IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER
AMERICAN IMMIGRATION COUNCIL

For Immediate Release

Climbing the Socio-Economic Ladder:
An Historical Perspective on the Success of Immigrants and Latinos

December 7, 2009

Washington D.C. - As a front-page story in today's *Washington Post* reminds us: "Not since the last great wave of immigration to the United States around 1900 has the country's economic future been so closely entwined with the generational progress of an immigrant group." The story highlights the degree to which the children of immigrants from Latin America have become crucial to sustaining the working-age population and tax base of the nation as the 75 million Baby Boomers retire. The parents of these children most likely would not have even come to this country if not for the U.S. economy's past high demand for workers to fill less-skilled jobs; demand which was not being adequately met by the rapidly aging and better-educated native-born labor force.

The *Post* story also casts a spotlight on the insecurities and anxieties of commentators who feel that Latino immigrants and their descendants aren't integrating into U.S. society and moving up the socio-economic ladder "fast enough." Although these concerns are certainly understandable, they are as unjustified now as they were a century ago when they were directed at immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

By any objective measure, the children of immigrants from Latin America are making significant progress compared with their parents. As demographer Dowell Myers points out in a 2008 report, the experience of Latino immigrants in California reveals not only the vast strides that immigrants themselves make within their lifetimes in terms of English proficiency, homeownership, and declining poverty rates, but also the degree to which the children and grandchildren of immigrants do better than "newcomers." Similarly, the National Research Council's Panel on Hispanics in the United States concluded in 2006 that "trends in wages, household income, wealth, and home ownership across time and generations point to the gradual ascension of many U.S.-born Hispanics to the middle class."

This isn't to say that the undeniable disparities in educational attainment and income between native-born Latinos and native-born non-Latinos in the United States aren't pressing social concerns. However, to effectively address these problems, they must first be accurately identified. The challenges confronting (and posed by) a poor immigrant from Mexico differ from the "Struggles of the Second Generation" Latinos whose parents are immigrants, which in turn differ from those of a poor third-generation Latino whose parents are native-born. Some of these challenges are unique to the immigrant experience, others derive from being part of a "minority" group in U.S. society, and others stem from dynamics of poverty that are not limited to any ethnic group, immigrant or otherwise.

For instance, if some third-generation Mexican Americans, like other minority groups in the United States, have encountered a "glass ceiling" in wage growth, this says more about the need for educational investment in poor communities than it does about a culturally specific lack of ambition. To treat Latinos as a homogeneous group inherently incapable of upward mobility, as some immigration restrictionists do, serves only to simplistically misidentify what are in fact a diverse range of issues. To deny the tremendous progress of Latino immigrants and their children over time is simply inaccurate.

###

For more information contact Wendy Sefsaf at 202-507-7524 or wsefsaf@immcouncil.org