reduced new immigration. Their children came of age in a context of low immigration with few new arrivals to reinvigorate ties to the old country or to reinforce old country ways. Americanization was further reinforced for many by the experience of serving in the American armed forces in World War II. Today, by contrast, members of the new second generation rub shoulders with recently arrived immigrants their own age in the streets, classrooms, and workplaces of New York. There is therefore a good deal less distinction between the first and second generations than in the past (Rumbaut 2004; Waters and Jiménez 2005; Foner and Kasinitz 2007).

Today's second generation also grows up in communities where the parents have more transnational connections than in the past. Modern communications and cheap transportation enable immigrants to remain socially connected to their home communities. Today's transnational immigrants (or "trans/migrants") and their children remain active in social networks that make it possible for them to live in more than one society at a time, perhaps never fully committing to either (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blane-Stanton 1992; Forés 1999; Levitt 2001, 2007; Levitt and Waters 2002).

New York's immigrant neighborhoods are jammed with businesses selling low cost phone calls and instant money transfers to remote parts of the globe. In every group, some second generation people remain strongly tied to their parents' homelands. They visit often, send money back, and even contemplate settling there. A surprising number of first generation West Indian and Latin American parents "send back" children to live with relatives when the dangers of the New York streets terrify them or they suddenly lose their child-care arrangements. These transnational connections may be quite important to the American lives of the new second generation.

Finally, it is important to study the second generation because so many first generation parents worry about what will happen to their American children. While social scientists cannot automatically accept their view of their community's problems, we should nevertheless take their concerns seriously. Anyone spending time in America's growing immigrant communities will hear parental concern over the second generation. "We are afraid for our kids," we have been told. With a mixture of awe, fear, and disdain, immigrant parents say their children are "becoming American."

This stuff of sermons in Korean churches, of discussion in Ecuadoran hometown associations, of debate in Chinese newspapers.

Sometimes this is only a vague but nagging fear about cultural loss among people who are otherwise quite happy in America. Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional couple, for example, find themselves inexplicably afraid for their U.S.-born son at Harvard: "So we drive to Cambridge to visit him or bring him home for the weekend so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (Lahiri 1999:197). Other times the fear is more pointed. West Indian Brooklynites told Mary Waters that "we are losing our kids to the streets," a shorthand both for the manifold dangers of the American ghetto and for the less well understood but nonetheless frightening impact that being considered a black person in racist America was having on their children (Waters 1999).

This fear is part of the paradox of the immigrant experience. Immigrants come to America to improve their lives and those of their children. Most manage to do just that. They overcome hardships and obstacles to give their children the chance to become Americans. At the same time, parents are often uncomfortable with and anxious about the future of the new Americans they have created. Whether the experience of the immigrant second and 1.5 generations in New York justifies these fears or not is the most important question that we hope this book can answer.

The State of the Debate

The discussion of how America will incorporate today's immigrants always involves an implicit or explicit comparison with the experience of those descended from the last great wave of immigration. This is unfair. It is also inevitable. Americans, and particularly New Yorkers, justifiably celebrate the incorporation of that group of immigrants and their descendants. We have made the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island into shrines for what makes America unique. At the same time, America's (and especially New
York’s) proud history of incorporating immigrants stands in sharp contrast to the troubled history of America’s native racial minorities.

Social scientific observers of the last great wave of European immigrants tended to assume that assimilation was both probable and desirable. Writing at the height of American self-confidence, they saw assimilation as closely tied to upward mobility and often wrote as if assimilation, acculturation, and upward mobility were virtually the same thing. While they disagreed on whether immigrants would drop immigrant values in favor of Anglo-Saxon norms or develop some hybrid instead, they assumed, as the popular discourse continues to assume, that immigrants would achieve upward mobility by embracing the main elements of the culture of the dominant society. Whatever the psychic toll the shedding of old cultural identities might cause, substantial upward mobility would be the reward (Hansen 1958; Park 1950; Gordon 1964; Shibutani and Kwan 1965).

William Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s (1945) study of ethnic groups in “Yankee City” remains the most complete discussion of the identity and experience of the second generation of this historical period. Warner and Srole describe a generational march of the ethnic groups from initial poverty amidst residential and occupational segregation to residential, occupational, and identity integration and Americanization. This orderly pattern of mobility has come to be called the “straight line” model of assimilation (Warner and Srole 1945:72): “Each consecutive ethnic generation pushes progressively farther out of the bottom level and into each of the successive layers above. That the class index of an ethnic group is related to the length of its settlement in the city is a manifestation of the continuous advance achieved in the hierarchy of each new generation.”

In a chapter on the children of the immigrants, Warner and Srole explore the forces affecting the children’s relations with their parents’ generation and the wider society. They argue that the parents orient the child’s early socialization to the values and beliefs of the old country. As soon as the child enters into social relations outside the home, however, he begins to reorient himself toward the wider American society. The child quickly absorbs values and skills specific to American society and experiences tension when these clash or disagree with those of his parents. Schools, peer groups, and the media all teach American ways. As the child absorbs these values, he or she often leads the rest of the family in adapting to the new world. This process, Warner and Srole argue, can turn the traditional parent-child relationship on its head. With knowledge about U.S. society, the child teaches the parent. This role reversal often leads to conflict within the personality of the child as well as between children and parents.

Looking back with the advantage of more than a half century of historical knowledge, we can see the weaknesses of this approach. Warner and Srole assumed that immigrant children would be absorbed into a single, unified, middle-class “American culture.” They ignored the diversity among natives and the ways in which immigrants were being assimilated into distinct segments of U.S. society (Portes and Zhou 1993). They also ignored the possibility that immigrants might improve their prospects for upward mobility by retaining their immigrant culture. The model also discounted the ways in which immigrants, in the words of Alba and Nee (2003), “remade the American mainstream” and gradually brought the immigrant world and American world closer together. Their model takes for granted that “American” culture has a higher status than immigrant culture (Warner and Srole 1945:145): “In any judgments of rank, the American social system, being the most vigorous and having also the dominance of host status, is affirmed the higher. Since the child identifies himself with it, his position in the present reciprocal is higher.”

Straight line theory also proposes a one-dimensional model of assimilation. In fact, however, groups often assimilated in one sphere of life while remaining distinct in others. Eastern European Jews, for example, are often considered the archetype of immigrant success. Starting out low status and highly stigmatized, they achieved substantial educational and economic mobility in one generation. As the straight line theory predicts, they evinced clear signs of acculturation in their rapid adoption of English, their almost complete loss of Yiddish, their residential assimilation, and so on. At least through the 1960s, however, Jews remained the least assimilated of European immigrants in many other respects. They maintained highly developed ethnic organizations and exhibited high degrees of occupational concentration and distinctive voting patterns. Despite the fretting of Jewish leaders over the rise of intermarriage, Jews are not likely to “disappear” into mainstream America even today, upward mobility notwithstanding.

The straight line model came under increasing attack after the 1960s. As intellectuals lost confidence in America’s ability to overcome its racial problems and the civil rights movement waned, some critics reminded us that “assimilation” had historically been for “whites only.” Others (Novak 1974) celebrated the “unmelted” white ethnicities. Yet while the line may
have been more “bumpy” (Gans 1979) and the ethnic cultures more resilient than predicted, the large majority of the second, third, and fourth generation descendants of European immigrants did join the American mainstream in most respects, albeit remaking that mainstream in the process (Alba and Nee 2003). Those “white ethnics” who asserted a “symbolic ethnicity” during the 1960s and 1970s usually did so in the form of individualistic and “optional” celebrations of culture, often mediated through mass consumption. Although important to many people’s self-concept, such cultural celebrations had little direct bearing on their daily life or life chances (Gans 1979; Alba 1990; Waters 1990).

Will the contemporary second generation follow this path? Many social scientists have been skeptical. In 1992 sociologist Herbert Gans (1992) inverted the straight line model of assimilation by proposing what he termed the “second generation decline.” Gans outlined ways in which members of the post-1965 second generation could do worse than their parents. Children who refused to accept the low level, poorly paid jobs of their parents could face a difficult bind (Gans 1992: 173–174): “In adulthood, some members of the second generation, especially those whose parents did not themselves escape poverty, will end up in persistent poverty, because they will be reluctant to work at immigrant wages and hours like their parents, but lack the job opportunities and skills and connections to do better.”

By having the same reactions toward these low level jobs as poor young native whites, blacks, and Hispanics, members of the second generation might risk sliding into persistent poverty. Indeed, some may “become American” by adopting negative attitudes toward school, opportunity, hard work, and the “American dream.” By contrast, those who retain their ties to their parents’ ethnic community may, Gans suggests, do better while assimilating less: “People who have secured an economically viable ethnic niche acculturating less than did the European 2nd and 3rd generation and those without such a niche escaping condemnation to dead end immigrant and other jobs mainly by becoming very poor and persistently jobless Americans.”

Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1992, 1993) greatly expanded on these notions by proposing the idea of “segmented assimilation.” Perhaps the single most influential concept in the contemporary study of the second generation, this notion was further developed in Portes and Rubén Rumbaut’s 2001 book, Legacies (see also Rumbaut 1997, 2004, and 2005b; Zhou 1997a, 1997b; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Portes and Rumbaut 2005). The segmented assimilation model argues that the varying modes of incorporation of the first generation endow the second generation with differing amounts of cultural and social capital in the form of ethnic jobs, networks, and values and expose it to differing opportunities. This in turn exerts differential pulls and pushes on the allegiances of the second generation.

Second generation youth with strong ties to American minorities, whose parents lack the ability to provide them with jobs or to protect them from the influence of the native poor, tend to develop an “adversarial stance” toward the dominant white society similar to that of American minorities. According to this view, those facing high levels of discrimination or who live close to American minorities are particularly likely to adopt such a “reactive” ethnicity. They may become skeptical about the possibility of upward mobility and the value of education. Like Gans, Portes and his colleagues concluded that second generation young people who cast their lot with America’s minority groups will experience downward social mobility, in part because high levels of discrimination will preclude the option of joining the white mainstream, even if they are highly acculturated. Joining the native circles to which they have access may be a ticket to permanent subordination and disadvantage (Portes and Zhou 1993).

While Gans stresses that deindustrialization has sharply reduced the kinds of jobs that eased generational mobility a century ago, Portes and Zhou focus on how cultural organization interacts with economic opportunity. Gans believes that the second generation must attain skills in one generation to succeed, that took European immigrants several generations to gain. Portes and Zhou instead highlight how strong kinship ties among the Chinese, or the religious affiliations of the Korans, constitute “social capital” that increases the ability of the first generation to instill loyalty and obedience in their children. Simultaneously, they involve few ties to U.S. minorities. When these groups resist acculturation into the broader American culture—or allow their children to acculturate only selectively while retaining strong ties to the ethnic community—they paradoxically provide their children with better means to get ahead.

The idea that assimilation has costs and “paradoxes” is not new, as Rumbaut carefully notes (1999). Observers of early twentieth century immigrants often commented on the heartache produced by intergenerational conflict (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). Leonard Covello, a leading educator in New York’s Italian American community in the mid-twentieth
century, famously recalled of his own second generation childhood: “We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents” (quoted in Iorizzo and Mondello 1980:118). Years later, as principal of an East Harlem high school, Covello introduced the teaching of Italian as a means of preserving ethnic heritage and keeping assimilation partially at bay.

Complaints that the children of immigrants were becoming the “wrong kind” of Americans are also not new. As early as 1906, *The Outlook* magazine warned “against rushing Italian children into the ‘streetness’ and ‘cheap Americanism’ which ‘so overwhelms Italian youngsters in the cities’ (Kahn 1987:244). Even the notion that a dense “ethnic enclave” can provide a bulwark against the worst effects of the American street, a case made forcibly by Zhou and Bankston (1998), is foreshadowed by studies of New York’s Jewish community in the early twentieth century in which juvenile delinquency among boys and sexual promiscuity among girls are seen as the result of overly rapid Americanization (Landesman 1969; Prill 1999).

Yet if the literature on the last great wave of migration contained most of the arguments made in the segmented assimilation model, such skeptical voices were very much in the minority. Against a background of falling real wages, rising income inequality, and continuing racial conflict, doubts about the possibility and value of assimilation are more common today. Some have nevertheless taken up the tattered banner of assimilation. In their major book on the subject, Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) argue that assimilation not only accurately describes the experiences of white immigrants from Europe and their descendants in the twentieth century; it is also happening among nonwhite immigrants and their descendants in the twenty-first century. They argue that the segmented assimilation model exaggerates the factors working against assimilation among contemporary nonwhite immigrants, and the scholarship on the revival of ethnicity among whites misses the forest for the trees. Ethnic occupational niches have diminished for the latter over time, while a declining portion of ethnic populations live in ethnic neighborhoods. Intermarriage is eroding ethnic boundaries among Asians and some Latino groups as well as whites.

Few immigrants in any period, Alba and Nee remind us, ever made a conscious decision to “assimilate.” Assimilation is the sum of a million small decisions and tiny changes in daily life that often occur despite the immigrant’s efforts to ward off assimilation. Many immigrant parents,
past and present, make heroic efforts to inculcate “old country ways” in their U.S.-born children. They lecture their offspring on the virtues of traditional values and of speaking the parental language. Yet they also tend to support their children’s use of English, move them to “better” — that is, less ethnic—neighborhoods, and send them to “better” — that is, less ethnic—schools.

The debate over the new second and 1.5 generations has been lively, but largely speculative. Until recently, this group has been too young to permit a robust assessment of their educational attainment, labor force participation, marriage and fertility patterns, and political participation. Data have also been lacking. The U.S. Census stopped asking about parents’ place of birth in 1970. While the Current Population Survey did begin to ask this question in 1994, this sample survey permits fine-grained analysis only of the largest first and second generation groups, like Mexicans, mainly at the national level (J. Smith 2003; Perlmutter 2005). Most other surveys use categories like “black” and “Hispanic” that do not distinguish the children of immigrants from native stock populations, so the second generation statistically disappears into increasingly problematic racial categories. Valiant efforts have been made to draw conclusions about adult life chances from surveys documenting the expectations and attitudes of adolescents (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 2001); but as any parent can attest, this is a questionable enterprise. Excellent case studies of particular communities provide some indications about the adult second generation (Min 2002; Smith 2006), but not broad evidence.

Until recently, then, we have not been able to assess how the second and 1.5 generations are actually doing as adults. This provided the impetus for our effort to gather data. Our way was paved by Portes and Rumbaut’s path-breaking Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), which initially studied eighth graders in Miami and San Diego and has now followed respondents into their mid-twenties (Portes and Rumbaut 2005). Data-gathering efforts shaped partly by our study have also recently been completed in Greater Los Angeles and the big cities of eight European countries. These studies have begun to permit meaningful comparisons of second generation young adults from different backgrounds and in different settings.
Our Study

This book is based on a three-part study of five immigrant-origin groups and three native born comparison groups. Between 1998 and 2000, we conducted a telephone survey of 3,415 young adults (aged 18 to 32) living in the ten counties within metropolitan New York where the 1990 Census indicated our target populations were present in sufficient numbers to be sampled economically—in at least 1.5 percent of the households. (This sample frame included New York City except for Staten Island; the inner suburban counties of Nassau and Westchester in New York; and Essex, Hudson, Passaic, and Union counties in northeastern New Jersey.) This area contained about 12 million of the region’s 21 million people in 2000, and our study groups made up 81 percent of that total population. Eighteen was our lower age boundary because it did not make sense to collect data on education and work data on younger people. Thirty-two was the upper boundary because that was the oldest a child born in the United States to a post-1965 immigrant parent could be when we went into the field.

We located respondents in two waves of screening. The first round of “random-digit dialing” within the study area produced the necessary quota (about 400) of native white, black, and Puerto Rican respondents, along with varying numbers for the other second generation groups. A second round of random-digit dialing took place only in telephone exchanges that yielded at least one eligible respondent in the first wave. The response rate among those who were identified as eligible for an interview was 53.3 percent. Response rates were higher among the second generation groups and lower among all three native groups—whites, blacks, and Puerto Ricans, ranging from 67 percent among the Chinese to 41 percent among the native born blacks. The telephone interviews were thirty to forty minutes long and provided many of the statistics presented in the following chapters. (See the Methodological Appendix for more information on the technical aspects of this survey and for response rates by group.) The map on page xii provides an overview of where our respondents lived.

In the second stage of our study we conducted detailed, open-ended, face-to-face interviews with 333 of our telephone respondents. The interviews began a month after the respondents answered the telephone survey and continued into 2001. Our interviewers were advanced graduate students in the social sciences. They used an interview protocol but were encouraged to follow the conversation where it led when that seemed appropriate. These interviews lasted from two to four hours. Most took place in the respondents’ homes, although some were conducted at university facilities or in public places. These respondents are broadly representative of the wider sample, although they have slightly more educational attainment. (The characteristics of the in-depth interview sample and the total telephone sample are further discussed in the Methodological Appendix.) Then, in an effort to learn more about how the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent sharp economic downturn affected the respondents, we re-interviewed 172 of these respondents in 2002 and 2003. All the interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded. The quotations presented in the book come from these in-depth interviews.

Finally, since surveys and interviews can reify ethnic groups and miss the importance of institutional context, we also fielded six ethnographers to investigate domains where second generation and native groups were interacting between 2000 and 2002: high schools, community colleges, university campuses, workplaces, unions, community organizations, and church congregations. These projects, along with other qualitative research by the in-depth interviewers, are presented in a companion volume, Becoming New Yorkers (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2004). Many insights drawn from the ethnographic work inform this volume as well.

Our selection of groups reflects several strategic choices. We considered gathering data from a representative cross section of all second generation young people, rather than by specific ethnic groups. Yet if we had done so, the fact that New York’s immigrants come from so many different national origins would have prevented us from being able to make meaningful group comparisons. We also felt that many previous studies of the second generation had suffered from the lack of native born “control groups.” We wanted to be able to compare the second generation groups with black, white, and Latino natives of native parentage.

Dominicans were an obvious choice. They are the largest national-origin immigrant group and play an important role in the city’s economy and politics. Because most Dominicans appear racially “mixed” by North American standards, having African, European, and Amerindian ancestry, the group is also theoretically interesting. It does not fit easily into North American racial categories. Our study often compares the Dominican second generation with New York’s longstanding Puerto Rican and “Nuyorican” population. We surveyed only Puerto Rican young people.
who had been born on the U.S. mainland, most of whom were lifelong New Yorkers, as were many of their parents.

We also wanted to compare both Dominicans and Puerto Ricans with New York's growing population of non-Caribbean Hispanics. Because no other single Hispanic national group was large enough to be sampled on its own, we combined the three largest South American groups, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Peruvians. First generation South American immigrants tend to have more education, slightly higher incomes, and less African ancestry than first generation Dominicans. Although there are differences among these three groups, they tend to live near each other, work in similar occupations, and often intermarry. (We discuss their similarities and differences in Chapter 2.) They generally have more in common with each other than with Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. We did not study New York's rapidly growing Mexican population because it is still new and has a small adult second generation (Smith 2006).

We also wanted to compare the children of Caribbean Hispanic immigrants with those of English-speaking West Indian parents. By "West Indian," we mean the thirteen Caricom nations making up the "British West Indies" prior to their independence starting in 1962. These former colonies have different cultures and histories, but their premigration commonalities far outweigh these differences and, in any event, they constitute a single ethnic group in New York City (Kasinitz 1992; Waters 1999). Taken together, West Indians are the largest immigrant community in New York City. Although Indo-Caribbeans play a fascinating role in the racial stratification of West Indian New Yorkers (Warikoo 2004), we interviewed only those West Indians of African descent.

The Chinese are the largest Asian population in metropolitan New York. We oversampled Chinese respondents in order to distinguish those with parents from People's Republic from those whose parents hail from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora. Finally, we selected the largest "white" second generation group, the children of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, whom we compare with native white New Yorkers of native parentage. We selected only those with a Jewish background in part to control for religion and in part to approximate the boundaries of ethnic solidarity as it is lived in daily life in New York today. Such boundaries are often imprecise and shifting (Zeltzer-Zubida 2004a), but this group does clearly have a subjective sense of identity.

Our book investigates many aspects of the lives of members of the new second generation. Chapter 2 begins with how the second generation's immigrant parents came to New York, where they settled, what kinds of jobs they do, and what kinds of families they formed. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to our second generation respondents and examines how they sort themselves into the ethnic groups. Chapter 4 describes the dynamics of the families in which they grew up and how they experienced the neighborhoods where their parents had settled. These neighborhoods varied greatly in terms of the quality of their schools, the mixture of groups and classes, and even their physical safety. Chapter 5 follows the second generation young people as they enter their crucial high school years and the many who go on to some college experience. Chapter 6 examines their entry into the labor force, the jobs they do, and the ethnic composition of the places where they work. Chapter 7 asks when and how they have children of their own and form marriages. It also examines the surprisingly different ways in which groups time and combine parenting and marriage. Chapter 8 explores the extent to which immigrant cultures continue to shape the patterns of adaptation of these young people. Chapter 9 examines questions of civic engagement and politics, a topic that contemporary immigration scholars too often ignore. Chapter 10 takes up the thorny issue of the continuing salience that racism has in shaping people's life chances.

Second Generation Advantage

This book does not tell a simple story. The data we gathered are rich but complicated. They provide exceptions for every generalization and require caveats for every assertion. Although there is considerable variation across ethnic groups, there is also much variation within each group. Both dimensions must be taken into account in order to understand the relationship between cultural adaptation and economic, social, and political status. Incorporation is also not a single story. Young people are being incorporated into different spheres in different ways.

Attempting to measure the progress or the "assimilation" of the second generation immediately poses questions: Assimilation into what? And progress compared to whom? Second generation young people may see themselves as very "American" compared to their immigrant parents and yet still feel—and seem—very much like foreigners compared to the children of natives. Further, the United States remains very much an ethnically and racially stratified society. It is probably unrealistic to expect black
and Hispanic immigrants to come to resemble white natives in one generation. The fact that often they have not achieved parity with native whites is, we feel, too easily seized upon by those who would minimize the progress these second generation young people are making. (Indeed, in the past it often took white immigrants more than one generation to reach parity with white natives.) Of course, it is important to note those areas in which the children of immigrants do not do as well as the children of white natives. At the same time, it is equally if not more important to see how the black and Hispanic second generation compares with the black and Hispanic children of natives. In the pages that follow we make all these comparisons. We feel, however, that the clearest reference groups for the second generation are other young people who share their “racial” backgrounds. Thus we compare second and 1.5 generation Dominicans and South Americans with mainland born Puerto Ricans, West Indians with the children of native born African Americans, and Russians with the children of native born whites. There is, of course, no obvious large racial comparison group for the second generation Chinese. Here, comparison with native whites probably gives the clearest benchmark.

Given these comparisons, we are guardedly optimistic about the second generation. On measures of educational attainment and labor force status, two-fifths of the second generation have already gone beyond their immigrant parents. Except among Dominican men, there is little evidence of second generation decline. In every case, the second generation young people we have studied are doing at least somewhat better than natives of the same race, even after adjusting for various advantages in family background. Indeed, we find the greatest evidence of persistent disadvantage, not among the second generation groups, but among African Americans and Puerto Ricans—particularly among young men.

The children of immigrants have not achieved these successes by clinging to the networks and enclaves of their immigrant communities. Instead, they have joined the mainstream, at least in the sense that their educational and occupational profiles look more like those of each other and native young people their age than they do those of their immigrant parents. Chinese youngsters have achieved the greatest educational and economic success relative to their parents’ often humble origins. Members of the Chinese first generation often live and work within a well-developed ethnic enclave (Wilson and Portes 1980; Zhou 1992). Yet their children have moved farther than any other group in terms of their distance from their parents’ occupations, educational levels, and even attitudes. Whatever advantages the enclave provided their parents, the second generation young people did not embrace them. As a result, the Chinese enclave appears largely to be a first generation phenomenon. (Portes recently reached a similar conclusion about the Cuban enclave in South Florida [Portes and Shafir 2007].)

Nor are Chinese second generation young people unique in distancing themselves from their parents. Most members of the other second generation groups are forsaking ethnic niches and joining the mainstream. This does not mean they always experience rapid upward mobility. Many members of this generation are in fact joining New York’s working class. Yet their problems and opportunities are generally common among young people working in entry level positions. Rarely do they stem from the status of being the children of immigrants.

In addition, many black and Hispanic second generation young people have benefited from civil rights era policies and institutions initially designed to help African Americans and Puerto Ricans. While originally intended to address the age-old racial cleavages in American society, such policies may actually be more effective in aiding the incorporation of recent immigrants “of color” and their children. As a result, we conclude that being racialized as a member of a “minority” group can have positive impacts in contemporary America along with the negative effects stressed by segmented assimilation theory.

The second generation is also remaking the mainstream with a truly remarkable speed and creative energy. By and large, black and Hispanic members of the second generation have not closed their gap with native whites (although Chinese and Russian Jews have done so on many measures). Given the continued salience of race in American society and the low human capital of many minority parents, it would be highly unrealistic to expect minority members of the second generation to close the gap with whites within a single generation. Yet second generation minority youth rarely worry about how they stack up to native white young people, perhaps because they rarely meet native whites in their schools, work sites, and neighborhoods. They do meet and compare themselves to members of native minority groups and are often doing quite well by that metric. They also meet each other. As they interact with each other and native minorities, the children of immigrants are creating a new cultural and economic landscape.

Of course, there is no one measure of “doing well.” Different groups
achieve varying levels in different spheres of incorporation. The dynamics of the spheres themselves are distinct. Economic mobility, for example, does not guarantee cultural inclusion, and neither economic mobility nor cultural inclusion correlates perfectly with political inclusion or political efficacy. Relatively well-off West Indians, for example, are just as likely to think that the police single them out for abuse and disrespect as do African Americans. This may lead them to feel less at ease and less comfortable as “Americans” than members of other groups, despite their comparative success in the labor market. Upwardly mobile Russians and Chinese are not the most likely to participate in American civic or political life. Nor does upward mobility guarantee happiness and harmonious family lives. The Chinese second generation has had a steeply rising career trajectory, but many second generation youth express profound personal dissatisfaction and difficulties communicating with their parents—with whom they nevertheless live longer than most other groups. In short, progress in one sphere of incorporation does not guarantee forward movement in all the others.

Finally, we have concluded that culture counts. Despite their overall assimilation, the different groups organize their lives in markedly different ways in terms of timing and sequencing major decisions in the transition to adulthood. They vary in when they leave home, finish their education, begin full-time employment, find spouses or partners, and have children. We have some trepidation in saying that culture counts. Social scientists often shy away from culture when discussing ethnic and racial differences for fear that mentioning culture will lead to invidious distinctions, stereotypes, “victim blaming,” or racism. Yet even when distinct groups face common problems of survival in New York, they bring different ideas, values, repertoires of action, and strategies to bear on these problems. At the same time, we understand that culture is highly contingent on social structure. What aspect of a cultural repertoire an individual brings to bear on any particular problem depends on a host of considerations. Social context facilitates some approaches and discourages others. Further, different cultural strategies also have different practical results in people’s lives.

How do we explain why we reach more optimistic conclusions that do some other researchers, or indeed than do worried immigrant parents? One reason is that we undertook our research in more prosperous times. Gans (1992) developed his “second generation decline” scenario and Portes and Zhou (1993) originally formulated the segmented assimilation model at a time when the crack epidemic, crime, and the growing concentration of poverty were having a devastating impact on inner city neighborhoods. By the time our research began, many urban areas, particularly New York, had begun to reinvent themselves amidst a long national economic expansion. In particular, New York City’s declining crime rate yielded a dramatically improved quality of life.

Lack of legal status may also have been less detrimental for the parents of our respondents than for more recent immigrants, or indeed for the first and second generation in other parts of the country. Our second generation respondents are all citizens, and only a few of our 1.5 generation respondents reported not being legally documented. Although many of their parents had been undocumented at some point in the past, the vast majority of them had found ways to become legal residents or U.S. citizens. The earliest members of one group, the Russian Jews, were cold war refugees who obtained legal status quite easily. Among the other groups, most of the parents came to the United States between the late 1960s and late 1980s, when becoming “legal” was easier than it is today.

New York’s immigrants are also less likely to be undocumented than those in many other parts of the country. The undocumented are estimated to comprise between 15 and 20 percent of New York’s foreign born as opposed to around 40 percent in California and over 50 percent in Greater Los Angeles. (We also did not study Mexicans, a group with comparatively high levels of undocumented people.) As a result, even respondents whose parents were originally undocumented did not grow up in communities where most adults lacked legal status. Indeed, their families tended to be of mixed status, containing U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents along with temporary visa holders and undocumented persons.

New York’s undocumented are not clustered together or especially stigmatized. Most entered on a temporary visa that they subsequently overstayed. It was unusual to have the traumatic experience of being smuggled across the border. It is reasonable to assume that as visa abusers rather than illegal border crossers, having once obtained a tourist or student visa, they were better positioned to become legal permanently. The immigrants most likely to enter the country without documents, Mexicans, have only recently become a growing presence in the city. While Mexicans constitute more than 40 percent of the immigrants in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston, they are less than 5 percent of the foreign born population in New York (Foner 2005).
New York also has an extensive public sector, a well-developed social welfare system, and a large and open public university system developed in large part in response to earlier waves of immigrants and their children. Immigration is a messy business. False starts and disrupted trajectories are common. New York’s institutional structure allows for many “second chances.” New York sees itself as a place where people can remake themselves, and the local culture celebrates those who do. That one is allowed second, third, and fourth chances is a particularly good fit for the children of immigrants.

Finally, many previous observers have worried that the children of immigrants will be caught between two worlds, rejecting their parents’ “old country” ways, yet not fully Americanized. While this may sometimes be a problem for them, we feel that social scientists have not sufficiently appreciated how “in-between-ness” can provide the second generation with real advantages.

Park and Warner and Srole assumed that members of the second generation could share the native advantages of the majority by distancing themselves from their immigrant parents. Through assimilation, they would become familiar with American culture and access a relatively open opportunity structure. Perhaps they understood that these were white native advantages. In assimilating, European immigrants were, in effect, becoming fully and unambiguously white. On the other side, Gans, Portes, and Zhou posit that the children of nonwhite immigrants would come to share the native disadvantages of racial minorities. Discrimination and racial segregation would block their access to educational opportunities and decent jobs. To avoid this tendency, some members of the second generation would retain the immigrant advantages stemming from their parents’ positive selection, their embeddedness in ethnic networks and economies, and their cultural orientations (Rumbaut 2004). Of course, their parents’ immigrant disadvantages, such as lack of English, low human capital, and discordant cultural orientations, might also hold them back.

While our research yields examples of all these scenarios, it suggests an additional possibility: members of the second generation can sometimes negotiate among the different combinations of immigrant and native advantage and disadvantage to choose the best combination for themselves. In other words, we believe that the ability to select the best traits from their immigrant parents and their native born peers yields distinct second generation advantages. Members of the second generation neither simply continue their parents’ ways of doing things nor simply adopt native ways. Growing up in a different society from that of their parents, they know they must choose between immigrant and native ways of doing things. Sometimes they choose one, sometimes the other, and sometimes they try to combine the best of both worlds. They also sometimes create something wholly new. They do not always choose wisely or well. But they are more aware than most people that they have a choice. Being “in between” allows many members of this generation to engage in forms of cultural innovation that New Yorkers have received well.

Just as we have learned about how young people come of age, we have also learned about New York. Our respondents constantly reminded us just how hard it can be to grow up in the city. Even middle class youngsters and their parents had to compete fiercely for things that middle class Americans elsewhere can take for granted, from a seat in a good elementary school to a spot on the little league team. The situation is many times worse for the poor. The crack epidemic of the late 1980s ravaged many of the neighborhoods in which our informants grew up. Housing remains extremely expensive for young people starting out, even in the poorest neighborhoods. Competition for jobs is fierce, not only from the constant supply of new immigrants, but from young educated people moving from other parts of the United States to try to make it in the city that never sleeps.

As tough as New York is, it is has also historically been good to immigrants. It offers extraordinary opportunities and rewards the improvisation that comes easily to the second generation. Immigrants and their children, past and present, have helped New York emerge as the dominant city in American (and perhaps world) culture and commerce in the mid-twentieth century. New York’s brusque local culture is not exactly welcoming, but it offers a rough-and-tumble tolerance to newcomers who can use second generation advantages to best effect. Its native white population celebrates its immigrant origins. If their cousins turned into “unhyphenated” whites after crossing the Hudson, the remaining native whites continue to have social networks and life chances shaped by ethnic histories.

Ethnicity thus has legitimacy. To borrow Elijah Anderson’s (2004) phrase for physical and social spaces that celebrate difference, the city’s “cosmopolitan canopy” is large and vibrant. When Republicans in Congress proposed criminalizing illegal immigrants and building a fence at the border, New York’s Republican mayor dismissively called on them to “get
real.” Only the chair of the City Council Immigration Committee, a 1973 migrant from Guyana, disagreed: he chided the mayor for not coming out strongly for an unconditional amnesty (Chan 2006:66). That the city has no clear ethnic majority means that it was “no big deal” for our second generation respondents to have immigrant parents. They rarely felt like outsiders or exotics. Most of their friends were in a similar situation, and anyway, everyone is from somewhere. “Immigrants” are the people who arrived last week, while the only native white “Americans” without accents they know are the ones they see on television. They are New Yorkers, comfortable with the city they have inherited. Without thinking too much about it, they live multicultural lives in the streets, workplaces, and nightclubs of a city that put the tortuously self-conscious “diversity” of elite educational institutions to shame.

Our young respondents appreciated this cosmopolitanism. Cultural diversity was one of the things they liked most about their city. Of course, their explanation of why diversity is good often began and ended with the variety of restaurants. Still, even if practice falls short of theory, they take it for granted that one should have friends of many races and backgrounds and think contact with people different from oneself enriches one’s life. That belief is important. It is one of the best things about this generation and about New York.

Thinking about Groups

A few caveats are in order before proceeding. Most of the analysis presented in this book is structured around the comparison of ethnic groups. We hope that our evidence will convince the reader that these groups are in some sense real, not just our own nominal creation. Indeed, we think the data make clear how group membership shapes people’s lives. Time after time in the pages that follow we will present evidence that even after controlling for all the other relevant variables we have measured in our study, there is still a group effect that we cannot explain away. Nevertheless, we are aware that intergroup comparisons—“the Chinese do this, the Dominicans do that”—sometimes reify groupness more than reality warrants. The variation within the ethnic groups is often as great as the differences between them. When we focus on the differences between ethnic groups, we do not mean to imply that this is the most important factor in their lives, or that other factors like gender or age or race are not sometimes more important. We also recognize that the importance of ethnic identity, as well as the degree to which ethnic groups actually function as groups, varies from group to group and rises and falls over time (Cohen 1974; Brubaker 2004).

We further recognize it is possible to read group comparisons as stereotypes or even racist generalizations. Let us be clear: any reference to group differences makes groups appear more homogenous than they actually are. Our young respondents belonged not only to ethnic groups but also to social classes, genders, social groups, and neighborhoods. Like all modern people, they had a multiplicity of interacting social roles and identities. Although a quick reading of a table comparing groups will not always make this apparent, we have tried to remain sensitive to individual variation without losing sight of the real difference that ethnicity makes. When we highlight ethnic group differences, we are referring to differences in central tendencies with larger, overlapping distributions.

Further, when we or our informants refer to the norms, values, or cultures of any particular group, we are talking about the particular, historically selected group now present in New York. When we refer to the “Chinese” or the “Ecuadorians,” we are talking about the specific people who migrated to New York and raised children there between the late 1960s and early 1990s. They represent specific regional, class, linguistic, political, and occupational segments of their countries of origin. They have sometimes created communities in New York that are bizarre parallels to their homelands. “Russian” New York is made up of urban mostly Jewish Russian speakers. “Chinese” New York is disproportionately comprised of Cantonese speakers from particular villages in southern China, with struggling newcomers from Fujian and middle-class migrants from Taiwan. Needless to say, the “Russian” or “Chinese” cultural practices of these communities may seem odd to many people in Russia or China.

With all these caveats in mind, we nonetheless believe that membership in and differences among ethnic and racial groups have real and important impacts on the lives of children. As Glazer and Moynihan (1963) argued, later members of ethnic groups inherit a social position derived from the ways in which earlier members entered and became situated in the city, and they function as interest groups that transcend waves of arrival. When members of the Russian Jewish second generation get help from social service agencies created by an earlier generation of Russian Jewish New Yorkers, or when a West Indian avails himself or herself of programs originally created to help African Americans, past group identities, networks, and social positions are shaping their lives, even if they are not fully aware.
of it. Even when children do not think that their parents’ national origin is particularly important, they inherit structures of advantage and disadvantage. Native born white Americans, for example, need not be aware of their “white privilege” to enjoy what Roediger (1999) terms the “wages of whiteness.”

Ethnic groups have different modal levels of education, employment, and social capital. Although, as we recognize, all groups vary along these dimensions in ways that overlap with one another, their central tendencies differ significantly, reflecting the group position within the larger society. Moreover, the ways in which traits vary around those central tendencies also differ systematically across groups. Put in plain English, it is better to be part of a poor group that has some well-off members than to be part of a uniformly poor group. These patterns of difference reflect not only conditions in the home countries but also the “selection” of the immigrant first generation from these national populations. While immigrants from poor countries have fewer advantages than those from rich countries, even immigrants from poor countries usually have advantages over those whom they left behind. Groups also have different connections with their home country, proximity to native born ethnic groups, and legal status on entry. Finally, groups vary in how tightly and how densely members are bound to each other and how much they function as groups. Given the larger society’s tendency to hold ethnic stereotypes, these patterns clearly have real consequences for group members.

Ethnic differences as experienced in the United States are constantly being shaped and reshaped as the groups interact with the larger society and as its patterns of race, social class, education, and a host of other factors evolve. Men and women experience ethnic differences in divergent ways as well. By itself, ethnicity explains nothing. Yet ethnic differences are not a myth obscuring some more fundamental underlying reality. As E. P. Thompson (1966) remarked about class, ethnicity is a historically contingent event, constantly changing, but real nonetheless, and of vital importance to the young people whose lives we are striving to understand.

The Worlds of the Fathers and Mothers

Everybody, back then, came to New York because they wanted to pursue a better life. For the Chinese it’s very ‘whatever you suffer is for the benefit of the children.’ Everything, in terms of working and saving money, is to leave behind to your children. Buying a house is to leave behind to your children. It’s all for the potential of what they can bestow to their kids.

CHINESE 17-YEAR-OLD WOMAN

The story of the second generation begins with the parents’ journey to New York. These first generation immigrants faced struggles, found jobs, formed families, settled in neighborhoods, and were received by native New Yorkers in ways that all set the stage for their children’s lives. Here, we draw on the literature on migration to Greater New York, reports from our respondents, and the 2000 Census to paint the portrait of the first generation. We begin by outlining the paths by which the various immigrant and native born racial and ethnic groups came to Greater New York. We discuss how the smaller, more recently arrived immigrant groups fit into the social, economic, and political matrix of the region alongside the larger, older native born groups. We then turn to the 2000 Census for the ten county area in which the telephone survey took place to compare people belonging to the likely age cohort of the parents—foreign born people aged 40 through 60 who immigrated between 1965 and 1990—with their native born counterparts along a series of key dimensions. Taken together, our eight groups comprised 74 percent of the 12 million people in the sampling area for the study.

Immigrant Groups

Dominicans

The United States has a long history of involvement in the Dominican Republic, having occupied it between 1916 and 1924. After the decades-old
Conclusion: The Second Generation Advantage

I think I have benefited from being Colombian, from being Hispanic. It's the best of two worlds. You know that expression? Like being able to still keep and appreciate those things in my culture that I enjoy and that I think are beautiful and at the same time being able to change those things which I think are bad.

21-YEAR-OLD COLOMBIAN WOMAN

Our research was initially motivated by worries about second generation decline. Like many other social scientists, we were concerned that the children of recent immigrants might be at risk of downward assimilation as they become Americans. We feared that many would earn less than their immigrant parents, get less education, have lower levels of civic participation in their new society, and become more alienated. We also suspected that upwardly mobile children of immigrants might achieve success largely by remaining tied to the ethnic communities and economic niches of their parents. In contemporary America, we speculated, the most successful immigrant families might be the ones who kept large parts of “mainstream” American culture at bay.

Although we found examples of these two scenarios, neither turned out to be common. On the whole, second and 1.5 generation New Yorkers are already doing better than their immigrant parents. The Chinese and Russian Jews have demonstrated particularly rapid upward mobility. This upward trajectory is partly explained by their parents’ pre-migration class backgrounds and “hidden” human capital—but, particularly among the Chinese, even those from working class backgrounds or with poorly educated parents have sometimes achieved stunning upward mobility. Not surprisingly, those second generation respondents who belong to groups that the context of reception has racialized as black or Hispanic have a more mixed record. For these individuals, racial discrimination remains a significant factor in shaping their American lives. Yet even here, most of the children of immigrants are exceeding their parents’ levels of education, if only because the parents’ levels were quite low. West Indians, the group in the greatest danger of being negatively racially stereotyped, show real gains over their parents and their native born peers on a number of fronts.

All the second generation groups earn as much or more than the comparable native born group. Controlling for age and gender, Dominicans and South Americans earn more than Puerto Ricans, West Indians earn more than native blacks, and the Russians and Chinese are on par with native whites. In terms of educational attainment, whether or not one controls for age, gender, and parental education, Dominicans and South Americans are doing better than Puerto Ricans, West Indians are doing better than African Americans, Russian Jews are doing better than native whites, and the Chinese are doing better than everyone. While less likely to be working full time than their staggeringly work-oriented immigrant parents, the Chinese and the Russian Jews are either working or going to school full time in slightly higher numbers than native whites (mainly because more are still attending school); the levels of the other second generation groups exceed those of African Americans and Puerto Ricans and, except for the Dominicans, are approaching the rates of native whites. While there are significant differences among the second generation groups in how many get involved in criminal activities, arrest rates are about the same as those of native whites even in those groups whose members are most likely to have had brushes with the law. Moreover, these arrest rates are well below those of native born minority counterparts.

Many respondents of African descent report experiencing racial discrimination, particularly from the police. The experience has clearly left many individuals feeling uncomfortable with their status as “Americans” and alienated them from some aspects of American life. Yet, the second generation group most identified as “black” and most likely to experience such discrimination—West Indians—is also the group most likely to participate in neighborhood and civic affairs and to be interested in New York politics. West Indians vote in numbers comparable to native whites, if somewhat below the very high proportion of native African Americans.

This rapid incorporation into American life does not stem from the second generation’s maintaining social or cultural ties with the parents’ immigrant communities. The group experiencing the most dramatic upward mobility—the Chinese—is actually the least likely to retain the parents’ language. Members of every second generation group who
work in predominantly ethnic work sites earn less than those who work in mainstream settings. At the same time, today's second generation does not seem overly concerned about shedding those ties or losing ethnic distinctiveness.

Like the 23-year-old Colombian-American young woman quoted earlier, members of the second generation are happy to acculturate "selectively," to use Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) phrase, taking what works the best in their parents' communities and combining it with the best of what they see around them among their native peers. Many respondents cheerfully report that they do not feel fully a part of their parents' immigrant communities nor do they see themselves as fully "American"—a term they use to describe the native whites whom they know primarily through television. Compared to past second generations, the children of immigrants today seem remarkably at ease about living between different worlds. They rarely see their parents' foreignness as posing a serious problem.

This level of second generation incorporation is particularly striking when compared to that of their counterparts in Western Europe. The 2005 riots in France brought worldwide attention to the problems of youth and young adults whose parents are immigrants and who have faced limited socioeconomic mobility. Many of the rioters in Paris live in the suburbs with staggeringly high youth unemployment rates. These unemployed, underemployed, and alienated youth evidently engaged in criminal behavior as a challenge to a racist society that they believe permanently relegates them to an urban underclass. As such, they became symbols of the possible second generation decline throughout Western Europe. For all of the city's problems, New York's relatively open economy, its overtly ethnic and pro-immigrant politics, and the myriad of its educational "second chances" have served the second generation fairly well—far better than they have served our native minority populations.

Despite the city's achievements, how the children of immigrants in and around New York City are incorporated into society remains problematic. Many young people have received substandard educations in the city's worst public schools. Although many of the second generation are working, their jobs often hold limited possibilities for advancement in an economy of stagnant or declining real wages. All too few individuals have found their way through educational routes into the highest-paying professions in the city. On the other hand, these problems are not unique to the children of immigrants but generally face all young working class New Yorkers and are less severe for the children of immigrants than for members of native minority groups.

We should note that the differences among the "centers of gravity" of second generation groups are as large as the overall difference between them and the native born minority groups. The variation within each of the groups is large as well. In the sense that different groups are being incorporated into different parts of American society, their assimilation has indeed been segmented. But this segmentation has not always produced the results predicted by earlier scholarship. Moreover, incorporation turns out to work differently in different spheres of social life. The groups who have done best in the mainstream economy show low levels of civic engagement and political participation, for example. Neither the straight line assimilation model nor the segmented assimilation alternative easily captures the complex ways in which groups have combined economic, political, and cultural incorporation.

Why Are Our Results Different?

Many scholars have speculated that the larger patterns of racial inequality and discrimination in America will force those children of immigrants who are not classified as white into the ranks of persistently poor native minorities. Gans (1992), for example, worried that labeling dark-skinned children of immigrants as black would trump their aspirations for upward mobility. Mary Waters's (1999) ethnography of Afro-Caribbeans in New York City gave support for that position.

The notion that racial and other forms of inequality in host societies will create socioeconomic exclusion for large portions of the second generation has motivated an intense debate in the United States and Europe (Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; Waldinger and Perlmann 1998; Alba and Nee 2003; Smith 2003; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004; Perlmann 2005; Rumbaut 2005a, 2005).

The segmented assimilation hypothesis posits three alternative paths for the second generation: upward assimilation, downward assimilation, and upward assimilation combined with biculturalism. These paths correspond to three types of relationships among the children of immigrants, their parents, and the wider ethnic community. Consonant acculturation occurs when the children and the parents both gradually learn American culture and abandon their home language and culture at about the same
pace. As children enter the mainstream, they not only achieve upward mobility, but they do so with the support of their parents. This path is most open to those who are most similar to, or most likely to be accepted by, the white majority.

Dissonant acculturation occurs when children learn English faster and accept American ways more readily than do their parents, who are more likely to cling to immigrant identities. Portes and Rumbaut argue that this process often leads to downward assimilation, as young people face racial discrimination, bifurcated labor markets, and an often nihilistic inner city youth subculture on their own, without strong parental authority and resources and with few community resources and supports. This path is most open to those who are most similar to, or most likely to be classified alongside, native minority groups, especially African Americans.

The third process, selective acculturation, leads to economic upward mobility alongside continued attachment to home country cultures and biculturalism. Selective acculturation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:52) occurs when “parents and children learn English and American customs at the same rate, where parents and children are inserted into the ethnic community. It is characterized by preservation of parental authority, little or no intergenerational conflict, and fluent bilingualism among children.” As such, it forms the “strongest bulwark against effects of external discrimination” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:54).

Segmented assimilation also takes into account background factors such as parental human capital (including parents’ education and income), modes of incorporation (state definitions of immigrant groups, eligibility for welfare, and the degree of social prejudice or discrimination facing immigrant groups in the receiving society), and family structure (single versus married couple families as well as multigenerational versus nuclear family living arrangements). The model points (we believe correctly) to the varying degrees of transnational connection among immigrant groups as an important element of the context of reception.

The most striking innovation in this model lies in two of its predictions. The first is that downward assimilation does not occur because the children of immigrants fail to Americanize. It occurs, rather, because they do so too quickly, relative to their parents, or assimilate into the “wrong” segments of American society. The second is that those children whose immigrant parents do not have particularly high educations or incomes can achieve upward mobility through a strategy of selective acculturation—staying at least partially ethnic and embedded in ethnic communities. In making these two predictions, the segmented assimilation model stands the standard assimilation model on its head. For at least some immigrants, the argument goes, coming quickly and easily to share American (or at least lower class American) ways is bad for the second generation. Holding on to immigrant distinctiveness can be an advantage.

This model has proven extraordinarily useful in focusing our attention on how differences in parental human capital, contexts of reception, and ethnic community structure influence second generation outcomes and how the highly segmented nature of American society presents native and immigrant racial and ethnic groups with very different life chances and opportunity structures (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005:1004):

If it is true that most descendants of today’s immigrants will eventually assimilate to American society, it still makes a great deal of difference whether they do so by ascending into the ranks of a prosperous middle class or join in large numbers the ranks of a racialized, permanently impoverished population at the bottom of society.

Few of our respondents followed either of the two most theoretically innovative predictions of the model. Few experienced downward assimilation resulting from overly rapid Americanization, and few also experienced upward mobility by maintaining their place in an ethnic enclave. Indeed, any sort of second generation downward mobility relative to their immigrant parents is rare. When downward mobility does occur, it is not correlated with rapid differential loss of the parents’ ethnic language or culture. (We find no correlation between the ability to understand or speak an ethnic language and educational attainment among our second generation respondents from non-English-speaking backgrounds.) To the contrary, upward mobility is associated with the use of English, employment outside of an ethnic enclave, and learning American ways faster than one’s parents. Indeed, joining the mainstream is the most common route to success in this study (Alba and Nee 2003).

Our most successful second generation group, the Chinese, is the least likely to retain the parental language. The Chinese are also among the least likely to participate in ethnic organizations and the most likely to use the public schools. While a minority among the Chinese participates in religious activities, they are generally not connecting to their parents’ ethnic ways but often become more religious than their parents in ways that can be a source of tension with them (Chai Kim 2004). Although the dense social networks of New York’s Chinese immigrant community have
helped the second generation, this relationship has little to do with maintaining home country traditions or smooth relations with parents. Chinese respondents actually often report difficult, strained, and sometimes unhappy relationships with their parents, despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that they tend to live with parents longer than do members of other groups. Finally, whereas first generation Chinese New Yorkers have gone the farthest in establishing a thriving economic ethnic enclave (Zhou 1992), the upwardly mobile majority of the second generation avoids it. Only a downwardly mobile minority of the Chinese second generation has resorted to enclave employment, with its poor wages and working conditions. Enclave employment may well be preferable to unemployment, but it is a safety net, not a springboard.

Why has the experience of New York’s second generation not accorded with the predictions of the segmented assimilation model? Our data offer several possible answers. First, members of the second generation have found a way around the “hourglass” model of the U.S. labor market presented by the segmented assimilation model. As Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller (2005:1005) put it:

The promise of American society, which makes so many foreigners come, lies in the access it provides to well remunerated professional and entrepreneurial careers and the affluent lifestyles associated with them. At the same time, it is obvious that not everyone gains access to those positions and that, at the opposite end of society, there is a very unenviable scenario of youth gangs, drug dictated lifestyles, premature childbearing, imprisonment and early death. Immigrant families navigate between these opposite extremes seeking to steer their youths in the direction of the true mainstream.

Most of the second generation young people with whom we spoke are not affluent professionals, but neither are they perennially unemployed nor part of a “permanently impoverished” underclass. Instead, they are working members of the lower middle class service economy, employed as white collar clerical or service workers in retail or financial services. Their labor market position resembles that of other New Yorkers their age more than it does that of their parents. They rarely drop out of the labor force or become criminals. Most have achieved real, if modest, progress over their parents’ generation. They have more education, earn more money, and work in more “mainstream” occupations and sectors.

Second, the studies developing the segmented assimilation model have rarely paid much attention to native youth culture beyond documenting the understandable contempt in which immigrant parents hold it. Without including native born comparison groups, however, it is often hard to sort out what aspects of young people’s behavior stem from having immigrant parents and what simply reflect being a young person in urban America today. The model posits downward assimilation for those children of immigrants who adopt an “adversarial stance” or “reactive ethnicity” as a result of the experience of prejudice and discrimination. It argues that the emergence of reactive ethnicity reflects the “value contagion” of attending school with members of native minority groups and lacking family and community resources for dealing with ethnic and racial discrimination. Portes and Rumbaut (2001:61) underscore the conflict between parental values of hard work and upward mobility and inner city subcultures:

Because of their poverty, many immigrants settle in close proximity to urban ghetto areas. In this environment, they and their families are often exposed to norms of behavior inimical to upward mobility as well as to an adversarial stance that justifies these behaviors. For second generation youths, the clash of expectations is particularly poignant when the messages that education does not pay and that discrimination prevents people of color from ever succeeding are conveyed by native peers of the same race or ethnic origin.

Without a native comparison group, however, it is easy to confuse the style with the substance of such an “oppositional” identity, as a quick look at the baggy pants and backward baseball caps worn by students on any Ivy League campus will attest. It is worth noting that the features of “ghetto culture” that most alarm these scholars (and immigrant parents!) actually resemble the broader youth culture in America, albeit in a form made more intense by poverty. There is nothing particularly “ghetto” about drug use, materialism, nihilism, and anti-intellectualism. With slight differences in style, these traits are as easy to see in any suburban mall as on inner city street corners.

Drawing on our native white comparison group, we can see that native white males are just as likely to engage in rebellious behaviors as the second generation groups. A comparison of arrest rates among the males in our survey shows that 23 percent of native born white males report having been arrested, compared with 24 percent of West Indian males, 22
percent of Dominican males, and 20 percent of South American males. White males who grew up in New York City get in trouble at even higher rates. Only native-born blacks and Puerto Ricans have higher arrest rates than native-born whites.

What differs between the native whites and the second generation groups is not the adversarial behaviors but how the larger society reacts to them. Whites who take drugs or get in trouble with the law often have more family resources and face a more lenient criminal justice system (Sullivan 1989). Second generation respondents often face harsher penalties and have fewer resources to deal with the repercussions of the same youthful indiscretions, although a well-networked ethnic group can sometimes provide support for its most troubled young members. Still, second generation youth are less likely to find themselves permanently derailed by youthful missteps than are the Puerto Ricans and native blacks who have fewer economic and family resources and even less societal good will to draw upon when they get into trouble. Indeed, whereas “social capital” helps better-off groups cope with many types of trouble, being heavily “embedded” in networks of reciprocal obligation among the worst off can be a real disadvantage. In such groups, many of the most successful members describe themselves as “loners.”

Most standard accounts of second generation incorporation also present a one-dimensional view of how people experience and respond to racial domination. As we argued in Chapter 10, prejudice and discrimination can mean very different phenomena. Discrimination in impersonal sites where the only thing known about a person is his or her race leads to the development of strong feelings of exclusion and reactive ethnicity. This is especially true when the discrimination comes from the police. But this discrimination has implications very different than discrimination that occurs in institutional settings where an individual can signal other nonracial characteristics to would-be discriminators. A young dark-skinned man stopped by the police while walking on the street may reasonably conclude that the officers are responding to his skin color. The same can be said about a dark-skinned young woman who is followed in a store while she looks at clothing. Both individuals get the message that their skin color signals criminal behavior to authority figures. Obviously, they have little individual control in these situations. In this context their race is a “master status,” sociologist Robert Merton’s (1967) term for a characteristic that trumps all other personal characteristics.

A college student who questions whether his professor has low expectations of him or a young associate in a law firm who wonders if it will treat black or Hispanic associates as well as whites, however, can draw on a wider repertoire of coping skills. Our respondents often talked about such situations in which they felt they had indeed experienced racial prejudice and discrimination. Yet instead of just getting angry and discouraged, they learned to develop strategies to overcome such discrimination. The most common strategy was to try to outperform others to disprove negative racial or ethnic stereotypes, something they had within their power to at least try to do. We found that Chinese and light-skinned Hispanics are most likely to report this kind of discrimination. By contrast, people with dark skin who can be coded as black in American racial terms are most likely to experience the more virulent impersonal discrimination from authority figures in anonymous public spaces, an experience that individuals have little real power to overcome (Anderson 1990). Many people experience discrimination, but what it means to them, and how they react to it, depends on social sphere and context.

Finally, previous accounts of second generation incorporation often overlook the possibility that identifying with African Americans or adopting African American-inspired models of racial difference and racial politics can have benefits as well as costs. The claim that the second generation may experience downward assimilation when mainstream American society categorizes them as nonwhite underestimates the extent to which the civil rights movement has changed the meaning of race since the 1960s. However partial its victories or unfulfilled its promise, that movement did delegitimize de jure segregation and overt white supremacy. It also created a repertoire of ideas, institutions, and organizational forms for challenging racial subordination. Affirmative action and other programs designed to promote upward mobility among members of native minority groups are now available to the children of nonwhite immigrants. The emergence of Ethnic Studies programs on American university campuses and the use of blanket categories like “black” or “Hispanic” to enforce the Voting Rights Act and other civil rights era legislation mean that immigrants and their children have access to institutions facilitating social mobility precisely because they are considered nonwhite. Assimilating into “black America” or “Latino America” thus does not have universally negative consequences for the contemporary second generation.
Explaining Second Generation Progress

If previous models do not explain the experience of today's second generation New Yorkers, what does? We conclude by answering this question and speculating about what contemporary patterns of second generation integration mean for American public policy and society.

New York City can be tough on any young person, regardless of where his or her parents were born. The children of immigrants face extra difficulties. Only a third of New York City's 3 million households are families with related children under 18. In other words, two-thirds of the households are not currently facing the burdens of rearing children. Among families with children, immigrant parents are much less likely to speak English at home (only 19 percent compared with 60 percent of native parents), and they may not even understand English at all (about a quarter of immigrant parents as compared with only 4 percent of the native parents). Moreover, only half of immigrant parents in New York families are citizens, which gives them far less political influence than native parents.

Most crucially, immigrant parents are less likely to be well educated than native parents: a third lack a high school degree compared with one-fifth of native parents, and only a fifth have college degrees, compared with a quarter of the native parents. As a consequence, they have less income. Immigrant parents had a mean household income of $54,404 in 1999, compared with $73,983 for the native parents. Thus young people growing up in immigrant families have parents with less English facility, less education, less political clout, and less income than those growing up in native families. It would be surprising if these factors did not constitute barriers to progress.

Yet we find that the second generation is generally doing better than natives of comparable racial backgrounds despite these barriers. Why is this so?

The first reason is an obvious factor that is nevertheless consistently overlooked in comparisons between immigrants and natives. Immigrants are a highly selected group. Even when they have relatively modest educations and few financial resources, they have shown that they have the drive, ambition, courage, and strength to move from one nation to another. Their second generation offspring are, therefore, the children of exceptional parents. Although parents may have measurable characteristics that put their children at risk—low education, low incomes, poor language skills, and so on—they have unmeasured characteristics that make them different kinds of parents, mostly in ways that are advantageous for their children.

At first glance a Dominican father who does not speak English and has only a second grade education may appear to have characteristics similar to those of the least well-off New York-born Puerto Rican father, and even fewer resources. Yet as an immigrant parent he has other qualities that separate him from most uneducated Dominican men who stayed at home on the island, qualities that contributed to his success in migrating to New York. His lack of education may not have a negative effect on his ability to instill a desire for education in his son or daughter. So too, a poorly educated Chinese waiter in New York City is quite different from the many comparable men in China who did not make the journey to New York, for he has overcome extraordinary obstacles to change his lot in life. That drive to better his situation is something he is likely to transmit to his children. Thus, when comparing children of natives to the children of immigrants, it is important to remember that while the second generation is not technically a "selected" population, the parents who raised them surely were.

Second, many members of the second generation are well positioned to take advantage of civil rights era institutions and policies for promoting diversity. Indeed, the very presence of many members of the second generation in this country was in large part the result of one important piece of civil rights legislation, the 1965 Hart Celler immigration reforms, which ended national origin quotas in U.S. immigration policy. As the children of parents who come from societies where they typically formed the racial majority, the second generation is far less encumbered by the residue of past discriminatory practices.

Although covert racist practices and assumptions obviously do affect the lives of the second generation today—for example, when the second, third or fourth generation Asian American professional is complimented on his command of English or asked when she is "going home"—we showed in Chapter 10 that such practices and assumptions are less pernicious and less pervasive for many second generation youth than for native minorities whose caste-like subordination has been central to the formation of American identity. Many second generation respondents believed that they had benefited by being characterized as nonwhite and thus recruited to universities and jobs in order to increase diversity in these institutions. Although nonwhite second generation young adults must cope with racial discrimination, they also profit from a post-civil rights world in
which they are able to inherit some of the positive as well as the negative results of America’s long, troubled history of race relations.

Finally, the children of immigrants are in a good position to develop their own creative strategies for living their lives. Children of immigrants are often described as being “torn between two worlds” (Child 1943). Social scientists and immigrant parents alike often worry that in navigating between two cultural systems and two languages, their children may never be completely competent in either. It is often feared that growing up in a world where parents who have come of age in a different culture have a hard time guiding their children into adulthood can lead to confusion, alienation, and reversal of authority roles within the family. In the early twentieth century, many children of European immigrants coped with this challenge by rejecting their parents’ embarrassing “foreign ways” and trying to become “American.” Although our respondents occasionally felt that their parents’ cultures were at odds with the American worldview, they rarely saw this as a real problem. Perhaps because today’s ethos of multiculturalism, most of our respondents believe they can choose which aspects of a given cultural model to adopt.

Traditional, straight line assimilation theory implies that the children of immigrants, torn between two worlds, will do best when they assimilate. Doing this may have emotional and psychic costs, but in the end the children of immigrants will come to share the “native advantages” over their immigrant parents (Warner and Srole 1945). Alba and Nee’s (2003) contemporary reworking of this notion greatly improved the model by excising its prescriptive aspects, emphasizing that assimilation does not preclude retaining elements of ethnic culture and stressing how assimilation also remakes U.S. culture. Yet they too see the second generation as sharing advantages that come from joining the increasingly multicultural mainstream. By contrast, segmented assimilation theory posits that resisting Americanization can be helpful for the second generation. This theory argues that members of the second generation who assimilate into disadvantaged segments of the native population will suffer, whereas those who partially keep assimilation at bay can continue to share the “immigrant advantages” of relatively better-positioned immigrant communities.

Clearly, today’s second generation provides examples of all these paths. However, our study also underscores the importance of a distinct second generation advantage: its location between two different social systems allows for creative and selective combinations of the two that can be highly conducive to success. In developing a strategy for navigating challenges, second generation youngsters do not have to choose whether being foreign or being American is “better.” They can draw on both cultures. Members of the groups we have studied clearly have different options depending on their parents’ position and their own position in a segmented social structure. Sometimes none of the available choices are particularly conducive to upward mobility. Other things being equal, however, seeing choices where others see constraints is in itself a significant advantage. Further, whereas puritans of various stripes are generally more comfortable with the coherence of traditional cultural systems, New York, more than most places, has historically honored hybridity and rewarded innovation.

In the mid-twentieth century, New York became one of the world’s greatest centers of cultural creativity. While American economic ascendency helped, it is probably not coincidental that the previous second generation came of age in this intensely creative period in American music, art, letters, theater, and criticism. Immigrants and their children played a cultural role far out of proportion to their numbers (Hirschman 2005), and New York, where so much of the second generation was concentrated, became a hothouse for intellectual “scenester” and cultural movements, both mainstream and avant garde. New York gave the children of immigrants the cosmopolitan space in which to make these innovations. And despite the nativists’ worries that New York was becoming a place apart, the second generation repaid America with a new, broader, and, we think, better vision of itself. It was Irving Berlin, a 1.5 generation New Yorker, who penned “God Bless America” (a Russian Jew, he also wrote “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”).

It is too early to say whether New York is experiencing something like this today. The second generation is still young, the world is a different place, and history never quite repeats itself. Yet social scientists may have exaggerated the differences between past experiences of immigrant incorporation and those of the present. The creative mixing of immigrant and native minority cultures already clearly evident in the music, art, dance, and poetry being produced in hyperdiverse cities like New York and Los Angeles is in many ways reminiscent of the best of New York’s past. Here we see the second generation advantage most clearly. The greatest spur to creativity in multicultural cities is neither the continuation of immigrant traditions nor the headlong rush to become similar to the host society, but the innovation that occurs when different traditions come together, where no one way of doing things can be taken for granted. For all their problems,
the increasingly diverse working class neighborhoods of New York exhibit an undeniable innovative energy.

This creativity is evident in the everyday decisions and behaviors of young people who are growing up with a dual frame of reference. These young people can be, and perhaps must be, creative in their reactions to their environments. For many situations, second generation members cannot blindly repeat the received wisdom of their parents, which is best suited to a different society. More than most of us, members of the second generation know that their parents' ways cannot always be their ways. Nor can they unreflectively take up an American culture they are only beginning to understand. Instead, they must choose among the ways of their parents, of broader American society, and of their native minority peers or, perhaps, create something altogether new and different.

We often attribute drive and creativity to the self-selection of immigrants or to ethnicity itself, but the real second generation advantage comes from being located between two cultures. The creativity inherent in occupying a position at the crossroads of two groups has been widely recognized in a variety of situations, but we believe it has been insufficiently recognized with respect to the second generation. Sociologist Ron Burt describes the situation of being between two social networks as being in a "structural hole." He notes that

opinion and behavior are more homogeneous within than between groups, so people connected across groups are more familiar with alternative ways of thinking and behaving which give them more options to select from and synthesize. New ideas emerge from selection and synthesis across the structural holes between groups. (Burt 2004:349–350)

This insight is not new. At the beginning of the last century Georg Simmel (1922) recorded it in his classic discussion of conflicting group affiliations and the role of the stranger. Burt (2004:350) goes back even further, quoting John Stuart Mill:

It is hardly possible to overrate the value ... of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar ... Such communication has always been, and is particularly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress.

Yet, if anything, this has become more true for today's second generation than it was for the children of immigrants in the past. The ethos of multiculturalism and the reality of globalization and the unprecedented diversity that characterizes cities like New York multiply the second generation advantage. The contemporary second generation does not feel undue pressure to reject the languages, beliefs, and behaviors of its immigrant forebears. Nor do its members feel the need to cling to them to keep the dangers of assimilation at bay. They are individuals who grew up in a world in which being different can be "cool," and they insist that they are free to assert certain aspects of their parents' ways and to reject others—thus allowing this cultural creativity to flower.

Consider an example of how this can work. When we asked about the age at which young people were expected to leave home, there was widespread agreement among native white, native black, and Puerto Rican respondents that living with your parents after age 21 was difficult at best, and definitely not conducive to "being an adult." By contrast, most of our second generation respondents in every group grew up with a different norm transmitted to them by their parents and their ethnic group—that living with parents and other extended family members until marriage and maybe even after was normal and did not have to be fraught with conflict and angst. In many cases living in the parental home was a sign of responsibility and maturity and thus completely compatible with being an adult.

As one 24-year-old Russian Jewish woman notes:

In our culture, it's like, it's not like our thing. It's not like you're eighteen and you move out. American people do it different. So it's not like such a burden. And it's not weird that I'm twenty-four and I'm living at home or anything like that. If I wanted to, I could move out, but it's fine. I have a good relationship with my mother, I like being here with her, knowing her and my brother also. We have our independent lives, but it's nice to come home at night sometimes with them, and I get enough alone time here.

On the other hand, our native born respondents also grew up with an expectation that men and women would receive the same amount of education and that there was no reason that women should not expect to get as much education as men. Many of our Hispanic and Chinese respondents received messages from their parents that girls did not need as much education as boys.

These two sets of ideas, the first about the timing of establishing one's
own household and the second about the length of education, interact with the structure of the New York City housing market, one of the most expensive in the world. While many native white families had the financial resources to help their children attain independent living or owned homes that they could give to their offspring when they retired, the black and Puerto Rican families had far less ability to support their children in their desire to live independently. Regardless of race, however, most of our native respondents expected that they should strike out on their own and have their own apartments, if not by age 18, then certainly by their early twenties. They struggled to do so and often felt like failures when they could not. The second generation respondents, by contrast, often continued to live with their parents until they felt able to afford to live on their own. This allowed many second generation women to continue their schooling, even if they had children, because their parents could help with child care or because they did not have to work full time to support high rents.

Thus a second generation young woman is able to combine the norm of education and career ambitions that pushes her toward college and the norm of multigenerational living that allows her to live at home while she attains that goal. Most CUNY schools and other low cost New York colleges have no dormitories; those that do charge far more for them than the cost of living “at home.” (Once again, this is not so different than in times past. In the “glory days” of the City College in the 1930s, its mostly second generation student body lived at home with immigrant parents. A generation later, how many of their thoroughly Americanized children would have done the same?)

A young second generation woman may not be aware that she is choosing to maintain one norm and shed another. These are simply norms that fit the realities of a labor market that rewards education, a primary education system that has equal expectations of men and women, and a housing market that makes it hard for a young single woman attending college to find an apartment. Her ability to combine an American norm about education with an immigrant norm about living with parents nevertheless means that she is better off than her native minority neighbor who cannot conceive of living with her parents at age 25, even though she would like to finish college. It also makes her better off than her first generation counterpart who has just arrived at age 18 believing that her brother should finish college but that she can be successful if she can just get a high school degree and a job. The creativity of this second generation comes from its members’ ability to meet structural environment needs with a wider repertoire of options about beliefs and behaviors than is available to people who have grown up in the same society as their parents and who consequently have only a single frame of reference.

Being located between two or more cultural systems can, of course, sometimes have negative consequences. The Dominican American student attending Fordham whom we quoted in Chapter 7 about the inadequacy of the guidance Dominican parents gave their children in sexual matters and the problems this had caused her peers presents a good example. Of course, the extent of the advantage derived from combining two sets of norms does depend on which immigrant norms the second generation person draws upon and which segment of U.S. society the person is being incorporated into. We are not suggesting that the positive side of being between cultural systems always outweighs the limitations and constraints faced by the most disadvantaged of the second generation. This second generation advantage is but one factor among many shaping young people’s lives today. Most of the time, however, we suspect it is on the positive side of the balance sheet, and that too often previous observers have ignored its impact or have been too quick to see combining two sets of norms as negative.

The creativity that comes from being between cultural systems was clearly evident among earlier generations of European immigrants as well. Yet even while they remade America on their own “ethnic” terms, they often did so in the face of very real pressures to assimilate that left them profoundly aware of their outsider status and embattled, or at least ambivalent, about their parents’ “foreign” ways (see Hansen 1938; Gordon 1964). In part because of their successful integration into U.S. society, and in part because of changes in American attitudes about difference in the wake of the civil rights movement, today’s second generation members live in an America in which the pressures for cultural conformity have lessened substantially. Far from being embarrassed, many of our informants felt proud of the ways in which they bridged two worlds in which Monica Boyd and Elizabeth Grieco have called their “triumphant transitions” (1998). We saw this in the pride with which young people described using their ability to translate to help their parents or other people with limited English, in the easy ways in which young people described their multilingualism, in the extensive use of ethnic music and media, especially among the Spanish speakers. Indeed, our
respondents were more likely to be embarrassed that they had too rapidly assimilated into American society—a number described how bad they felt about losing their parents' language. This reflects the stronger appreciation of diversity in America in general as well as the particularly cosmopolitan ethos of New York.

In New York City the second generation inherits an environment where the second generation advantages work to particularly good effect. While these young people feel the sting of disadvantage and discrimination, they move in a world where being from somewhere else has long been the norm. For them being a New Yorker means being both ethnic and American, being different both from native whites and from their immigrant parents. In this feeling they are reaping the benefits of New York's long history of absorbing new immigrants. As Glazer and Moynihan put it in *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963/1970:xiii):

New York is not Chicago, Detroit or Los Angeles. It is a city in which the dominant racial group has been marked by ethnic variety and all ethnic groups have experienced ethnic diversity. Any one ethnic group can count on seeing its position and power wax and wane and none has become accustomed to long term domination, though each may be influential in a given area or domain. None can find challenges from new groups unexpected or outrageous... The evolving system of inter-group relations permits accommodation, change and the rise of new groups.

This situation has persisted despite the nonwhite origins of most new immigrant groups. No doubt New York City still has an entrenched white establishment that can trace its roots in the United States back many generations. But the second generation rarely encounters such people on the job, in the unions, or around the neighborhoods, schools, and subways of New York. Instead, the children of immigrants see a continuum of “whites” who trace their origins to Italy, Ireland, Germany, Russia, Poland, Greece, or Israel. If Italians are yesterday's newcomers and today’s establishment, then perhaps Colombians are the new Italians and, potentially, tomorrow’s establishment. New Yorkers, old and new, are happy to tell themselves this story. It may not be completely true. But the fact they tell it, and believe it, is significant and may serve to help make it come true.

Why Do Some Groups Do Better Than Others?

Why do some of our groups do so much better than others? Members of the second generation, as we outlined, are creative partly because of the variety of strategies they have available for how to be in the world. A logical extension of this is that different groups have different strategies or concepts that they have brought with them, and as we have tried to make clear throughout the book, these groups face different structural realities once they get to the United States.

As argued earlier, the groups differ in terms of parental human capital, reasons for migration, and the contexts of reception they encounter. Thus, the relative success of the Russian Jewish second generation respondents is not unexpected—their parents had high levels of education, they came as refugees, and while they were getting established and retrained in the United States, a large percentage of the families took advantage of welfare, food stamps, and other government programs. Indeed, in contrast to native minority groups, it is striking how little stigma was attached to the Russians’ use of widespread public assistance, either within the group or from other New Yorkers. As Jews, the Russian immigrants were also given special attention and aid from established Jewish organizations that helped them with everything from housing to job referrals and English-language lessons. As whites the Russians found housing in better neighborhoods with less crime, better schools, and better stores and services. It is no surprise, then, that their children have done well.

Obvious factors do less to explain the success of our Chinese respondents. Twenty-two percent of our Chinese respondents are from families with highly educated parents, and one would expect these respondents to do well. But 67 percent of our Chinese parents have very low levels of education. Unlike the Russians, few entered the country as refugees, and thus they did not initially qualify for welfare or other government programs. In addition, the Chinese sometimes faced racial and ethnic discrimination in schools and the labor market. But the Chinese in our study are doing exceptionally well, better, by most measures, than groups in which parental education is, on average, considerably higher.

Explaining the relative success of the Chinese suggests that what we might call “family strategies for the accumulation and intergenerational transfer of capital” may be more important than race or parents’ nativity. The most successful children come from groups that are more likely to have two parents and even other adult wage earners and caretakers in the
household supporting relatively few children. The Chinese have a high ratio of working adults to children in the household. While it is true that Chinese parents relentlessly expect their children to perform well in schools, they also provide the means for them to do so in the form of higher household incomes (even when individual incomes are modest), living in neighborhoods with better schools, keeping their children out of the labor force while they pursue higher education, and navigating the bureaucratic pathways toward the best schools in the New York City public school system. It is worth noting that unlike native whites or better-off African Americans, the Chinese rarely turn to private schools as an alternative, although they do spend money on supplemental educational and exam preparation, often in weekend "Chinese schools."

The Chinese are able to provide the means for their children to do well because of several other important factors. First, while the group has low median parental education and income, the first generation is marked by a great diversity of class origins. Despite this class diversity, the group is very much a cohesive group, with a high degree of social connection between its better- and worse-off members. Perhaps because of language barriers, perhaps because of race, many Chinese professionals continue to inhabit the same social world as their poorer compatriots; whereas South American professionals—particularly if they are light skinned—often leave the community and become functionally white.

Social networks link middle and working class Chinese immigrants, and all the Chinese share ethnic newspapers, ethnic churches, and ethnic broadcast media. Guides to the New York City public school system published in the Chinese-language newspapers pass on information provided by the middle class immigrants who have used their own education and class-based cultural capital to figure out how the system works and how to navigate it. This knowledge is shared with working class immigrants. In this way the Chinese respondent who told us that her barely literate mother who worked in a garment factory but who "somehow" knew her daughter should go to Stuyvesant (the premier public high school in the city, accessible only by test) is a beneficiary of both the class heterogeneity and ethnic solidarity of the Chinese ethnic group.

As Burt (2004:351) defines it, "Social capital exists where people have an advantage because of their location in a social structure." Working class Chinese second generation youth acquire social capital because they are embedded in a social structure—the networks encompassing their immigrant parents—with educational and class diversity. This social capital is not available to Dominican youth, whose parents' community is homogeneously poor, nor to South American youth, whose group exhibits less ethnic solidarity.

At the same time, the context of reception by the wider society also shapes group experience. One reason the Chinese are able to take advantage of the islands of excellence in New York's public school system is that, despite their racial distinctiveness, they face little discrimination in the housing market. Chinese immigrants can move into white neighborhoods without causing rapid white out-migration. By contrast, West Indians or Dominicans, regardless of income, face much higher levels of discrimination in housing. They are less able to move into white neighborhoods in search of better schools or safer streets. When they do, "white flight" often leads to declines in school quality and public safety, much as it would if the newcomers were native African Americans or Puerto Ricans. Added to these advantages is the stereotype of the Chinese as successful students. One of the strongest findings in educational research is that high expectations from teachers have a positive effect on student outcomes (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). Unlike Hispanic and black students, who often have to overcome low expectations, the Chinese enter schools that expect them to do well.

Finally, cultural factors are at play in the success of the Chinese. The pattern of obligations that keeps working class mothers and fathers from divorcing even when they are miserable together and that keeps young adults living at home and supporting their parents even when they do not communicate with them promotes socioeconomic mobility for the Chinese second generation. Second generation Chinese put off marriage and childbearing until they have finished school and established themselves in their careers. This does not necessarily make them happier than others their age—we interviewed a lot of lonely and bitter Chinese young adults. But it does facilitate academic and career success. While they may not always be having a good time, they are experiencing very high rates of upward social mobility.

The other groups we studied have different mixes of behaviors and beliefs and face different structures of barriers and opportunities. The Dominicans probably present the clearest case for concern. With a comparatively high level of African ancestry, Dominicans face high levels of discrimination, both in public space and in the housing market. Unlike the parents of West Indians, few of their parents spoke English on arrival. They arrived in the United States with very low levels of education and
continue to have low incomes. Their nearest “proximal host” population, Puerto Ricans, are also quite poor, and the neighborhoods they share have some of New York’s worst schools.

It is not clear whether Dominicans, caught between remaining in one of the poorest immigrant communities and assimilating into the poorest of the native communities, enjoy much second generation advantage. Many have formed single-parent households, and the ratio of children to working adults in the household is low. By New York standards, many of the Dominican first generation arrived in the United States undocumented, and their high level of remittances to and investments in the Dominican Republic drains capital out of the community.

Nevertheless, despite these disadvantages, members of the Dominican second generation are in many respects doing at least marginally better than their Puerto Rican counterparts and even native born African Americans. They are much better educated than their parents, although less well educated than most other New Yorkers their age. Finally, those Dominicans who do achieve high levels of education show little evidence of disadvantage relative to native whites, something that is not true for the native minorities.

Immigration, Race, and Public Policy: Looking into the Future

While our story is cautiously optimistic, we must underscore several caveats. First, our study began at an auspicious time—from 1999 to early 2001. The labor market was tight, unemployment was low, and the financial services industry in New York was pumping money into the local economy. After decades of rising income inequality and stagnant median wages, the local and national economy experienced some good years at the end of the 1990s. Our young respondents reaped the benefits of that particular time and place, even though they generally held entry-level jobs without much security. Most of our respondents could find work, and most were optimistic about their own futures.

The collapse of the dot-com boom and the economic shock of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001 shook that confidence. When we reinterviewed many of our in-depth respondents in 2002 and 2003, some had lost their jobs and had not been able to replace them. Given that most of our respondents were working and lower middle class people with some college education and relatively low-paying jobs, severe economic downturns like the one in 2001–2003 could change stories of modest upward mobility and rosy outlooks into stories of stagnation, pessimism, and worry about the future.

We can also ask whether the social mobility and general optimism we found will carry over to the third and fourth generation or whether the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the immigrants will experience a reversal of fortune, as seems to be true of the Puerto Ricans. Academics and policymakers have not paid nearly enough attention to Puerto Ricans in recent decades. Dwarfed by the arrival of new immigrant groups, Puerto Ricans have often disappeared statistically into the broader Hispanic category. Neither immigrants nor natives, they have a special political status that also allowed them to fall through the cracks. Even the rediscovery of urban poverty in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s has focused almost exclusively on African Americans, and the new immigration literature has left Puerto Ricans out of the picture entirely.

While “off stage,” in New York, at least, the Puerto Ricans’ situation has deteriorated. The poorest group in our sample, the Puerto Ricans show distressing evidence of persistent poverty and intergenerational socioeconomic decline. Perhaps this is because the special selectivity of immigrants does not apply to the third generation families our respondents grew up in. It is also possible that there is a reverse selectivity effect, with the more successful Puerto Ricans moving to other parts of the country or even out-marrying and losing their identity as Puerto Rican. Nonetheless, the New York–based sample we spoke with is doing poorly. Racial discrimination, poor urban schools, language issues, and dysfunctional families all play a part.

Another clear pattern in our findings is deeply troubling. Race and racial discrimination continue to shape the life chances of second generation respondents with dark skin, who can be confused or associated with, or who see themselves as becoming, African Americans. Although we find little evidence of second generation decline, the continuing disadvantages faced by native African Americans, the status of the New York–born Puerto Ricans, the poverty and incarceration of many second generation Dominicans, and the high levels of discrimination reported by even the relatively well-off West Indians clearly point to the possibility of third generation decline. Because race encapsulates a complex dynamic of scarce family resources, high obstacles to success, and a risky environment, it still counts very much in New York City. That many children of immigrant minority parents manage to avoid racism’s worst impacts does not lessen the
sting for those who cannot. There is a distinct possibility that some portion of Dominicans and West Indians experience marked downward mobility as they become less distinguishable from African Americans over time and as residual immigrant and second generation advantages fade into the third or fourth generation. West Indians, despite relatively high incomes and levels of education, are the most likely of our second generation groups to report experiencing discrimination from the police and in public places, where their interactions with whites seem little different from those of African Americans.

Several public policies can make a difference in continuing second generation integration and preventing third generation decline. The shameful inequality in the educational system has to be lessened. The New York City public schools vary so much in quality that it is difficult to imagine they are part of the same system. The variation begins at the very earliest grades, and the effects of attending a substandard school are compounded and reinforced year after year until it is too late to undo the damage by the time students enter high school. At the other end of the spectrum are students who enter some of the best elementary schools and can navigate the system. They end up in one of the magnet schools and achieve an education as good as any obtainable in private school. This inequality maps onto racial and income disparities and is inexcusable. In order to ensure continued positive integration of generations of immigrants, we must make good on America’s promise of equality of opportunity.

Affirmative action in higher education, while intended primarily to address the long-standing grievances of native minority groups, especially African Americans, is in fact a policy that has worked well for the children of immigrants and should be supported. Harmed by racial discrimination, some substandard schools, and a lack of knowledge about the American educational system, yet ambitious and coming from families who invest a great deal in the success of the next generation, the children of nonwhite immigrants are perhaps best suited to a program designed to locate and help qualified but disadvantaged youth. Affirmative action and other programs that seek to facilitate the upward mobility of minority youth have, in fact, served us well in integrating the children of nonwhite immigrants. That this was not their original intention should not obscure this important success.

In addition, the government should continue to monitor and fight both overt and subtle racial discrimination in housing, jobs, and schools and by the police. Discrimination is a fact of life for dark-skinned young people, but how that discrimination feels is very different if they know that the law will protect them and that their society does not countenance such behavior.

We began this study worried about downward mobility of some of the children of immigrants. We now feel that it is, in some ways, the opposite problem that is actually a greater cause for concern. It has become clear that the relative success of the children of immigrants is now obscuring the depth of continuing poverty and discrimination, limited opportunities, staggering rates of incarceration, and the general social exclusion of large segments of the native minority youth population. When elite colleges point with pride to their increasing “diversity” and to the growing numbers of “blacks” and “Latinos” among their students and faculty, it is easy to overlook how much of that diversity is provided by the growing numbers of immigrants and their children, and how little by the descendants of American slaves or by long-present Puerto Ricans or Mexican Americans. When institutions like the CUNY colleges or New York’s selective public magnet schools express concern over their declining “black” and “Latino” enrollments, it is easy to miss how much more dramatic those declines would be if it were not for the children of West Indian, Dominican, and South American immigrants.

Let us be clear. The increasing diversity of American institutions and of American society is a good thing. The reduction of racial barriers, initiated by the civil rights movement, however partial, has created a fairer and thus better society. In fact, the use of affirmative action and the active pursuit of diversity have facilitated the incorporation of the children of immigrants. However unintentionally, such policies and practices have helped members of the second generation find their place in American society. They are part of the reason the situation in New York and other American cities looks so different than that in Europe. Good for the immigrants and their children, this unintended incorporation policy has also been good for the United States. In an era of globalization, it has brought new and different skills, fresh talent, and extraordinary drive to an America that needs them now as much as ever. At the same time, such policies and practices have been less successful in addressing the problems of the very populations they were originally designed for, and whose struggles for justice brought them about in the first place. This is a fact that must be faced squarely. When, out of ignorance or misguided notions of solidarity, politicians and social scientists lump native and immigrant minorities together under rubrics such as “Hispanic,” or worse, “people of color,” they make such issues more difficult to talk about, much less address.
Further, for the children of non-black, nonwhite immigrants it is important to remember that race is mutable and that the color line may be moving. The central cleavage in American life was once clearly between whites and nonwhites. Today there is mounting evidence that it is between blacks and non-blacks. This has tremendous salience for much of the second generation. The changing position of Asian Americans—once as racially excluded as anyone—on most indicators of acculturation and assimilation in the last two decades should remind us that there is nothing permanent about what we call race. Perhaps the ties of language will, in the next century, make the children of Colombians, Ecuadorians, Cubans, and Mexicans (along with the grandchildren of Puerto Ricans and the great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren of southwestern “Hispanos”) a single “Latino” race. But this is hardly the only possible outcome, or even the most likely one, given the consistent finding that many of the second generation children of Latino immigrants prefer to use English anyway.

Finally, we must remember that incorporation is a two-way street. The second generation has been successful partly because New York, compared to many other places, has put few barriers in their way. In this regard it is important to remember that the number of undocumented immigrants among our 1.5 generation respondents was relatively low. Indeed, most of our respondents’ parents entered the country legally; and of those who did not enter legally, most eventually managed to regularize their status. Few of our respondents reported that their own legal status or that of their parents had posed a major problem as they were growing up in the 1980s and 1990s. This finding presents a sharp contrast to cities in which more of the immigrant population is undocumented. It is also a contrast to the situation of the children of today’s newest immigrants, since even in New York the proportion of undocumented immigrants has risen and legalization has become more difficult. While efforts to “get tough” on undocumented immigrants and plug the various loopholes used to legalize an immigrant’s status have been singularly unsuccessful in keeping undocumented immigrants out of the country, they do keep immigrants undocumented longer. As a result many immigrants are now permanently locked out of meaningful participation in American civic life.

Whatever one thinks of the situation that created today’s large undocumented population, one can easily see how much the presence of such a large, permanent population who are part of our nation economically, socially, and culturally, but not politically, ill serves a democratic society. The situation is bad for the immigrants, bad for America, and particularly bad for the immigrants’ American children. This, far more than downward assimilation, is where we feel the true danger of creating an underclass lies. If we are truly concerned about the integration of the children of immigrants into American society, policies that keep their parents undocumented can only be judged highly counterproductive.

The elements of the civic culture of New York and America that welcome and celebrate immigration and ethnic diversity should be maintained and reinforced. The history of America’s treatment of immigrants has many shameful aspects—forced assimilation, forced repatriation, imprisonment in concentration camps, blatant prejudice, discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Through it all, however, America has also maintained an ideology of equality and openness to immigrants and a bedrock rule that anyone born in the United States is a citizen. We can see this ideology as a hypocritical story we have told ourselves, and sometimes it is. But it has also been a resource for the immigrants, for their children, and for members of native minority groups fighting for inclusion and fair treatment.

One need only look at the continued exclusion of the second and third generation of post–World War II immigrants in Western Europe to see how much worse the situation could have been. Every year for the last few decades some misguided lawmaker proposes to deny birthright citizenship to the children of undocumented migrants or even to the children of immigrants more generally. This would be a terrible mistake. Not only would it create a permanently excluded but permanently present class of noncitizens in our midst, it would send a terrible message to our newcomers.

America can be proud of its ideology of inclusion, and New York, on its best days, can be proud of the reality of inclusion it offers to the second generation. The hold that members of the second generation have on that promise of a better life may be precarious, but, combined with their youthful optimism, it leaves us hopeful about their future and about the future of the city that they inherit.