# HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE, MIGRATION COMMUNITIES AND CHILD POVERTY: AN INVESTIGATION OF POVERTY AMONG THE CHILDREN OF MEXICAN MIGRANTS

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## Extended Abstract

The children of Mexican migrants to the United States experience among the highest rates of poverty relative to other racial and ethnic groups (Oropesa and Landale 2000; Van Hook, Brown et al. 2004; Lichter, Qian et al. 2005; Crowley, Lichter et al. 2006). This is of great concern because research shows that children who grow up in poverty experience worse health, lower cognitive development, greater risk of dropping out of school and, as a result, are more likely to live in poverty as adults (Iceland 2006). Poverty among the children of Mexican immigrants thus jeopardizes chances for intergenerational economic mobility and places at risk the successful economic incorporation of the Mexican origin population. Our understanding of the mechanisms of child poverty among immigrants is limited, however, which in turn limits the efficacy of public policies intended to reduce child poverty in general.

Prior research on racial and ethnic differences in child poverty finds that parental characteristics, household structure, and labor market opportunity structures are primary factors (Van Hook, Brown et al. 2004; Lichter, Qian et al. 2005; Iceland 2006). Research on the relationship between household structure and poverty has mostly focused on the deleterious effects of female headship, due in large part to growing rates of female headship and poverty in the 1970s and 1980s (Iceland 2006). Immigrant households, however, have among the lowest rates of female headship and instead are more likely to include multiple families and/or

independent adults (U.S. Census Bureau 2003; Van Hook and Glick 2007). Prior research thus does little to enlighten our understanding of the relationship between household structure and child poverty *among immigrants*.

The proposed research seeks to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between household structure and poverty among the children of Mexican-born persons in the United States. The research will address two primary questions. First, do extended households offer an economic advantage in terms of lower poverty to Mexican children? Or is there a trade-off between such living arrangements, which may offer other kinds of support for Mexican families, and economic well-being? Second, if a relationship between household structure and child poverty exists, does the strength of the relationship vary across immigrant destination places where ethnic communities vary in size and maturity of migration networks?

## PRIOR RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Migration, social capital and extended households**. The effect of extended household structures – in contrast to female-headed households – on child poverty has not received much attention in scholarly research. The relationship is complicated by varying rates of extended-household living arrangements across racial and ethnic groups and the predominate reasons within each group for doing so. For some groups extended households may be a purely economic strategy and thus offer an economic advantage by way of pooled economic resources within a household or by shared childcare responsibilities that enable a parent to work more, for example, or both (Tienda and Glass 1985; Cohen 2002). Alternatively, cultural inclinations may more influence other groups such that extended households represent non-economic motives that

may unintentionally trade economic stability for stronger familial ties, for example (Staples and Mirandé 1980; Angel and Tienda 1982).

Van Hook and Glick (2007) offer a third perspective that suggests extended households among labor migrants such as Mexicans result more from network-driven migration processes rather than being purely economic or cultural. Migration networks facilitate exchanges of information, financial resources and other forms of support that reduce costs and risks of migration and ease transitions to settlement (Massey 1986; Massey, Goldring et al. 1994). One's access to such resources, often referred to as migration social capital (Portes 1995), largely determines who migrates and where they go. Mexicans thus are much more likely to leave sending communities in Mexico and migrate to the United States if they know someone with prior migration experience than if they do not (Massey, Alarcón et al. 1987; Cerrutti and Massey 2001). In the United States, migrants are much more likely to settle in places where previous migrants reside (Gurak and Kritz 2000; Bauer, Epstein et al. 2005; Scott, Coomes et al. 2005; Diaz McConnell 2008). One form of assistance that migrants may receive upon arrival is help in finding or the provision of housing (Massey 1986).

As a migration strategy, research is not clear whether extended households might offer an economic benefit in light of ambiguity regarding the economic benefits of ethnic networks and the resources they provide after a migrant's initial settlement. On one hand, some scholars argue that ethnic communities offer migrants provision of housing and jobs and shelter against discrimination long after their arrival (Portes and Bach 1985; Portes 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). If extended-household living arrangements are one such form of support, one might expect to find an economic advantage for children who reside in them, other poverty-related factors being equal. Others argue, however, that while ethnic communities may ease the

difficulties of initial settlement they often do not remain cohesive and supportive over time or, worse, become exploitative (Menjívar 2000; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003; Morales 2009). And some contend that over-reliance on ethnic ties inhibits economic opportunities and socioeconomic incorporation (Nee, Sanders et al. 1994; Nee and Sanders 2001; Alba and Nee 2003). If this is more the case, extended-households may more indicate dire economic circumstances in the absence of social support and offer no benefit. It thus remains an open question whether extended-household living arrangements that result from migration processes, as suggested by Van Hook and Glick (2007), help or hinder the economic wellbeing of children.

**Geographic dispersion and migrant community resources**. If extended-household living arrangements represent a form of social support, the extent to which this they are available in a place may determine its effectiveness in staving off child poverty. The geographic dispersion of Mexican migration in recent decades implies that there are a greater number of Mexican migrant communities across the United States that vary in the degree to which different forms of support are available (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005; Light 2006; Bachmeier and Bean 2008). Mexican migrants, largely concentrated in the Southwestern United States historically, increasingly settled in non-traditional destinations in the South and Midwest during the 1990s (Kandel and Cromartie 2004; Durand, Massey et al. 2005; Lichter and Johnson Forthcoming). A form of social support that is readily available in Los Angeles, where migration networks and infrastructure have developed for decades, may not be as available in Atlanta or Minneapolis. Insofar that household structure is one such resource, its effect on economic outcomes such as child poverty may depend on the history and nature of migration into a place, including the social and economic forces that attract migrants, the kinds of migrants that settle in a place, and the forms of support a migrant community offers. I thus expect that the strength of the

relationship between household structure and poverty will vary across Mexican migration destinations.

**DATA AND METHODS**

My data come from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) 2000 Census 5-percent data and the 2005/6/7 American Community Survey 1-percent data (Ruggles, Sobek et al. 2008). The target population for this study is families that include both a Mexican-born parent and at least one child younger than 18 years of age (heretofore referred to simply as "Mexican families"). I excluded Mexican families who reside in regions (defined below) with fewer than 50 Mexican-born persons to increase the reliability of regional measures. I identified 123,166 families with a Mexican-born parent and a child younger than 18 years of age in the 2000 five-percent U.S. Census data. For more efficient processing, I randomly sampled 52,791 Mexican families that reside in 32,314 unique households.

Units of Analysis. I construct variables at three levels of analysis 1) family, 2) household and 3) metropolitan/non-metropolitan region to assess the effects of variables at each level on family poverty. I define a family as a family head, their spouse or a co-habiting partner if present in the household, and any children younger than 25 years old of either adult that are present in a household. I limit my sample to families with at least one Mexican-born parent and at least one child who is 18 years or younger. I use the Census Bureau definition of household. Households may be comprised of only one Mexican origin family or one or more Mexican origin families and a combination of other families and/or independent single adults. Each family or independent adult within a household is referred to as minimal household unit (MHU) (Van Hook, Bean et al. 1995; Van Hook, Brown et al. 2004).

I construct region-level variables by first identifying the metropolitan area of each household as defined by the Census Bureau. If a household is not located in a metropolitan area, I identify the "migration PUMA" of the household. Migration PUMAs are comprised of one or more Public-Use Micro Areas created by the Census Bureau, many of which align with one or more county boundaries. Some migration PUMAs within the same state are combined to achieve a minimum of 70 Mexican-born person to calculate reliable region-level variables.

Key Measures. The following are variables of primary concern to assess the expectated relationships discussed above.

*Family Poverty Indicator (dependent variable).* Indicates whether a family's total income is above or below a poverty threshold for a family. The threshold is updated annually by the Office of Management and Budget and published by the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

*Family Type*. Identifies the relationship status of the Mexican-born parent(s) within each family, married, cohabiting, or single. This variable allows me to control for the possibility that extended households relate differently to poverty for different family types.

*Household Type*. The primary independent variable of interest, household type, identifies the relationships between minimal household units (MHU) within a household. Household types include single family (only one family in the household), vertically extended (grandparent(s) and grandchild(ren) both present in the same household with no other minimal household units present), horizontally-extended kin (multiple related families or independent adults, may include grandparents and grandchildren), and horizontally-extended non-kin households (multiple unrelated families or independent adults).

*Mexican-Born Population Maturity (region).* Also of primary interest, the maturity of the Mexican-born population within each region serves as a proxy for the development of migration infrastructures and the kinds of support offered by a Mexican migrant community. Following Bachmeier and Bean (2008), I create a measure of maturity of the Mexican origin population in each region by combining six measures into a single scale of maturity using principal components analysis: 1) the percentage of the Mexican origin population that is Mexican-born, 2) the percentage of the Mexican-born population residing in the U.S. for more than 25 years, 3) the percentage of the Mexican-born population residing in the U.S. for 5 or fewer years, 4) the percentage of the Mexican-born population that is female, and 6) the percentage of the Mexican-born female population residing with their own children.

A scale measure of migration maturity has particular advantages over other measures that are now commonly used to distinguish newer destinations of Mexican migration from more traditional destinations that have received Mexican migration for many decades. Some authors simply rely on historical patterns of Mexican migration to identify new destination regions and traditional destination regions, typically in terms of states (Durand, Massey et al. 2000; Durand, Massey et al. 2005). Heer (2002) and Light (Light 2006; Light and von Scheven 2008) use the density of the Mexican-born population. And Suro and Singer (2002), with many following their lead, use a combination of population density and growth rates of the foreign-born population to create a typology of Latino migration destinations. The weakness of each of these measures is that the density of a migrant community or rate of growth may not directly correlate with the demographic composition of a community and the kinds of support it offers. For example, the Mexican-born population in a place may have grown very rapidly and become relatively large in the 1990s, but if it is comprised entirely of young, male workers it is not likely that it will offer

the same kinds of support than a community that has grown due to the resettlement of Mexican origin families who have been in the United States for many years and reflected in greater proportions of Mexican-born women and children

Regression Model. Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) are uniquely suited to test variability in the predicted probability of poverty across multiple levels of analysis (Bryk and Raudenbush 1992; Cohen and Huffman 2003). HLM allows me to test whether the probability of poverty varies across families (level 1) that reside in various kinds of households (level 2) and regions (level 3). It also allows one to test the significance of interactions between variables across levels of analysis, in this case household structure and Mexican migration maturity.

I will model the predicted probability of poverty for each MHU as a function of MHU, household, and regional characteristics. At the MHU-level the model is

$$Y_{ijk} = \beta_{0jk} + \beta_{1jk}X_{1ijk} + \cdots + \beta_{mjk}X_{mijk} + e_{ijk}$$

where $Y_{ijk}$ is the dichotomous poverty indicator for MHU *i* in household *j* in region *k*, and $\beta_{0jk}$ is the intercept for household *j* in region *k*. Next, $X_{1ijk}$ through $X_{mijk}$ denote the *M* MHU-level control variables, and $\beta_{1jk}$ through $\beta_{mjk}$ represent the associated MHU regression coefficients. $e_{ijk}$ is the level-1 random effect. The level-2 model is simply

$$\beta_{0jk} = \alpha_{00k} + \alpha_{01k}W_{01k} + \alpha_{02k}W_{02k} + f_{0jk}$$

where $\alpha_{00k}$ is the intercept for the household-level model in region k. Additionally, $W_{01k}$ and $W_{02k}$ are dummy variables that indicate residence in nuclear/vertically-extended households and non-kin/horizontally-extended households, respectively. Likewise, $\alpha_{01k}$ and $\alpha_{02k}$ represent the effects of residence in such household types on $\beta_{0jk}$ relative to residence in the omitted category

of single parent households. If $\alpha_{02k}$ is statistically significant, then a relationship between household structure and poverty likely exists. Finally, $f_{0jk}$ is the level-2 error term.

Each Level-2 coefficient relating household structure to Level-1 effects on child poverty can be modeled as either a random effect or fixed effect across regions. I hypothesize that the effect of household structure will vary by the degree of migrant community maturation so I model the intercept and two household type coefficients as random effects. The Level-3 model is

$$\alpha_{00k} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{001}(Migration\ Maturity)_k + \gamma_{002}Z_{1k} + \cdots + \gamma_{00n}Z_{nk} + g_{00k}$$
$$\alpha_{01k} = \gamma_{010} + \gamma_{011}(Migration\ Maturity)_k + \gamma_{012}Z_{1k} + \cdots + \gamma_{01n}Z_{nk} + g_{01k}$$
$$\alpha_{02k} = \gamma_{020} + \gamma_{021}(Migration\ Maturity)_k + \gamma_{022}Z_{1k} + \cdots + \gamma_{02n}Z_{nk} + g_{02k}$$

where $\gamma_{000}$, $\gamma_{010}$ , and $\gamma_{020}$ are the regional intercepts in models of the household type coefficients, and $\gamma_{001}$, $\gamma_{011}$, and $\gamma_{021}$ are the effects of migration maturity on the household type coefficients. $Z$ represents the n regional control variables and $g$ is the level-3 error term. If $\gamma_{021}$ is statistically significant, then the relationship between extended households and poverty likely varies across regions of varying Mexican community maturity, as expected.

## PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

I have yet to complete the regression analyses which I will present and discuss in the final version of the paper. The preliminary descriptive results, however, justifies further analysis. Thirty-two percent of Mexican families with children were living below the poverty line at the time of the 2000 U.S. Census. While my sample is slightly different, the high rate of poverty among Mexican migrant children is similar to that of Landale and Lichter (1997) and Lichter et al. (2005). A high rate of marriage (73 percent; 6 percent co-habiting and 20 percent single

parent) among the families indicates that poverty is not entirely due to single-parent family structures.

Not unexpectedly, almost forty percent of Mexican immigrant families with children reside in households with more than one minimal household unit (whether one or more families and/or independent adults). While this is on the lower end of the range among all Mexican-born *adults* observed by Van Hook and Glick (Van Hook and Glick 2007), my calculation does not include independent adults who probably reside with other adults or families with greater frequency. Of the families who reside in multiple-unit households, they are fairly evenly split between vertically-extended (11 percent of all families), horizontally-extended (16 percent) and non-kin extended (11 percent) households.

Poverty varies greatly between families that reside in different kinds of household structures with the largest difference between single and multi-MHU households. Twenty-three percent of families in single-family households experience poverty while families residing in one of the extended-type households experienced poverty twice as frequently, with vertically-extended households having a slightly lower rate (42 percent) relative to non-kin extended households (46 percent). Although, the pattern varies across family type. Driving the overall results, married families that reside in extended households tend to be worse off (30 percent in poverty) than other married families in single-family households (23 percent in poverty). Conversely, single-parent families that reside on their own experience higher rates of poverty (56 percent) than those that reside within multi-family households (50 percent). Without controlling for other factors that relate to poverty, it appears that single-parent families benefit from extended-household living arrangements, whereas married families may be more burdened by such arrangements. Surely, a portion of the different rates in poverty reflect *a priori* differences

in socio-economic status rather than an effect of household structure on poverty. In other words, married families also may be more likely to reside in extended households because they are poor. While analyses of cross-sectional Census data do not allow me to unravel causality between household structure and poverty, the regression models will enlighten our understanding of the relationship once other factors such as parental education and time in the United States are controlled.

Lastly, Mexican migrant families with children reside in places that vary greatly in the maturity of migration. Values of the maturity score are not directly interpretable and only hold relative meaning. Negative scores indicate Mexican-born populations largely comprised of male migrants who recently arrived in the United States, and positive scores indicate Mexican-born communities with long histories of migration and more families. The scores range from -1.7 to 3.7 with a mean value of 0.5 and standard deviation of 3.8. The final paper will include the full details of the principal components analysis that generates the maturity score.

Mexican community maturity is positively related Mexican family poverty ($r=0.04$, p-value$<0.0001$) indicating that Mexican families that reside in less established migration destinations are somewhat better off economically, a finding consistent with Crowley et al. (2006). At the same time, extended households are generally *less* prevalent among Mexican families in places with more mature migrant communities. In other words, extended households, while generally associated with higher poverty (particularly among married families), are more available in places where poverty rates are relatively lower. While this may appear as though extended-household living arrangements may contribute to lower poverty, family selection into household types and migrant destinations likely are important also. Again, the regression models allow further exploration.

## SUMMARY

The research presented in this paper carries implications for both social theory and public policy. Theoretically, the research will engage a broader literature that considers the relationships between social capital, ethnic communities, and immigrant economic incorporation. It contributes to this literature by exploring whether extended households, viewed here as an outcomes of social capital from migration processes, helps or hinders the economic wellbeing of the children of immigrants. The results will contribute to the debate on whether immigrants' continued reliance on ethnic social capital continues to help or hurt their chances for socioeconomic mobility in the United States.

Furthermore, public policies meant to alleviate child poverty must recognize not only racial and ethnic group differences but also nativity differences. Recent policy proposals that encourage marriage as a means to reduce child poverty will have little effect among international labor migrants such as Mexicans who have among the lowest rates of female headship *and* experience poverty to the greatest degree. If the proposed research finds that extended household living arrangements are related to lower child poverty, then policies that increase the supply of multi-family housing may operate to reduce Mexican origin child poverty. Additionally, the research may help local policy makers across communities with varying histories and maturation of Mexican migration to create policies that build upon existing resources available through migration networks as a means to most efficiently reduce child poverty.

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