



LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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THE STATE OF LATINO LOS ANGELES

by

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Latinos are increasingly important to the fabric of everyday life in California and, in particular, Los Angeles, where their population will soon top that of other racial/ethnic groups. This policy brief examines how the quality of life for Latinos in Los Angeles compares to that of whites, blacks, and Asians. Data from a number of sources, including the decennial census in 1990 and 2000, were used to create an “equality index” that quantifies the experiences of these four racial/ethnic groups in terms of their overall welfare in six important areas: economic well-being, education, health, housing, criminal justice, and civic engagement (Nichols 2005; Raphael and Stoll 2007).¹

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

According to decennial census data, during the 1990s the Latino population of California grew 188 percent, exceeding the growth of all other racial/ethnic groups as a whole. In Los Angeles the Latino population

grew by only 26.6 percent, indicating that Latino population growth was stronger in areas of California outside Los Angeles. Nonetheless, by 2000 Latinos had become the most populous racial/ethnic group in Los Angeles, nearing majority status at 46 percent. The actual percentage is likely higher given the widely acknowledged undercounting of Latinos, which is the consequence of a large undocumented population, mixed housing arrangements in which multiple families live together but are only counted as one, garage conversions that are unknown to the state, and other factors that discourage Latinos from participating in the decennial census and other surveys. In California in 2000 almost half of Latino residents were foreign born, and approximately 38 percent of this group had immigrated within the previous ten years (table 1).

EQUALITY INDEX

An equality index provides an objective tool for measuring a set of conditions for one racial/ethnic group in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups. Like other commonly used indexes such as the Dow Jones industrial average, an equality index summarizes a variety of outcome data into a single figure that can be used to track change over time and to compare groups at one point in time on various outcome measures such as economic well-being, housing, health, and other important factors.

Table 1. Immigrant Population of California and Los Angeles, 1990 and 2000

	CALIFORNIA			LOS ANGELES		
	Population	Percentage foreign born	Percentage recently immigrated	Population	Percentage foreign born	Percentage recently immigrated
1990						
White	17,029,126	6.7	30.3	3,618,850	11.7	37.3
Black	2,092,446	3.9	50.4	934,776	4.1	47.1
Latino	7,557,550	45.7	52.9	3,351,242	53.2	53.1
Asian	2,710,353	67.4	57.5	907,810	70.4	60.1
Other	240,158	7.8	53.5	50,486	17.3	55.2
2000						
White	15,816,790	7.4	29.4	2,959,614	14.0	30.3
Black	2,181,926	4.5	39.5	901,472	4.8	35.4
Latino	10,966,556	44.6	38.1	4,242,213	49.3	34.9
Asian	3,752,596	67.3	37.6	1,147,834	69.3	36.2
Other	250,665	21.5	39.1	45,544	35.3	40.2

Notes: The percentages for “recently immigrated” give the proportion of foreign-born residents who had immigrated within the previous ten years of the census date. Racial/ethnic groups include Latino/Hispanic and non-Hispanic white, black, Asian, and other.

Source: U.S. Census of Population, 1990 and 2000.

The equality index developed for this study compares conditions indicative of the quality of life experienced by Los Angeles’s four major racial/ethnic groups, allowing one to see how Latinos fare relative to whites, blacks, and Asians. Data are grouped into six subindexes, one for each area of study. Whites are used as the baseline group, with a constant score of 1.00. A score of less than 1.00 means that a racial/ethnic group fared relatively worse than whites in any particular subindex, while a score of greater than 1.00 indicates it fared relatively better than whites.

Because Latinos are a heterogeneous group, aggregating Mexican-origin Latinos with other Latino ethnicities may mask important differences in regard to ethnic origin, generation, immigrant status, and so on. We know, for example, that when compared with Salvadorans, the second-largest Latino ethnicity in Los Angeles, the Mexican-origin population includes

a larger proportion that not only is native-born but also spans many generations, meaning that results might be biased in favor of native born or older generation respondents. In addition, the vast majority of the undocumented Latino population is of Mexican origin. Still, this policy brief, which discusses significant indicators, is an important first step in understanding the relative position of Latinos in Los Angeles.

The results demonstrate that, overall, Latinos and blacks fared worse when compared to Asians and whites (fig. 1). The overall index score for Latinos was 0.69, and the score for blacks was 0.70, meaning that both groups shared the dubious distinction of being equally worse off. The difference between Latinos and African Americans is statistically insignificant. Asians, with an index score of 1.01, were essentially on par with whites. The low overall score for Latinos was driven by their relatively low subindex scores in economic

well-being, housing, education, and criminal justice.

Economic Well-being. Economic factors such as income, employment, poverty, and business ownership strongly influence the overall well-being of individuals and groups in a society. Latinos scored 0.54 on the economic well-being subindex, slightly lower than blacks (0.55), but significantly lower than Asians (0.79). Their score was half that for whites.

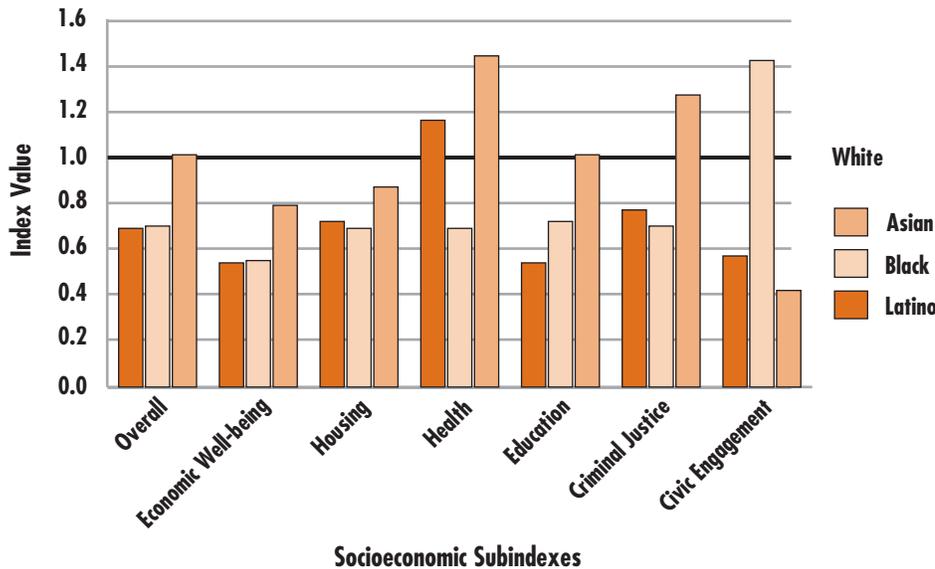
Housing. Housing is an important indicator of patterns in other areas such as wealth accumulation and family and neighborhood stability. The score for Latinos (0.72) was about a quarter lower than the score for whites, while the score for blacks (0.69) was even lower. The score for Asians (0.87) was closest to the baseline.

Health. The health index measures life expectancy, mother’s health, and children’s health. The health subindex indicates that Latinos, with a score of 1.16, generally had better health than whites and blacks (0.69). Asians had the highest score (1.44). The relatively high score for Latinos reflects their longer life expectancy and healthy lifestyle practices, which include low rates of alcohol use and smoking.

Education. Education plays a significant role in a person’s mobility and the achievement of social and economic security. The education subindex measures course quality, degree attainment, academic achievement, and enrollment and dropout rates. Latinos, at 0.54, scored lower on this index than blacks (0.72), whites, or Asians (1.01).

Criminal Justice. Democratic participation in society and confidence

Figure 1. Equality Index for Major Racial/Ethnic Groups in Los Angeles, 1990–2000



in the system of justice can be weakened by unfair and biased practices within the criminal justice system. This subindex measures equality before the law and arrest and homicide rates. The criminal justice score for Latinos was 0.77, higher than the score for blacks (0.70), but lower than the score for whites and significantly lower than the score for Asians (1.27).

Civic Engagement. Civic engagement—active participation in social and political life—can significantly improve social problems in neighborhoods, schools, and other community institutions. This subindex measures participation in the armed services, union representation, and English fluency. The score for Latinos in

this category was 0.57, nearly three times lower than that for blacks (1.42). The score for Asians was even lower (0.42). This subindex is likely not capturing many activities that are culturally nuanced or specific to immigrants, so it may be underreporting civic engagement for Latinos and Asians.

CONCLUSION

This equality index, which provides a snapshot of the quality of life in Los Angeles, indicates that a hierarchy of inequality exists, with Asians and whites at the top and Latinos and blacks at the bottom. Results in the socioeconomic categories reveal that Latinos experience significant disparities in many areas.

Their scores for economic well-being and education fell below those for blacks, whites, and Asians, and their scores for housing, criminal justice, and civic engagement were also low.

The findings suggest that for Latinos (and blacks), access to education, secure and well-paying jobs, and affordable housing are key to improving their well-being in Los Angeles. Making the criminal justice system more equitable—by, for example, decreasing homicide and victimization rates—will go a long way toward improving Latinos' quality of life. And promoting active, meaningful, and open participation in social and political life will yield measurable improvements in Latino neighborhoods.

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NOTE

1. Each subindex has an index value determined by a weighting methodology developed by Michael Donnelly (see Nichols 2005) that allows the data to be ranked by their relative importance. Categories within each subindex are also weighted.

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This policy brief examines how the quality of life for Latinos in Los Angeles compares to that of whites, blacks, and Asians. An “equality index” was used to quantify the experiences of these four racial/ethnic groups in terms of their overall well-being in six socioeconomic categories. Results reveal that Latinos experience significant disparities in many areas.

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