



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Higher Dropout Rate of Foreign-born Teens: The Role of Schooling Abroad

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Foreign-born youths are significant contributors to the nation's teen school dropout population. Only 8 percent of the nation's teens are foreign born, but nearly 25 percent of teen school dropouts were born outside the United States, according to a Pew Hispanic Center analysis of data from the 2000 U.S. Census.

Many of these foreign-born school dropouts—nearly 40 percent—are recent arrivals to this country who were already behind in school before they left for the United States. In absolute numbers, recently arrived foreign-born teens who had difficulties in school before migration are a relatively small phenomenon—they make up just 6 percent of all foreign-born youths—but they are at high risk of dropping out once they arrive. (A youth is categorized as a dropout if he or she is not currently enrolled in school and has not completed a high school education. This includes those who have never enrolled in school in the United States.)

The impact of schooling difficulties before migration on school enrollment in the U.S. applies widely to youths from all countries of origin. For example, recently arrived teens from China who made adequate progress in school before migrating have a school dropout rate of less than 4 percent. But recent arrivals from China who did not make adequate school progress in China have a dropout rate greater than 30 percent.

How well recent arrivals do at school varies markedly between youths who experienced education difficulties before migration and other foreign-born teens, and the two groups differ in other ways as well. The dropout rate for teens with school problems before migration is in excess of 70 percent, in comparison with 8 percent for other foreign-born youths. And their characteristics, especially for males, suggest that many of them are labor migrants: Their purpose in migrating was probably to seek employment in the labor market, and they may have never enrolled in U.S. schools. Recently arrived males who did not make adequate school progress before migration are twice as likely to be working as other foreign-born males, and nearly 40 percent of them are in the agriculture and construction industries, in comparison with 10 percent of other foreign-born youths. In contrast to the living arrangements of other foreign-born youths, the majority of recent arrivals with prior school problems do not reside with any parent in the household. Given their participation in the labor market and the degree to which they were behind in school, the prospects of enrolling these youths in traditional high school settings appear to be remote.

Foreign-born teens who have received most or all of their schooling in America are much more likely to be in school. These early childhood arrivals have a dropout rate of 5 percent, not much higher than the native-born dropout rate of 3.3 percent. For nearly every country of origin, teens who arrived early in childhood are much more likely to be in school than teens who arrived in the United States recently.

The analysis utilizes a large, nationally representative sample of foreign-born teens from the 2000 Decennial U.S. Census. It examines the dropout behavior of teens from over 40 countries or regions of origin. The large Census file permits the analysis to focus on the most relevant age range for school enrollment, 15 to 17, when most U.S. youths enroll in high school, rather than broader ranges beyond traditional high school age.

The study's key findings include:

- Foreign-born school dropout rates strongly depend on two linked factors: the age at which the teen migrated and the country that initially educated the teen.
- Foreign-born teens who arrived in the United States early in childhood have a modestly higher school dropout rate than native-born teens.
- The small share of foreign-born teens who arrived recently and had education difficulties before migration have an exceedingly elevated school dropout rate. More than 70 percent of such teens are high school dropouts.
- Recently arrived foreign-born teens with education difficulties before migration are a small share of foreign-born teens but a large share of foreign-born high school dropouts.
- The pattern of dropout rates by age at arrival and prior schooling history applies to foreign-born teens from all countries of origin.
- The importance of recently arrived teens with prior education difficulties varies from country to country, but nonetheless, such youths have much greater dropout rates regardless of country of origin.
- Many of the male recent arrivals who had education difficulties before migration are likely labor migrants, i.e., they came to the United States recently in order to work.