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Winnipeg a model for new immigrant integration: professor

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Canada's experiment sewing a multicultural fabric might, in certain cases, be most successful if sewn in patches, York University geography professor Philip Kelly told an audience on Parliament Hill Thursday morning.

Presenting research on social mobility amongst Filipino youth across the country, Kelly said mainstream assimilation of young immigrants does not always foster a positive environment for integration. Rather, "enclaved, culturally specific upbringings [are] actually correlated with better educational and occupational outcomes," he said.

While the long-term patterns of upward social mobility for children of Canadian immigrants are generally positive — they tend to outperform their own parents as well as the children of Canadian-born parents — Kelly warned against drawing broad conclusions.

"We too often talk about immigrants in a general way, as if they were an undifferentiated group," he said. "How parents arrived and how they integrated into society is connected in profound ways to where they come from, and that has echoes in the next generation."

Filipinos, who now comprise the largest total group of new permanent residents and temporary foreign workers arriving in Canada, are an exception to the trend.

Filipino immigrants tend to be educated and skilled at integrating into new communities and taking advantage of globalized labor markets, but here they often face "de-professionalization," forcing them to take on new jobs, which strains family and finances.

“This de-professionalization, the downward mobility of parents, doesn’t just lead to financial difficulties for the second generation,” Kelly said. “It often leads to life in low-income neighborhoods.”

Young Filipino-Canadians are actually less likely to hold university degrees than their parents.

Kelly looked to one of the success stories – Winnipeg – for answers. Specific neighborhoods and schools can often mean the difference between change and failure and, in Winnipeg, the Filipino community is more geographically condensed, downtown and in the northern neighborhoods, than it is in Vancouver or Toronto.

Filipinos there are active and prominent in public life. A street is named after the Filipino patriot José Rizal. Next week, when the Winnipeg Blue Bombers host the Toronto Argonauts, it will be “Filipino Night.”

It’s an environment that provides the right sense of community, pride of origin and positive mentoring that Kelly says is crucial to successful integration.

It isn’t always easy to find. He points to Manny Pacquiao – the world champion boxer and Filipino congressman – to illustrate the lack of positive role models.

Pacquiao is one of the few international success stories young Filipinos hear that is “not about typhoon disasters, political corruption, or, as the CBC recently put it, the forgotten front in the war on terror,” he said.

“Children need to have a pride in where their roots are,” Kelly explained. “This shapes their self-esteem, their confidence, and their aspirations about how far they can go. What we’re hearing in Winnipeg are very different things than in Toronto or Vancouver.”

Equally important to the success of younger generations is family life – what Kelly calls the “intimate micro-geographies” in which macro-outcomes are achieved.

But the Filipino experience in Canada has often been one of familial separation, shaped by the stipulations of temporary work permits intended to satisfy Canadian labour shortages. Most notably, the Live-In Caregiver Program has employed thousands of Filipinos working alone and away from home for many years. The number of Filipinos in this program has traditionally been lower in Winnipeg, than in Toronto or Vancouver.

For Kelly, it is a cautionary tale.

“There is a danger to immigration models where families arrive in stages,” he said. “The consequences are felt across generations.”

Kelly's presentation, "Generation Next: Social Mobility and the Children of Immigrants," was the second in seven "Big Thinking" lectures organized by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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