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## Words Matter

Nasty, Donald Trump-style immigration rhetoric hurts children.



No way to conduct a policy debate.

By [Carola Suárez-Orozco](#) and [Marcelo Suárez-Orozco](#)

Sept. 10, 2015 | 9:30 a.m. EDT

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Rhetoric around immigrants has taken an ugly turn of late. Recent comments by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump are but the tip of a dark iceberg. While the public rhetoric has been loosely focused on the southern border, undocumented immigrants and "anchor babies" a toxic narrative paints with an expansive brush, tarnishing many hapless targets along its way.

The United States has always been an immigrant nation and throughout its history the arrival of large numbers of immigrants has spawned [xenophobic narratives](#). We love and celebrate immigrant backgrounds but always resent newcomers in the here and now. That was true of the Irish in Boston and the Eastern European Jews in New York then and it is true of the Mexicans today. This is a disturbing constant in our love-hate affair with immigration.

Today, a quarter of our [nation's children are immigrants](#) or the children of immigrants and nearly [one third of our population](#) under the age of 34 fits this demographic.

Do immigrant children and youth register the increasingly harsh national narrative?

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At the height of the current migratory wave, we initiated the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study of 400 newcomer children in Boston and Northern California who arrived from five points of origin in Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. We were interested in understanding how [immigrant children](#) – on average 12 years olds – were adapting to schools and to their new society. One of many questions we asked was a simple fill in the blank: "Most Americans think that most [people from the respondents' birthplace] are \_\_\_\_\_."

Sixty-five percent of children responded with negative terms. Indeed the most frequent word used was "bad," though many children had more elaborated thoughts: "Most Americans think that Mexicans are lazy, gangsters, drug-addicts that only come to take their jobs away," one 14-year-old boy said. Beyond criminality other negative associations channeled by the kids in our study focused on issues of contamination ("We are garbage," another 14-year-old boy said) as well as competence ("We can't do the same things as them in school or at work," said a 10-year-old girl). And youth hailing from different countries reported distinctive patterns of negative perceptions. While a little less than half of Chinese youth completed the sentence with negative responses, 75 percent of Mexican and 82 percent of Dominicans and Haitians did so. We repeated the task annually; these percentages changed little over the course of the five years of the study. The young people steadily perceived [negative attitudes about themselves](#) and their groups of origin.

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Fifteen years have elapsed since. What has changed? The [rate of immigration today](#) (13 percent) remains below what it was in the last great wave (15 percent). [Undocumented immigration](#) is at a decade low and the number of unauthorized Mexicans continues to decline year-after-year since its 2007 peak. The deportation of unauthorized immigrants has continued at a crisp pace with more than 2 million people deported [since President Barack Obama took office](#). In the meantime, more [immigrant kids are enrolling](#) in our schools and colleges, with Latinos leading the way.

What have not changed, what have worsened, are the blatant, uncensored xenophobic sentiments freely bandied along the campaign trail and in social media. Just a few generations ago, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic and anti-black sentiments were [loudly vocalized](#) in the media and even in "good" company.

Today, many look back aghast at those practices. While [implicit biases](#) remain stubbornly intractable, it has been outside the bounds of acceptable civic discourse to engage in the base name-calling of yesteryear. Sadly, however, it is once again open season to target immigrants – both in public and in private –with righteous impunity.

Turning back to our newest and youngest Americans, what are the implications for them of an onslaught of such messages?

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Repeatedly hearing denigrating messages – criminals, rapists, anchor babies – sows doubt, saps optimism and elevates anxiety. In a [national survey](#) of immigrant students completed earlier this year at UCLA we found highly elevated rates of anxiety and stress when compared to non-immigrants. Growing up in an [exclusionary climate](#) threatens well-being, positive identity formation and social belonging.

Another urgent concern is the creation of a social climate of sanctioned bullying. Already there are reported increases of hate crimes targeting immigrants. Recently in Boston, two brothers [mercilessly beat](#) a Mexican immigrant taking inspiration from [Trump's recent rhetoric](#) about, as one of the alleged assailants put it, deporting "all these illegals." Data suggest that children and youth readily internalize attitudes and behaviors signaled by adults. How long until we see these hate crimes infecting our neighborhoods and schools?

The school year has launched. As millions of children have returned to school, principals, teachers and parents must be alert to more violence, bullying, and aggressions targeting immigrant children – our fastest growing demographic. Words matter and when politicians go overboard it is doubly important for the rest of us to model proper behavior for *all* our children.

TAGS: immigration, Mexico, China, children, students, minority students

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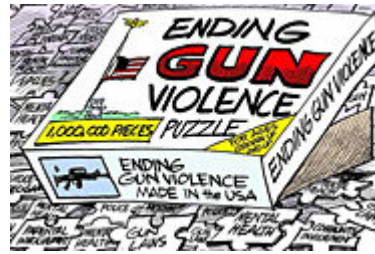


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