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MEXICAN AMERICANS AND EDUCATION

by
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A report drawn from *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race* (2008), an update of the classic *The Mexican American People* (1970), a longitudinal and intergenerational study on the extent of assimilation among Mexican Americans over four generations.

Mexican Americans have the lowest educational level among major racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Farley and Alba 2002). Assimilation theory argues that educational achievement will improve steadily over generations for the descendents of immigrants (Alba and Nee 2003). Our study shows that, contrary to this, Mexican Americans' years of education are not increasing with generational status. This has important implications for the assimilation of Mexican Americans and for their future socioeconomic status.[1]

YEARS OF SCHOOLING

Viewed from the vantage point of the entire twentieth century, the amount of schooling received by Mexican Americans has risen significantly. Census data for the southwestern United States indicate that Mexican Americans have experienced a notable increase in the average number of years of schooling completed, from 9.7 years in 1970 to 12.3 years in 2000, reflecting a century-long trend for all U.S. residents. Nevertheless, educational progress was slower for Mexican Americans than for other racial/ethnic groups. Mexican Americans had, on average, two full years less of schooling than whites and one year less than blacks (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

Figure 1 shows that second-generation original respondents had 10 years of schooling, whereas their parents had 4.1 years. Among the children of original respondents, however, we observe a slowdown in educational progress. Second-generation children made significant educational advances compared to their first-generation parents—13.1 years versus 7.4 years—but years of schooling for second- and third-generation children were nearly the same. Moreover, fourth-generation children had fewer years of education—only 12.4.

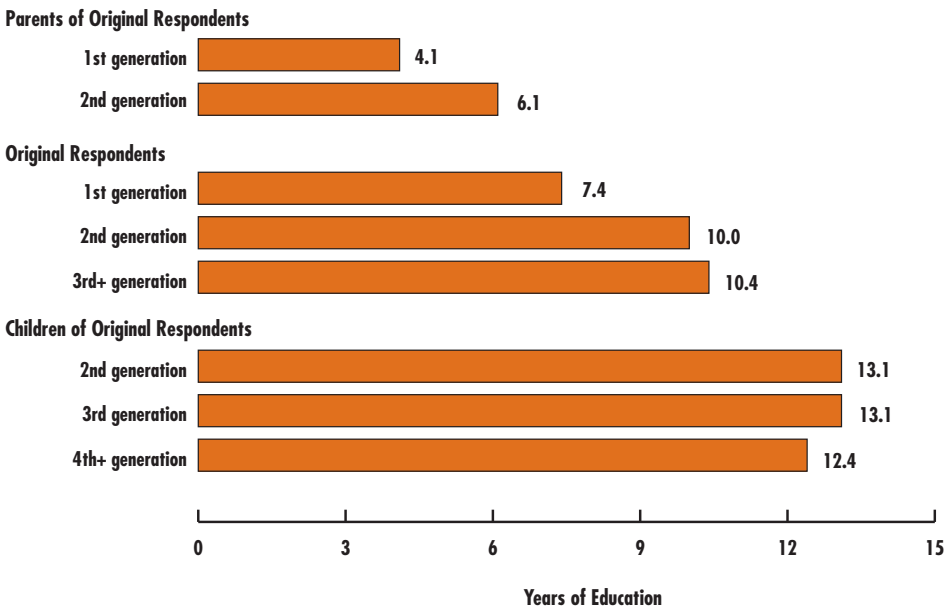
GRADUATION RATES

Key transitions in the educational process—graduation from high school and college—provide important indicators of

educational progress. High school completion has become nearly universal among white Americans—94 percent received a high school diploma in 2000, as Figure 2 shows (Telles and Ortiz 2008). Among the children of respondents, however, 84 percent of the second generation and 87 percent of the third generation reported in 2000 that they had completed high school. Completion rates for the fourth generation were even lower, with only 73 percent receiving a high school diploma.

A college education is increasingly necessary as the U.S. economy becomes more reliant on technology, yet the percentage of respondents who received a college degree was significantly smaller than the percentage of white Americans: in 2000, 39 percent of white Americans completed college (Telles and Ortiz 2008), but among respondents in 2000, only 13 and 14 percent of the second and third generations, respectively, and only 6 percent of the fourth generation did so.

Figure 1. Respondents' Average Number of Years of Education



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

Note: Third- and fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

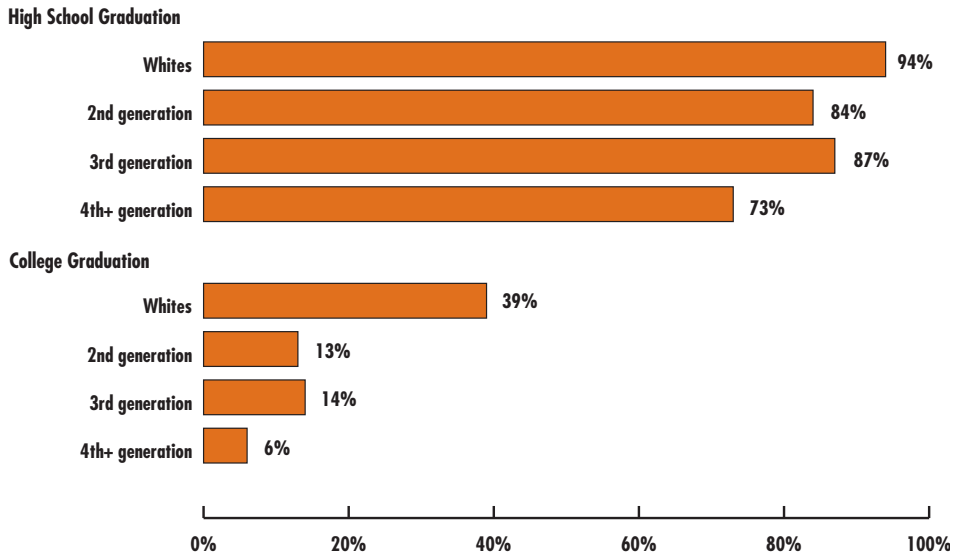
FACTORS AFFECTING EDUCATION

Mexican American respondents did better educationally when their parents were well educated and had a relatively high socioeconomic status. Educated parents are more likely to have a higher income, allowing them to provide better schooling for their children, whether in parochial or private schools or in high-achieving public schools, which are often located in neighborhoods with a high income base. They have the knowledge and the time to read frequently to their children and to give them other cultural advantages. They are more likely to know the pathways to educational success: they can better navigate complex school systems and manage their children's education in numerous ways.

Respondents benefited if they knew professionals and participated regularly in a church community while growing up and if their parents communicated with teachers. For example, respondents who grew up in homes in which the parents attended church weekly had more years of education than respondents whose parents attended church less frequently. We surmise that the social networks that develop in these settings help individuals succeed. Similarly, we found that respondents who attended Catholic schools had almost two more years of education than those who attended public schools.

Students in segregated schools did no worse than those in integrated schools; our study showed that the explanation had to do with parental resources (educational level and wealth) rather than segregation itself.[2] Moreover, while socioeconomic status and social networks improve education levels, we did not find that respondents did more poorly in school because their parents lacked certain cultural attributes. For instance, speaking a language other than English and having low educational expectations had no effect on reported educational levels.

Figure 2. Percentage of Children of Original Respondents That Graduated from High School and College



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.
Note: Fourth-generation respondents include subsequent generations.

CONCLUSION

If we take a historical view, we observe that Mexican Americans have experienced educational progress that somewhat parallels the educational improvements among all Americans over the course of the twentieth century. A focus on generational differences reveals, however, that schooling has not improved for later generations of Mexican Americans and that Mexican Americans continue to lag behind white and black Americans. Our findings support the claims of policymakers and educators that public schools are failing Mexican American students and cementing their low status in American society.

NOTES

1. The immigration of Mexicans to the United States is the largest and longest migration from a single country in our nation's history. Scholars disagree considerably on how extensively Mexican Americans are assimilating into U.S. society. Results reported in *Generations of Exclusion* reveal that Mexican Americans are not assimilating as consistently or as rapidly as predicted.

These results are drawn from a longitudinal and intergenerational research study based at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. In 1965–66, Mexican Americans living in Los Angeles and San Antonio were interviewed (referred to as the 1965 survey). Of these original respondents, 684 were re-interviewed in 1998–2002 (referred to as the 2000 survey), plus 758 of their adult children (up to two per family). The two surveys provide data for a systematic analysis of assimilation over four generations. Key measures of assimilation—including education, socio-economic status, language, religion, family values, inter-marriage, residential segregation, ethnic identity, and political preference—are explored in CSRC Policy and Issues Briefs Nos. 17–21.

2. See *Mexican Americans and Integration and Segregation,* CSRC Latino Policy and Issues Brief No. 20.

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A longitudinal and intergenerational study on Mexican American assimilation finds that years of schooling and graduation rates have not improved for Mexican Americans, which has important implications for their future socioeconomic status.

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