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## **Mexican Immigrant Political and Economic Incorporation**

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As the United States begins the 21st century, it remains the world's leading immigration country. Almost 35 million legal and unauthorized migrants lived in the United States in 2000 (the latest year for which migration data are available on a global basis), a figure 2.7 times larger than the number in any other country (United Nations 2002). 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 (Smith and Edmonston 1997). However, over the past three decades, more and more new arrivals possessing non-European origins (more than four-fifth are Asian and Latino), relatively low levels of education, and illegal statuses at entry have come to the country. 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: (1) Are too many (and the wrong kinds of) immigrants coming? (2) Are those coming negatively affecting the employment and earnings prospects of either natives or earlier immigrants? And, (3) 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 (Bean and Stevens 2003)? Of these questions, the one hardest to answer (and thus, the most controversial) is the last, mostly 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.

Participants in the recent immigration policy debates have thus been forced to base their arguments about immigrant group incorporation on data from the immigrant generation, although evidence about the mostly teen-aged members of the second generation has recently begun to emerge (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Actual longitudinal data that track individual immigrants over time or measure true inter-generational change (from parent to child) have been lacking. Thus, extrapolations about the incorporation prospects of recent immigrant groups 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 examining only 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 constitute more than one-third of all U.S. immigrants. It also indicates almost half of the migrants from Mexico come to the United States illegally. These trends – large numbers of Mexican migrants coming with low education and illegal status – raise serious questions in the minds of many observers. 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 illegally, might not this predispose them to condone if not engage in illegal behavior, not to mention a disinclination to embrace American ideals and values? In short, this picture 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 status from illegal 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 not difficult to comprehend why many observers 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) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998-2002). Moreover, as noted above, Mexican immigrants also frequently come without any kind of legal visa. More than four-fifths of Mexican arrivals between 1995-2000 are estimated to be unauthorized (Passel, Van Hook and Bean 2004). 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 would bode ill for the country.

But do most Mexican immigrants in fact remain in unauthorized statuses? 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 movement from illegal to legal status, is almost non-existent. Fortunately, a recent study, Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA), provides new and heretofore unavailable information about intergenerational changes among Mexican immigrants (Bean et al. 2004). This study queried the adult children of 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 20 years later on average). Almost half of the respondents indicated their

fathers had come to the United States illegally, a fraction consistent with the best recent demographic estimates of unauthorized migration in California occurring 20 to 25 years ago (Passel, Van Hook et al. 2004). 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 almost 90 percent two decades or so later. This increase makes clear that illegal migration status changes 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.

But what of Mexican migrants' interest in obtaining citizenship? Samuel P. Huntington (2004) notes: "Naturalization is the single most important political dimension of assimilation" (p.238). 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. As more and more have come in recent years intending to stay permanently, however, greater numbers have begun to naturalize (Freeman and Bean 1997). 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 (Bean et al. 2004). 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

fostered greater tolerance for illegal behavior, we would not expect to see so many Mexicans changing their legal status or seeking naturalization.

What we do 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 25 years later, more than two-thirds of those coming initially as legal permanent residents had become citizens. And of those who had come as unauthorized immigrants, more than two-fifths 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 values and national identification. In naturalizing, immigrants may not complete the 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 that expectations that Mexican immigrants will fare poorly in America based on their entry characteristics may be unduly pessimistic. If we were to observe that the children of immigrants were in fact becoming economically incorporated, this would further support the idea that observers should consider more optimistic outlooks regarding the incorporation prospects of Mexican immigrants. 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 (Smith 2003). This suggests that considerable intergenerational mobility in education may 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 (Smith 2004).

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 2nd 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 2nd generation, having a father who naturalized improves substantially the likelihood of human capital acquisition. About 25 percent of those whose immigrant fathers had naturalized had received a college degree or were still enrolled in college, compared to about 22 percent of those whose fathers were legal permanent residents, versus only about 15 percent of those whose fathers were still unauthorized. Similarly,

only about 8 percent of the father-naturalized group had failed to finish high school, compared with 15 percent of the legal permanent resident group and 27 percent of the 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 after having initially come as unauthorized entrants with those who had initially come as and stayed legal permanent residents, the former group shows higher educational attainment (23.1 percent receiving or still earning college degrees or higher versus 20.7 percent for the latter group). And among those who had eventually naturalized after coming as unauthorized entrants, the advantage was even greater (27.6 percent of the children achieving at least a college degree compared to 23.0 percent for those whose fathers had eventually naturalized after coming legally).

## Conclusion

A large fraction of contemporary immigration to the United States, including a substantial majority coming from Mexico, involves persons who arrive illegally and 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 illegal migration status to legal permanent residence status, an important precursor of political incorporation, 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 considerable evidence that parental trajectories of political incorporation lead to offspring educational improvement. 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 in unauthorized statuses severely handicaps offspring educational attainment. But not a very large fraction of persons appears to remain unauthorized for a long

period of time. Our assessment then of political and economic incorporation after immigrant arrival, an undertaking that takes us into examining education in the second generation, uncovers considerable upward economic mobility. This suggest a solid basis for optimism about the eventual incorporation prospects of recent Mexican immigrants, a vastly different picture from that which emerges when we examine only what immigrants look like when they arrive.

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