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For Mexican American millennials, success is tied to providing for parents

A new, longitudinal study primarily focused on first-generation college graduates, is led by Daisy Verduzco Reyes, a researcher for the CSRC's Latina Futures 2050 Lab and sociology professor at UC Merced

For the majority of first-generation Mexican American college graduates, success means fulfilling a particular dream: pay their parents' bills or even purchase them a home.

The United States' definition of adult achievement, known by sociologists as Standard North American Adulthood, or SNAA, means fulfilling five stages: leaving home, finishing college, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children. Unlike SNAA, for Mexican American millennials, a successful adult is defined by a much broader goal, which includes lifting their families' social and financial status. This is according to a14-year study, "Complicating Upward Mobility: Latinx College-educated Millennials Reflect on Life After Graduation" recently published in the journal of *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. **https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23326492251349228**

The article was authored by Daisy Verduzco Reyes, Latina Futures 2050 Lab researcher and associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Merced. Reyes studied 61 millennials (anyone born between 1981 and 1996 is considered a millennial) who identify as Latinx, attended college in California, and primarily reside in the state as well. This research is central to her forthcoming book.

https://sociology.ucmerced.edu/content/daisy-reyes

"I began this research 14 years ago and have seen how these millennials have graduated from UC, Cal State, and private universities. About 60% have crafted adult lives while having $25,000 to $80,000 in student loan debt," said Reyes, whose last two years of research has been supported by Latina Futures, an initiative spearheaded by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC). Latina Futures is a research initiative spearheaded by the CSRC and created in 2022 in collaboration with the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute (LPPI). Funded by a $15 million California state budget allocation, Latina Futures seeks to increase knowledge and insight through applied policy research on the contours of the economic, political, and social lives of Latinas living in the United States over the next several decades.

"I wanted to focus on Latinx college graduate millennials because as researchers we do not have much documented data and analysis to help us see and understand the lives of this population. The voices and self-reflections of Latinx descendants of immigrants matter, yet are rarely examined," said Reyes, noting that 85% of respondents were the first in their family to attend and graduate from college and 96% were of Mexican origin.

Understanding why familial responsibility is so important to immigrant, second, and third generation Latinx people helps researchers explain that children giving back to their parents is a form of gratitude, Reyes said. This, in a way, is a continuation of the cultural and socio-structural conditions that have made these millennials fulfill financial, emotional, legal and cultural labor roles in their families of origin.

When it comes to paying for college, U.S. Latinx children of immigrants are more likely to pay for school on their own. Only about 15% receive parental assistance, compared to nearly 24% of whites, 21% of Blacks, and 18% of Asian American.

Further, most Mexican-origin individuals who have accumulated wealth have done so through their own labor, not through intergenerational asset transfers, Reyes said. The last economic recession took a financial toll on families. Between 2007 to 2016, middle-income Latinx families faced a loss of 55% in their wealth, while white middle-income families faced a loss of 31%. These recession losses led to a lower median wealth of $38,900 for Latinx middle-income families in 2016 compared to $131,900 for white middle-income families.

"Millennials are worse off economically than previous generations in terms of income, wealth, homeownership, and debt," Reyes said.

In conducting interviews and analyzing her findings, Reyes coined the term "Latinx mobility bargain" that explains how Latinx college graduates define their own economic upward mobility, unlike the SNAA.

"This is particularly true for children of immigrants," Reyes explained.

Reyes's published study documented narrative responses from 40 women and 21 men. Among the questions participants responded were "Do you think you have achieved mobility relative to your parents?" and "Do you provide financially for anyone?"

Responses varied from millennials whose annual earnings of $150,000-$200,000 have allowed them to purchase a home for their parents and pay utilities and groceries, to those who see themselves in a stagnant situation primarily because they hold low-paying jobs.

For some participants, income and career growth challenges are associated to their family's geographic location. Some participants, for example, returned to the agricultural communities to be with their parents, but career paths tend to be limited. Other challenges include the rising cost of housing, diminishing returns on salaries, and student loan debt.

"It is worth noting, however, that the one idea that none of the respondents questioned was the cultural imperative of the immigrant bargain. Some might expect this 'burden' to feed resentment, but none of my respondents expressed any such feelings. The narratives here show that for many Latinx millennials, providing for parents has constrained their mobility trajectories, leaving less resources for their own capital development," Reyes said. "Yet, this constraint is simultaneously perceived an accomplishment. It is not uncommon for children of immigrants to serve in more adult roles in their families like translators, caregivers, and sometimes, laborers. Many begin their economic support within their families early on."

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