**Alphachat: Mary Waters on the immigrant integration**

**Cardiff Garcia**  You've been researching immigration for quite some time. Why don't you start by telling us how you became interested in it?

**Mary Waters**  Well, I started out in sociology about 30 years ago and all four of my grandparents were immigrants and my first project was looking at people whose grandparents and later -- great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents -- were immigrants and how they identified ethnically. I studied Irish and Polish and Italian Americans and from there I began to be interested in new immigrants who were coming to the US from around the globe and began various studies, did some studies of Caribbean immigrants and how they related to African Americans, and then we looked at many different immigrant groups in New York City. And I've been studying immigrant integration for a long time now.

**Cardiff Garcia**  Can you tell us where your grandparents are from?

**Mary Waters**  All four of my grandparents were from Ireland.

**Cardiff Garcia**  Ireland was one of the places that you just mentioned, when you were saying that you studied Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants.

**Mary Waters**  Yes, and I wrote about how people who were descended from the European immigrants who came in the 20th century developed optional identities; they could be Irish or Italian when they wanted to be, and when they wanted to just blend in they didn't mention it, and ethnicity was something that they enjoyed and it was something that brought joy to their lives.

**Cardiff Garcia**  Okay, and let's talk about the report itself now. Can you just give us a sense of how it came together, who participated and what its ultimate objectives were?

**Mary Waters**  Right, so the National Academy of Sciences is founded to provide objective scientific advice to Congress, so when Congress or any element of the Federal Government wants to know about a scientific question they will create a committee at the National Academy of Sciences to investigate it, so if they want to know whether autism is caused by vaccinations or something like that, which it isn't,
they would create a committee to study that and so they were interested. We were sponsored in part by US Citizen and Immigration Services, which is part of Homeland Security, and they were interested in whether immigrants were integrating into American society and how that was going across many different dimensions.

So they asked the National Academy of Sciences to put together a committee, they asked me to chair it and then there's a long process that you go through in finding the experts across different academic backgrounds to serve on the committee so we had demographers, sociologists, psychologists, geographers, social scientists, economists and we put together this committee that covered all of the different areas that we wanted to investigate and the idea is that we're just going to talk about the objective, scientific findings about what's happening with immigrants.

Cardiff Garcia First let's talk about the very concept of the integration of immigrants, because I think when somebody who's not a scholar hears that, they probably think of immigrants just falling into the slipstream of our daily lives. So that I guess language comes to mind, finding their way into the education system, getting jobs -- things that we all do every single day.

But in fact along socio-economic, sociocultural and political dimensions there are a number of different ways in which we can quantify what's happening. So can you take us through what some of those specific measure are and what they tell us?

Mary Waters Yes, we looked at many different dimensions of integration, so we looked at socio-economic outcomes, we measured immigrants and the children of immigrants in terms of their education, their occupation, their income, poverty rates. We looked at political integrations and we looked at naturalisation, voting, civic participation. We looked at sociocultural measures, so English language use, whether or not you maintain your prior foreign language if you had one; crime rates; how do immigrants compare to natives in terms of their religious backgrounds and practices.

We investigated attitudes, so do immigrants hold different attitudes towards things like gay marriage than native-born Americans do; we looked at intermarriage patterns between immigrants and native-born Americans; we looked at spacial assimilation; do they live in enclaves or ethnic neighbourhoods or do they live alongside native-born Americans; we looked at family structure; do immigrants have similar family structures to native-born Americans; and we also have a chapter on health, so how do immigrants and their children differ in terms of their health outcomes than native-born Americans.

So it was a very comprehensive look at immigrant integration. We looked at whatever research has been done and if there wasn't research that answered the question, we did some of the research ourselves. We had a sister panel that was
looking at the fiscal and economic impacts of immigrants so we did not look at that but we really looked at every other aspect of immigrant integration.

Maybe I could say something about how we defined integration.

Cardiff Garcia  Sure.

Mary Waters  You could think of integration as being pretty synonymous with assimilation; some, I think, everyday Americans sometimes talk about assimilation. But we defined integration as the process of native-born Americans and immigrants coming to resemble each other, and we measure that both over time since immigration for the immigrants themselves, and then by generation, so do the children of immigrants look more like native-born Americans than their parents do.

That was the major measure that we looked at; do they converge with native-born Americans. But then we also measured well-being, so are immigrants better-off because they are becoming like native-born Americans. We looked at whether integration led to greater well-being for immigrants and their children. In general it did, but we found that there were some areas in which becoming American led to less well-being for immigrants and their children.

Cardiff Garcia  Yes, let's go straight into that because something that I very much liked about this report and the sister report was that they brought quite a bit of nuance to a topic that so often is dominated by very general headlines and with not enough attention, I think, paid to all of these different, complex variables and so let's start by talking about the findings on the areas in which immigration tends to be good for immigrants. You just mentioned, I think, schooling. There were a few others so can you take us through those?

Mary Waters  Yes. In terms of socio-economic outcomes, immigrants come, some with very high levels of education and some with very low levels of education but overall if you look just at immigrants in general, their children make great strides in terms of converging with native-born Americans. So the average, say, Mexican American first-generation immigrant male has eight years of education but the average child of a Mexican immigrant when they are a young adult has 12.5 years, so that's a real movement for Mexican Americans and you see that for all of the different groups; that the immigrants come with less education and their children do much better.

In terms of occupation we see the same kind of movement, so immigrants tend to be concentrated, especially low-educated immigrants, in jobs that native-born Americans don't want to do so service jobs and farm jobs. By the second generation they're moving to much higher-level jobs, jobs that come with health insurance and retirement and those kinds of things so we see a lot of progress, greater well-being
for immigrants and their children on both measures. We see lower poverty rates so the first generation have a higher property rate, the second generation lower and then the third even lower than that.

In terms of labour force participation, it's a little bit more complicated. Immigrants have very, very high labour force participation rates, so especially compared to native-born with low education they're much more likely to be in the labour force.

By the time you get to the second and then third generation they look more like native-born Americans so their labour force participation rates might go down a bit by the second and third generations.

**Cardiff Garcia** Yes, and I think even within that employment breakdown we can go further. In the report you found that male immigrants are more employed than the native-born, but female immigrants are less employed. But again, as you just said, that starts to change by the second generation where things start to vary by race, ethnicity and gender.

**Mary Waters** That's right and we did find a troubling trajectory for black immigrants where their labour force participation rates are much higher in the first generation and by the second generation they look more like native-born African Americans than like native-born whites so there is a problem with their labour participation going down.

**Cardiff Garcia** Sure. I guess the natural question to follow that one then is whether or not it's the case that black immigrants then end up being susceptible to, I guess, the same legacy of institutional discrimination that native-born African Americans do.

**Mary Waters** Right. It's hard with census data to say unequivocally that it's racial discrimination that's leading to this, but there are other studies in the social sciences pointing to discrimination as one of the factors, yes, in what's happenin.

**Cardiff Garcia** There's a section in the report that looks at the differing composition of immigrants who are arriving. Especially in recent years there's been a change and it looks like annually arrivals from Asia have already exceeded annual arrivals from Latin American countries. Can you talk about how those two different groups integrate into the US, and whether or not that will also have a noticeable impact on things like the US economy or anything else?

**Mary Waters** Right. Since 2008, since the fiscal crisis, Asians have surpassed Latinos as new immigrants coming into the US each year, and they tend to have higher levels of education and their children to have more rapid educational attainment than Latinos, who take a little bit longer to converge with the native-born.
So one of the impacts of that is that you have people who are paying taxes more quickly, paying higher taxes, contributing more to the economy and doing better in the economy. You also have... One of the reasons that the number coming in each year has gone down is not because of legal immigration but because basically undocumented immigration has been flat since 2008 so there are people still coming in undocumented but the number of people leaving is not equal so there's been no net gain; in fact there's been a decline since 2008 in the number of undocumented people.

They tend to be concentrated in the lowest-paying and the least desirable jobs and already we are seeing labour shortages in those kinds of jobs around the country because there are just fewer people than the labour market needs.

Cloud Garcia  Mary, from everything you just said, it sounds as if a lot of the topics that get the most attention now are outdated topics; in other words a lot of what drives the immigration debate in the US is about undocumented workers but, as you just mentioned, the number of undocumented workers in the US seems to have been flat for the better part of the last decade. And furthermore a lot of it has to do with the extent to which low-skilled immigrants are competing with low-skilled native-born workers for jobs and driving down their wages, potentially.

But from what you just said, it turns out that now the mix has changed and high-skilled immigrants are coming in greater and greater numbers. So it seems as if, in some sense at least, the debate is, if not obsolete, maybe it doesn't quite deserve the attention it does get or maybe the attention should be shifted to another part of the debate. Do you agree with that?

Mary Waters  I do agree with that. Many of the aspects of the immigration debate are either factually wrong or very outdated, and they really are not talking about the reality of immigration on the ground right now.

Cloud Garcia  And is there anything else that you would choose to emphasise that I haven't mentioned?

Mary Waters  Yeah, one example I would give is crime. So a lot of the debate about undocumented immigrants and about immigration in general talks about immigration as somehow causing crime or increasing crime rates and the reality is that immigrants including the undocumented, commit crimes and are incarcerated and arrested at much lower rates than native-born Americans so immigrants actually decrease the crime rate and areas where there are a large number of immigrants have lower crime rates than areas where there are fewer immigrants and the whole idea that immigrants are bringing crime into the US is factually wrong.
It's interesting because it was also a belief back 100 years ago about European immigrants that they were bringing in crime, and it was untrue then too, so it's really a red herring that doesn't deserve to be debated.

**Cardiff Garcia** Yes, and I want to ask about how localities differ in terms of integrating immigrants. So what do we really know about, for instance, how immigrants integrate when they move to, let's say, rural areas versus urban areas, or places that have not had a high share of immigrants in the past versus gateway cities like New York or Los Angeles that already have a lot of immigrants and already have a lot of the institutions with which to process them and integrate them? What does the report tell us about that?

**Mary Waters** It's a really good question. Since the mid 1990s immigration has spread out and become a national phenomenon so that immigrants are settling in parts of the south and the Midwest that have not had immigrants, in some cases, ever before and in other cases for a century or more and we're just really beginning to look, as social scientists, to look at the difference by locality in terms of how immigrants integrate and because we're stalled on Federal immigration policy a lot of states and local areas are developing their own policies towards immigrants so some places are becoming much more welcoming to immigrants and some places are becoming more punitive, especially towards undocumented immigrants.

So it's really varying now, the experience of immigrants, by which state and even which localities you live in within the states, as to whether or not you're creating a more welcoming environment or a less welcoming environment. But one thing we do know is that cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami that have had a long experience with immigrants tend to have a lot of institutional organisations and just ways in which they have... They tend to have... I'll start over again.

These cities, gateway cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, Miami have institutions and they have developed their institutions in ways that they have experience in integrating immigrants and they are less troubled by it and more experienced with it so that their schools have better ESL programmes and their hospitals are better at having translators available so there is some ease of integration in those cities.

**Cardiff Garcia** Sure. I'd imagine also a higher likelihood that a friend or a family member who already immigrated there perhaps years ago will already be there to help ease the transition for later family members and friends who arrive.

**Mary Waters** That's true, although when immigrants started to spread out to places like Georgia and North Carolina and Iowa and even the Dakotas and Montana, they did so by following friends and family so immigration is very much a network phenomenon; people tend to go where they know other people. But yes,
having had other immigrants come before me and having the ease of dealing with new immigrants for the local government or the local institutions paves the way.

**Cardiff Garcia** You mentioned that some localities crack down and some localities actually do things to try to make it easier for immigrants to come and to integrate. I'd imagine that in some cases that's driven by a fear of demographic trends so if a locality - a city, a county - is worried that a lot of their young people for instance might be moving to the cities then as a way of bolstering local demand, maybe local housing markets, immigrants would be a good source of that demand. Do you have any examples at the ready that you like in particular for how that can work and how maybe that's been tried in the US?

**Mary Waters** I think there has been a lot of research on the housing market in a number of different areas around the country; in California without immigrants fuelling demand for houses the housing market would have been growing much less quickly. A lot of rural areas and places in the Midwest that have been losing population for a long time find now that their schools are back up again and their housing costs, their housing market is being reborn so there are areas that are very grateful for the population demand that immigration creates so the immigrants coming in have stopped the outflow of people.

**Cardiff Garcia** Staying on the topic of how either the Federal or local governments can help with the process of integration, I wanted to turn to the impact that the design of different kinds of visas can have on that process. What do we know about it and -- actually let me just stop there -- what do we know about it?

**Mary Waters** Well, we know that in the last few decades there has been a plethora of different kinds of visas that people have come in on and there are growing numbers of H1B visas and temporary protected status visas and all kinds of different ways that people get to the United States. Unlike Canada, where the immigration visa status of people is something that you can connect to their census data and to their income tax data so that you could say, well, somebody came in under a family visa, after 20 years they have this kind of income trajectory, you can't do that in the US because we don't integrate those statistical systems.

So I think it would really be helpful to the Government in creating a rational immigration policy if we could do that kind of research and it's possible to do because Canada now does it but the US does not keep the data that they have on what kind of visa you came in on in such a way that researchers can connect it to outcome data.

**Cardiff Garcia** That seems quite an own goal, no matter what you think about the immigration system. That seems like quite an important lapse.
Mary Waters  It is one of the recommendations of our report, which is that whatever is done with immigration reform, if anything is, or even if we remain stalemated, that we need to look at a way to be able to look at the long-term outcomes of immigrants and trace it back to how they got into the country.

Cardiff Garcia  You mentioned the H1B visa, and for our listeners overseas, that's essentially the high-skilled visa to come work in the US. There're a number of other categories but I guess I want to talk a little bit more about the nightmarish bureaucratic process that seems to be attached to any American visa system, and what impact that might have on integration and also in just turning people off to, in some cases, the potential to ever get a green card or to become a US citizen or long-term, I guess, US permanent resident. Because I know quite a few people who've had to go through it. In many cases they are brilliant people who nonetheless had to hire very expensive and very qualified immigration attorneys to try to navigate it. And it's this grinding, year-after-year process and maybe parts of that system are deliberately designed that way but it seems like something that's geared towards turning people off from staying in the country for a long time.

Mary Waters  Yes. Our immigration system has developed in a very piecemeal way and not in a very rational way so that after 1965 when we revised our immigration system we gave the same number of visas to every country in the world so the country of Madagascar got the same number of visas as Mexico and many scholars have pointed out that that doesn't really make a lot of sense because there is a lot more demand and a lot more integration of the economies of Mexico and the US and a lot more ease of travel, etc, and so the idea that every country in the world gets the same number of legal visas means that some countries, especially countries that have previous immigrants here who have a backlog of family members who want to come, have waiting lists of 20, 30, 40 years.

So they're processing applicants for green cards, for visas to come to the United States, of people who applied back in the 1980s and 1990s, which does not make any sense, that somebody would wait that long for a green card.

In part that's one of the reasons we have had such a high growth in undocumented immigration, that it's not as if you can get in line and wait for your number to be called because the line is too long, you cannot ever get here and there is a demand for these workers so there is a contradiction in our immigration system where we have not allocated the number of visas that we want to give out in a very rational fashion.

Cardiff Garcia  Sure, and there's obviously an ongoing economic debate about whether or not the US economy should have more lower-skilled immigrants or fewer. But it sounds from what you're saying that if you accept the premise that if we geared
our immigration system towards at least something that facilitated economic integration, then a lot of the undocumented problem would go away because it would be a lot more rational, a lot more streamlined and a lot of the people that are now undocumented would be documented. They might not be citizens, they might not be permanent residents, they might be here temporarily, but they would be counted and they'd be out of the shadows and everything would just be a little bit more sane, a little bit more normal -- is that a fair characterisation of what you just said?

**Mary Waters** Right. We as a national academy of sciences report don't make any recommendations politically about what should be done about immigration. What we can say is what is happening now in terms of integration is that we have a little over 11 million undocumented immigrants and we have a partial integration of them. So they haven't been stopped from coming into the country. Many of them have now been here over a decade. The actual length of time that the undocumented have been in the US keeps growing because we're not having much net new undocumented immigration.

So these people are going to church, they're sending their children to school, they're having children who are American citizens, they are working, they are saving money, they are buying houses. At the same time we're preventing them from becoming full citizens and becoming politically integrated, and they are hiding from ICE agents and the police. So we have a kind of quasi-integration policy where there are now many mixed-status families where the father or the mother are documented or undocumented and the children are born in the US so they're US citizens. So we have over four million kids who have one or other of their parents undocumented, or both. That's 7% of our Kindergarten-to-12 school population so we have a very high number of people who are affected by this legal limbo and it's not stopping them from integrating completely. It's creating roadblocks to their partial or full integration.

**Cardiff Garcia** Yeah, this was a striking stat in the report; 4.5 million kids who are US citizens but who have undocumented parents. There's another stat in there showing that actually the US has a very low rate of citizenship compared to the OECD average; 50% versus 61%. What exactly does that stat tell us and what is its significance?

**Mary Waters** Yes, the US does have a low rate of naturalisation compared to other countries and we tried very hard to try to understand why that was happening, and we investigated a number of different hypotheses. It doesn't look as if it is the cost, although it is costly for people to try to naturalise. The US doesn't do very much in terms of helping to facilitate naturalisation. So for instance immigrants don't get a notice when they've been here -- you have to be here five years after you've come with a green card before you can naturalise -- we don't send a notice saying, *your*
five years are up, you can come take the citizenship test. That would be something pretty simple that would encourage people to naturalise. We don't yet do that.

We don't have the same kind of institutions that helped people naturalise 100 years ago; people aren't in unions or in civic organisations; the local political party, working very hard in that very on-the-ground kind of way. But we really couldn't answer the question about why the naturalisation rate is so low compared to other immigrant-receiving-countries so it remains a puzzle.

Cardiff Garcia That's interesting. Let me ask what might be a difficult question because it's just so broad but it's something I've heard before and it's an argument that I usually hear from immigration restrictionists but not just from the haywire ones, even from very thoughtful immigration restrictionists, which is that in the past there have been waves of a lot of migration to the US, in particular at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. Then that was followed by a period where there was much less immigration, especially after a couple of laws were passed in the mid 1920s that severely restricted annual immigration flows. And their thinking was, yes, okay, so we had that period where there was a lot of migration and the share of the foreign-born population back then was about the same as it is now but because it was followed by this period where there was much less immigration, that essentially what happened was that the American economy and the American society -- whatever that means -- was able to absorb that previous migration flow.

Then they say, well, we've had quite a lot of migration in the last few decades -- you mentioned the law change of 1965 -- and so maybe what we need now is another period where there's less migration so that we can absorb the earlier waves of immigrants and so that we can integrate them. I don't myself buy this but I guess I'm wondering what we learn about that approach from the kind of research that you've done and from what's known about immigration integration.

Mary Waters Well, I would say that it seems like a solution in search of a problem, and once again it's a problem that when you look factually at what's happening is not really a problem. So across everything that we measured, across all of the different sociocultural, socio-economic, political measures, immigrants are becoming like the native-born, and in general they're doing it more rapidly than European immigrants did 100 years ago. So for instance Mexican Americans are learning English and are speaking English at a more rapid rate than Italians learned English 100 years ago.

So the question of whether we need some kind of hiatus in order to integrate people is something which perhaps you would want to think about if people weren't integrating. But what we found -- and actually I think it surprised all the people on the panel -- was the real force of integration in the US, despite the racial and ethnic
differences, despite the fact that people are coming from all over the globe, there's something about American society that is very good at integrating immigrants and the immigrants come to resemble native-born Americans quite quickly. It's not overnight and perhaps that's what Americans are noticing when they think, people aren't speaking English; they're not taking into account how long people have been here and the generational processes.

But across everything that we measured integration is proceeding and it's proceeding quite rapidly, so that would be one answer to that question about the hiatus.

The second answer is that we live in a really globalised society, so we live in a world in which there is very much integration across national-origin lines in terms of media, in terms of air travel, in terms of all kinds of different things. And the idea that you can just turn off the spigot and stop immigration without becoming some kind of police state is, I think, quite naive.

**Cardiff Garcia** You mentioned just a second ago that there's something interesting or there's something unique about American society in being able to integrate immigrants. Can you maybe draw a comparison between the US and the success of, for instance, European countries in terms of integration? Because again a lot of what drives the conversation is [the idea] that waves of migrants end up inflaming populist sentiment in the countries that experience these inflows. And a lot of times people point to Germany but there are also arguments that this is what happened in France and this is what happened in the UK with Brexit. Can you just give us some sense of how the US perhaps distinguishes itself in this regard, as I think you just alluded to?

**Mary Waters** Right. Yes, all of the European countries -- the western and southern European countries -- are trying to cope with immigration now and trying to understand how best to integrate people into their societies. And I think one of the very strongest assets that we have in America is our long history of seeing ourselves as a society that is created and renewed and enriched by immigration. So the idea that you can be Chinese-American or Mexican-American or Irish-American is itself as American as apple pie, right? The idea that you can be a hyphenated person with immigrant roots but very much an American is something that I think we've very much celebrated in our history and is something that immigrants sense when they get here, that it's not that they have to choose between being ethnically Chinese and being full American citizens.

That is something that I think Europe, many European countries really struggle with. So for instance France has a very strong assimilationist approach and they don't really recognise... You can't be an Algerian-French person; you're Algerian when you
first arrive and then you become French and you should not have a hyphenated identity. Germany also is coping with this question of how do you become German; whereas becoming American does not mean that you're giving up what you came with. You are celebrating that but also being integrated into American society, and that's a great strength that we have and that immigrants themselves pick up on as soon as they get here and celebrate.

**Cardiff Garcia**    Something I think is tied to that and which we kind of skipped over earlier when we were going through the point-by-point list of socio-economic and sociocultural measures was the family, the impact on American families of immigration -- and, also really interesting towards the end of the report, intermarriage rates have been increasing recently. Can you just elaborate on those two things?

**Mary Waters**    Yes. In terms of the family, immigrants actually are the group that are least likely to have kids out of wedlock, are most likely to remain married, they have lower divorce rates and so immigrant kids are the most likely among all kids in the US to grow up with both parents in the family, in the household. Over time they become more like native-born Americans and so the second generation has higher out-of-wedlock births and they have higher divorce rates so the third generation grow up in more single-parent households.

What was the other question?

**Cardiff Garcia**    Intermarriage rates increasing.

**Mary Waters**    Oh, right. Yes, one of the things we were very much charged with was understanding how immigration was transforming American society, because integration is a two-way street; immigrants change because they come here and become more like native-born Americans, but native-born Americans change because immigrants have come and changed the society. And historians looking back in time can really see how Americans were changed by earlier waves of immigration.

But in the middle of it it's very hard to measure how we're changing because immigrants are coming. But one way that we can see it is in intermarriage patterns so one out of seven marriages now in the US crosses the major racial and ethnic lines between whites, blacks, Hispanics and Asians and these intermarriages are very much fuelled by immigration, because immigrants will have high amounts of intermarriage with the native-born and by the second generation, across racial and ethnic lines.

So this is one way in which immigration is transforming American society and the line between them and us is really dissolving as immigrants become us and we become them, and that is a very strong factor in integration as well.
Cardiff Garcia: One final question, Mary; you mentioned earlier that one of the report's recommendations was to fix the data lapses. Can you take us through a couple of the other recommendations and any in particular that you would emphasise?

Mary Waters: The report really restricted our recommendations to being about the data the Government collect, so we also very much stress that it's important because integration is a long-term process that we continue to gather data on the children of immigrants so that we can look at generational progress. And those were really the important recommendations that we made. The rest of our findings are really about how immigrants are doing in American society. And the political questions about how to change our immigration system or what to do about undocumented people, we lay out the facts but that's a political question and not a scientific one.

Cardiff Garcia: Mary Waters, thanks so much for being on Alphachat. This was a real treat.

Mary Waters: You're very welcome; happy to do it.