Introduction

Immigration is remaking populations not merely in nations like the U.S. that have long welcomed newcomers but also in societies that have not traditionally received immigrants. Although the U.S., with its policy emphasis on family re-unification, admits increasing numbers of aging immigrants, immigrants are usually young. With the passage of time, they grow older and may make up a significant share of the aged population in places where there have been high and sustained levels of immigration. An important question is whether the well-being of this older immigrant population approaches that of native-born seniors or is characterized by significant disadvantage. The answer to this question depends on immigrant selection and incorporation processes, that is, on the characteristics of those who come to stay as well as on the extent to which they are integrated economically and socially into the society.

For a rough indication of what the future holds, we can compare native-born and foreign-born older adults in the U.S. today. However, older Americans in coming decades will not necessarily resemble today’s seniors. Because of changes in immigrant flows, they are more likely to hale from Asia or Latin America and less likely to come from Europe. As newcomers, they may not have started at the same place as earlier immigrants and they may not traverse the same path to old age as the current generation of immigrant elderly. Changes in the opportunities provided by the economy and cut-backs in the safety net protecting individuals from extreme deprivation are apt to affect all Americans but newcomers are especially vulnerable.

There are many commonalities between older foreign-born persons and their U.S.-born counterparts today. Age-related challenges like widowhood and disability affect both groups. However, older immigrants, on average, are at a socio-economic disadvantage. They are not as well educated as native-born older adults and they are more likely to live in low-income families. Further, among older immigrants there are noteworthy distinctions. Much less well-off than long-term immigrants, recent elderly arrivals, often the parents of naturalized U.S. citizens, remain very dependent on family for support.

Looking to the middle of the 21st century, our chapter begins with a brief overview of the age structure of immigrants in the U.S. and projections of the number and share of immigrants in the older population. The chapter turns to a discussion of trends in U.S. immigration and welfare laws that shape the context of reception for immigrants who are or will be old. Because age at immigration is an important determinant of incorporation and adaptation, the paper explicitly considers the flow of older immigrants to the United States. We recognize the diversity of older immigrants with analyses of their geographic distribution across the U.S., their changing race-ethnic composition and the age distribution of foreign-born older adults, which differs between newcomers and long-time immigrants. We gauge the incorporation of the older foreign-born population, noting the distinction between long-term residents of the United States and older newcomers as well
as highlighting variations among origin groups. To evaluate the economic position of immigrants, we consider their employment and income, especially in old age. We also give weight to social indicators of incorporation, namely English language proficiency and living arrangements. We conclude our paper with a discussion of the health of older immigrants and the “Hispanic mortality paradox.” Except as otherwise indicated, statistical information in this chapter is derived from authors’ tabulations of the 5 per cent Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) of Census 2000. We use the terms “foreign born” and “immigrants” interchangeably. Where possible, we draw comparisons between immigration to the U.S. and to other developed countries.

**An Overview of the Immigrant Age Structure in the U.S.**

The youthful nature of the immigrant population of the U.S. today demonstrates its inherent potential to generate a large population of older foreign-born adults in coming decades. One implication is that immigrants will make up an increasingly larger share of the older population by the middle of the 21st century.

Differences in the age-sex structures of immigrant and non-immigrant populations are striking. As Fig. 16.1 shows, the age-sex structure of the native-born American population in 2000 forms a squat pyramid that is unusual only because of its bulge of middle-

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**Fig. 16.1** Age and sex pyramids for native and foreign-born Americans: 1970 and 2000