

Extended Abstract

Intergenerational Mobility of the Children of Mexican Immigrants: Converging to a Mainstream Differentiated by Gender and Region

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The proposed paper traces a quarter-century of socioeconomic advancement between the first and second generations of Mexican-Americans living in the U.S., from 1980 to 2005, a time period in which the mainstream standards of achievement changed considerably, especially among women. The paper also distinguishes the experience of Mexican-origin populations living in California, Texas, or elsewhere in the US.

The liveliest debates about generations and intergenerational mobility relate to the Mexican-origin population. Some scholars see steady assimilation from one generation to the next, much like that of European groups, others have concluded that Mexican Americans have experienced exclusion across generations (Telles and Ortiz 2008), or characterize their experience as that of a permanent immigrant group that perpetually deals with the struggles of assimilation (Jiménez 2010).

The differences in conclusions permeating the literature are due to several factors, including varying theoretical positions or normative assessments, and differences in methods, data or context for analysis. The lack of congruence flourishes in the absence of temporal clarity brought to measurements and amid the ambiguity of assumptions that characterizes much of the research. Certainly, this reflects the difficulty of observing and measuring changes over the 25-year interval between generations, especially when the subjects involved are changing locations within the U.S. However, there also has been uncertainty about the appropriate reference groups for comparing change over time, whether it is the parents or age peers who belong to other ethnic groups, and what to do about differences between men and women. Finally, the body of scholarship reflects diverse choices about the most important dimensions of socioeconomic behavior for measuring achievements, often times reflecting the preferences of different disciplines or the potential of different data sets. In essence, the continuing question is about choice of appropriate standards—indicators and reference groups—for judging immigrant progress.

Method

Analysis of multiple indicators is employed in this paper to assess the socioeconomic status of parents and children in relation to their age and gender peers among the native-born, non-Hispanic white population, which serves as a proxy for a more generalized, mainstream population. The indicators are selected from what is observable in both the 1980 census and the CPS of 2003, 2005, and 2007. These include high school and college completion, occupation, earnings, living above the 150% level of poverty, and homeownership. We select a population age 25 to 41 for comparison among parents, grown children, and the mainstream at the two historical moments of observation. Parents are identified as foreign-born Mexican-origin adults living with U.S. born children ages 0 to 14 in 1980. Grown children are identified in the CPS as U.S.-born with foreign-born parents (those with a U.S.-born parent are excluded).

The methodology follows an analytical framework of immigrant generation cohorts newly developed by Park and Myers (2010), which enables us to better capture the complex temporal structure of the Mexican-origin population in the United States. Focusing on a single immigrant population also enables us to delve much more deeply into gender differences and to better capture the exceptional contributions of women to overall generational achievements by the Mexican-American population. Certainly, the different socioeconomic trajectories of Mexican women and men suggest gendered paths of intergenerational mobility.

The geographic basis for judging mobility proves crucial. Because Mexican Americans have been historically concentrated in two states, we develop a regional comparison of the progress of the second generation living in California and Texas, home to two-thirds of the nation's second generation Mexican-Americans. More generally, this geographic analysis forces a specificity that sheds light on the potential role of selective migration in shaping the progress of other immigrant groups observed in cities and regions of the United States (Kasinitz et al. 2008). We calculate that over 84% of U.S.-born Mexican-Americans born in California and Texas remain living in those states in the 2006 American Community Survey. Further, 91% of current U.S.-born residents in California were born in that state (86% of current Texans are native sons and daughters). Further, the in-movers to these states have only slightly better education than the homegrown population, so selection effects are minimal among Mexican-Americans. Selection effects are more substantial for the mainstream population which is twice as likely to have moved into the state and has arrived with somewhat higher college completion.

Changes in the status attainment of the mainstream population are often overlooked in assessments of immigrant assimilation but often have crucial importance. We show that changes in the benchmarks must also be accounted for when measuring assimilation. At the same time as immigrant children are launching into adulthood, mainstream cohorts may be rapidly elevating their own status, particularly in the case of women, and on some indicators more than others. Thus, the standards for judging achievements by the second generation are both relative and escalating over time.

Findings

The empirical findings offered in this paper should enable scholars to better see the judgments that have previously been only implicit. The profile of intergenerational mobility prepared for this paper is substantially positive but highly differentiated.. Graphic visualization is the best way to grasp this complexity, although statistical models are developed for each separate outcome. The accompanying exhibit presents a sampling of the research findings, showing college completion and mean earnings, which are both individual-level attainments, and living above the 150% poverty line, which is a household-level attainment that pools incomes and family members.

It is striking that our findings reveal such broad similarities across the regions of settlement. Nonetheless, there are notable differences between California and Texas, some of which are prominent. California has slightly higher education, occupation, and earnings among both the mainstream and the second generation. And Texas stands out for the lower education and earnings among men in the second generation, unlike for women, for reasons deserving further research. What is more alarming is the markedly

lower share of men and women among the first and second generation in Texas that have risen above the 150% level of poverty. This indicates substantially lower living standards in Texas. In the case of California, the one major area of shortcoming is in homeownership (not shown in this exhibit). Despite the higher incomes available to California residents, both the immigrants and the mainstream have achieved similar but markedly lower levels of homeownership than in the rest of the country. Clearly in this case it is helpful to have a regionally specific reference group in order to represent mainstream standards for judging immigrant progress.

Implications of Choices

The gender differences are substantial and have considerable consequence. The socioeconomic advancement of female immigrants is not always emphasized in the literature on intergenerational mobility. Were the socioeconomic progress of women to be ignored or overlooked, as is often the case, this would lead to clear underestimation of Mexican-American progress in Texas in particular.

The debates about whether or not Mexican-origin U.S. residents are assimilating are fueled by many factors. Alternative conclusions derive at least partially from the choice of different outcome measures such as educational attainment or homeownership. Our employment of a broad suite of outcome measures seeks to overcome that bias. Individual-level measures of socioeconomic attainment are represented in our analysis by education, occupation and earnings. The gains achieved by Mexican second-generation women and men are substantial but have seemed overshadowed in some instances by the fact that the mainstream has also experienced a rise in socioeconomic attainment. Therefore, the individual-level outcomes often show little convergence with the mainstream.

The major cause for conflicting assessments of intergenerational progress is that some studies focus mainly on the process of status increase above the attainments of the parents' generation while other studies focus on the failure to close the gap with the average white native-born residents. Both of these approaches to the study of assimilation are important for understanding the Mexican-origin situation, but privileging either may leave us with a one-sided understanding of progress. It bears attention that the emphasis on closing the gap is subject to significant selection effects that are inflating the status attainments of the white native-born residents used to proxy the mainstream population. On the one hand, this is the group that resides in the state and with whom the second generation must compete. On the other hand, it may be more appropriate to judge the second generation in Texas only against other native Texans. What is the best reference group for second generation Mexican-Americans deserves further discussion.

Conclusions

Given our data, two scholars who emphasize either the assimilation process or closing the gap might claim to see conclusive evidence for the often ambiguously defined concept of socioeconomic assimilation. One may reach a more optimistic conclusion while the other may find a pessimistic one (i.e. the proverbial glass half empty versus half full). Whether or not the Mexican-origin population is assimilating in the United States remains in the eye of the beholder, but the present research has now supplied a much richer view of the evidence. The empirical findings offered in this paper should enable

scholars to better see the judgments that have previously been only implicit and that flourish in their ambiguity.

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Figure 1-A: Raw Mexican's Intergenerational Mobility Profile Compared to the White, Non-Hispanic Native Born, 1980 and 2005

