



# LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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## MEXICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

by  
**Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz**

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.

Learning English, losing one's native language, and acquiring the dominant culture are strong indications of assimilation. In our study we find significant linguistic assimilation among Mexican Americans. In addition, preferences for religion and music and attitudes toward gender roles are inexorably shifting to the preferences and attitudes predominant in the United States. Nevertheless, Mexican Americans in our study retain strong elements of their ethnic culture.<sup>1</sup>

### LANGUAGE

Language is the core of a culture. Some commentators have suggested that the growing presence of Spanish in conversation and commerce in Mexican American and immigrant neighborhoods is a sign of a national bifurcation (Huntington 2004). Yet our study indicates that, in terms of learning English, Mexican Americans are following the assimilation pattern established by European immigrants in previous centuries. English

fluency for subsequent generations was even higher. In 2000, all U.S.-born respondents spoke English fluently. In 1965, approximately half of first-generation and over 90 percent of second-generation original respondents reported that they spoke English well.

Spanish fluency concurrently declined, as Figure 1 shows. Almost all first-generation original respondents were fluent Spanish speakers. Fluency had decreased dramatically by the fourth generation, to 36 percent. This is comparatively high, however, given that European immigrant groups had largely lost their native languages by the third generation (Alba and Nee 2003). The continuing influx of Mexican immigrants into Mexican American communities helps keep Spanish alive.

### BIRTH NAMES

First names, given at birth, can be an indicator of ethnic culture among immigrants and their descendants. We examined whether the first names recorded on the birth certificates of respondents were Spanish (like María or Juan) or English (like Mary or John). Among first-generation original respondents, 84 percent had Spanish names, as shown in Figure 2. Use of Spanish names faded by generation, falling to 53 percent for third-generation original respondents. The generational shift continued among the children of original respondents. Only 26 percent of the fourth generation reported having a Spanish name.

**RELIGION**

Mexican Americans have long been considered predominantly Catholic. And in 1965, most respondents were, as Figure 3 shows. Catholicism declined considerably among the children of original respondents, who were increasingly evangelical Protestants or nondenominational Christians. These shifts may partly reflect the growing importance of evangelical or nondenominational religions among working-class white Americans in the Southwest (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008).

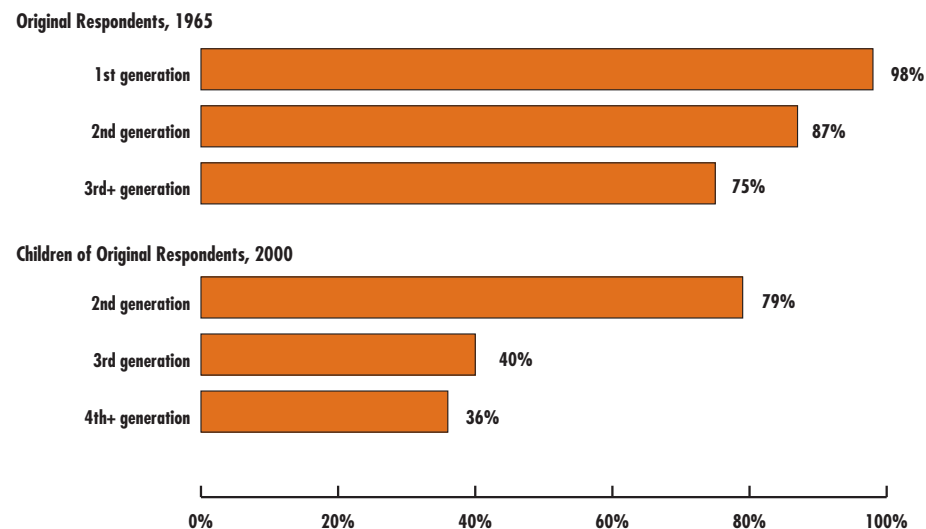
**FAMILY VALUES**

Traditional gender roles have long been thought to be characteristic of Mexican Americans. We found some evidence that Mexican Americans do hold traditional views, although there was considerable variation. When asked whether girls should live at home until they marry, first-generation respondents reported the most traditional gender attitudes, as Figure 4 shows. Considerably fewer second- and third-generation original respondents held this view. Agreement dropped in succeeding generations, with about one-third of the fourth generation replying that girls should remain at home.

**MUSIC AND HOLIDAYS**

Music is a strong indicator of a cultural connection. A preference for traditional Mexican music declined from 74 percent for the first generation to approximately 10 percent for the children of original respondents. Sixty percent of the latter preferred American music such as rock, pop, country, soul, and jazz. Nevertheless, a significant minority of the children—around 25 percent—reported that they identified with Chicano music, suggesting an ongoing adherence to the ethnic culture. Similarly, more than half of all respondents reported celebrating Mexican holidays, another indication of identification with

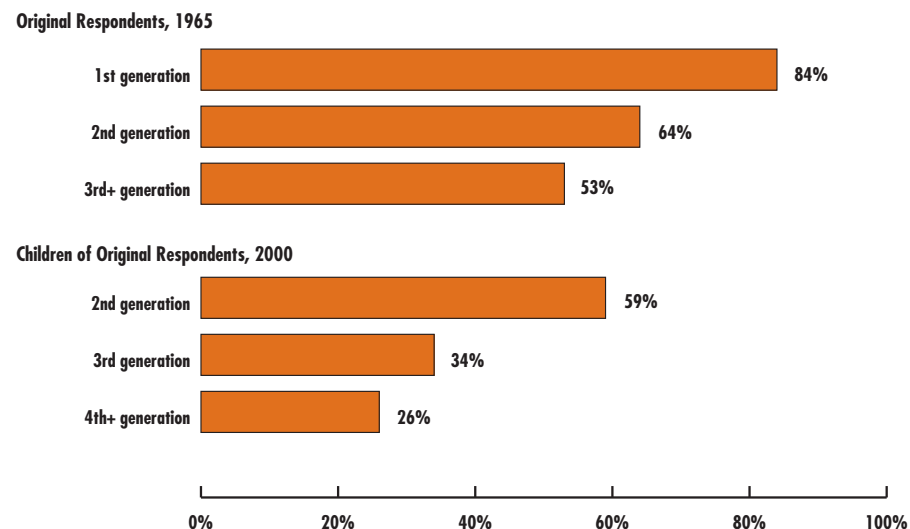
**Figure 1. Percentage That Speak Spanish Well or Very Well**



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

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

**Figure 2. Percentage with Spanish First Names at Birth**



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

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

Mexican culture. In addition, more than 80 percent of respondents said that children should learn about Mexican history, traditions, and values.

**CONCLUSION**

We find strong evidence of both cultural assimilation and cultural retention. The loss of the native language appears

inevitable, but it has been slower for Mexican Americans than it was for European immigrant groups. Other indicators of cultural retention—use of Spanish names for children, traditional gender attitudes, listening to traditional music, and celebrating traditional holidays—also declined from the immigrant to the fourth generation.

Mexican Americans are losing key aspects of Mexican culture, but at a pace that sustains expressions of the ethnic culture.

#### 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, socioeconomic status, language, religion, family values, intermarriage, residential segregation, ethnic identity, and political preference—are explored in CSRC Policy and Issues Briefs Nos. 17–21.

#### WORKS CITED

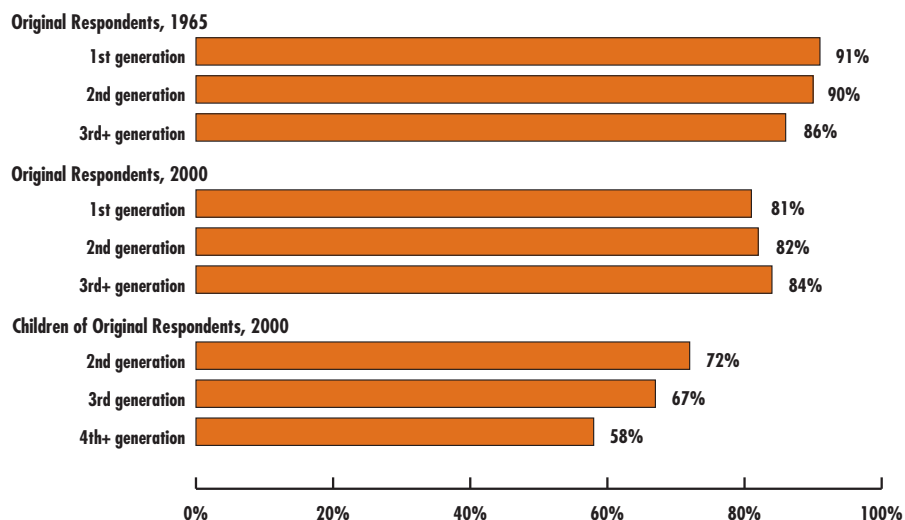
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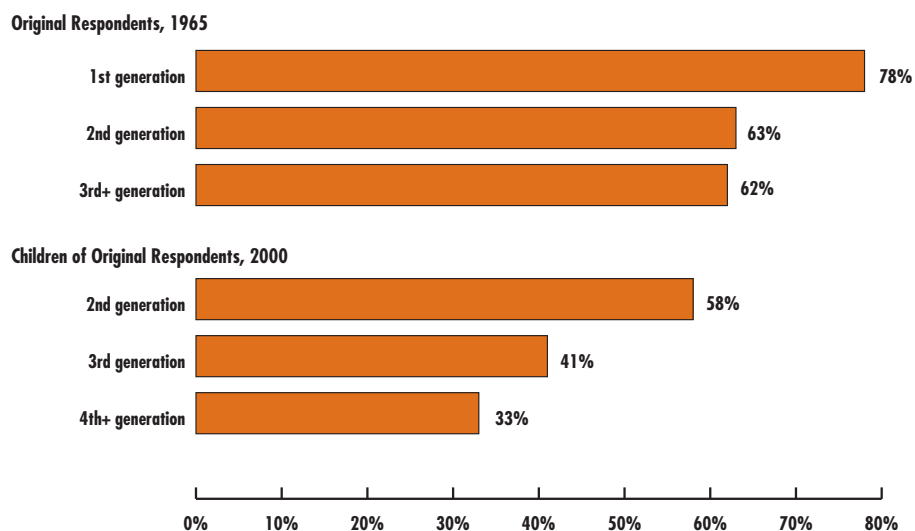
**Figure 3. Percentage That Are Catholic**



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

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

**Figure 4. Percentage Agreeing That Girls Should Live at Home Until They Marry**



Source: Telles and Ortiz 2008.

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

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## MEXICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

A longitudinal and intergenerational study on Mexican American assimilation reveals that although Mexican Americans are adopting predominant U.S. cultural expressions, they retain strong elements of their ethnic culture.

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