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## Study: Mexican Americans still standing on the fringe

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In many Los Angeles public schools, a troubling trend has long been noticed: Teachers tend to push white students and those of Asian heritage to perform well in class while holding Mexican-American children to a lesser standard.

Now a new study by two UCLA sociologists provides powerful evidence that low teacher expectations in inadequately funded schools, coupled with an atmosphere of anti-immigrant hostility and a host of other factors, have kept generations of Mexican Americans poorly educated — and alarmingly poor.

The study, published in a much-anticipated book, "Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation and Race," (Russell Sage Foundation) is the most comprehensive scholarly analysis yet of the economic, educational, linguistic, social and political status of one of the nation's largest minority groups.

The book's co-authors, Professor Edward Telles and Associate Professor Vilma Ortiz, studied four generations of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio, Texas. What makes their endeavor a truly impressive intergenerational snapshot of Mexican Americans is the fact that nearly half of the 1,442 people surveyed were the subjects of a similar UCLA-based study, called the "Mexican American Study Project," in the mid-1960s.

The oldest of the respondents are now in their early 80s — and their invaluable contribution to this four-decade comparative project might never have occurred but for a fortuitous development.

In 1992, workers retrofitting Powell College Library stumbled upon some 50 dusty boxes in an unused corner of the basement. Puzzled librarians called the Chicano Studies Research Center, and Telles and Ortiz went over to take a look.

"I remember the sense of excitement I had when we opened the boxes," said Ortiz, explaining that they contained original questionnaires from the 1960s study, replete with respondents' names and addresses.

In the earlier study, "there was a sense of optimism that Mexican Americans would integrate in society, following in the path of European immigrants, but that has not happened," said Ortiz. Although the overwhelming majority of ethnic Mexicans in the nation are U.S. citizens significantly assimilated into the mainstream, many live in segregated neighborhoods. As a result, "outsiders treat them all as recent immigrants and they are stereotyped," she noted.

One of the most pervasive and disturbing stereotypes is that even third- and fourth-generation Mexican Americans are doing low-level work, according to the study.

"The place in society that kids imagine for themselves makes a big difference in where they end up as adults," observed Telles, adding that low expectations of children by teachers can be devastating.

Little wonder that while second-generation Mexican Americans are more educated than their immigrant parents, subsequent generations have failed to do better than the second generation or fallen behind them.

Nothing short of a heavy investment in public education and the creation of a level playing field for all students can make Mexican Americans successful, the authors argue in their book.

The problem, they said, is not that Mexican Americans are unwilling to assimilate, as many scholars have argued. Rather, it's "the failure of societal institutions, particularly public schools, to successfully integrate them."

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