

Article: “Mexican Immigrant Political and Economic Incorporation”
Author: Frank D. Bean, Susan K. Brown and Rubén G. Rumbaut
Issue: Jun. 2006
Journal: *PS: Political Science & Politics*



This journal is published by the American Political Science Association. All rights reserved.

APSA is posting this article for public view on its website. APSA journals are fully accessible to APSA members and institutional subscribers. To view the table of contents or abstracts from this or any of APSA's journals, please go to the website of our publisher Cambridge University Press (<http://journals.cambridge.org>).

This article may only be used for personal, non-commercial, or limited classroom use. For permissions for all other uses of this article should be directed to Cambridge University Press at permissions@cup.org.

Mexican Immigrant Political and Economic Incorporation

Frank D. Bean, Susan K. Brown, and Rubén G. Rumbaut

As the United States begins the twenty-first century, it remains the world's leading immigration country. In 2000 (the latest year for which migration data are available on a global basis) the United States was home to almost 35 million legal and unauthorized migrants, or 2.7 times as many as any other country.¹ Although other nations have higher proportions of foreign-born residents (e.g., nearly 25 percent in Australia and 20 percent in Canada), the globally dominant position of the United States in regard to numbers of new immigrants reinforces its self-image as a "nation of immigrants," as does the fact that immigration is generally seen as contributing to the country's economic and demographic strength.² However, over the past three decades, more and more new arrivals with non-European origins have come to the country (more than four-fifths are Latino and Asian), many with very low levels of education and illegal status at entry. These changes have fueled public concerns and led to heated debates over whether U.S. admissions and settlement-related policies ought to be modified.

Such disputes have tended to center on three broad issues: Are too many (and the wrong kinds of) immigrants coming? Are those coming negatively affecting the employment and earnings prospects of either natives or earlier immigrants? And, are those coming less likely to become an integral part of mainstream America compared with earlier waves of immigrants, either owing to insufficient educational preparation for today's post-industrial economy or to less inclination to integrate, especially socioculturally?³ Of these questions, the one hardest to answer (and thus, the most controversial) is the last, in

part because it is still too soon to tell how the children and grandchildren of the newcomers are going to fare in the United States. Most of the new immigrants have arrived so recently that many of their children, let alone their grandchildren, have yet to reach adulthood. If it takes at least a couple of generations for new immigrant groups to become fully involved in the American mainstream, not enough time has elapsed to discern how the descendants of the new groups are turning out economically, culturally, or politically.

One of the most influential expressions of such concerns comes from the pen of Samuel P. Huntington, who has recently argued that American identity and culture are being threatened by a "trend toward cultural bifurcation," the driving force of which is "immigration from Latin America and especially from Mexico".⁴ For Huntington, this presumed divergence is occurring in large measure because "Mexican immigrants and their progeny have not assimilated into American society as other immigrants did in the past and as many other immigrants are doing now".⁵ While Huntington's main worry focuses on the putative negative cultural implications of Mexican immigration, the merits of his argument depend substantially on his claim that Mexicans are not assimilating, an assertion he seeks to support with data drawn from the research literature, some of which has been put forth by the authors of this paper. But how adequate is such evidence? On what kind of assumptions does it rest? Is it in fact true that Mexicans are not assimilating?

The Research Literature

Because so many of the new immigrant groups as well as so many Mexicans are recent arrivals, participants in the immigration policy debates on Mexican incorporation have tended to base their arguments on data from the immigrant generation, although evidence about the mostly teen-aged members of the second generation has also recently begun to emerge.⁶ Actual longitudinal data that track individual immigrants over time or measure true intergenerational change (from parent to child) have largely been lacking. Thus, extrapolations about the incorporation

Frank D. Bean is Professor of Sociology (fbean@uci.edu), Susan K. Brown is Assistant Professor of Sociology (skbrown@uci.edu), and Rubén G. Rumbaut is Professor of Sociology at University of California, Irvine (rrumbaut@uci.edu). Some of the research results reported in this paper come from a research project entitled "Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles" and supported by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation.

prospects of recent immigrant groups, including Mexicans, have often perforce relied on data showing what immigrants look like at the time of arrival, information that offers only short-run, static pictures of the immigrant incorporation experience. To be sure, analysts have examined trends over time in the characteristics of immigrants when they come, but the results from such approaches tend more to reflect changes in what kinds of immigrants are arriving than they do any longer-term changes experienced by individual immigrants. This is especially true when depictions of immigrants involve examinations only of recent arrivals.

What portrait of the immigrant experience has emerged from such partial and incomplete information? Basically, it shows a growing gap in educational levels between the native-born and many immigrants, particularly those from Mexico, who constituted about one-third of all U.S. immigrants in 2000.⁷ It also indicates almost half of the migrants from Mexico in 2000 were living in the United States illegally. These patterns—large numbers of Mexican migrants coming with low education and unauthorized status—raise serious questions in the minds of many observers, including Huntington. If many of today's immigrants start out so far behind other new labor force entrants, how can they ever catch up? Moreover, if many immigrants enter and reside in the country in unauthorized statuses, might not this predispose them to condone, if not engage in, illegal behavior, not to mention to eschew American ideals and values? In short, the information from which this picture is drawn invites the conclusion that immigrants in general, and Mexican immigrants in particular, are generating a permanent and largely illegal underclass, perhaps one even antagonistic to mainstream values and behaviors.

At first glance, this may not seem an inaccurate or unreasonable point of view. However, we must recall that it is based on largely short-run, static depictions of the incorporation experiences of new immigrants. More complete pictures would involve longer-run, dynamic examinations of what happens to immigrants several years after their arrival, as well as true inter-generational comparisons between parents and children. This is particularly important in the case of those Mexican immigrants with low education who enter illegally and whose initial status suggests especially pessimistic futures. Before jumping to dire conclusions, then, we need to ask what in fact is actually happening to Mexican immigrants in the decades after they arrive? What is happening to their children? More specifically, to what extent are immigrants changing their migration statuses from unauthorized to legal? To what extent are they becoming citizens? What are their reasons for doing so? Do the children of those who change their status and become citizens advance farther economically than the children of those who don't? Answers to such questions help to provide better bases for assessing

whether worries about many of the new arrivals seem justified.

Mexican Migration Status and Naturalization

It is thus not difficult to comprehend why many observers (including Huntington) fear that Mexican immigrants may be less likely to become integral members of American society. The average years of schooling completed for Mexican male immigrants in the United States in 2000 was only 8.8 years, and for Mexican women it was slightly lower, 8.7 years. To obtain perspective on these figures, it is useful to note that the educational levels of native African Americans, a group that has faced historically educational disadvantage in the United States, averaged almost 50 percent higher in 2000 (12.8 years of schooling).⁸ Moreover, as noted above, Mexican immigrants also frequently come without legal status. More than four-fifths of Mexican arrivals between 1995–2000 are estimated to be unauthorized.⁹ Clearly, recent Mexican immigrants start their lives in the United States in enormously disadvantaged positions. If they tended to stay in these positions, it might well bode ill for the country.

But do most Mexican immigrants in fact remain in an unauthorized status? To what degree do their migration situations change? And to what extent does change in status propel greater educational levels, at least among the children of immigrants? Longitudinal evidence about transitions in migration status, especially the movement from unauthorized to legal status, is almost non-existent. Fortunately, a recent study, entitled *Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA)*, provides new and heretofore unavailable information about intergenerational changes among Mexican immigrants.¹⁰ This study queried the adult children of Mexican immigrants about the migration status of their parents and changes in that status between the time their parents came to the country and the time the children were later surveyed (about 30 to 35 years later, on average). Almost half of the respondents indicated their fathers had come to the United States as unauthorized immigrants, a fraction consistent with the demographic estimates of unauthorized migration in California occurring 30 to 35 years ago.¹¹ However, by the time of the IIMMLA survey in 2004, only about one-eighth of the respondents' fathers were still unauthorized. The others had become legal permanent residents or naturalized. In other words, the roughly half of the Mexican immigrant fathers who had legal status at the time of their arrival in the United States had swollen to nearly 90 percent two decades or so later. This increase makes clear that unauthorized migration status can and often does change a great deal in the years after arrival and is not a permanent, static property of Mexican immigrants coming to the country over

the past three decades. While such changes in status may sometimes depend on special programs that become available for legalization, like those connected with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, the sheer fact that such opportunities were taken advantage of appreciably by this generation of entrants only dramatizes that Mexican immigrants do not avoid such chances when they present themselves.

But what of Mexican migrants' interest in obtaining citizenship? Huntington notes: "Naturalization is the single most important political dimension of assimilation."¹² Traditionally, Mexican immigrants have shown one of the lowest tendencies to naturalize of any national origin group in the country. But this has been primarily due to the fact that so many of them in the past came on a temporary basis, often as seasonal circular migrants. Even among those who were legal immigrants, many often returned to Mexico, and many others planned to return eventually, often for economic reasons. However, as more and more have come in recent years intending to stay permanently, greater numbers have begun to naturalize.¹³ By 2000, more than a fifth of all Mexican-born persons in the country in 1992 had become citizens, compared with about 30 percent of all other immigrants, quite a high level considering that the proportion of Mexicans who are unauthorized and thus ineligible to naturalize is much higher than is the case for other immigrant groups.¹⁴ In short, Mexicans appear to be approaching the levels of previous immigrant groups in their tendency to naturalize. If coming to the United States as an unauthorized migrant in fact fosters greater tolerance for illegal behavior, we would not expect to see so many Mexicans changing their legal status or seeking naturalization.

What do we find when we examine longitudinally the transition to citizenship among Mexican immigrant fathers in the IIMMLA data? The fathers of the Los Angeles respondents show evidence of considerable change after arrival. None of them, of course, had been citizens when they first came. However, by about 30 to 35 years later, almost two-thirds of those coming initially as legal permanent residents had become citizens. And of those who had come as unauthorized immigrants, nearly half had naturalized. Such transitions carry significance because naturalization seems likely to foster educational attainment among the children of immigrants, together with greater commitment to the values of their new society. Legal permanent residents who have cleared all the hurdles required to become naturalized citizens are free to increase their participation in those civic and social institutions to which citizenship provides access. Doing so not only may make them more familiar with the opportunities educational and other institutions in the country offer, the very act of fulfilling new citizenship roles, together with having sworn allegiance to the United States in the process of acquiring citizenship, provides feedback that reinforces societal val-

ues and national identification. Of course, naturalization may self-select those more likely to value education and more likely to seek integration in general. But even if this is the case, the significant point remains that considerable naturalization is occurring. In so naturalizing, immigrants may not finish their process of identifying with their new country, but they certainly cover a great deal of the distance involved in the journey.

Intergenerational Education Mobility

Widespread changes from illegal to legal migration status and transitions to naturalization thus indicate that Mexican immigrants are not mired in static life situations that thwart other kinds of incorporation, including further political incorporation. The number and pace of these transitions suggest the expectations of scholars like Huntington that Mexican immigrants will fare poorly in America based on their entry characteristics are unduly pessimistic. If we were further to observe that the children of immigrants are in fact becoming economically incorporated, this would add more support to the idea that more optimistic outlooks regarding the incorporation prospects of Mexican immigrants are warranted. Recent research has revealed that when the educational levels of those third-generation Mexicans are compared with those of second-generation and first-generation Mexicans old enough to be their fathers and grandfathers respectively (as opposed to those not old enough), substantial educational gains are evident across generations.¹⁵ This suggests that considerable intergenerational mobility in education does in fact occur among Mexican immigrants. While a gap may still remain before Mexican Americans achieve full parity with non-Hispanic whites, rapid improvements appear to be taking place, albeit from low starting points, that involve upward intergenerational movement.¹⁶

Are such higher levels of education connected intergenerationally with political incorporation? In particular, do the children of immigrants do better educationally when their parents have naturalized? If political incorporation is related to economic mobility, we would expect to find higher levels of human capital among the second generation offspring of immigrants who have naturalized compared to the offspring of immigrants who have not. To shed light on this possibility, we again examine the IIMMLA data, concentrating on the naturalization status of the respondents' fathers. The results show that within the second generation, having a father who naturalized improves substantially the likelihood of human capital acquisition. About 52 percent of those whose immigrant fathers had naturalized had received a college degree, or some college education (including community college), compared to about 43 percent of those whose fathers were still legal permanent residents, versus only about 13.6 percent of those whose fathers were still unauthorized.

Similarly, only about 9 percent of the father-naturalized group had failed to finish high school, compared with 17 percent of the legal permanent resident or unauthorized group.

Skeptics may claim that naturalization mostly reflects individual rather than social motivations and maximizes individual gain rather than broader social goals. However, the above findings about the educational attainment of the children of immigrants suggest that immigrants appear likely to link naturalization to better life chances for offspring, whose success in turn may serve the social purpose of minimizing overall financial risk to the family. Further indication that naturalization decisions are often more social than individual in origin also emerges from the IIMMLA findings. If minimization of risk to the family/household primarily drives naturalization, we would expect higher levels of human capital acquisition among the children of immigrants whose backgrounds most involved vulnerability and uncertainty. Fathers who came to the United States as unauthorized migrants fit into this category, given that they are more subject to exploitation than other immigrants and face more uncertainty and ambiguity about their futures. In fact, when we compare the college attainment levels of those whose fathers eventually became legal permanent residents and then naturalized after having initially come as unauthorized entrants with those who initially came as legal permanent residents and then naturalized, the former group shows higher educational attainment (54.2 percent receiving a college degree or completing some college versus 51.0 percent for the latter group).

Conclusion

A large fraction of contemporary immigration to the United States, including a substantial majority coming from Mexico, involves persons who are unauthorized and come with initially low levels of education. This understandably generates concern that an unassimilable underclass may be emerging, one perhaps even with the potential to become increasingly structurally and culturally separate from the rest of the country. Most information available about new immigrants, especially Mexican immigrants, provides information about their characteristics only upon arrival and thus tends to support such views. And indeed, if Mexican immigrants continued to possess the same characteristics as when they first came, there might indeed be cause for worry. But closer looks at Mexican immigrants reveal this not to be the case. Based on information about what happens to individual immigrants after entry and about what happens to their children, we find in the data examined here that many are undergoing changes that knit them more closely into the political and economic fabric of the country. This is taking place through conversion of unauthorized migration status to legal permanent residence status, an important precursor of political incorpo-

ration, as well as subsequently through naturalization itself, perhaps the single most significant aspect of political integration.

Finally, when we examine the educational attainments of the children of Mexican immigrants, we find evidence that parents' trajectories of political incorporation lead to educational improvement among their offspring. That is, greater educational gains take place among the children of those immigrants who have attained legal permanent residence status and, within this group, still further advances occur among those who have naturalized. At the other end of the spectrum, staying unauthorized handicaps the educational attainment of offspring. But not a very large fraction of immigrants with children living in the United States appears to remain unauthorized for long periods of time. Our assessment of political and economic incorporation after immigrant arrival, an undertaking that involves our examining education in the second generation, thus uncovers considerable upward economic mobility. This suggests a basis for optimism about the eventual incorporation prospects of the children of recent Mexican immigrants, a considerably different picture from that which emerges when we examine only what immigrants look like when they first come. This conclusion is buttressed by other recent research carried out in Mexico, which finds that well over half (56.7 percent) of those who had been in the U.S. recently as unauthorized immigrants stated their intention to legalize their status in the United States. A nearly identical percentage (56.4 percent) reported that they desired to become U.S. citizens. And nearly three-quarters (74.7 percent) had a favorable view of Mexicans who become U.S. citizens.¹⁷ Such results, together with those presented in this paper, suggest that Mexican immigrants possess strong motivations to integrate into U.S. society, findings contrary to Huntington's fears about their intentions and unassimilability.

Notes

- 1 United Nations 2002.
- 2 Smith and Edmonston 1997.
- 3 Bean and Stevens 2003.
- 4 Huntington 2004, 221.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 6 E.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001.
- 7 Passel, Van Hook, and Bean 2004.
- 8 U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998–2002.
- 9 Passel, Van Hook, and Bean 2004.
- 10 Bean et al. 2004.
- 11 Van Hook and Bean 1998.
- 12 Huntington 2004, 238.
- 13 Marcelli and Cornelius 2001, Freeman and Bean 1997.
- 14 Bean et al. 2004.
- 15 Smith 2003.

- 16 Smith 2004.
17 Cornelius forthcoming.

References

- Bean, F. D., and G. Stevens. 2003. *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Bean, F. D., J. Van Hook, I. Bloemraad, and S. K. Brown. 2004. "Minimizing risk versus maximizing gain: The welfare reform contexts of immigrant reception, naturalization, and second-generation incorporation." Presented at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, October 29–30.
- Cornelius, Wayne A. Forthcoming. *Impacts of U.S. Immigration Control Policies on Mexican Migration: The View from Sending Communities*. La Jolla, CA: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, UCSD/Lynne Reinner Publishers.
- Freeman, G. P., and F. D. Bean. 1997. Mexico and U.S. worldwide immigration policy. In *At the Crossroads: Mexican Migration and U.S. Policy*, eds. F. D. Bean, R. O. de la Garza, B. R. Roberts, and S. Weintraub. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Huntington, S.P. 2004. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Marcelli, Enrico, and W.A. Cornelius. 2001. The changing profile of Mexican migrants to the United States: New evidence from California and Mexico. *Latin American Research Review* 36 (3): 105–31.
- Passel, J., J. Van Hook, and F. D. Bean. 2004. Estimates of the legal and unauthorized foreign-born population for the United States and selected states, based on Census 2000. Report for the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC: Sabre Systems, Inc.
- Portes, A., and R. G. Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage.
- Smith, J. P. 2003. Assimilation across Latino generations. *American Economic Review* 93 (2): 315–19.
- Smith, J. P. 2004. "Immigrants and the U.S. labor market: Are they succeeding or failing?" Presented at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, November 2.
- Smith, J. P., and B. Edmonston. 1997. *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- United Nations. 2002. *International Migration Report 2002*. New York: United Nations Press.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census. Department of Commerce. 1998–2002. Current Population Survey: Annual Demographic Files (computer files). Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Van Hook, Jennifer, and Frank D. Bean. 1998. Estimating unauthorized Mexican migration to the United States: Issues and results. In *Migration between Mexico and the United States Binational Study, Vol. 1, Binational Study on Migration Project*. Mexico City and Washington, DC: Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform.