

Children of immigrants hit an economic ceiling

Even the well-educated find it tough to earn middle-class wages, and some end up in the farm fields where their parents toiled to give them better lives.

By Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Dos Palos, Calif.

A Salvadoran flag wrapped around his neck to block out the sun, Geremias Romero hunches low to the ground alongside the other laborers, following the tractor along rows of cantaloupes.

He reaches into the leafy green rows of fruit, touches a melon to gauge its ripeness, and then tosses it into a cart, where another laborer boxes it. Walk, pick, toss. The pattern goes on all morning.

Harvesting cantaloupes for \$8.25 an hour isn't the job that Romero, 28, dreamed of as a child. Born in Newark, N.J., to immigrant parents from El Salvador, he graduated from high school and has taken classes at the Art Institute of Philadelphia and Merced Community College. He has experience as a special education teacher but, unable to find a teaching job, he's started working in the fields.

"I'd rather keep myself working than get in trouble," he said, wiping his hands on his ripped jeans, stained with grass. "My dad started from nothing. He worked hard, so I don't mind working hard too."

Many young Americans are finding themselves worse off than their parents were at their age, without jobs or working below their skill and education levels. The unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds is 17.4%, up from 10.6% in 2006.

The situation is even tougher for children of immigrants, such as Romero. Their parents paved the way by working tough jobs so their children could get an education and secure their place in the middle class. Now, with middle-class jobs disappearing, many children of immigrants are settling for the jobs their parents did, even if they are better educated.

"We've never had so many American-born working in the fields," said Joe Del Bosque, the Central Valley farmer who hired Romero and other laborers like him to pick melons. "Farm work is usually the big step for some people to push their kids into the American Dream."

They include Raul Lopez, 23, who worked as a contractor for a utility company during the construction boom but is now back in the fields picking cantaloupes.

"We're still struggling, so we have to go where the work is," said Lopez, whose mother, a Mexican immigrant, just passed her U.S. citizenship exam.

Economists worry that this lack of mobility imperils the country's productivity, especially since about a third of American adults ages 18 to 34 are foreign-born or children of immigrants.

"It's a great waste of talent and motivation," said Alejandro Portes, a Princeton University sociologist who studies children of immigrants. "Since this is a growing population, the fact that they find so many obstacles to becoming productive citizens represents a significant waste for a knowledge-based economy."

Only 47% of Americans think their children will have a higher standard of living as adults than they do, down from 62% in 2009, according to a poll done in May on behalf of the Pew Economic Mobility Project.

Concerns about the availability of a middle-class lifestyle are likely to be a hot topic this election season. It has already come up in such diverse forums as Occupy Wall Street and the Republican presidential debates. About half of Americans think the government does more to hurt people trying to move up the economic ladder than it does to help them, according to the Pew poll. About 80% said the government was doing an ineffective job of helping poor and middle-class Americans.

"There is clearly a demand among voters and working Americans in general for Congress and the president to do something bold to create jobs" said Catherine Singley, senior policy analyst at the National Council of La Raza.

In 2008, there were about 32 million people in the U.S. with either one or two foreign-born parents. They include a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds, but overall, those ages 18 to 34 lag in reaching traditional adult milestones, including leaving home, finishing school and entering the workforce, according to a 2008 study by Ruben G. Rumbaut, a sociology professor at UC Irvine.

"If I had to update that study, the situation would be much more dire for children of immigrants," Rumbaut said.

In the study, about 24% of young adults born in the U.S. to Mexican parents were high school dropouts, compared with 11% of whites with native parentage and 7% of children born in the U.S. to Indian immigrants.

Even education doesn't always help, as some of the fastest-growing sectors in the economy are those that require few skills. Personal service and care jobs, which paid an average of \$25,000 last year, grew 27% over the last decade. Food preparation and service jobs grew 11%. They pay an average of \$21,000 a year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"A lot of families who felt at one point that they were on the solid rung of the American middle-class ladder are slipping and falling down a rung," said Sylvia Allegretto, a labor economist at the Center on Wage and Employment Dynamics at UC Berkeley.

Decreasing access to the middle class could especially imperil economic recovery in states such as California, Florida, New York and Texas, where nearly 60% of young adults are immigrants or children of immigrants.

"A key to the future of California — and to that of a nation being transformed by immigration — will be how the rapidly expanding generation of young adults is incorporated" into its economy, politics and society, Rumbaut wrote. "For a sizable proportion of the nation's immigrant population, that access is now blocked."

Dorian Alcanzar, 24, doesn't feel as if he's being incorporated into the economy at all. He has a degree in civil engineering from Cal State Long Beach, but he has started applying for low-wage jobs here because he can't find work in his field.

"We came here for his dreams, for the future, for the opportunity, but we don't see that here," said his mother, Aida Hermosillo, 43.

Alcanzar is considering returning to his mother's home in Mexico, where his cousins are working the jobs they want. His current situation reminds him of visits to Mexico while he was growing up, where family friends who had trained as lawyers worked as street vendors.

"I'm not very optimistic right now," he said. "I feel that we're going to have an economy similar to a Third World country."

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-children-of-immigrants-20111031,0,4700202.story>