# Hispanic/Mexican Fertility: A Cause for Concern?

Reanne Frank[1]
Elizabeth Wildsmith[2]
Kristi Williams[3]

[1] Corresponding Author. Associate Professor of Sociology, The Ohio State University. 238 Townshend Hall, Columbus, OH. 43210. frank.219@osu.edu. Ph (614) 247-4679 fax (614) 292-6687
[2] Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends. ewildsmith@childtrends.org.
[3] Associate Professor of Sociology, The Ohio State University. 238 Townshend Hall, Columbus, OH. 43210. williams.2339@osu.edu. Ph (614) 688-3207 fax (614) 292-6687

**ABSTRACT**

Widespread agreement exists with respect to the magnitude of Hispanic/Mexican-Origin fertility and the critical role it will play in shaping the ethno-racial landscape of the country in the future. There is considerably less consensus in the academic literature over whether the high fertility levels characterizing the Hispanic/Mexican-Origin population are a cause for concern. In this paper we argue that the most important issue for subsequent generations of Mexicans is not the *number* of births occurring to Mexican-Origin women (i.e completed family size) but the *timing* and *marital context* of those births. Using data from the recently compiled Integrated Fertility Series, we produce the first complete description of the broader context of Hispanic/Mexican fertility, identifying variation in these patterns along two different axes (nativity and SES), and compare them against fertility patterns of non-Hispanic black and white women.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, nearly one quarter of the nation's births occurred to Hispanic women (Martin, Hamilton, Sutton, Ventura, Matthews, Kirmeyer, and Osterman 2010). In fact, births have overtaken migration as the main source of population growth among the Mexican-Origin population, accounting for 63% of the 11.2 million increase in the last decade (Pew Hispanic Center 2011). Widespread agreement exists with respect to the magnitude of Hispanic fertility—in particular, Mexican-Origin fertility—and the way it will shape the future ethno-racial landscape of the U.S. There is also an emerging consensus regarding the convergence of Hispanic fertility with that of the general U.S. population (Parrado and Morgan 2008), reflected in the recent declines in Hispanic birth rates.(Hamilton, Mathews, and Ventura 2013)

In this paper, however, we contend that it is not the *number* of births that matters most for subsequent generations of Hispanics (in particular, Mexicans), but rather the *context* of those births—specifically, the age of the mother at birth (i.e. teen fertility), her relationship status at birth, her birth intentions, and parity level. These domains of birth context are often at the center of family and welfare policy initiatives. Yet, while some research suggests a disadvantageous birth context among Hispanics may put women and children at risk of negative outcomes, including poorer health (Henretta 2007; Williams, Sassler, and Nicholson 2008), other research argues that these factors may in fact be less detrimental to Hispanics than other groups, for a combination of structural and cultural reasons (Crosnoe and Wildsmith 2011; Williams, Sassler, Frech, and Adoo 2011). Which of these scenarios is more accurate lies at the crux of whether a process of incorporation among Hispanics is occurring or whether fertility patterns are reinforcing inequality and slowing the pace of social and economic assimilation (DeLeone, Lichter, and Strawderman 2009). We take up this question and propose to produce a complete account of the (social) context of Hispanic/Mexican fertility in the United States as it has evolved over time. Throughout the paper we will focus on both the larger Hispanic population *as well as* the Mexican-Origin population separately when sample size permits (we indicate this dual focus hereafter by referring to the "Hispanic/Mexican population"). The main aim of the paper is to produce a temporal account of the fertility context of the Hispanic population, and the Mexican-Origin population in particular, across 4 different domains (fertility timing, maternal relationship status at birth, fertility intentions, and parity level). We will use the recently compiled Integrated Fertility Series to produce the first complete description of the broader

context of Hispanic/Mexican fertility, identifying variation in these patterns along two different axes (nativity and SES), and compare them against fertility patterns for non-Hispanic black and white women. These analyses will lay a foundation for future work identifying how fertility context shapes well-being, particularly among the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.

**BACKGROUND**

Amid dramatic changes in the context into which children are born, and ultimately, in which they grow up, the experience of Hispanics/Mexicans continues to stand out (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, Wilson, and Matthews 2012). Hispanic women have the highest levels of completed fertility in the United States and, despite impressive declines in recent years, the highest teen birth rates. Recent estimates suggest that 30% of Hispanic teens will have a birth prior to age 20 (Martinez, Copen, and Abma 2011). Additionally, while lower than among non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanic women have higher rates of nonmarital childbearing than non-Hispanic whites—53% of all births to Hispanic women occur outside of marriage—as well as higher rates of unintended childbearing (Mosher 2012; Wildsmith, Guzzo, and Hayford 2010).

These remarkable patterns of fertility have not escaped notice by scholars or the popular press. Much of this focus has been on the high completed fertility of Hispanics/Mexicans, in large part because of the implications for the future racial/ethnic landscape of the U.S. (Parrado and Flippen 2012). We argue, however, that the significance of Hispanic/Mexican fertility lies, not *only* in its impact on population projections, but perhaps, *more importantly*, in its impact on future race/ethnic and socioeconomic inequalities in the U.S. In this respect, a focus on completed fertility misses the characteristics of births (i.e., the domains) that are most central to future patterns of stratification; in particular, the timing of fertility, whether the birth occurred to a teen mother, an unmarried mother, or was unintended. An expanding body of research has linked each of these domains to negative outcomes for children, mothers, and society in general (Brown 2010; Gipson, Koenig, and Hindin 2008; Hoffman and Maynard 2008; Logan, Holcombe, Manlove, and Ryan 2007; McLanahan and Beck 2010; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Waldfogel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn 2010). And although each domain has been shown to be significantly elevated for Hispanics/Mexicans, there is limited research examining these associations among this population.

In this paper we examine trends in fertility patterns among Hispanics/Mexicans, paying close attention to variation within the Hispanic/Mexican population by nativity and socioeconomic status. Historically, scholarly attention emphasized the high overall levels of fertility of *foreign-born* Hispanics/Mexicans (Bean, Swicegood, and Berg 2000). However, existing descriptive patterns suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the *native-born component* of the Hispanic/Mexican-Origin population (Batson 2013; Wildsmith 2004), particularly with respect to birth context. Currently, teenage childbearing is higher for *native-born* Hispanics than for the foreign-born (partly due to different age distributions), as is the share of births that occur to unmarried mothers (Hummer and Hamilton 2010; Landale and Oropesa 2007). We know relatively little about the temporal patterns of early, unintended, and nonmarital fertility among the native-born Hispanic/Mexican population, yet how they fare on these dimensions as compared to other race/ethnic groups, particularly over time and across generations, serve as critical indicators of well-being in the U.S. Perhaps equally as important, we account for variation by socioeconomic status. Some research finds that, consistent with a segmented pattern of assimilation, there are multiple trajectories of incorporation over time among Hispanics/Mexicans in the U.S., such that some groups, particularly those with more human/social capital, are faring quite well, while others are struggling and becoming increasingly disadvantaged (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Whether this is true in regard to birth context is not well examined.

Beyond a singular focus on Hispanic/Mexican completed fertility size, our research moves beyond the existing literature in its focus on the *timing, relationship context, and intentionality of births* (in addition to parity), which provide a more complete picture of childbearing, and must be considered when discussing whether Hispanic/Mexican fertility patterns are consistent with a general or segmented assimilation perspective. There remain many unanswered questions regarding the context of Hispanic/Mexican births that lie at the crux of whether a process of incorporation is occurring or whether fertility patterns are reinforcing inequality and slowing the pace of social and economic assimilation (DeLeone, Lichter, and Strawderman 2009). Parrado and Morgan (2008), whose pioneering work on cumulative fertility levels directly informs this paper, argue that "future work should also examine whether convergence is occurring with other aspects of fertility behavior. For instance…the timing of childbearing (especially teenage childbearing) or out-of-wedlock births." Our objective is to take up this call and examine

patterns of fertility behaviors frequently overshadowed by the high number of Hispanic/Mexican births.

In conceptualizing our examination of the fertility behavior of the Hispanic/Mexican population over time, we draw primarily from assimilation theory. Two strains of assimilation theory are currently dominant, both of which aim to describe the process of incorporation of U.S. immigrants and their descendants over time. The *general assimilation* framework predicts a narrowing of differences across various cultural, economic, and behavioral outcomes between racial/ethnic groups as immigrant groups spend more time in the context of the U.S. and become farther removed from the homeland (Alba and Nee 1997). The *segmented assimilation* perspective, in contrast, argues that multiple trajectories of assimilation may occur, with some groups assimilating towards the mainstream and other groups actually faring worse across generations as they come to resemble other marginalized groups with the U.S. (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993).

There is no consensus as to which framework best explains how the U.S. experience has affected Hispanic/Mexican fertility and family formation behavior (Wildsmith 2004). The majority of existing empirical work has concentrated on completed fertility levels, with much less attention given to the domains of birth context that we propose to study here. The general assimilation framework has gained its strongest support in studies of marital fertility. A recent analysis of inter-generational change in completed fertility among Hispanic/Mexican women overturned much of the conventional wisdom regarding a *lack* of a convergence in completed fertility between Hispanic/Mexican women and non-Hispanic whites over time. Once the authors aligned biological and immigrant generations, they observed patterns of substantial convergence, providing strong support for the general assimilation framework (Parrado and Morgan 2008).

Other work, restricted to cross-sectional comparisons, insists on the continued relevance of a sub-cultural hypothesis, with high rates of Hispanic/Mexican fertility argued to be rooted in cultural repertoires such as familism, that encourage high fertility among Hispanics/Mexicans within the U.S. (Lichter, Johnson, Turner, and Churilla 2012). Data from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey (ACS) demonstrate that, net of differences in social characteristics, Hispanic and Mexican fertility rates are highest in new Hispanic destinations in the U.S., where, the authors argue, "cultural expressions of Hispanicity" have been replenished including "its characteristically high fertility" (Lichter, Johnson, Turner, and Churilla 2012).

Still other work is more suggestive of a segmented assimilation framework, particularly research that extends beyond the domain of marital fertility. In an analysis of data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), Frank and Heuveline find that at younger ages, native-born Mexican-Origin women had higher fertility levels than foreign-born women, a trend that was more pronounced in recent cohorts and increasingly due to nonmarital fertility (Frank and Heuveline 2005). A separate analysis using CPS data of nonmarital fertility among the Mexican-Origin population found that education emerges as a key moderator in the process of assimilation (Wildsmith 2004). Rates of nonmarital fertility for Mexican-Origin women were shown to be highly dependent on education level with women with less than a high school education having higher levels of nonmarital fertility that were similar to those of African-American women. A similar pattern was found in an analysis of first-birth timing with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) demonstrating that native-born Mexican-Origin women with low education experienced earlier first-birth timing (Batson 2013). These studies suggest that key indicators of the opportunity structure for social mobility (e.g. education level) may precede assimilation in the realm of family formation. They support the segmented assimilation framework to the extent that they demonstrate assimilation toward multiple reference groups, largely dependent on socioeconomic status. Whether a general assimilation or segmented assimilation framework best describes patterns of fertility behavior for the Hispanic/Mexican Origin population awaits a more complete analysis that examines change over time across multiple domains of fertility, differentiating by sub-group.

**DATA**

The purpose of this paper is to produce the first temporal account of the *broader* context of Hispanic/Mexican fertility. Moving beyond previous work that has focused almost exclusively on the levels of completed fertility for this population, we will describe the fertility context of the Hispanic/Mexican population across 4 different domains (teen fertility/fertility timing, intentions, parity and relationship status at birth). To do so requires a large dataset that includes a sufficient number of Hispanic/Mexican-Origin women spanning multiple cohorts and that provides comprehensive information on the broader context of fertility. Until recently no such comprehensive dataset existed. The recently compiled Integrated Fertility Survey Series (IFSS) corrects this omission. The IFSS's first data release was in 2010 and is a harmonized dataset

based on 10 individual component nationally-representative U.S. family and fertility surveys spanning a roughly 50 year period (they include: the Growth of American Families (GAF), National Fertility Surveys (NFS), and National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG)).

The dataset has 4 essential features that make it ideal for our purposes: 1) The main purpose of the IFSS is to yield insights into *changes* in fertility and the family in the U.S., including across different sub-populations, e.g. by race/ethnicity. Previous attempts to make comparisons over time in the realm of fertility and family formation for any segment of the U.S. population have been constrained by difficulties in using multiple datasets to perform time-series analyses. By harmonizing surveys over a 50 year period, the IFSS overcomes this constraint and provides us with the first opportunity to create a temporal account of the broader context of Hispanic/Mexican fertility. 2) Because the IFSS draws from surveys that are explicitly focused on fertility and family formation, it includes comprehensive information on each of the 4 domains we propose to describe. For example, each of the IFSS component surveys includes information on the fertility intentions allowing us to use the harmonized data to provide one of the first time-series of fertility intentions across race/ethnicity. 3) Many previous attempts to analyze the fertility context of the Hispanic/Mexican population have been hampered by sample size issues. The IFSS includes information on a sufficient number of Hispanic women, and in most cases Mexican-Origin women specifically, for the descriptive analyses we propose here. Although we are not able to utilize all of the component surveys because Hispanic ethnicity was not asked on three of them, we are able to utilize the rest. Furthermore, we plan on additionally harmonizing the NSFG 2006-2010 (which is not included in the current IFSS data). Table 1 presents the n sizes for women by race/ethnicity and by birth cohort.

Table 1. N's for Women ages 15-44 from the IFSS, by Race/Ethnicity and Birth Cohort

| *Birth Cohort* | <1945 | 1946-55 | 1956-65 | 1966-75 | 1976-85 | 1986-90 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hispanic | 600 | 913 | 1,907 | 2,375 | 1,737 | 542 |
| Mexican-Origin | 247 | 442 | 1,015 | 1,429 | 1,061 | 339 |
| Non-Hisp. white | 6,631 | 8,407 | 9,120 | 6,798 | 4,438 | 1,152 |
| Non-Hisp. black | 4,106 | 5,053 | 4,555 | 3,151 | 1,746 | 453 |

4) For each of the 4 domains we describe, we expect considerable diversity within the Hispanic/Mexican population along two axes of differentiation: nativity and socioeconomic status. In terms of SES, the IFSS includes comprehensive information on individual and familial SES which will allow us to move beyond a problematic reliance on maternal education as a proxy for SES (which is often a cause *and* a consequence of fertility and family formation behavior and is often the only SES measure available in many existing datasets). In terms of nativity, beginning with women interviewed in the 1988 NSFG, country of birth is ascertained which will allow us to differentiate between native and foreign-born women. The inclusion of information on SES and nativity for a sufficient number of Hispanic women over multiple cohorts will allow for the first descriptive accounting of Hispanic fertility and family formation behavior relative to non-Hispanic whites and blacks over time.

**PROPOSED ANALYSIS**

The analytic approach for this paper is split into two components. First, for each domain, we will describe patterns of change over time by race/ethnicity (i.e. comparing Hispanic/Mexicans with non-Hispanic whites and blacks), differentiating foreign- and native-born when possible. Second, we will use multivariate modeling to identify how different sets of factors, i.e. socioeconomic, demographic etc., are associated with the 4 different domains across groups, and whether these associations have changed over time.

*Descriptive*. Depending on the domain under investigation, we will estimate proportions, percents, cumulative percents, probabilities or averages of each fertility domain across quinquennial birth cohorts for each race/ethnic group, distinguishing by nativity and SES when possible. The age sub-samples we will use will depend on the domain under investigation. For instance, for measuring completed fertility (children ever born--CEB), our descriptive analysis is necessarily restricted to women who have reached at least age 40 by the time of the survey and thus have come to the end of their reproductive years. For these women we can examine roughly 6 five-year birth cohorts. With respect to a focus on early childbearing, we will also include younger birth cohorts and additionally distinguish the descriptive estimates by age.

We plan on devoting considerable time to investigating the multi-faceted nature of the domains. For instance, in the realm of nonmarital childbearing, we will estimate trends not only

nonmarital births, but also distinguish between nonmarital births that occur within and outside of cohabiting unions. In the realm of fertility intentions, a harmonized set of questions on fertility intentions exists across the entire IFSS dataset which will allow us to capture changes in some basic aspects of intendedness over a long time period on a parity specific basis. More detailed questions are only available in the more recent IFSS component surveys (e.g. beginning in the 2002 NSFG). Accordingly, for a shorter time span (i.e. only examining 3 birth cohorts), we will also follow Wildsmith et al. (2010) and will also examine unwanted vs. unintended births, distinguishing between moderately and seriously mistimed births, which will better capture the heterogeneity in the meaning of intendedness.(Wildsmith, Guzzo, and Hayford 2010). With respect to the domain of fertility timing, our descriptive portion of the analysis will focus on changes in first birth timing across the entire age spectrum as well as on the transition to early motherhood given the relatively higher rates of teen pregnancy within the Hispanic/Mexican population.

*Multivariate*. The second component of the analytic approach is to conduct a series of multivariate analyses (separately by domain) which will allow us to identify the factors associated with each domain and whether the importance of these factors varies over time by race/ethnicity. Central to our approach is a focus on maternal socioeconomic status. As mentioned earlier, we are in a better position to measure SES than many previous analyses of fertility and formation behavior because of the IFSS's extensive set of respondent (R) familial background factors, including: respondent's parental education levels, parental home family structure (i.e. whether R's parents lived together at age 14), parental fertility context (i.e. number of children R's mother had, age at first birth for R's mother), rural residence at age 16 and R's maternal employment status.

Model choice will depend on the domain under investigation. For instance, to model age at first birth we will use discrete-time logistic regression based on person-year datasets. For some analyses, we will use births as the unit of analysis instead of women (e.g. predicting the relationship context at birth). We plan on estimating several sets of multivariate models for each domain, with the specific modeling plan depending on the domain under investigation. For example, in the case of first-birth timing, previous research suggests that the associations between family background characteristics and early first births vary by age (i.e. the influence of

familial SES on an early first birth is stronger for teenagers than for women in their early 20s) (Hynes, Joyner, Peters, and DeLeone 2008). In this case, in addition to testing for differential effects over time (i.e. by cohort) and by race/ethnicity/nativity, we will also test for differential effects by age. Models will be run separately by race/ethnicity/nativity, cohort, and age (when appropriate) and then pooled along certain dimensions to test for significant interactions between, e.g. cohort and the family background variables, separately by race/ethnicity/nativity.

This analysis will be one of the first efforts to focus explicitly on the birth context of the Hispanic/Mexican-Origin population and sets the groundwork to investigate the consequences of the descriptive patterns we uncover for the health and well-being of Hispanic/Mexican-origin women and their children.

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