Legal Status and Wage Disparities for Mexican Immigrants

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Abstract

This paper employs a unique method of imputing the legal status of Mexican immigrants in the 1996-1999 and 2001-2003 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation to provide new evidence of the role of legal authorization in the U.S. on workers' wages. Using growth curve techniques, we estimate wage trajectories for four groups: documented Mexican immigrants, undocumented Mexican immigrants, U.S-born Mexican Americans, and native non-Latino whites. Our estimates reveal a 17 percent wage disparity between documented and undocumented Mexican immigrant men, and a 9 percent documented-undocumented wage disparity for Mexican immigrant women. We also find that in comparison to authorized Mexicans, undocumented Mexican immigrants have lower returns to human capital and slower wage growth. These findings suggest possible discriminatory practices in the wage determination of undocumented Mexican workers.

Legal Status and Wage Disparities for Mexican Immigrants

Over the past 20 years, two apparently contradictory changes have been taking place in the U.S. labor market: the quantity and quality of jobs available to low-skill workers have steadily declined, and the number of low-skill immigrants entering the country in search of employment has steadily increased (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The increase in the number of immigrants from Mexico has been especially notable. Given the large size of this stream and the fact that economic circumstances have become less favorable for lower-skilled workers, understanding how Mexican immigrants fare in the labor market is of considerable interest. Research by sociologists and economists on labor market outcomes for low-skill immigrants, including Mexicans, attests to the interest of social scientists in this question. Yet one potentially critical influence on the labor market outcomes of this group has been rarely examined: legal status. By considering the influence of legal status, this paper provides a more complete understanding of the factors shaping Mexican immigrants' earnings in U.S. labor markets.

As governmental efforts to prevent employers from hiring unauthorized immigrants have increased, and social services and political privileges for undocumented immigrants have been rolled back, the importance of legal status for immigrants' outcomes is likely to have increased. In order to make clear comparisons between ethnic groups and examine trends in immigrants' earnings over time, it is therefore crucial to disaggregate immigrants by legal status (Massey and Bartley 2005). Failure to do so is to risk distorting the realities faced by Mexican immigrants in the labor market or attributing the effects of legal status to other factors, such as cultural differences between ethnic groups or declines in immigrants' unobservable skills over time. Further, other factors influencing the earnings of Mexican immigrants may interact with legal status in ways that are not yet understood. For instance, returns to human capital have been

shown to be lower for low-skill Mexican immigrants than for other low-skill workers (Hall and Farkas 2008). It is possible that this finding is driven by the inability of unauthorized workers, who make up a much larger proportion of immigrants from Mexico than from most other sending countries, to translate human capital into higher earnings. It is therefore necessary to consider the role of legal status when evaluating the effects of human capital and other worker characteristics that may be correlated with legal status.

This paper employs a unique method of imputing the legal status of Mexican immigrants included in the 1996-1999 and 2001-2003 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). We then use this information to provide a more complete understanding of earnings disparities faced by Mexican immigrants in the low-wage labor market. In particular, we focus on two broad questions. First, does legal status matter for the wages of low-skill Mexican immigrants, and if so, does the high proportion of Mexican immigrants who are unauthorized explain the wage disadvantage that has been documented in previous studies? Second, are the returns to human capital similar for documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants?

Background

Legal Status and Earnings Disparities for Mexican Immigrants

It is well known that recently arrived immigrants have lower earnings, on average, than native-born workers with similar educational levels. Labor market disadvantages that are common among foreign-born workers include employers' lower valuation of both work experience and educational credentials obtained outside the U.S., lack of English language skills, and lack of knowledge about the U.S. labor market. There is a substantial research literature on the earnings "assimilation" patterns of immigrant workers that debates the extent to which immigrants'

earnings catch up with those of natives over time spent in the U.S. (Borjas 1985; Chiswick 1978; Schoeni 1997). While it is expected that there will be disparities in earnings between foreign- and native-born workers, Mexican immigrants stand out for their particularly low earnings. The median earnings of Mexican and Central American immigrants who worked full-time, full-year in 2003 were only $20,840, compared with $38,486 among European immigrants, $40,297 among Asian immigrants, and $36,784 among native-born workers (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Poverty rates are also disproportionately high among Mexican and Central American immigrants, with nearly 25% living in poverty (compared with only 10%, 12%, and 11% of European immigrants, Asian immigrants, and the U.S.-born population, respectively) (Census Bureau 2004).

The low average educational attainment of Mexican immigrants undoubtedly contributes to their low earnings. Over 40% of Mexican immigrants over age 25 have completed less than a ninth grade education (Census Bureau 2004), a low level of education that is extremely rare among the U.S.-born population (at only 3.7%). Schoeni (1997) estimated that this disparity in education is responsible for about one-third of the wage gap between male native workers and Mexican immigrant workers, but found that a substantial wage differential remained unexplained even after controlling education. For most other immigrant groups studied, by contrast, Schoeni found little or no unexplained earnings disadvantage after controlling for education and age. He proposed the high proportion of undocumented immigrants in the Mexican foreign-born population as one possible explanation for this difference.

This speculation appears to be well-founded. Both popular accounts and the academic literature have portrayed undocumented immigrants as especially vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation by employers (Massey 1987; Rivera-Batiz 1999). Employing undocumented

immigrants makes it easier for employers to skirt regulations designed to protect workers, such as the minimum wage and overtime pay. Lack of documentation also weakens workers' bargaining position relative to employers, potentially resulting in lower wages. However, empirical verification of the labor market disadvantages associated with undocumented status has been limited. Donato and Massey (1993) demonstrated that the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, which introduced new penalties for establishments employing undocumented immigrants, substantially increased the wage penalties associated with undocumented status. Therefore, the findings of studies based solely on data collected prior to 1986 can no longer be relied upon to indicate how undocumented immigrants are currently faring. The relatively small number of post-IRCA studies have found evidence of substantial earnings penalties associated with undocumented status, on the order of 14-24% for Mexican immigrants (Donato and Massey 1993; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002; Rivera-Batiz 1999).

Post-IRCA research on the effect of legal status on immigrants' earnings has been limited, primarily due to data constraints. The sensitive nature of questions about legal status precludes them from being included in the nationally representative surveys that form the basis for most studies of labor market outcomes. Thus, most existing studies have relied on smaller, non-nationally representative samples. Donato and Massey (1993) utilized unique data, collected on both sides of the border, on migrants from 13 Mexican communities. They found substantial earnings penalties associated with being undocumented, but only after the passage of IRCA. Most other previous studies have relied primarily on one data source – the Legalized Population Survey (LPS) (Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002; Powers and Seltzer 1998; Powers, Seltzer and Shi 1998; Rivera-Batiz 1999). This survey was conducted among a sample of immigrants who had applied for legalization under IRCA. The immigrants were surveyed twice, once prior to

becoming legalized (in 1988) and once after legalization (in 1992). Researchers have taken advantage of this unusual longitudinal data to attempt to estimate the causal effect of the change in legal status on earnings.

We believe that our use of SIPP data presents significant advantages over the LPS. Although the LPS data are unique in that they directly identify undocumented immigrants, their usefulness is limited by the fact that they do not contain a comparison group of workers who did not experience a change in legal status. Rivera-Batiz (1999) addresses this problem by comparing Mexican immigrant workers included in the LPS with similar Mexican immigrant workers from the 1990 Census, who are assumed to be predominantly legal – a problematic assumption given the high proportion of Mexican immigrants who are undocumented. Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark (2002) use Hispanic immigrant and native men from the NLSY as a comparison group. While in this case the comparison sample is not as potentially contaminated by containing a substantial share of workers who are actually undocumented, it differs from the undocumented sample on many characteristics other than legal status, such as nativity, length of residence in the U.S., and specific Hispanic ethnicity. By contrast, our study uses a single nationally representative data source to identify both documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants, as well as Mexican American and white native comparison groups. We are therefore able to more effectively estimate the unique influence of legal status on workers' wages.

Returns to Human Capital

In addition to providing an improved estimate of the effect of undocumented status on earnings, we explore the extent to which returns to human capital vary by legal status. Hall and Farkas (2008) analyzed differences by race and nativity in earnings returns to education among low-skill workers. They found that of all the race/nativity groups studied, Hispanic immigrants were the

only group for whom education did not significantly raise earnings, and that returns to education were particularly low for Mexican and Central American immigrants. We suggest that the high proportion of undocumented workers among low-skill Mexican immigrants may contribute to their uniquely low returns to education.

Theories of labor market segmentation, recently summarized by Hudson (2007), posit that the economy contains two distinct sets of jobs: those at the "core," which offer stability, good working conditions, higher pay, and prospects for advancement; and those at the "periphery," which tend to be low-paying, "dead-end" jobs with few prospects for improvements in earnings, regardless of human capital. Although the existence of such a clear demarcation has been challenged on empirical grounds, it is widely recognized that low-skill immigrant workers tend to be concentrated disproportionately in jobs with many "peripheral" characteristics. While Hudson (2007) found that many workers who start out in peripheral jobs eventually move on to better jobs, this may not be as true for undocumented workers, whose lack of legal authorization to work in the U.S. presents a barrier to switching employers. The lack of internal opportunities for advancement in peripheral jobs, coupled with greater difficulty in moving to better jobs, may combine to depress wages among undocumented workers.

Even disregarding theories of labor market segmentation, any barrier to switching employers should have the effect of depressing earnings growth: Topel and Ward (1988) demonstrate that at least 1/3 of early-career earnings growth is attributable to workers moving to better-paying jobs, rather than to internal raises or promotions. To the extent that their legal status restricts undocumented workers' ability to seek better jobs, their human capital is likely to be rewarded less highly in the labor market, even in the absence of discrimination by employers.

We test this possibility by exploring differences between undocumented Mexican immigrants and other groups (including both documented Mexican immigrants and native white and Mexican-American workers) in wage returns to education and potential work experience.

Data and Methods

Study Sample

This paper analyzes monthly wage data from the 1996-1999 and 2001-2003 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). SIPP is a panel study focusing on tracking U.S. workers' employment and public program experiences. The SIPP design draws a nationally representative sample of U.S. households and interviews each household member every four months for three (2001-2003) to four (1996-1999) years. At each interview, respondents are asked wave-specific topical questions and a set of core questions that cover the reference months and preceding three months. Thus, in the 1996 panel, for a respondent who completes all 12 interviews, there are 48 months of observation. SIPP provides translators for respondents with poor English skills.

SIPP is uniquely suited for this study for several reasons. First, these data contain a wealth of information on wages, work experience, and educational attainment. Second, the combined samples of the 1996 and 2001 panels include a large number of Mexican immigrants and Mexican American natives. Third, unlike other large, nationally representative data sources, SIPP includes key variables, such as immigrant visa status and participation in public welfare programs, that can be used to assess the legality of Mexican immigrants.

Since we are interesting in the wage trajectories of low-skill workers, we limit our sample to workers between 18 and 60 whose highest level of educational attainment is no more than a high school degree (or its equivalent). We restrict the sample to men and women who self-

identify as either native-born non-Hispanic white or of Mexican-descent (native or foreign born). Using the ancestry data in SIPP, native Mexican Americans (second or higher generation) refer to U.S.-born individuals who identify as "Mexican," "Mexican-American," or "Chicano." Mexican immigrants, by contrast, are individuals who were born in Mexico, but migrated and are currently living in the U.S. Nativity data comes from a set of topical questions asked during wave 2 (months 5 to 8); and inclusion in our sample is thus restricted to those who completed the "migration" module. We segment individual longitudinal records into a series of person-months, one person-month for each month of data collected.

Study Variables

The dependent variable in this analysis is respondents' current wage rate. Our measure of wage rate corresponds to the rate of pay of the respondent's primary job. For workers who are employed on an hourly basis, wage rates are reported by respondents. Among workers who report a pay unit other than "per hour," we estimate wage rates based on monthly personal earned income from the respondent's primary job and the number of hours worked in a given month at that job. Since this procedure of estimating wage rates occasionally results in extreme values, we set lower and upper bounds of $1.00 and $250.00 per hour, respectively.[1]

We include two measure of individual human capital in our models: *educational attainment* and *potential work experience*. Educational attainment is measured as years of schooling completed (up to 12 years). Full employment histories are not available in SIPP; therefore, we use potential work experience, defined as age (in years) minus educational attainment plus 6 [age-(education+6)], as our measure of time in the labor market. Unfortunately, language ability is unavailable in the 1996 SIPP panel, and the combined panels sample is necessary for sufficient sample sizes.[2] However, research has shown that English skills have

little effect on wages after controlling for educational attainment and time in the U.S. (Bleakley and Chin 2004). Thus, for models specific to immigrants, we include a term for age at arrival to the U.S., which in conjunction with potential experience (described above) controls for length of time in the country. To account for differences in occupation, we include terms indicating employment in one of seven Bureau of Labor Statistics-defined aggregated occupational sectors (based on the 1990 classification scheme): managerial and professional; technical, sales, and administrative; service; farming, forestry, and fishing; production, craft, and repairers; and operatives and laborers.

Inferring Legal Status

The key independent variable in our study is legal status. As with most surveys, undocumented status is not measured directly in SIPP. However, with knowledge of Mexican migration patterns derived from earlier research and data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), it is possible to use information available in SIPP to infer legal status for Mexican immigrants. (See Appendix Figure 1 for a schematic presentation of the imputation strategy). SIPP gathers information on whether sampled immigrants are naturalized citizens or legal permanent residents (LPRs) (see Appendix 2 for survey questions). We classify such immigrants as legal. If an immigrant "personally", as opposed to "dependently" (i.e., via a child's eligibility), receives federal welfare benefits (e.g., Food Stamps, Medicaid, SSI, TANF), for which undocumented immigrants are not eligible, he or she is also classified as legal. Remaining immigrants are either undocumented or have visas falling into one of several categories: refugees and asylees, students and exchange visitors, tourist and business travelers, temporary workers, and diplomats and other political representatives (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2007). Tourists and other short-term visitors are not sampled by SIPP and, historically, very few Mexicans have been granted

asylum in the U.S. Those enrolled in school are excluded from a sample, but to be certain that we are not mis-categorizing the legal spouses of immigrants on student visas, we consider those with an immigrant spouse enrolled in college full-time (student visas are contingent on full-time enrollment) as legal. To account for those admitted as diplomats, we deem Mexican foreigners that report being or are married to those employed as high ranking public officials to be in the country legally. The only group of temporary migrants that we are unable to directly infer is temporary workers. However, authorized temporary workers form a small minority of Mexicans in the U.S. (see U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2007). Nonetheless, readers should keep in mind that the group we refer to as "undocumented" may include a small proportion of authorized temporary workers.

Methods

To best utilize the longitudinal nature of the data and to model both initial wages and wage growth aspects of workers' wage trajectories, we employ hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) techniques (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002), where both the intercepts and the slopes are a function of time-invariant person specific characteristics. More specifically, we estimate random-coefficient growth curve models (Greene 2000) for a pooled sample of Mexican immigrants, and separately for Mexican documented immigrants, Mexican undocumented immigrants, and native Mexican Americans and non-Latino whites. Our pooled Mexican immigrant growth curve models are specified as follows:

$$Ln(wages)_{tj} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 time_{tj} + r_{tj}$$

$$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} legal_j + \gamma_{02} education_j + \gamma_{03} experience_j + \gamma_{04} arrival_j + \gamma_{05} \mathbf{Z}_j + \gamma_{06} panel_j + \mu_{0j}$$

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11} legal_j + \gamma_{12} education_j + \gamma_{13} experience_j + \gamma_{14} arrival_j + \gamma_{15} \mathbf{Z}_j + \gamma_{16} panel_j + \mu_{1j}$$

where t refers to chronological month and j represents individuals. Each value of t corresponds to the number of months elapsed since first interview. There are, depending on the panel, 48 (1996 panel) or 36 (2001 panel) possible values of t. $Ln(wages)_{tj}$ represents logged hourly wages of respondent j at month t. β_0 is the intercept and β_1 is the wage growth rate, which are both a function of person-specific characteristics *legal*, *education*, *experience*, *arrival,* **Z**, and *panel*. $Legal_j$ is a dummy variable representing the legal status of Mexican immigrant j (documented=1; undocumented=0); $education_j$ refers to years of schooling for person j; $experience_j$ represents potential labor market experience for person j; $arrival_j$ indicates age at arrival to the U.S. for person j; $\mathbf{Z}_j$ is a vector of occupational dummy variables (with "managerial and professional" serving as the referent); $panel_j$ is a dummy variable indicating the SIPP panel (1996 or 2001); μ_j are unobserved differences that affect wages; and r_{tj} is a stochastic error term.

These models allow both the intercepts and slopes to be correlated (tau), and for autoregressive error terms to adjust for serial correlation and heterogeneity in the variance within individuals (rho). To account for the non-random sample loss of poor households (Bavier 2002), both the descriptive and inferential parts of this analysis are adjusted using the person weights provided by SIPP.

Results

Table 1 shows average wage rates in six month intervals, between the first and 36th month, for the pooled SIPP panels (1996 and 2001), separately for men and women workers belonging to each of the four low-skill analysis groups – documented Mexican immigrants, undocumented Mexican immigrants, Mexican-Americans and non-Latino white natives. Although there are some irregular movements in these mean wages, almost all groups show an upward trend in wage rates over time. Thus among low-skill males, the hourly wages of documented Mexican

immigrants rise from $9.82 to $10.88 over the 36 month span; those of undocumented Mexican immigrants rise from $8.27 to $9.36 over this period; those of Mexican-Americans rise from $10.74 to $11.62; and those of non-Latino white natives rise from $12.98 to $14.49. For low-skill women, the hourly wages of documented Mexican immigrants rise from $7.63 to $8.18, those of Mexican-Americans rise from $8.65 to $9.80, and those of non-Latino white Natives rise from $9.69 to $11.01. The exception is female undocumented Mexican immigrants – their hourly wages average $7.08 in the first month of the panel, and $7.07 in the 36th month. This group has the lowest starting wages, and no wage growth, over the observed duration.

(Table 1 about here.)

Table 2 shows the means for the exogenous variables used in the wage trajectory regressions, separately for men and women in each of the four ethnic/legal groups. Not surprisingly, we find that low-skill native Mexican-Americans and whites have higher educational levels than Mexican immigrants. Natives are also much more likely than immigrants to hold managerial, professional, technical, sales, and administrative jobs, whereas immigrants are more likely to be employed in farming, forestry and fishing. Despite these differences between native and immigrant workers, documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants appear quite alike: both groups have similar levels of education and ages at arrivals, and are similarly distributed across the occupational categories; legal Mexican immigrants do, however, have about 6 more years of potential experience in the labor market than do undocumented Mexican immigrants.

(Table 2 about here.)

Table 3 shows growth curve regressions for the logged wages of low-skill Mexican immigrant men. Our presentation of the growth curve models shows the intercept or starting

wage effects in the upper half of the table and the slope or wage growth rate effects in the lower half. Thus, for example, the legal status effect in the "intercepts" panel refers to the impact of being documented on wages at the start of each panel period (one beginning in 1996 and the other in 2001), and legal status in the "slopes" panel shows the monthly wage return to being documented (i.e., the interaction between legal status and time). Wages have been log-transformed in our regression models, which allows for marginal effects to be interpreted as percent change in wages resulting from a one-unit change in predictor variables. The first column of Table 3 shows a model in which legal status is the only predictor; the second column adds potential labor market experience, education, and age at arrival to the U.S. to the regression, and the third column also adds occupation.

(Table 3 about here.)

The first column shows that documented male workers average significantly higher starting wages than those who are undocumented. The gross wage premium associated with being a legal immigrant is 17.3 percent. In our sample of Mexican immigrant men, wages grow at an average rate of 0.5 percent per month. However there is no significant effect of legal status on the rate of wage growth during these panel periods, indicating that documented and undocumented immigrants' wages increase at about the same pace.

In the second column of this table, we test whether the wage disparity between documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants is due to differences in human capital. The results show that, as expected, starting wages are affected positively by potential labor market experience and education, and negatively by age at arrival. The negative slope effect for potential experience indicates that the positive return to education (in the intercept equation) is less positive for workers with more potential experience. Education and age at arrival do not

significantly influence wage growth – at least within our relatively short period of observation. With these variables controlled, the wage advantage for being legal is reduced by more than half (57%), but the legal status effect on starting wages is still large, positive, and highly significant, and suggests that net of human capital, documented Mexican immigrants hold a 7.4% wage premium over their undocumented peers.

Labor segmentation theories posit that one reason unauthorized immigrant workers' wages are lower than legal immigrants is that they are permanently consigned to jobs in the "periphery" of the labor market. While the results in the final column loosely conform to the segmentation prediction that peripheral occupations have lower starting wages and wage growth than professionals and managers, controlling for occupation does not attenuate the wage advantage of being documented.

Table 4 repeats these calculations for low-skill female Mexican immigrants. The overall pattern of results is similar to that for men, with a few notable distinctions. Most importantly, while documented women workers, like documented men, receive significantly higher starting wages than undocumented workers, the differential for women is only 8.6 percent – about half of that observed for men. Also, when experience, education, and age at arrival are held constant (column 2), this legal status wage differential is reduced to a statistically insignificant 2.7%. Mexican immigrant women also appear to receive lower returns to experience and education, and have slower (and nonsignificant) wage growth than Mexican immigrant men. Despite these differences, potential labor market experience and education significantly increase, and age at U.S. arrival significantly decreases starting wages. Also as for males, professional and managerial occupations tend to have higher starting wages and wage growth than the other occupations.

(Table 4 about here.)

Table 5 estimates separate growth curve models for males in each of the four low-skill ethnic/legal groups. This allows a full set of interactions between, on the one hand, immigrant and legal status, and on the other, wage predictors such as potential labor market experience and education.[3] We thereby test whether the lower returns to education reported for Mexican immigrant men (Hall and Farkas 2008) are accounted for by the undocumented status of some of these workers. (These calculations are repeated for females in Table 6.)

(Table 5 about here.)

The results clearly show that undocumented male workers receive lower starting wage returns to experience and schooling than the other groups, and that their average wage growth is lower than that of the other groups. For undocumented Mexican immigrants, the coefficient of potential labor market experience is .0087. This means that for each additional year of potential labor market experience, starting wages for this group increase by 0.9 percent. There is a comparable effect for documented Mexican immigrants, about 1.1 percent. By contrast, Mexican American and non-Latino white natives gain significantly more from potential work experience, with each additional year associated with an increase in starting wages of about 1.5 percent.

Effects for years of schooling show even more striking inter-group differences. Thus, each additional year of schooling increases the starting wage rates of undocumented Mexican immigrants by 1.5 percent, whereas the effect for documented Mexican immigrants is 3.5 percent, that for Mexican American natives is 6.0 percent, and that for non-Latino white natives is 9.3 percent. This shows that a significant portion (but not all) of the lower returns to schooling received by Mexican immigrants (Hall and Farkas 2008) is due to the very low returns experienced by undocumented workers.

Finally, Table 5 shows average wage growth rates (the coefficient of time in the slope equation) of 0.1 percent per month for undocumented Mexican immigrants, 1.0 percent per month for documented Mexican immigrants, 0.9 percent per month for Mexican Americans, and 0.8 percent per month for non-Latino white natives. Clearly, undocumented immigrants have by far the lowest rate of wage growth.

Table 6 repeats these calculations for low-skill female workers. There are strong similarities, as well as some differences, when compared to males. The most important similarity is that, as with males, undocumented female Mexican immigrants receive a wage rate increase of only 0.7 percent for each additional year of schooling. By contrast, documented Mexican immigrants receive a wage increase of 2.0 percent for each year of schooling, while the comparable rates are 5.1 percent for Mexican Americans and 9.3 percent for non-Latino white natives. Thus, for females as well as for males, undocumented workers receive particularly low returns to years of schooling. However, female undocumented workers receive wage rate increases of 0.7 percent for each additional year of potential labor market experience, and this does not differ significantly from those for the other groups.

(Table 6 about here.)

As for average wage rate growth – the coefficient on time in the slope equation – none of the three female Mexican ethnic groups receive growth rates significantly different from zero. This contrasts with non-Latino white natives, whose growth rate of 0.8 percent per month *is* statistically significant.

Discussion

We provide new evidence on the wage benefits of having legal authorization to be in the U.S. for Mexican immigrants. In contrast to other research, this study uses recent, nationally-

representative data to assess wage differentials between documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants, and the differential returns to human capital between these groups and native Mexican Americans and non-Latino whites. Using two panels (1996-1999 and 2001-2003) of longitudinal SIPP data, and employing a unique strategy of imputing immigrants' legal status, we have shown that the wage premium of "being legal" for Mexican immigrants is approximately 17 percent for men and 9 percent for women. Although a considerable portion of this wage premium is attributable to differences in potential labor market experience, educational attainment, and age at arrival to the U.S., male documented workers retain a significant wage advantage relative to their undocumented counterparts even when these factors are taken into account. Our analysis also demonstrated the very low returns undocumented Mexican immigrant workers receive from human capital. For both male and female undocumented Mexican workers, the wage returns to education are half of those realized by documented Mexican immigrants. Similarly, undocumented men receive lower returns to labor market experience than documented men. Also, in comparison to other low-skill workers (including documented Mexican immigrants) wage growth during our observation periods (1996-1999 and 2001-2003) was slowest for undocumented Mexican immigrants.

The 17 percent gross wage differential we find between undocumented and documented Mexican immigrant men is within the range of previous post-IRCA estimates (Donato and Massey 1993; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002; Rivera-Batiz 1999). Less is known about the legal status wage differential for Mexican immigrant women, but our finding that documented women hold a wage premium of about 9 percent indicates that, like undocumented men, undocumented women face employment challenges in U.S. labor markets. Once our estimates are adjusted for worker's characteristics (e.g., education, experience, age at arrival), legal

Mexicans' wage advantage drops to 7 percent for men, and a statistically insignificant 3 percent for women. This net wage differential is also in line with other studies (Kaushal 2006; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark 2002; Rivera-Batiz 1999). However, it is important to keep in mind that our (and others') estimate of the documented-undocumented wage disparity is likely biased downwards since our sample of undocumented Mexicans potentially includes a small group of legal temporary immigrant workers, and because of possible positive selection of those illegal immigrants who participate in SIPP. Thus, the wage differentials we estimate are, in all likelihood, lower-bound estimates of the wage benefit of legal authorization.

If the cost of being undocumented is not explained by workers' human capital or by the types of jobs they hold, what explains the wage disparity? Unmeasured variables related to both wages and legal status are one possible explanation. Borjas (1987; 1994) argues that undocumented Mexican workers are drawn from the low-end of the educational distribution (also see Taylor 1987) and are negatively selected on unobservable personal characteristics such as intelligence, initiative, and motivation. However, evidence on this hypothesis is weak, as undocumented Mexican immigrants appear to come from the middle of the Mexican educational distribution (Orrenius and Zavodny 2005), and, based on the findings of Jensen et al. (2008), are *positively* selected relative to non-migrants in Mexican origin communities.

More likely, our results point to employer discrimination against undocumented Mexican immigrants. Stringent governmental sanctions levied against U.S. employers hiring illegal immigrants have increased the costs of employing them as workers. Employers, in turn, pass these costs off as an effective tax on the wages of undocumented workers (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Phillips and Massey 2000). Because undocumented immigrants lack legal rights, they are also at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis employers in bargaining for wages. These

discriminatory features of the labor market experiences of undocumented workers have staying power when job networks are exclusionary and ethnically-based (Cranford 2005; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

Institutional and legal discrimination also undoubtedly plays a part in explaining the legal status differentials in wages and returns to human capital. Not only are undocumented immigrants ineligible for many governmental assistance programs, for which legal immigrants *are* eligible, heightened animosity toward undocumented immigrants and harsh municipal policies related to where they can live and seek employment (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008) create an unstable and hostile social environment. As a result, undocumented immigrants often take the first job they are offered, continue to work in jobs even if the pay is low, or accept exploitative or illegal work conditions out of fear that they will be exposed.

We may actually be under-estimating the legal status wage premium if legal Mexican-origin workers (documented Mexicans and native Mexican Americans) also fall victim to these discriminatory practices. Lowell, Teachman, and Jing (1995) demonstrated discrimination in hiring for all Latino-looking workers, not just the undocumented, as a result of IRCA-implemented employer sanctions. Bansak and Raphael (2001) and Orrenius and Zovodny (2009) show evidence of lower earnings for Latino workers as a function of increased enforcement. Donato et al. (2008) document similar processes for Mexican-origin women. Massey et al. (2002) go a step further and argue that the employment prospects and wages of *legal* Mexican immigrants are more greatly impacted by governmental sanctions and employer discrimination than those of undocumented Mexican immigrants: "Rather than protecting domestic workers, the criminalization of undocumented hiring ended up marginalizing [legal Mexican workers] by exacerbating income inequality, encouraging subcontracting, and generally promoting the

informalization of hiring" (126). Thus, if the wages of documented Mexican immigrants are penalized as a result of illegal immigration, our legal status wage differentials are likely biased down.

Discrimination against Latino immigrants regardless of legal status may explain why legal Mexican immigrants are less able to convert additional schooling into higher wages than non-Latino white natives. Despite finding that a significant portion of Mexican immigrants' low returns to education (Hall and Farkas 2008) is explained by the presence of undocumented workers, legal Mexican immigrants' return to education is still about one-third of whites'. Thus, researchers would profit from continuing to explore these issues further.

Notes

[1] We reestimated our modes using lower bounds of $0.01 and $2.50 and upper bounds of $100.00 and $500.00. The results are consistent regardless of wage bound placement.

[2] Descriptive statistics for Mexican immigrants in the 2001 panel with valid English ability information (N= 695 men and women) indicate that undocumented Mexican workers are less likely than documented Mexican immigrants to speak English well (36.3 vs. 51.1 percent, respectively), but the correlation (.12) between English ability and legal status is considerably smaller than those between English ability and education (.30) and age at arrival (-.26).

[3] As the main goal of the group-specific models is to test differences in the returns to human capital, occupational controls are excluded from group-specific growth curve regressions.

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Table 1: Mean Wages (in $ per hour) by Observation Month

	Month						
	1	6	12	18	24	30	36
Men							
Documented Mexican Immigrants	$9.82	$9.63	$10.24	$10.24	$10.32	$10.94	$10.88
Undocumented Mexican Immigrants	$8.27	$8.09	$8.57	$9.00	$9.42	$9.57	$9.36
Mexican-Americans (Natives)	$10.74	$10.62	$10.59	$11.18	$11.09	$11.37	$11.62
Non-Latino White Natives	$12.98	$12.90	$13.25	$13.66	$14.07	$14.28	$14.49
Women							
Documented Mexican Immigrants	$7.63	$7.80	$7.80	$7.91	$7.78	$8.02	$8.18
Undocumented Mexican Immigrants	$7.08	$7.26	$7.05	$6.68	$6.98	$7.30	$7.07
Mexican-Americans (Natives)	$8.65	$8.65	$8.85	$9.14	$9.26	$9.78	$9.80
Non-Latino White Natives	$9.69	$9.81	$10.16	$10.44	$10.66	$10.87	$11.01

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Exogenous Variables, by Sex and Ethnic/Legal Group

	Men				Women			
	Doc. Mexican Immigrants	Undoc. Mexican Immigrants	Mexican-Americans	Non-Latino White Natives	Doc. Mexican Immigrants	Undoc. Mexican Immigrants	Mexican-Americans	Non-Latino White Natives
Potential labor market experience	22.27	16.71	17.55	21.12	24.57	17.75	19.31	22.89
Education (years of schooling)	7.90	7.99	10.73	11.63	7.86	8.32	10.87	11.74
Age at arrival to the U.S.	19.87	21.03	--	--	20.95	22.50	--	--
Occupation:								
Managerial and Professional	.03	.02	.06	.09	.03	.01	.10	.15
Technical, Sales, and Administrative	.05	.05	.17	.15	.17	.18	.48	.47
Service	.16	.15	.13	.10	.39	.29	.24	.20
Farming, Forestry, and Fishing	.15	.16	.06	.03	.08	.08	.01	.01
Production, Craft, and Repairers	.24	.26	.23	.29	.06	.08	.03	.03
Operatives and Laborers	.37	.35	.35	.34	.27	.36	.13	.13
N of individuals	1,149	375	828	9,917	732	171	742	9,323
N of person-months	32,598	8,817	22,932	294,518	16,410	3,413	17,829	258,364

Table 3: Growth Curve Regression Coefficients Predicting Logged Wages for Mexican Immigrant Men

	(1)			(2)			(3)		
	β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.	
Intercepts (Starting wage)									
Constant	2.0679	(.0242)	***	1.7134	(.0529)	***	1.7622	(.0604)	***
Legal status (documented=1)	.1731	(.0264)	***	.0742	(.0270)	**	.0750	(.0265)	**
Potential labor market experience				.0163	(.0015)	***	.0158	(.0015)	***
Education (years of schooling)				.0346	(.0038)	***	.0330	(.0037)	***
Age at arrival to the U.S.				-.0092	(.0016)	***	-.0086	(.0016)	***
Occupation:[a]									
Technical, Sales, and Administrative							-.0099	(.0358)	
Service							-.1224	(.0330)	***
Farming, Forestry, and Fishing							-.0716	(.0333)	*
Production, Craft, and Repairers							.0576	(.0319)	+
Operatives and Laborers							-.0602	(.0309)	*
Slopes (Monthly wage growth)									
Time (in months)	.0051	(.0010)	***	.0089	(.0023)	***	.0136	(.0027)	***
Legal status (legal=1)	.0000	(.0011)		-.0005	(.0012)		-.0005	(.0011)	
Potential labor market experience				-.0001	(.0001)	*	-.0001	(.0000)	+
Education (years of schooling)				-.0002	(.0002)		-.0003	(.0002)	
Age at arrival to the U.S.				.0000	(.0001)		.0000	(.0001)	
Occupation:[a]									
Technical, Sales, and Administrative							-.0045	(.0015)	**
Service							-.0023	(.0014)	+
Farming, Forestry, and Fishing							-.0057	(.0014)	***
Production, Craft, and Repairers							-.0073	(.0013)	***
Operatives and Laborers							-.0045	(.0013)	***

Notes: N= 41,415 person-months; *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10 (two-tailed tests); Models include controls for SIPP panel (1996 or 2001) and estimates are weighted by person weights; [a] "Professional and managerial occupations" are the reference category.

Table 4: Growth Curve Regression Coefficients Predicting Logged Wages for Mexican Immigrant Women

	(1)			(2)			(3)		
	β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.	
Intercepts (Starting wage)									
Constant	1.9264	(.0349)	***	1.7566	(.0733)	***	1.8105	(.0807)	***
Legal status (documented=1)	.0858	(.0365)	*	.0273	(.0378)		.0376	(.0371)	
Potential labor market experience				.0090	(.0018)	***	.0084	(.0018)	***
Education (years of schooling)				.0191	(.0048)	***	.0150	(.0048)	**
Age at arrival to the U.S.				-.0068	(.0019)	***	-.0055	(.0019)	**
Occupation:[a]									
Technical, Sales, and Administrative							.0531	(.0369)	
Service							-.0787	(.0362)	*
Farming, Forestry, and Fishing							-.1024	(.0447)	*
Production, Craft, and Repairers							-.0187	(.0468)	
Operatives and Laborers							-.0557	(.0382)	
Slopes (Monthly wage growth)									
Time (in months)	.0020	(.0016)		.0001	(.0033)		.0042	(.0336)	
Legal status (legal=1)	.0013	(.0016)		.0021	(.0017)		.0018	(.0017)	
Potential labor market experience				-.0001	(.0001)		-.0001	(.0001)	
Education (years of schooling)				.0003	(.0002)		.0004	(.0002)	+
Age at arrival to the U.S.				.0001	(.0001)		.0000	(.0001)	
Occupation:[a]									
Technical, Sales, and Administrative							-.0060	(.0016)	***
Service							-.0047	(.0016)	**
Farming, Forestry, and Fishing							-.0024	(.0019)	
Production, Craft, and Repairers							-.0029	(.0020)	
Operatives and Laborers							-.0041	(.0016)	*

Notes: N= 19,823 person-months; *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10 (two-tailed tests); Models include controls for SIPP panel (1996 or 2001) and estimates are weighted by person weights; [a] "Professional and managerial occupations" are the reference category.

Table 5: Ethnic/Legal Group Specific Growth Curve Regression Coefficients Predicting Logged Wages, Men

	Documented Mexican Immigrants			Undocumented Mexican Immigrants			Mexican Americans (Natives)			Non-Latino White Natives		
	β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.	
Intercepts (Starting wage)												
Constant	1.6929	(.0613)	***	1.8306	(.0977)	***	1.3932	(.0941)	***	1.0815	(.0525)	***
Potential experience	.0113	(.0014)	*** m,w	.0087	(.0025)	*** m,w	.0154	(.0015)	***	.0156	(.0004)	***
Education (years of schooling)	.0353	(.0044)	*** m,w	.0153	(.0075)	* d,m,w	.0600	(.0073)	***	.0934	(.0043)	***
Slopes (Monthly wage growth)												
Time (in months)	.0097	(.0022)	***	.0014	(.0066)	d,m,w	.0086	(.0032)	**	.0081	(.0017)	***
Potential experience	-.0001	(.0000)	**	.0001	(.0002)	d,m,w	-.0002	(.0001)	***	-.0001	(.0000)	***
Education (years of schooling)	-.0002	(.0002)		.0002	(.0005)		-.0002	(.0002)		-.0002	(.0001)	
N of individuals	1,149			375			828			9,917		
N of person-months	32,598			8,817			22,932			294,518		

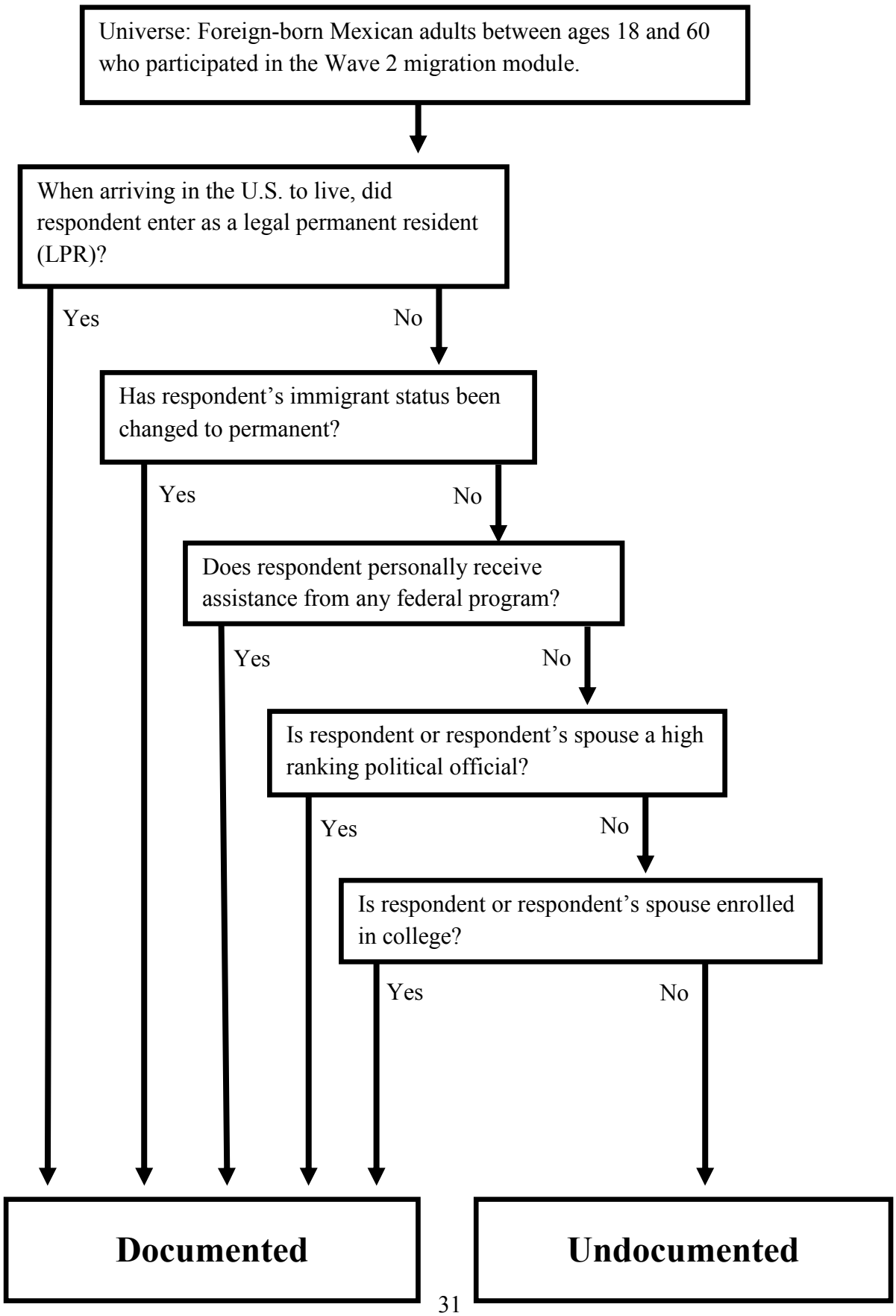
Notes: *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10 (two-tailed tests); Models include controls for SIPP panel (1996 or 2001) and estimates are weighted by person weights; Significant differences (at p < .10) in the effects of human capital variables across groups are shown for Mexican immigrants; [d] refers to significant difference with Documented Mexican Immigrants; [m] to Mexican Americans; and [w] to White Natives.

Table 6: Ethnic/Legal Group Specific Growth Curve Regression Coefficients Predicting Logged Wages, Women

	Documented Mexican Immigrants			Undocumented Mexican Immigrants			Mexican Americans (Natives)			Non-Latino White Natives		
	β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.		β	s.e.	
Intercepts (Starting wage)												
Constant	1.7253	(.0757)	***	1.7394	(.1783)	***	1.3841	(.1037)	***	.8766	(.0646)	***
Potential experience	.0051	(.0016)	*** w	.0072	(.0042)	+	.0081	(.0015)	***	.0107	(.0004)	***
Education (years of schooling)	.0204	(.0052)	*** m,w	.0068	(.0133)	d,m,w	.0508	(.0081)	***	.0928	(.0053)	***
Slopes (Monthly wage growth)												
Time (in months)	.0035	(.0034)	m	-.0027	(.0079)	m	-.0003	(.0003)		.0084	(.0021)	***
Potential experience	-.0001	(.0001)		-.0001	(.0002)		.0000	(.0000)		-.0001	(.0000)	***
Education (years of schooling)	.0002	(.0002)	w	.0007	(.0006)	w	.0004	(.0003)		-.0003	(.0002)	+
N of individuals	732			171			742			9,323		
N of person-months	16,410			3,413			17,829			258,364		

Notes: *** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05, + p < .10 (two-tailed tests); Models include controls for SIPP panel (1996 or 2001) and estimates are weighted by person weights; Significant differences (at p < .10) in the effects of human capital variables across groups are shown for Mexican immigrants; [d] refers to significant difference with Documented Mexican Immigrants; [m] to Mexican Americans; and [w] to White Natives.

Appendix 1: Imputation of Legal Status for Mexican Immigrants in SIPP



Appendix 2: SIPP Survey Questions on Citizenship and Immigration Status

Citizenship:
"Is [R] a U.S. Citizen?"
(1) Yes
(2) No

Initial Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) Status:
"When [R] moved to the United States to live, what was [R's] immigration status?"
(1)Immediate relative or family sponsored permanent resident
(2)Employment-based permanent resident
(3)Other permanent resident
(4)Granted refugee status or granted asylum
(5)Non-immigrant (e.g., diplomatic, student, business, or tourist visa)
(6)Other
This full list of responses is restricted in the public access data to:
(1) Permanent resident (which corresponds to response numbers 1, 2, and 3)
(2) Other (response numbers 4, 5, and 6)

Current LPR Status:
"Has [R's] status been changed to permanent resident?"
(1)Yes
(2)No