Biography of Alejandro Portes

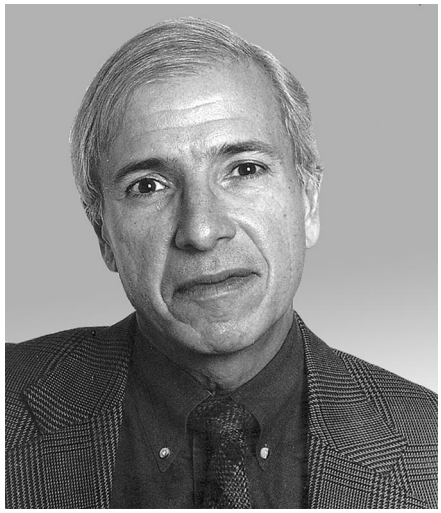
Alejandro Portes is a premier sociologist who has shaped the study of immigration and urbanization for 30 years. He is chair of the department of sociology at Princeton University (Princeton, NJ) as well as co-founder and director of Princeton's Center for Migration and Development. In 1998, Portes became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2001. From 1998 to 1999, Portes served as president of the American Sociological Association. He has authored and edited numerous books and has published articles on a range of policy issues, including immigrant assimilation, Latin American politics, and United States/Cuba relations (1–4).

A Cuban exile himself, Portes has spent his career tracking the lives of different immigrant nationalities in the United States. He has chronicled the causes and consequences of immigration to the United States, with an emphasis on informal economies, transnational communities, and ethnic enclaves (5–8). In Portes's Inaugural Article (9), published in this issue of PNAS, he and Hao study the children of immigrants and the factors that determine their successful adaptation to life in the United States, such as family support and school socioeconomic status (SES).

A Need to Understand the Past

Portes was born in Havana, Cuba, on October 13, 1944. He began his undergraduate studies at the University of Havana in 1959 but left after just one year. At the time, Cuba was in the midst of a revolution, as dictator Fulgencio Batista was overthrown and a new regime was established under the leadership of Fidel Castro. "I left in 1960 because of opposition to the regime and became a political exile," he says. In 1963, Portes resumed his studies at the Catholic University of Argentina in Buenos Aires. He completed his B.A. in sociology in 1965 at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. Portes was drawn to the field of sociology because he wanted to make sense of his own experience during the Cuban revolution. "I needed to understand what had happened in the country where I was born. [Cuba] was literally taken away from me and my family by a major social process that I could barely understand," said Portes.

Portes pursued his graduate education in sociology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which housed one of the strongest sociology departments in the country. For his dissertation, Portes studied political radicalism in the urban slums of Chile, a country that was polarized at the time. "I went to Chile to study the political attitudes among low-income urban dwellers in the squatter settlements surrounding the city, immediately before the election of the communist–socialist alliance to power, and that became my first major study," he recalls. In conjunction with his mentors at the University of Wisconsin, William Sewell and Archibald Haller, Portes authored papers on social stratification and status attainment in three major sociology journals in the late 1960s (10–12). His dissertation work was published in *Urban Latin America* (2), a book coauthored by John Walton. In addition to the doctorate that he earned in 1970, the University of Wisconsin later awarded Portes an honorary doctorate in 1998. In 2001, Portes's alma mater further distinguished him by asking him to deliver the inaugural William H. Sewell Memorial Lecture.



Alejandro Portes

After graduate school, Portes accepted a position as assistant professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. After one year at Illinois, he became a tenured associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, where he was also associate director of Latin American studies. Portes continued his dissertation work on Chilean political radicalism before turning to the study of immigration, a topic that would become his major research focus in future years.

Ethnic Enclaves

While at Austin, Portes launched a study comparing the adaptation of Cuban and Mexican immigrants arriving in Texas and Florida during the mid-1970s. "Up to that point, all Latin immigrants were seen as pretty much the same. I wanted to see how the two major Latin groups arriving at the time resembled and differed," he says. Approximately 1,500 Mexican immigrants and Cuban refugees were interviewed as soon as they arrived in the United States. Through the 1970s, Portes and his colleagues followed the progress of these immigrant groups, interviewing them three and six years after their arrival. Portes discovered that Cuban exiles in Miami were creating a new type of social structure consisting of highly entrepreneurial communities that employed many of their own coethnics, including the most recent arrivals to the United States; he named this novel social structure the "ethnic enclave." By this unique form of adaptation, Portes argues that an immigrant could spend his or her entire life within the confines of the ethnic enclave. "You could be born in a Cuban clinic, be employed in a Cuban factory or enterprise, and be buried in a Cuban cemetery," he said. After studying the Cuban ethnic enclave in Miami, Portes and colleagues identified other immigrant groups, such as the Russian Jews and the Japanese, that had adopted similar patterns of adaptation, greatly facilitating their economic success at the turn of the 20th century. "But then, not all immigrants have the necessary education, human capital, or favorable reception to create these conditions," Portes acknowledges. The study spawned several articles (13–15) and *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (16), a book coauthored by Robert L. Bach.

In 1975, Portes joined the faculty at Duke University as a full professor. He continued his analyses of immigration and social integration, combining an interest in urbanization and development in the Third World, primarily Latin America. During this period, Portes spent a year in Brazil as a program adviser for the Ford Foundation conducting a study on housing policy and the urban slums of Rio de Janeiro

This is a Biography of a recently elected member of the National Academy of Sciences to accompany the member's Inaugural Article on page 11920.

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during the military dictatorship (17, 18). For another year, he was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, CA.

After four years at Duke, Portes accepted a position as professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1981. At Hopkins, Portes launched a study of the informal economy—an economy created by unregulated service jobs, such as construction work, landscaping, and domestic services. "This form of employment is most common in Latin America and the Third World, where informal workers are more numerous than those regulated by the state. The population is not covered by social security, but labors under these irregular conditions," Portes explains. However, Portes and his collaborators found that the informal economy was also present in the mature, developed economies of the United States and Western Europe as well as those of the former Soviet regime. The comparative project encompassed studies of all world regions, including the United States, Latin America, Africa, and Europe (19–21).

In another line of research, Portes examined the integration of Cuban refugees who arrived during the 1980 Mariel boat lift, the surge of more than 125,000 refugees who landed in southern Florida from Mariel, Cuba. For comparative purposes, the study included a sample of Haitian refugees arriving in the United States at the same time. Portes and his colleagues found significant differences in the immigrants' mental health and access to health services. While Mariel Cubans had significantly higher levels of mental illness than the Haitian refugees, Potes found that the Cubans obtained effective treatment more readily (22, 23), "The success of the Cubans in seeking help for their needs was heavily influenced by the consolidated enclave created by their compatriots, which made available many institutional resources to which Haitians arriving at the same time did not have access," said Portes. This study, plus prior research conducted in Miami, culminated in *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (24), a book coauthored by Alex Stepick, one of Portes's former postdoctoral fellows. The book won the Robert Park Award for best book in urban sociology from the American Sociological Association in 1995.

The Immigrant Second Generation

While Portes's centered his early work on first-generation immigrants, he later expanded his research to include the children of these immigrants who were growing up in the United States. Based on the experiences of pre-World War II European immigrants, it was clear to Portes that the future of ethnic groups in the United States would be defined more by the second generation than by the first. "Immigrants are often *in* the society, but not yet *of* it," he says. First-generation immigrants may return to their country of origin, but their U.S.-born children are U.S. citizens with American aspirations, and most are here to stay. "Whether [the children] succeed or not, economically and socially, will determine the fate of the ethnic groups that come out of today's immigration as they did for Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and Italian Americans in the past."

In the late 1980s, Portes and his colleague Rubén G. Rumbaut of Michigan State University launched a labor-intensive project called the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS). With the help of local field teams, they interviewed more than 5,000 children of immigrants, 8th and 9th graders, in the school systems of Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and San Diego. The children were interviewed three years later, as they were about to graduate from high school, and again seven years later, when they were young adults. The goal of the study was to find out what happened to these children as they grew up in an environment divided between American society and their parents' culture. In addition, Portes and colleagues interviewed half of the children's parents, face to face, which required translating questionnaires into six languages, including the Cambodian language of Khmer and Philippine Tagalog.

"Immigrants are often *in* the society, but not yet *of* it."

The key concept that came out of CILS was that of "segmented assimilation," integration into different segments of American society rather than into one mainstream community. Portes observed that one path of integration, called "downward assimilation," is especially problematic. "It moves downward, increasing the probability of leaving school early, joining gangs, and integrating into a street and drug culture that commonly leads to imprisonment, teenage pregnancies, and other negative outcomes," he said. Fortunately, not all children follow the path of downward assimilation. Most second-generation youths do succeed in schools and in their early careers thanks to support from their families, ethnic communities, and their own efforts. Nevertheless, said Portes, downward assimilation is "problematic because it adds to the minority population trapped in American inner cities. Children of immigrants from poor working families who have had a precarious education in bad urban schools are especially at risk of following this path." In 2001, Portes published the results of CILS in *Legacies: the Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, coauthored with Ruben Rumbaut (25). The book has won several awards, including the Distinguished Scholarly Publication Award from the American Sociological Association.

In his PNAS Inaugural Article (9), Portes describes how the SES of schools works in tandem with the family SES to determine children's academic success. Immigrant youths from advantaged families who also attend advantaged schools exhibit greater academic performance than if they had attended average schools. The opposite happens to children from underprivileged backgrounds—their family disadvantages are compounded by poorer schools, resulting in lower grades and increased dropout rates. "There is a notable lack of support for working-class immigrant communities where parents struggle very hard to both survive and educate their children but do not often know how to do it. To prevent a clear bifurcation of the second generation between those that move upward and successfully integrate into the middle-class mainstream and those who move downward into the underclass, programs will have to be devised at the local level to work with parents and ethnic communities, supporting their efforts to educate their children properly," he advises.

In contrast to other immigrant populations, children of Mexican immigrants who attend higher-SES schools exhibit poorer academic performance and tend to drop out more frequently. Portes notes that many Mexican children are at risk of downward assimilation because of their unique conditions of disadvantage. They often come from poor families with parents who are unauthorized immigrants and laborers with little education. Portes thinks that it is not necessarily beneficial to mainstream children who come from disadvantaged situations into middle-class school environments. Rather, he believes that it would be more appropriate to improve the predominantly coethnic schools that most of them attend. "Mainstreaming is important, but it has to be assisted," said Portes. "Do

not simply put kids that come from these situations into highly competitive environments and expect them to sink or swim. They often sink.''

Analysis of the Unexpected

After 16 years at Johns Hopkins, Portes joined the department of sociology at Princeton University in 1997, where he currently serves as chair. In 1998, he co-founded with Marta Tienda the Center for Migration and Development to support students and younger faculty carrying out research on immigration and national development. ''In a sense, the center captures much of what has been the axis of my work,'' he says. At Princeton, he launched a new project on immigrant transnationalism: the economic, political, and sociocultural activities carried out by contemporary immigrants who give rise to communities ''that are suspended between two nations, as their members constantly move back and forth, living in two or more places and partaking of two cultures simultaneously.'' The study has focused on Colombian, Dominican, and Salvadorian immigrant groups settling in different regions of the United States (26–28).

Over the years, Portes has always been surprised by his research discoveries. ''From the very first—the determinants of political radicalism among low-income urban dwellers, which were entirely different from what the theory at the time predicted—to the reality of second-generation children, which is quite different from the usual story of immigrant assimilation,'' he remembers, ''I have gained a great deal of respect for scientific work, because it turns out that my early hunches were inevitably wrong. These experiences have been sobering and have taught me the limitations of armchair speculation.''

Portes lives in Princeton with his wife, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, a senior lecturer in the department of sociology. During his years of research, Portes says that is wife has been supportive of his work, evidenced by their collaboration on a number of projects, including her extensive participation in the CILS fieldwork (26, 29, 30). Together, they have three grown children. He notes, ''All of my children are American-born, so they are members of the second generation. I see how they have evolved, very much filling in the theories that their dad has concocted.''

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