Assimilating Into Inequality: Second-Generation Mexican-Americans and Social Mobility

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Abstract

For the most socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrant groups, social integration implies intergenerational socioeconomic mobility. Therefore, our understanding of how the Mexican second-generation is joining the American mainstream would benefit from measuring their socioeconomic gains relative to their own immigrant parents. This paper employs the 1997 Longitudinal Survey of Youth to measure intergenerational mobility among Mexican second-generation youth. These data make it possible to assess how Mexican second-generation youth fare relative to their own immigrant parents and relative to other youth. Given current trends of growing inequality and slow growth, modest gains in intergenerational educational attainment, employment, and earnings are expected. Comparisons with non-immigrant youth of similar class origins provide a benchmark to assess these gains.

Mexican labor migration to the United States dates back to the last age of mass migration and has been uninterrupted since. Over the course of the 20th century, this previously modest and geographically limitted flow expanded into the largest migrant flow to any one country (Passel and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). Mexican immigrants now represent nearly a third (28%) of post-1965 immigrants (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez 2013). They are also some of the poorest and most likely to lack authorization to live and work in the United States – conditions that expose their U.S.-raised and U.S.-born children to poor integration outcomes (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2005; Rumbaut 2008; Bean, Leach, Brown, Bachmeier, and Hipp 2011).

Their immigrant parents' disadvantaged economic status implies that the social integration or assimilation of Mexican second-generation youth will involve intergenerational social mobility. As they attain more education, higher incomes, and safer and more stable jobs than those held by their immigrant parents, these second-generation youth will also become more imersed into mainstream institutions.

Given contemporary trends of growing inequality and slow economic growth, we may expect these intergenerational gains to be modest and incremental. Yet, the low status of immigrant parents also suggest that their children may experience a regression to the mean phenomenon – children of parents at the tails of the distributions of education, income, and other endowments can expect to move towards the center of these distributions (Borjas 2001). How then might we interpret findings of intergenetrational mobility among this second-generation group?

This paper adopts both inter- and intra-generational comparisons to answer this question. First, the educational attainment, earnings, and employment status, of Mexican second-generation adults are compared to that of their own immigrant parents. Next, these same outcomes of Mexican second-generation youth are compared to those of youth whose parents are native-born while controlling for family socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity and a host of potential confounders. A finding of advantage relative to the intra-generation referent (non-Hispanic white youth of native parentage and similar class origins) may suggest that these immigrant families support greater upward mobility than their socioeconomic status would predict. Conversely, a finding of disadvantage relative to this referent would suggest that the second-generation group's upward mobility is lower than predicted by their socioeconomic background. A finding of "no difference," meanwhile, would allow us to reject both alternative hypotheses to conclude that, on average, Mexican second-generation youth experience about as much mobility as could be expected, given their modest origins.

Whereas much of the sociological literature focuses on other indicators of integration and on intra rather than inter-generational comparisons, some studies in both economics and sociology employ intergenerational mobility as a measure of second-generation integration. If upward mobility is observed among the second generation, this finding is generally interpreted as suggestive of progress towards greater integration or assimilation (Smith 2003; Card, DiNardo, and Estes 1998).

In applying this mobility approach to study second-generation integration researchers face several challenges, however. Because of the dearth of intergenerational longitudinal data, most studies have employed a cohort or even a synthetic cohort approach rather than measuring the outcomes of youth relative to those of their own parents (Card, DiNardo, and Estes 1998; Smith 2003; Park and Myers 2010; Borjas 2001). Applications with cross-sectional data where today's second-generation is compared to today's first generation will be biased if immigrant flows become more selective or more heterogeneous over time (Borjas 1989). Actual cohort studies where second generation immigrants today are compared, in aggregate, to first generation immigrants a generation ago represent an improvement over cross-sectional analyses but are also vulnerable to biases because some of the immigrants measured a generation before may not have had children or stayed in the country. Immigrants who left or remained childless may be very different from those who stayed and raised families.

One study, which had access to longitudinal data on multiple Mexican-origin families compared immigrants to their own parents but resorted to census data to compare the Mexican sample to "native" groups (Telles and Ortiz 2009). Because the census does not collect data on adults' parents socioeconomic status, it compared the Mexican-origin sample to the mean of all non-Hispanic white adults, with no controls for prental SES.

This paper addresses these challenges by employing data from a longitudinal study that includes measurements on parents and youth for both the second-generation sample and its' intra-generational comparison groups.

Data and Methods

This study uses data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), which follows a cohort of 8984 youths who were 12 to 18 years of age in 1997 annually. The last available wave of data were collected in 2010, when youth were 25 to 31 years old. With these data, it is possible ot identify a subsample of Mexican second-generation youth ($n = 488$) as well as a large and diverse comparison sample of third and later-generation youth ($n = 7002$).

The socioeconomic outcomes of interest are educational attainment, earnings, and labor market participation, all of which are measured annually. Educational attainment is defined as years of schooling completed and as high-school and college completion in alternative model specifications. Labor force participation is measured as the number of weeks employed in each year, and earnings correspond to annual personal income.

Gross estimates of intergenerational mobility for the Mexican-Second generation group will be obtained by comparing these youths' outcomes in adulthood to parental outcomes measured in the 1997 parents' interview. Ideally, children and parents would be compared at the same age but since only one measurement is available for parents, age will be included as a control variable. In the next set of analyses several analytic strategies[1] will be employed to assess how outcomes for the Mexican-Second generation compare to those of youth of similar socioeconomic origins, net of several cofounders.

Expected Findings

An earlier version of this paper focused on the "downward assimilation" outcome predicted by segmented assimilation theory and the problem of selecting a referent to assess second-generation integration. As the work proceeded, the focus of the analysis shifted to consider intergenerational mobility in educational attainment, employment, and earnings. These planned analysis have not yet been conducted but preliminary descriptive analyses suggest that second-generation Mexican-Americans attain more years of schooling and higher earnings than their own parents.

While Mexican immigrant parents in this sample had 9 years of schooling, most of their children attained at least a high school degree (76%) and went on to college (52%), although only 15% graduated from either a two-year or 4-year college. While over 40% of their parents reported poverty incomes at the survey baseline, only about 7% of second-generation Mexican-American youth reported poverty incomes at age 25, which is substantially lower than the levels of poverty reported by native minorities and no different from the much more afluent non-Hispanic whites in this sample.

A set of preliminary analyses focusing on the downward assimilation outcome (DAI) also suggests that Mexican second-generation youth fare no worse than native minorities, the mean of the population, or non-Hispanic whites of similar socioeconomic backgrounds on several measures of integration. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for this ana-

[1] Hierarchical linear models will be fitted to the continuous outcomes that are measured repeatedly. A survival analysis approach will be used to model the probability of college graduation because these data are right-censored and logistic regressions will model the probability of high-school graduation.

lytic sample, which excludes youth who are immigrant themselves (first generation) and second-generation youth not of Mexican origin[2]. Significance symbols (*) indicate that the difference between a group's mean and the mean of the Mexican second generation is significant ($p - value < 0.05$)[3]. The "matched whites" column refers to a subsample of third and later generation non-hispanic whites who were matched to the Mexican second-generation sample on several family background and demographic characteristics using a propensity-score matching technique.

[2]No other national origin groups are represented in large enough numbers to support inferences about these groups.

[3]Statistical significance was tested with Welch's (non-pooled variance) two-sample t-tests with $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 1: Sample descriptions by comparison group. Youth outcomes were measured at age 25 and predictors were measured at baseline

	Mexican 2nd. gen.	All Natives	Native Whites	Native Minorities	Matched Whites
Youth Outcomes – Age 25					
DAI	0.71	0.71	0.56*	0.89*	0.69
Ever incarcerated (%)	6.63	7.34	5.82	9.49*	7.42
Ever convicted (%)	18.65	21.44	20.39	22.67*	23.58*
Weeks unemployed past year	2.63	3.51*	2.59	4.75*	3.26
Below poverty past year (%)	6.84	11.10*	6.87	16.63*	6.93
Mother before age 20† (%)	30.96	23.78*	16.35*	32.77	23.69
High school drop-out (%)	16.63	10.46*	7.67*	14.36	11.35*
Drop-out with GED (%)	6.29	9.20*	7.07	11.95*	9.46*
High school graduate (%)	24.72	19.83*	19.20*	21.06	23.14
Some college (%)	32.13	26.42*	23.66*	29.80	25.33*
Graduated 2-year college (%)	5.62	6.69	7.24	5.86	5.68
Enrolled in college (%)	4.27	4.22	4.49	3.87	4.22
Graduated 4-year college (%)	9.66	22.70*	30.38*	12.41	20.52*
Family Background					
Family SES	−0.93	0.16*	0.41*	−0.17*	−0.10*
Parent(s) own home (%)	54.93	65.01*	79.18*	45.96*	66.97*
Pr. below poverty 1997 (%)	40.68	18.70*	9.17*	32.47*	18.83*
Parental income ($ * 1000)	24.29	45.59*	56.61*	29.68*	40.41*
Parental education (years)	9.24	13.43*	14.06*	12.59*	12.51*
Single-parent household (%)	35.28	45.28*	37.20	56.17*	39.59
Two-parent household (%)	57.30	36.22*	52.29	15.30*	52.55
Demographic Variables					
Female (%)	53.71	49.51	48.54*	50.25	47.31*
African American (%)	1.39	31.68*	-	75.22*	-
Hispanic (%)	98.65	11.13*	-	26.28*	-
Non-Hispanic white (%)	-	55.95*	100.00*	-	100.00*
Other (%)	55.09	7.01*	-	12.70*	-
Urban (%)	41.57	31.08*	18.53*	47.64*	24.89*
Rural (%)	1.12	11.92*	15.26*	7.74*	1.31
South (%)	29.89	41.35*	31.13	55.69*	27.66
West (%)	60.22	16.28*	17.03*	14.06*	19.94*
Northeast (%)	2.25	16.56*	19.23*	13.44*	21.25*
Midwest (%)	7.64	25.81*	32.61*	16.81*	31.15*

†The statistic reported is the percentage of women experiencing births before age 20.

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