

# *Intergenerational Mobility of the Mexican-Origin Population in California and Texas Relative to a Changing Regional Mainstream*

Julie Park  
*University of Maryland*

Dowell Myers  
*University of Southern California*

Tomás R. Jiménez  
*Stanford University*

We combine two approaches to gauge the achievements of the Mexican-origin second generation: one the intergenerational progress between immigrant parents and children, the other the gap between the second generation and non-Latino whites. We measure advancement of the Mexican-origin second generation using a suite of census-derived outcomes applied to immigrant parents in 1980 and grown children in 2005, as observed in California and Texas. Patterns of second-generation upward mobility are similar in the two states, with important differences across outcome indicators. Assessments are less favorable for men than women, especially in Texas. We compare Mexican-Americans to a non-Latino white reference group, as do most assimilation studies. However, we separate the reference group into those born in the same state as the second generation and those who have migrated in. We find that selective in-migration of more highly-educated whites has raised the bar on some, not all, measures of attainment. This poses a challenge to studies of assimilation that do not compare grown-children to their fellow natives of a state. Our model of greater temporal and regional specificity has broad applicability to studies guided by all theories of immigrant assimilation, integration and advancement.

## *INTRODUCTION*

Mexican immigration forms the core of U.S. scholarly and public debate on immigration and assimilation in the past 30 years. Not only do Mexicans account for nearly 30 percent of all immigrants in the U.S., but they also have lower average socioeconomic standing than the U.S.-born majority population. The second generation may improve their lot markedly from that of their parents, but debates continue about the degree of progress and what reference comparisons are needed to judge what progress, if any, has been made (Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters, 2011; Haller, Portes, and Lynch, 2011). One prevailing approach emphasizes the degree of upward mobility of children relative to the parent generation. Another focuses on the remaining gap between achievements of Mexican-origin adults and a white, non-Latino, U.S.-born reference group. Discrepancies in the conclusions that scholars reach about assimilation in general, and about Mexican-origin assimilation in particular, are partly due to over emphasis on one of the conceptualizations to the exclusion of the other.

What has been largely neglected in debates over immigrant advancement between generations is the passage and meaning of time. One generation cannot succeed another in the same year, and children need to be assessed 25 years after their parents – roughly the amount of time between generations. Yet, fieldwork and surveys generally capture a single moment of history. It is for this reason that census data from prior decades provide a valuable resource. Even without nuanced detail, census data afford measurement of status attainment at an earlier moment in history. The first U.S.-born children of the post-1965 immigration began to reach age 35 only after 2000, and much has changed in the quarter century as they were age 10 and their parents were approximately age 35. In that interval, U.S. society and its economy have undergone significant change, and standards have evolved in regard to education and other attainments, especially for women. Moreover, as time passes, grown children may have migrated away from the cities and states where they grew up. In all this, researchers of immigrant assimilation face challenges of capturing time. More than just a clear concept of generations – as in generation since immigration – is needed. Also required is a means of linking generations 25 years apart, a strategy of comparing rates of immigrant progress to meaningful reference groups in the same interval, and a means of situating parents, children, and their reference groups in a relevant geographic context.

Our study thus focuses on a single immigrant group: the Mexican-origin population in the U.S. We compare those living in California and Texas, the two large states that are home to over 60 percent of the Mexican-origin population. Like other studies that analyze immigrant socioeconomic advancement in particular places, we face the challenge of migration in and out of these locales by both the immigrant group of interest and the reference population that can affect assessments of progress. Our analysis addresses this challenge, neglected in previous studies of immigrant assimilation, and allows us to assess how the internal migration of both the immigrant and reference-group members shapes the picture of assimilation. In addition, because assimilation is a gendered process (Smith, 2002, 2005; Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005), our analyses offer a separate portrait of socioeconomic advancement for men and women in each of these states.

The goal of this paper is to provide a framework that offers a fuller view of the evidence from which to draw conclusions about the extent and kind of progress, which rests at the center of these theoretical and empirical debates. In particular, we offer a way of examining the temporal, contextual, and comparative components embedded in virtually all accounts of assimilation. We adopt a dynamic model of assimilation that shows multiple points of within- and between-group comparisons. Foremost is the comparison of status attainments measured on multiple indicators between immigrant parents and U.S.-born children. Second, whether that intergenerational progress is adequate can be judged by comparison of parents' and children's status to a reference group of non-Hispanic whites observed at the same age in different decades.<sup>1</sup> Given the 25-year passage of time, this comparison necessarily entails evaluating the progress of the reference group over time as well, including the impacts of internal migration. Empirical assessment of changing trajectories in the reference group(s) is essential to theoretical development concerning immigrant assimilation, in the case of the U.S. and more generally.

Five interrelated research questions thus guide our analysis: (1) To what extent does the Mexican-origin second-generation advance beyond

<sup>1</sup>Non-Hispanic whites are adopted as the reference group, not because they serve as a role model toward which immigrant youth aspire, but for reasons of comparison that measure the evolving status attainments against which immigrant adaptation is commonly judged. Whites also are the largest group in the broader mainstream society and thus serve as a proxy for the mainstream.

the status attainments of the parent generation, along a range of socioeconomic outcomes? (2) To what degree does the second generation close the gap with the mainstream of each gender in its state of residence? (3) How much difference does it make, and for what purposes, if the U.S.-born reference group is permitted to include adults who were born out of state, rather than being restricted to fellow natives of the state? (4) To what extent are there gender differences in these patterns? (5) Finally, to what degree is advancement greater for the Mexican-origin population in California than Texas and is this any different than for the nation as a whole?

### *REFERENCE GROUPS AND ASSESSING ASSIMILATION*

Assimilation – “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” (Alba and Nee, 2003:11) – fundamentally involves becoming more similar to a particular population and more different from another (Jiménez and FitzGerald, 2007). One strategy that scholars of assimilation follow is to focus on that from which a given group assimilates, treating assimilation as a process of adaptation that takes place within the lifetime or between generations. Alternatively, scholars often focus on that to which a group assimilates, treating assimilation as an endpoint reached when the assimilating group has closed the socioeconomic gap with a reference population. In the latter case, there has been debate over what is the most appropriate reference group to represent the end destination of assimilation. For the better part of the 20th century, assimilation theory treated U.S.-born, Protestant, middle-class whites as the reference to which immigrants and the subsequent U.S.-born generations were becoming more similar in their ways of life and socioeconomic outcomes (Warner and Srole, 1945; Gordon, 1964). Recognizing the ethnoracial and class diversity of the post-1965 immigrants and the U.S.-born host society, segmented assimilation theory conceives of multiple ethnoracial and class reference groups to which immigrants and their second-generation children assimilate (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). The newest iteration of assimilation theory, Alba and Nee’s (2003) “new assimilation theory”, stresses a more generalized reference group of the “mainstream.” Alba and Nee assert that as immigrants assimilate, they change the very “mainstream” – “that part of society within which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts” (2003:12) – to which they assimilate. In contemporary research, no matter the theory of assimilation that is adopted, a non-Hispanic white reference

group remains necessarily useful for measuring the degree of advancement, although this is no longer treated as a norm for behaviors that immigrants emulate to get ahead (Jiménez and Horowitz, 2013).

### *Alternative Vantage Points on Advancement and Assimilation*

Empirical analyses of assimilation draw on each heuristic. Some analyses of Mexican-origin assimilation in particular emphasize assimilation as an intergenerational process, showing the second generation fares better than their parents, but the later generation may not improve on the position of the second generation, and may even fare worse (Bean *et al.*, 1994; Wojtkiewicz and Donato, 1995). With behavioral indicators, like incarceration and health, second-generation Mexican Americans exhibit more negative outcomes than their parents (Rumbaut, 2005; Haller, Portes, and Lynch, 2011). However, when accounting for generation since immigration and birth cohort simultaneously, research shows a clear, though modest, upward linear pattern of socioeconomic advancement (Smith, 2003, 2006), and very significant progress on indicators like English proficiency (Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean, 2006). The limitation with these analyses is that what passes for intergenerational progress might only be a case of a secular trend lifting the observed achievements of all members of society, thus leaving the children of immigrants no better off relative to a mainstream that has also made progress. Assessing intergenerational mobility without accounting for societal changes can confuse how much of the observed mobility owes to assimilation within the immigrant group, and how much of the mobility is due to larger trends that condition the mobility of everyone.

A further limitation to the intergenerational view is that it downplays potentially persistent socioeconomic gaps between immigrants and the mainstream. Indeed, other studies have followed the end-state or gap heuristic embedded in assimilation theories that treat assimilation as an endpoint. These analyses draw attention to the socioeconomic gap that may remain between the assimilating and reference groups. If a negative gap remains, then assimilation is deemed to be incomplete, or even blocked (for later-generation individuals). Some research on Mexican-origin assimilation that draws on this heuristic shows that Mexican Americans have significantly narrowed the socioeconomic gap with U.S.-born whites (Smith, 2003, 2006), while others argue that Mexican Americans have not assimilated because they have not closed the gap nearly enough (Telles and Ortiz, 2008). Still others look to non-whites as a benchmark against which to

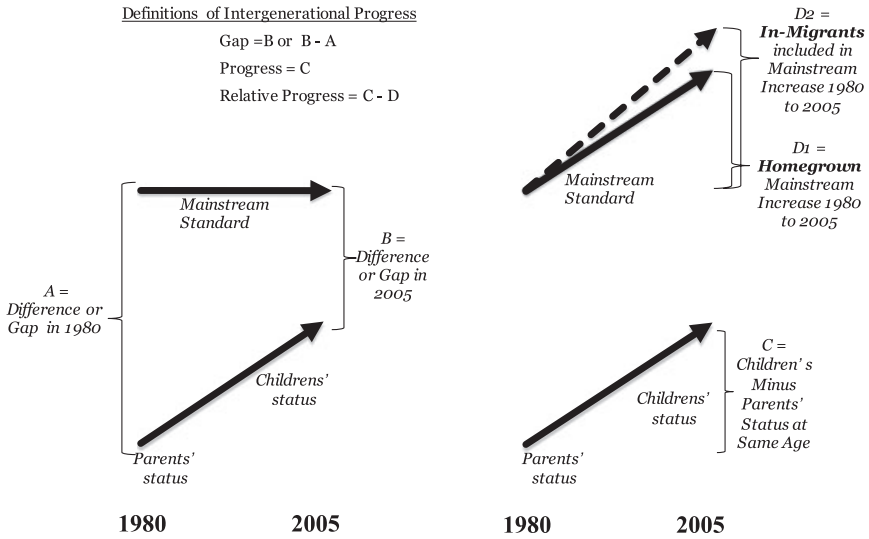
compare second-generation Mexican Americans who may be assimilating into a “rainbow underclass” segment of U.S. society, emphasizing that socioeconomic similarities to minority reference groups are evidence of a downward form of assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993; López and Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Focusing solely on socioeconomic gaps between the second generation and the reference group downplays how much better they fare than their immigrant parents. Whereas the alternative approach of emphasizing intergenerational progress yields findings that are potentially overly optimistic, the gap emphasis may lead to overly pessimistic conclusions about intergenerational progress. Furthermore, this judgment often gives insufficient consideration to changes ongoing in the *reference group* used to assess immigrant-group assimilation. Most often, scholars treat the reference group as a static benchmark, which may make sense for some behaviors or statuses, such as English proficiency, where complete fluency is the norm. Socioeconomic attainment is more open-ended, however, and there have been substantial advances among U.S.-born reference groups over the decades, thus raising the standards against which immigrant children are judged (Reardon, 2011). In addition, the in-migration of non-Hispanic whites who are more advantaged than locally raised whites has potential to raise the bar even higher over the decades. Taking full stock of Mexican-origin assimilation requires accounting for these effects.

The contrasting views on how to assess second-generation outcomes are summarized in Figure I. The left side depicts the “closing of the gap” viewpoint. If  $B$  is smaller than  $A$ , progress has been made, although some scholars might emphasize that if  $B$  is greater than 0, then there is not yet adequate adaptation. In contrast, on the right, the intergenerational view focuses on status advancement between parents and children. This advancement is then compared to changes in the reference-group attainment over the same time interval. The presumption is that the attainments of the reference group are also changing, as emphasized by its upward sloping line. Second-generation adaptation is found when  $C$  is greater than  $D$ . The advantage of this model is that it forces attention

<sup>2</sup>Perlmann (2005) offers a hybrid of views, looking at assimilation as both an intergenerational process and endpoint. Pearlmann, however, has two reference groups to which he compares Mexican-American progress: U.S.-born whites in the contemporary period and Italians in the past. His national analysis, like most others, ignores the differential progress occurring in selected regions within the country.

**Figure I. Gap Versus Progress Definition of Intergenerational Advancement**



away from just the end points used to infer gaps; instead, the model calls attention to both the intergenerational progress and the contemporaneous changes in the mainstream reference standard.

*Biases of Selective Migration on Immigrants and Reference Groups*

A major consequence of the passage of time is that parents, grown children, and reference-group members can all relocate. At the national scale, the only concern is for emigration, return migration, or other departures from the U.S. At the subnational scale, however, such as in studies of the New York or Southern California regions, residential relocation is far more common and could bias conclusions about the population remaining in place (Myers, 1999). Problems of selective migration have been only briefly acknowledged in previous studies of immigrant generations, but this study of Mexican-origin population in California and Texas fully exposes the potential biases in conclusions about assimilation due to this factor.

Local studies of intergenerational mobility often presume a degree of geographic stability, which may or may not be warranted. In their study of the second generation in New York, Kasinitz *et al.* (2008:382–83) acknowledged in their appendix the risk of selective out-migration on their measurements of socioeconomic achievement. Drawing on 2000

census data, they reported that 11 percent of their sample population exited the region in 5-year time, but this rate of departure was substantially greater among the lower-income than higher-income residents. The fact that more of the poor are selectively leaving the pool to be studied led the authors to conclude that this attrition might have upwardly biased their assessment of favorable progress for the second generation.

Tracing specific individuals across time frequently encounters substantial problems of selection. For example, Telles and Ortiz (2008: table 3.3) were able to interview only 57 percent of the original respondents from the 1965 study, and they report some bias in the types of people they could locate more easily: “. . .we found it easier to locate respondents with deeper roots, more family connections, and more stable lives” (2008:63). Indeed, people who had been married in 1965 were homeowners, US-born, were interviewed in English, and who had higher income and education were most likely to end up in the sample of re-interviewed Mexican Americans (2008: table 3.4). In addition, respondents who could only be interviewed by telephone (26% of the sample), presumably because they had moved farther away, enjoyed higher incomes (by \$7,816) and were half as likely as others to have married a Hispanic (odds of 0.53; 2008: tables B.4 and B.6).

It bears emphasis that selection biases can afflict measurement of both the immigrant population and the reference group. The latter effect is not important for the strict assessment of intergenerational progress, but failure to account for selection biases of the reference group is a crucial problem for studies that emphasize the gaps between the second generation and a reference group. In the present study, we demonstrate the potential for selective migration effects, not in the case of the Mexican-American grown children, but by the large degree of population turnover among the white U.S.-born *reference group*. Of particular interest for selection effects is the difference in educational attainment between those born and staying in the state of residence and those either arriving or out-migrating. Educational attainment is a prime indicator of socioeconomic status, signifying both future earning potential and occupational level. Education also can be a reflection of the relative wealth of the family of origin, because children from more advantaged families are helped to stay in school rather than drop out to earn an income that helps their family. Thus, changes in the reference group must be a central part of the modeling process.



## *MODELING INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY*

We carry out a model of intergenerational progress on key indicators, comparing both genders to the evolving mainstream attainments in the two states. Of key interest is how the assessment of second-generation progress differs when benchmarked against the two alternative U.S.-born reference groups – a total “mainstream” and a “homegrown” mainstream that is comprised of fellow residents born in the state (and thus not including in-migrants). As noted above, the mainstream is proxied by the status of non-Hispanic whites. According to Alba and Nee (2003), the mainstream is that segment of society for which ethnic distinction has, at most, a minor effect on life chances. The category “white” contains a great deal of ethnic and class diversity (*see* Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990; Frankenberg, 1993; McDermott and Samson, 2005), and whiteness is not an unequivocally advantaged racial identity (Hartigan, 1999; McDermott, 2006). Nonetheless, the individuals included in this category generally represent a societal mainstream. What is novel in our treatment is that, in our homegrown alternative, we take account of the birth state of the reference group to match that of the immigrant children.

### *Definition of Socioeconomic Indicators*

The outcomes we evaluate are limited by the set of variables included in the 1980 census, 2005 Current Population Survey (CPS), and the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). These datasets do not include any attitudinal variables or ethnocultural indicators. Moreover, for tracing trends over a generation, we seek identical measures of parents, children, and reference groups in all years. Accordingly, our measures of intergenerational change are limited to socioeconomic indicators:

*Educational Attainment.* “High School Completion” is the proportion of the population that has completed a high school degree or higher. “College Completion” is the proportion that holds a bachelor’s degree or higher.

*Occupational Attainment.* “Upper White Collar” occupational attainment includes the percent of all workers (both full-time and part-time) who are

in professional and managerial occupations, as defined by the occupational groupings supplied in the 1980 and 2005 data.

*Personal Earnings.* “Mean earnings” include salary or wage income as well as income from self-employment. The sample includes only full-time workers who worked 35 or more per week and 45 weeks or more the year prior to the survey. For comparability of 1980 and 2005 earnings, we adjust the 1980 earnings to 2005 dollars using the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

*Poverty.* The proportion in poverty includes those who fall below 150 percent of the federally determined poverty line. For ease of comparison across outcomes, we reverse this measure, expressing it as the proportion that exceeds above 150 percent of poverty line so that higher values represent higher attainments. References to living out of poverty mean living above this more generously defined poverty line.

*Homeownership.* Homeownership status is a shared status between householders and spouses. Therefore, we do not limit our sample to householders because we would then potentially leave out the spouses of householders from our sample and inject an unintended gender bias (Myers, 1992:50–55). Homeownership is thus measured by the proportion of householders and spouses (if present) who live in homes that are owner-occupied.

### *Sample Selection and Data*

The estimations of intergenerational mobility require a sample of Mexican-immigrant parents observed in 1980 and a sample of second-generation Mexican Americans observed in 2005. We define the second generation as U.S.-born and having both a foreign-born mother and a foreign-born father. Along with these immigrant generations, we also observe a reference-group sample, or “mainstream,” which is made up of native-born, non-Latino whites, as described above. To obtain observations for the mainstream, the dataset draws from the 1980 census 5 percent Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) and the CPS from 2003, 2005, and 2007 (referred to more generally as “2005”). Due to the small sample size of the CPS and its sampling method, we pool every other year of data to obtain a larger sample without replicating or excluding any cases.<sup>3</sup> For

<sup>3</sup>For a detailed discussion of the CPS sampling method, see *CPS Technical Paper 66* (2006).

construction of the reference group, we use the 2006 ACS. This dataset includes information on the state of birth of U.S.-born residents, but it does not contain a variable demarcating immigrant generations. Accordingly, the ACS serves well for describing the U.S.-born reference group in 2006, while the CPS is necessary for describing the second-generation adults. The 1980 census covers all segments in the base year.

The Mexican sample is designed around the repeated observation of second-generation birth cohorts in 1980, at ages 0–16, and again in 2005, at 25 years older (ages 25–41). We draw first-generation Mexican parents into the sample if they resided with a U.S.-born Mexican child in 1980. In addition, our sample selection for parents is based only on the first-born child so as not to have duplicate observations of parents for households with more than one child. We also restrict the sample of parents to those between the ages 25–44 for the purpose of comparability with their adult children, who are observed at ages 25–41 in 2005. Mexican ancestry is determined by the “Spanish” variable in 1980 and the “Hispanic” variable in 2005. This sample selection scheme is essentially constructing a cohort of the first generation and a matched cohort of their second-generation children. Although we compare the parent cohort in 1980 to the child cohort in 2005, we are not tracing kin between generations. We perform intergenerational comparisons by gender by comparing the average status attainment of grown daughters (sons) to the average for mothers (fathers) when the latter were the same age 25 years earlier.

Due to the large sample size of the mainstream, we randomly selected 5 percent of the 1980 sample and 20 percent of the 2005 sample for statistical analyses so that these samples would be more similar in size to the Mexican samples. The sample counts from all datasets are detailed in Table 1.

### *Specification by the Immigrant Generation Cohort Method*

We observe intergenerational mobility using the “immigrant generation cohort” method introduced by Park and Myers (2010). That method compares adult children to their parents when they were the same age and to the mainstream at that same age in the different decades. In the present paper, all analyses are stratified by women and men. An important advance is the comparison of immigrant generations to an alternative “instate-born” or “homegrown” mainstream, rather than all U.S.-born in the nation. To execute this innovation, analyses are conducted separately

TABLE 1  
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	1980 Mexicans				2006 Mexicans			
	California		Texas		California		Texas	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Unweighted count	5,518	5,188	1,924	1,588	350	345	182	124
Weighted count	110,360	103,760	38,480	31,760	551,852	635,965	294,372	228,697
Mean age	32.3	32.6	33.3	33.6	30.6	30.3	30.9	31.5
Percent high school completion	21.8	23.2	18.1	21.0	82.5	82.3	78.9	74.2
Percent college completion	1.5	2.3	2.3	2.3	14.6	14.6	17.3	8.3
Percent in white-collar occupations	4.1	4.8	5.5	4.6	28.9	23.0	32.5	19.3
Mean earnings	19,825	30,855	17,201	27,961	33,181	40,107	27,573	30,747
Percent above 150% poverty	55.3	59.8	38.9	42.9	77.6	84.5	63.3	62.2
Percent homeowners	41.8	38.6	51.6	50.1	51.7	54.7	66.2	59.1
	1980 Mainstream				2006 Mainstream			
	California		Texas		California		Texas	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Unweighted count	5,532	5,571	3,280	3,411	421	402	324	298
Weighted count	110,640	111,420	65,600	68,220	943,459	1,013,536	713,427	710,639
Mean age	33.2	33.4	33.4	33.4	33.6	33.7	33.2	33.6
Percent high school completion	90.9	91.8	84.0	86.8	97.7	95.7	90.8	92.5
Percent college completion	23.3	33.5	22.3	31.6	45.5	40.1	37.1	29.4
Percent in white-collar occupations	29.6	33.4	26.4	30.3	58.4	46.7	45.3	33.9
Mean earnings	31,696	53,558	26,816	50,489	46,512	64,252	39,696	55,474
Percent above 150% poverty	86.2	88.5	88.1	90.0	87.3	88.6	86.7	89.8
Percent homeowners	64.4	61.6	72.2	69.6	64.6	54.9	71.9	66.8

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)  
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	2006 Mainstream						2006 Born in state of residence mainstream					
	California			Texas			California			Texas		
	Women	Men		Women	Men		Women	Men		Women	Men	
American Community Survey												
Unweighted count	920	873		724	692		811	758		602	546	
Weighted count	96,696	96,327		72,039	71,166		84,669	81,161		57,113	54,263	
Mean age	33.3	33.1		32.7	32.1		33.6	32.9		33.4	33.9	
Percent high school completion	95.1	90.2		91.5	91.8		95.2	95.5		94.6	92.3	
Percent college completion	35.3	28.9		32.8	24.8		46.1	36.9		36.1	32.4	
Percent in white-collar occupations	48.8	33.1		44.6	30.5		55.2	43.9		51.6	38.9	
Mean earnings	46,768	62,070		36,394	50,731		54,049	65,144		39,549	59,010	
Percent above 150% poverty	85.4	86.5		82.9	81.8		84.0	87.8		87.8	86.8	
Percent homeowners	59.1	58.0		68.3	66.9		56.2	52.3		67.3	67.3	

Source: 1980 Census 5% PUMS; 2003, 2005, 2007 Current Population Survey; American Community Survey, 2006.

for California or Texas, by far the most common locations for the grown second generation of Mexican Americans. Based on this strategy of sample design, we obtain useful descriptive results that measure changes in status attainments between immigrant generations over time. It bears emphasis that 2005 and 2006 are more appropriate comparison years than 2010, because the latter would measure children's attainments after the deep ravages of the Great Recession that began in 2008. Given that the 1980 census measured parents' attainments at the end of a long economic expansion, for intergenerational comparisons, it is appropriate to measure children's status in the mid-2000s at a comparable point in the economic cycle.<sup>4</sup>

The immigrant generation cohort method enables multivariate modeling to test for statistically significant relationships. Changes over time and between the generations are represented by Year and its interactions. The main effect of Year represents period change in outcomes for the mainstream reference group between 1980 (Year = 0) and 2005 or 2006 (Year = 1). The differential effect of passage between immigrant generations is represented by Year\*Gen, where Gen represents immigrant generations, with Gen = 0 for the parent generation in 1980 and Gen = 1 for the grown children in 2005. The resulting intergenerational model is represented, thus

$$(O) = \text{Year} + \text{Out of State} + \text{Generation} + (\text{Year} * \text{Generation}) + \text{Age}$$

where (O) is the outcome variable of interest, Year represents observation year (1980 = 0 and 2005 or 2006 = 1), capturing period effects for the "mainstream" reference group, proxied here by U.S.-born, non-Hispanic whites, Out of State represents those in the "mainstream" in 2006 who were born outside of the state. Generation represents generation (second generation in 2005 and first generation in 1980, contrasted in both years to a reference-group proxy for the mainstream), Year\*Generation represents the differential effect of passing of time between first and second generations, over and above changes for the "mainstream" reference group, and Age represents exact years, center coded to age 35.

<sup>4</sup>The National Bureau of Economic Research dates the expansionary phase of the business cycle preceding the 1980 census as March 1975 to January 1980. The expansion preceding the Great Recession ran November 2001 to December 2007 (<<http://www.nber.org/cycles.html>>).

*INTERNAL MIGRATION MAGNITUDE AND SELECTIVITY*

Before turning to the main analysis, we examine whether geographic mobility within the U.S. is a potential source of bias in assessing assimilation. Economic and social opportunities for immigrants and their children are not equal in all parts of the nation, further complicating assessment of assimilation (Gouveia, Carranza, and Cogua, 2005; Zúñiga and Hernández-Leon, 2005; Marrow, 2008; Massey, 2008). California and Texas are very large states that are home to more than a fifth of all U. S. residents (12.1 and 8.4% of the U.S. population, respectively, in 2013). Since 1990, they have both experienced rapid population growth (27.8% in California and 53.4% in Texas). These two states are major sites for the study of immigration, because of their very large and long-settled immigrant populations, amounting to 27.1 percent of residents in California and 16.3 percent in Texas, compared to 12.9 percent for the nation in 2013. Although both states share a border with Mexico, Texas has offered historically weaker educational opportunities and less generous social services. Texas also has historically presented a greater degree of social segregation in keeping with its southern heritage, while California has been slightly more inclusive. Nonetheless, Texas has had stronger growth in employment opportunities in the last two decades. It also has the advantage of housing prices roughly one-third those in California, making homeownership easier to obtain.<sup>5</sup>

*Settled Mexican Americans but High Migration of the Mainstream*

Population flux due to in- and out-migration has potential to lead to erroneous assessments of immigrants' progress, due to changes either among immigrant children or among the mainstream reference group. In-migration or out-migration that is selective of the highest or lowest skilled can skew conclusions about trends in attainments. To examine whether this is the case in the two largest states of Mexican-origin residents, we examine the stability of both the Mexican-origin population and the U.S.-born, non-Hispanic white population. We find remarkable stability in the Mexican-American population resident in both states: 84.1 percent of

<sup>5</sup>In 1990, the median house value was \$195,500 in California and only \$59,600 in Texas. By 2006, this disparity had increased from a multiple of 3.3–4.7, based on 1990 census and 2006 ACS data.

**TABLE 2**  
**MIGRANT HISTORIES OF U.S.-BORN RESIDENTS AGES 25–41 IN 2006**

	Mexican-American U.S.-born			U.S.-born		
	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.
Total residing in state in 2006	1,145,701	953,704	956,109	2,977,510	2,365,131	35,139,354
Born and stay	1,047,512	818,089	685,541	1,948,982	1,442,052	33,450,025
Born and outmigrate	197,438	143,175	163,759	1,283,256	556,036	1,801,644
In-movers	98,189	135,615	270,568	1,028,528	923,079	1,689,329
Share of state native born remaining in same state	84.1	85.1	80.7	60.3	72.2	94.9
Share of current native-born residents that were born in state	91.4	85.8	71.7	65.5	61.0	95.2

Source: American Community Survey, 2006.

Californians and 85.1 percent of Texans born in that state were still residing in their home state more than 25 years later (Table 2). This contrasts with much lower stability among non-Hispanic whites, with only 60.3 percent retention of Californians and 72.2 percent retention of Texans who were born in the state. In addition, just 8.6 percent of the U.S.-born Mexican Americans living in California and 14.2 percent in Texas were born elsewhere in the U.S. (Table 2). In contrast, more than one-third of U.S.-born non-Hispanic whites living in California (34.5%) and Texas (39.0%) were born out of state, thus indicating a high degree of population turnover.

In sum, we find there is a remarkable degree of rootedness among the Mexican-American population born in California and Texas, which contrasts to the white U.S.-born residents who are engaged in much greater inflow and outflow. The implication is that the Mexican-American young adults surveyed in Texas and California are reasonably representative of the children residing there a quarter-century earlier. That fact makes it defensible to assess their intergenerational progress within their current state of residence. In contrast, the substantial migration turnover of white U.S.-born residents creates potential selection effects that impact the achievements of this reference group.



**TABLE 3**  
**IMPACT OF IN-MIGRATION ON THE LEVEL OF COLLEGE COMPLETION**

	Mexican-American U.S.-born ages 26–41			White U.S.-born ages 26–41		
	Share of residents in 2006			Share of residents in 2006		
	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.
In-movers	0.086	0.142	0.283	0.345	0.390	0.048
Born and stay	0.914	0.858	0.717	0.655	0.610	0.952
Total 2006 residents	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
	BA Prevalence (%) in 2006			BA Prevalence (%) in 2006		
	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.	California	Texas	Rest of U.S.
In-movers	18.6	12.0	15.1	51.6	42.2	33.3
Born and stay	14.1	14.2	16.0	33.2	30.8	42.2
Total 2006 rate (weighted)	14.5	13.9	15.8	39.6	35.2	41.7
Difference from born and stay	0.4	−0.3	−0.3	6.3	4.4	−0.4

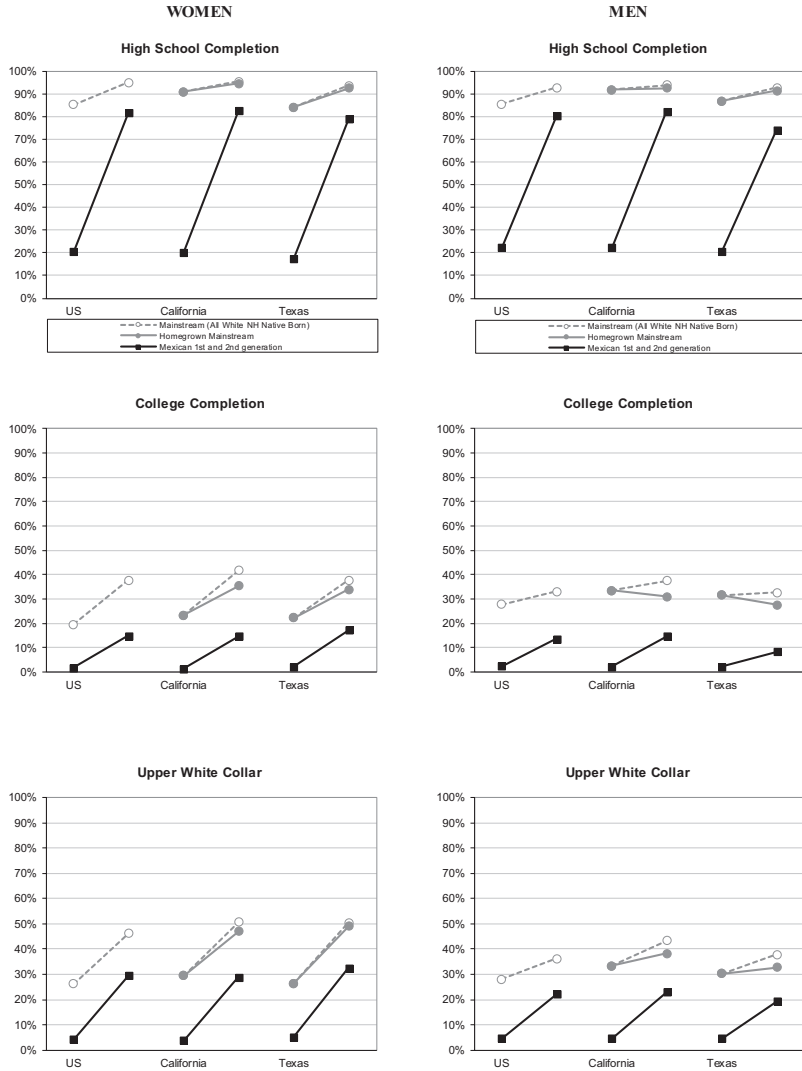
Source: American Community Survey, 2006

In the present study, we demonstrate the magnitude of selective migration effects by comparing the educational attainment of those born and staying in the state of residence to those either arriving or out-migrating. Among Mexican Americans in California and Texas, not only is there only a small degree of population turnover, but there are also relatively small differences in college graduation between those who were born in the state and in-migrants.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, selection effects are much greater in the case of the white U.S.-born. A majority of in-movers to California are college graduates (51.6%), compared to only 33.2 percent of Californians born in the state and who remain in the state (Table 3). A similar, but smaller effect is observed in Texas. When weighted by the substantial volume of population turnover, these educational differences create a much higher level of college completion among the white U.S.-born residents currently residing in the state. This is particularly a challenge for analyses that emphasize gap models of second-generation adaptation.

What is the significance of rising attainments of the reference group due to in-migration? One implication is that it indicates young Mexican Americans must compete in the labor market with ever more skilled age

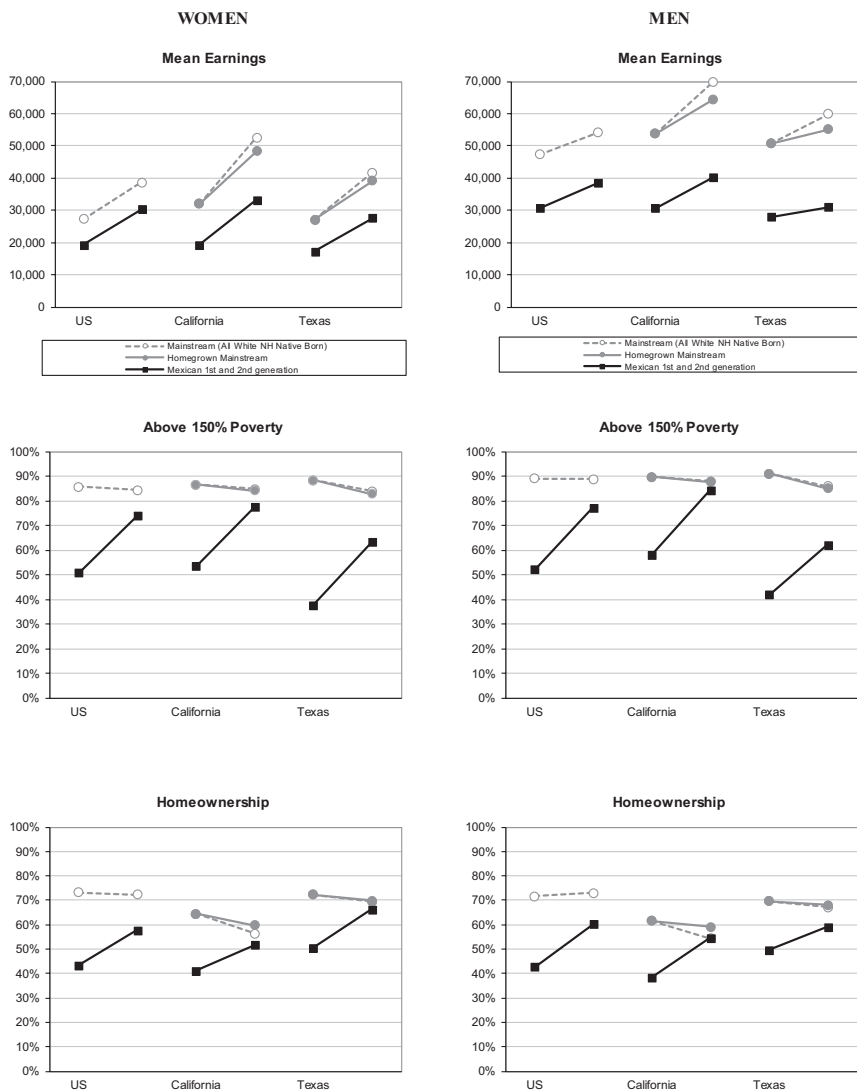
<sup>6</sup>In California, 14.1 percent of Mexican-Americans born and still residing in the state completed college, compared to 18.6 percent of Mexican-Americans in California who were born outside the state. The comparable figures for Texas are 14.2 and 12.0 percent.

**Figure II. Educational and Occupational Mobility, 1980 and 2005. Mexican Generations Compared to the White, Non-Hispanic Native Born (Total in State and Those Born in the State)**



peers. A rising bar due to in-migration indicates a growing disadvantage that lends support to a policy response of intensified educational investment in Mexican-American youth. However, for purposes of judging

**Figure III. Intergenerational Mobility in Earnings, Poverty, and Homeownership, 1980 and 2005, Mexican Generations Compared to the White, Non-Hispanic Native Born**



second-generation progress relative to age peers or assimilation, it suggests that comparison to a reference group born in the same state would be more appropriate. Accordingly, for greater clarity of interpretation,

modeling of intergenerational mobility that emphasizes gaps relative to a reference group should distinguish between those who were born in the state and an all U.S.-born reference group.

## *TRAJECTORIES OF CHANGE*

### *Descriptive Findings of Intergenerational Mobility*

The evaluation of immigrant achievement across generations can be usefully systematized by delineating three components as follows: (1) specifying a reference group for the mainstream that reflects the changing societal standards; (2) comparing both immigrant parents and children to this reference standard in different decades; and (3) comparing all groups when they are the same age as adults.

The simplest way of viewing these comparisons is via the intergenerational mobility profile chart introduced in Park and Myers (2010). The dotted gray lines in Figures II and III represent the societal standard, which is determined by the mainstream of a particular historical point in time, while the solid gray lines represent the subset that is the homegrown mainstream. The black lines represent the Mexican generations, immigrant parents in 1980, and second generation in 2005. The lines indicate both the *level* of attainment and the *rate* of change from 1980 to 2005 for each group. Any gaps between the attainments of different groups are plainly evident.

The high school completion rate is rather consistent across all geographies, groups, and gender. For the U.S. mainstream, the high school completion rate was approximately 85 percent in 1980 for both women and men. By 2005, the mainstream completion rate grew slightly higher for women (94.9%) than men (92.6%). There is almost no variation between the total mainstream and the homegrown mainstream. By comparison, only 20.6 percent of Mexican-immigrant mothers and 22.3 percent of fathers completed high school. By 2005, over 80 percent of the Mexican second generation nationally had completed high school. The one notable exception is the lower high school completion rate among second-generation Mexican men in Texas (74.2%). Overall, Mexican Americans have achieved tremendous intergenerational mobility in completing high school.

The patterns for Mexican college completion show much more modest gains. Only about 2 percent of all Mexican-immigrant parents

had obtained a college degree in 1980, while approximately 14 percent of the second generation did so by 2005 (women have a slightly higher rate than men). But second-generation Mexican Americans are far from reaching parity with the mainstream. During the past several decades, white women in the U.S. have made tremendous gains in college graduation compared to white men (reaching 37.7% compared to 33.1%). This is most evident in Texas where Mexican-American second generation women have the highest college completion rate (17.3%) among all Mexican second generation, while their male counterparts have the lowest (8.3%). We also observe a substantially lower college completion rates among the homegrown than the total mainstream, particularly in California, which reflects the in-migration effects observed above.

The large gain in mainstream women's educational attainment is also evident in entrance into upper white-collar occupations. But in this instance, the Mexican generations experience greater mobility than the mainstream. The share of mainstream women who have high occupations rose from 26.3 percent in 1980 to 46.1 percent in 2005. Very few Mexican-immigrant mothers had high occupations in 1980 (4.3%) compared to 29.4 percent of their daughters in 2005. Mexican men also experience a larger increase in occupational attainment than mainstream men. However, as in education, the level of men's occupational attainment is below that of women for both the mainstream and Mexican Americans. Again, the greatest gender difference is found in Texas. Lastly, the homegrown mainstream is slightly less likely to be in high occupations than the total mainstream.

Although mainstream women have surpassed men in educational and occupational attainment during the past quarter century, the same cannot be said for earnings. Nationally, full-time working white women earned approximately \$20,000 less than men in 1980. By 2005, the gap had decreased to \$15,500, but women's earnings continue to lag behind that of men. White women in California have made the greatest progress toward closing the gender gap, but women still earn \$10,600 less than men. Mexican women experienced substantially larger gains in earnings than men, but the Mexican men consistently have higher earnings. Again, Mexican men in Texas experienced the smallest gains in mean earnings (approximately \$3,000). As with college completion and occupational attainment, the homegrown mainstream earns less the total mainstream.

For household-level outcomes like poverty and homeownership, the mainstream evidences very little mobility and, in fact, there are slight

setbacks in some cases. In contrast, ethnic Mexicans experience a remarkable amount of intergenerational progress on these measures. In 1980, only about half of Mexican-immigrant parents were living out of poverty, compared to almost 90 percent for the mainstream. Yet, nearly 80 percent of second-generation Mexicans were out of poverty by 2005, closing much of the gap with the mainstream. The same general pattern exists for homeownership. In a major exception to the general pattern of the homegrown mainstream achieving at lower levels than the total mainstream, the homegrown mainstream is more likely to be homeowners than the total mainstream even though education and earnings are lower.<sup>7</sup>

The achievement patterns for ethnic Mexicans in California dramatically diverge from those in Texas when examining poverty and homeownership. In California, Mexican parents in 1980 may have fallen far short of the mainstream, but their second-generation children have nearly closed the entire gap with the mainstream. This convergence is made possible by the exceptional intergenerational mobility of Mexicans combined with the relatively stagnant attainment standards for the mainstream. Unlike in the case of educational attainment, the Mexican-American second generation in California was not forced to pursue a rising standard. If anything, home buying was suppressed for everyone by very high prices after 1995.

The Mexican-American second generation in Texas, in contrast, did not make up for the gap between their parents and mainstream Texans. A lower share of Mexican-immigrant parents was living above poverty in 1980 to begin with (approximately 40%). Accordingly, even if the second-generation women in Texas experienced the same amount of intergenerational mobility as those in California, they could not make up the gap with the mainstream. The contrast is even starker for homeownership. Mexican-immigrant parents in California start with a larger gap from the mainstream than in Texas. However, the second generation in California is closer to eliminating the gap with the mainstream than those in Texas. Again, this gap is largest among men in Texas.

<sup>7</sup>One possible explanation for the homegrown advantage in homeownership stems from their parents' earlier arrival date in the housing market, with parental investments made when prices were much lower, and their subsequent equity accumulation may have been used to assist children with home purchases. The in-migrating mainstream members may have higher education but they lack the resources of their parents' earlier real estate investments in the state.

There are several important observations to take away from these results. Foremost, a considerable amount of intergenerational mobility occurs across all outcomes, regardless of geographic location. Like mainstream women, second-generation Mexican-American women experienced greater gains in education and occupation compared to their male counterparts. Second, the Mexican-American second generation does not converge to the attainment levels of the mainstream in education, high occupation, and earnings, all of which are outcomes where the mainstream standard has been rising over time. However, the second-generation Mexican Americans are more successful in the areas of poverty and homeownership, where the mainstream standard has held more constant. These outcomes are also constructed as household achievements that pool resources of multiple adults, not individual achievements like education and occupation. Third, the intergenerational mobility profile chart allows us to quickly identify Mexican men in Texas as experiencing the least amount of progress.

The addition of homegrown mainstream attainments serves as a more accurate benchmark for those who grew up in that state, given the selectivity previously described. The comparison reveals a smaller gap between the mainstream and the Mexican second generation for individual outcomes, which is an indication that the Mexican second generation is faring even better than many previous studies indicated, particularly in California. The one exception is homeownership in which the homegrown mainstream experienced stronger gains than the total mainstream, thereby increasing the gap with the Mexican second generation. The multivariate analyses will determine whether the mainstream attainments are significantly different than the homegrown.

### *Multivariate Estimations*

The intergenerational mobility profile chart provides a comprehensive picture with which to make visual assessments of intergenerational mobility relative to the changes in the mainstream. Multivariate modeling allows us to gauge whether these observed differences are statistically significant after control for variations due to age composition. It also provides a way to statistically test differences between the homegrown mainstream and those in the mainstream who were born out of state.

Table 4 contains odds ratios for selected variables from the full model for all outcome indicators by sex, with all Mexican-origin and

**TABLE 4**  
**ODDS RATIOS OF MEXICAN INTERGENERATIONAL ADVANCEMENT COMPARED TO ALTERNATIVE MAINSTREAMS**

	California		Texas	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
High school completion				
Year	1.71***	1.51***	2.29***	1.41***
Out of state	1.39***	1.23***	1.12***	1.60***
Year*Generation	9.75***	11.15***	8.03***	7.06***
College completion				
Year	1.84***	0.89***	1.88***	0.71***
Out of state	2.05***	3.17***	1.34***	2.07***
Year*Generation	6.27***	10.22***	4.85***	6.26***
Upper white-collar occupation				
Year	2.43***	1.35***	3.13***	1.19***
Out of state	1.09***	1.40***	0.96	1.40***
Year*Generation	3.93***	5.10***	2.69***	4.73***
Mean earnings				
Year	19,187***	7,033***	13,116***	6,493***
Out of state	8,185**	13,368***	1,714***	18,333***
Year*Generation	5,489*	4,944**	1,563	386
150% Above poverty				
Year	0.68***	0.68***	0.59***	0.53***
Out of state	1.83***	1.23***	1.74***	1.53***
Year*Generation	4.20***	5.81***	4.41***	4.12***
Homeownership				
Year	0.80***	0.75***	0.74***	0.88***
Out of state	0.73***	0.70***	0.87***	0.71***
Year*Generation	2.03***	3.22***	3.17***	2.11***

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

reference groups adjusted to age 35.<sup>8</sup> The Year variable indicates the change for the homegrown mainstream while the “Out of State” variable denotes the relative change for the mainstream that was born outside of the observed state. For example, the 2005 California mainstream women’s odds of obtaining a high school degree are 71 percent higher than those in 1980, and another 39 percent greater than that for those who moved in from out of state. Overall, both men and women who are born out of state have higher rates of high school completion than their homegrown counterparts. This pattern is consistent across all groups for educational and occupational attainment as well as earnings. As observed in the graphs for 150 percent above poverty, the models also capture a decline in economic well-being for the homegrown mainstream, while those who were born out of state fair much better. Lastly, homeownership rates for the homegrown are lower in 2005 than in 1980. However, unlike the other

<sup>8</sup>Full logistic regression results are presented in Appendix A.



outcomes, those in the mainstream who were born out of state have even lower homeownership rates than the homegrown.

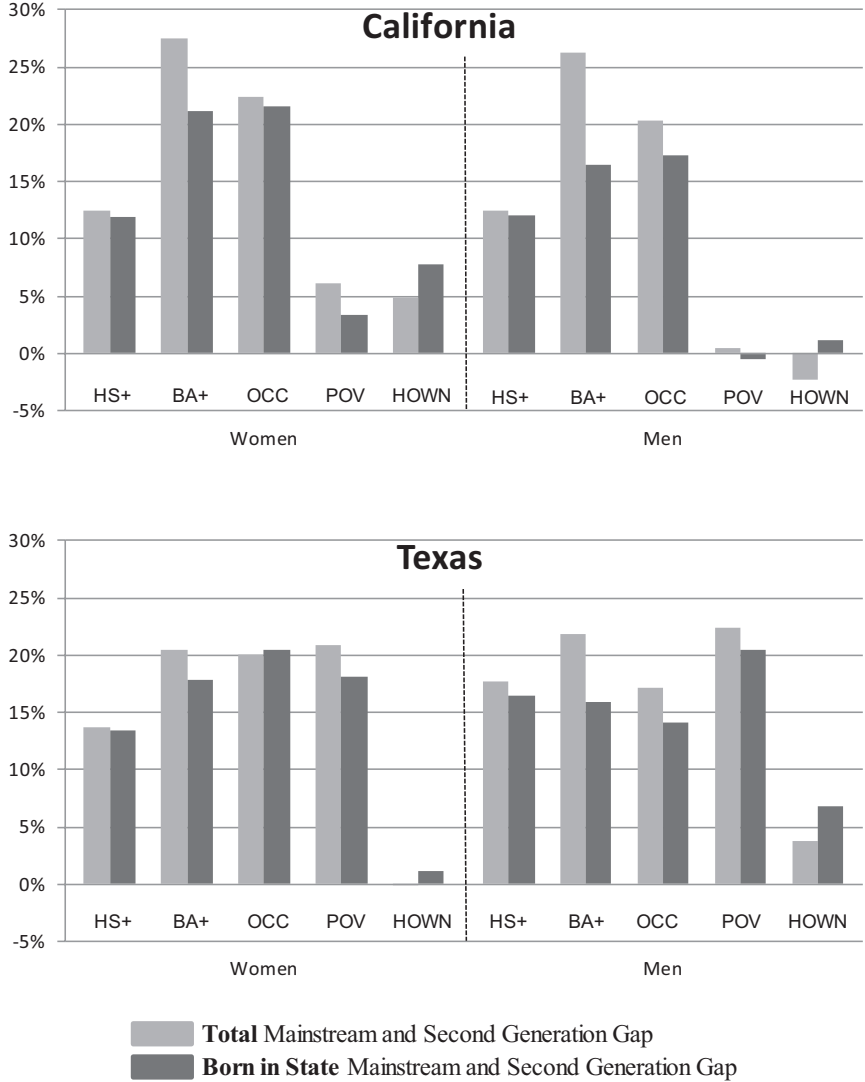
For Mexican-origin generations, the Year\*Generation variable indicates the advancement of the second generation in 2005 compared to their immigrant parents in 1980 (net of rising homegrown mainstream standards captured by Year). For example, second-generation women in California are over nine times more likely to complete high school than their mothers, net of mainstream progress. Overall, the Mexican second generation attained greater status than their parents across all outcomes. Second, their rate of advancement outpaced that of the mainstream with the exception of personal earnings. The greater educational and occupational attainment has not translated to an increase in earnings beyond that observed for the mainstream. Only Mexican men in California have experienced an increase in earnings greater than mainstream men. Although Mexican second generation women have higher earnings than their mothers, the increase in earnings did not keep up with the rise in mainstream women's earnings.

The model results confirm two findings from the graphic displays of intergenerational advancement. First, the Mexican-American second generation achieved significant socioeconomic advancement over their immigrant parents across all outcomes. There are no signs of second-generation decline. Second, the socioeconomic advancement of the homegrown mainstream in California and Texas is lower than it is for those who were born out of state with the notable exception of homeownership.

If the purpose of tracking the mainstream is to capture how individuals growing up in a particular state are faring socioeconomically, then combining the attainment levels of both the homegrown and those born out of state misrepresents the mainstream comparison for judging advancement. Therefore, the comparison of a total mainstream to the Mexican-American second generation may lead to an overestimation of a socioeconomic gap relative to a homegrown comparison. Figure IV illustrates the gap between the Mexican second generation and alternative mainstems.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The gaps between the second generation and the homegrown mainstream are calculated with expected values from the model results shown in Figure IV. The gaps between the second generation and the total mainstream are calculated with expected values from an alternative set of models that do not distinguish state of birth.

**Figure IV. Gap Between the Second Generation and Alternative Mainstreams, 2005**



For scholars interested in assessing the socioeconomic gap between the mainstream and the second generation as a barometer for assimilation, Figure IV shows that a total mainstream comparison yields a larger gap on most attainment indicators than does a comparison with a homegrown

mainstream. This gap is particularly apparent for college completion in both California and Texas. For example, a total mainstream comparison for women in California overestimates the gap by 23 percent relative to a homegrown comparison. The overestimation is even greater for men in California (37%). Similarly, in regard to living above poverty, a total mainstream comparison for California men generates a 22-percentage point gap, while a homegrown comparison indicates a complete closing of the gap. On the other hand, a total mainstream comparison for homeownership leads to the conclusion that the second generation has surpassed the mainstream while the homegrown comparison shows the mainstream still holding a slight advantage. While the in-migrants generally raise the bar for comparison in the reference group, they are less advantaged in homeownership than the homegrown and so the standard of comparison is lowered by their inclusion.

## *DISCUSSION*

The findings of immigrant progress that have been presented here trace a quarter century of socioeconomic advancement between the first and second generations of Mexican Americans in the U.S. We compare this progress to the advancement between two generations of U.S.-born whites, observed in 1980 and 2005, a time period in which the mainstream standards of achievement changed considerably, especially among women. We extend this comparative framework to examine the Mexican second generation's adaptation in two subnational regions, California and Texas, and by necessity we have compared two alternative reference groups, one that is homegrown in the state and the other that is augmented by substantial in-migration of U.S.-born whites.

### *Referencing the Mainstream*

Our close examination of the mainstream reference group has shown how much it has changed over time, more for women than men, and more for some outcomes in California or Texas than others. It is crucial to grasp the mainstream trends to evaluate the relative outcomes of the second generation that resides in the same area. High school completion, for example, is higher for the mainstream in California than Texas, among both men and women, as is college completion. However, high school completion has increased as a norm among the mainstream in

Texas more than in California, and it has increased far more among women in both states than among men. In addition, migration of U.S.-born into the two states raised the mainstream's college completion levels by 4–6 percentage points in Texas and California, creating a higher standard of comparison for the homegrown second generation than they would have faced with their local age peers who are also natives of the state. Thus, when we evaluate the educational attainment of Mexican-American men or women, it is important to reference the appropriate mainstream standard.

The larger lesson is that the reference populations to which social scientists compare the progress of assimilating immigration groups are moving targets. The socioeconomic fortunes of the reference groups are shifting so that change among these reference populations must be tracked across time just as carefully the immigrant-origin groups. Ideally, we should compare the attainments of grown children of immigrants to those of other local children now grown up, not to the higher (or at times, lower) attainments who later moved into the state.

### *Differences by Gender*

Observations of average intergenerational gains are expressed separately for men and women because assimilation is a gendered process (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Smith, 2002; Blau and Kahn, 2008). Along some measures, like earnings, men outpace women; however, the earnings of second-generation women have increased more than for men, especially in Texas, and the second generation also is closer to equaling the attainments of the mainstream. Other measures, like college completion, show that women – especially those in Texas – have experienced far greater gains than their male counterparts.

The Mexican women's higher attainment in Texas underscores the important contribution of women to the overall observed progress for ethnic Mexicans. Ignoring the socioeconomic progress of women, as is often the case, underestimates Mexican-origin progress in Texas. Alternatively, failing to differentiate progress by gender could disguise the stronger progress of women and the weaker success of men. Further research is needed to ascertain why the Mexican-origin men of Texas have lagged behind the second generation elsewhere.

### *Texas Versus California*

Adding a geographic component uncovers the importance of previously neglected issues of internal migration and reference groups. But what of the revealed differences between the two major states of Mexican-American settlement? The strongest conclusion is the broad similarities across the regions of settlement. The patterns of advancement relative to parents and the mainstream are remarkably similar in the two states and similar to the U.S. as a whole. The rate of progress appears to vary more by indicator of attainment than state of origin, including the stronger opportunity for homeownership in Texas, in contrast to the weaker earnings performance of men in that state. The Mexican-American second generation fares well in both states, although there are some notable differences. California has slightly higher education, occupation, and earnings among both the mainstream and the second generation, and Texas stands out for the lower education and earnings among men in the second generation, but not women, as noted above.

What is more problematic is the markedly lower share of men and women among the first and second generation in Texas that have risen above the 150 percent level of poverty. Certainly, the cost of living and wage levels are higher in California, and accordingly fewer people would be expected to fall below the nationally fixed poverty line, but the large gap with the mainstream indicates markedly lower living standards for Mexican Americans in Texas. Lastly, despite the higher incomes available to California residents, both the immigrants and the mainstream achieve markedly lower levels of homeownership than in the rest of the country. Clearly, it is helpful to have a regionally specific reference group to represent mainstream standards for judging immigrant progress.

### *Selective Outcome Measures*

Alternative conclusions about the adaptation of Mexican immigrants derive at least partially from the choice of outcome measures, such as educational attainment or homeownership. Our use of a broad suite of outcome measures seeks to overcome that bias. The gains achieved by Mexican second-generation women and men on individual-level measures of socioeconomic attainment, such as education, occupation, and earnings, are substantial, but overshadowed by the fact that the mainstream has also

experienced a rise in socioeconomic attainment. Therefore, the individual-level outcomes often show little convergence with the mainstream.

More favorable findings stem from household-level outcomes (homeownership and movement out of poverty). In fact, the Mexican-American second generation in California is approaching parity with the mainstream on these household-level outcome indicators. Often times, these household-level attainments are underplayed in intergenerational studies in favor of the individual-level indicators. To exclude them is to underestimate intergenerational progress.

### *Two Contrasting Perspectives on Progress*

A major cause for conflicting assessments of intergenerational progress is that some studies focus mainly on status increase above the average attainments of the parents' generation while other studies focus on the failure to close the gap with the average white U.S.-born residents. We have argued that the two perspectives are closely related to the very structure of the assimilation process. Assimilation fundamentally involves becoming more similar to a particular population, and more different from another. Scholars of assimilation generally focus on either that from which ethnic Mexicans assimilate – assimilation as a process of adaptation in the lifetime and change between generations – or that to which they assimilate – assimilation as an endpoint. The latter often reduces to measuring how much the gap with the white U.S.-born has been closed. Both of these approaches are important for understanding the Mexican-origin situation, but privileging one of the other may leave us with a one-sided understanding of progress. Our approach tracks the progress of both ethnic Mexicans and the benchmark population(s), comparing how they fare relative to each other.

Given our data, scholars who emphasize either the intergenerational assimilation process or closing the gap with an eye on an assimilation endpoint might each claim to see conclusive evidence for the often ambiguously defined concept of socioeconomic assimilation. One may reach a more optimistic conclusion while the other may find a pessimistic one (*i.e.*, the proverbial glass half empty versus half full). Our belief is that each viewpoint offers a part of the story and both are needed to understand more fully intergenerational mobility. Studies that do not explicitly consider both approaches could be internally conflicted between data exhibits that suggest clear intergenerational progress and text interpretations that emphasize failure to close the gap. In addition,

without an evenhanded assessment that employs multiple variables, it would be easy to fall into one conclusion or another depending on what single outcome was selected to represent the overall concept of socioeconomic assimilation. It clearly would also make a difference for the conclusions whether the study was based in Texas, California, New York, or some other region of the U.S. A gap analysis that emphasizes disparities with the mainstream reference group is particularly vulnerable to biased comparisons of selective in-migration to the reference group.

### *Limitations to the Analysis*

Our empirical analysis is crafted within some data limitations. We are not able to link specific kin between parents and children across the decades. Instead, we must rely on average achievements in the parent and child cohorts. This emphasis on averages prevents us from detecting the failure and success of small subgroups. Indeed, as others have noted, there is tremendous variation within groups, in particular among ethnic Mexicans, that averages mask to some degree (Agius Vallejo, 2012; Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow, 2014; Rumbaut, 2005). But the prevalence measures we employ provide a sound depiction of how the group is faring overall. Our sub-national analysis also is restricted to the level of states, both for reason of data limitations about how birthplace is recorded and also because of the practical difficulty of tracing the effects of migration at the level of localities. Another limitation is that despite our efforts to assemble a range of outcome measures, there are no markers for sociocultural traits (*e.g.*, language use at home) or deviance and risk-taking behaviors, which are absent from the CPS. Although we cannot directly measure culture and identity here, the contingent framework is relevant to these dimensions of assimilation.

We also acknowledge that we may not be capturing every individual who is of Mexican ancestry. For ethnic groups within the Hispanic population, Emeka and Vallejo (2011) find that those who identify with a Hispanic ancestry do not necessarily identify with the “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” ethnicity. Furthermore, Duncan and Trejo (2008, 2011) find that this “ethnic attrition” is sizeable and selective among the Mexican-origin population born in the U.S. Those who identify with Mexican ancestry but also as “not Hispanic” have especially high levels of educational attainment and earnings (*see* Alba and Islam, 2009). These findings suggest that our observed intergenerational advancement may be underestimated

due to the attrition of the most assimilated out of the reported Mexican-origin second generation. However, these studies also show that this attrition is lower for Mexicans than for other Hispanic or Asian groups and that the attrition is much more of an issue for the third generation than the second.

More broadly, as Alba and Nee (2003) suggest, immigrant assimilation may exert change on the very mainstream populations that we use to assess the assimilation of immigrant groups. That is to say, the identity, norms, practices, and behaviors of the host society may change *because of* immigrant socioeconomic assimilation (Jiménez and Horowitz, 2013). Thus, our call to measure both changes in the assimilating groups and relevant benchmark populations is particularly important when examining culture and identity as dimensions of assimilation. Finally, absence of data on grandparents' place of birth in the decennial census and CPS prevents us from tracing intergenerational mobility beyond the second generation. Moreover, there are practical limitations to any contemporary analysis because the later-generation outcomes to the post-1965 immigration cannot be revealed until their grandchildren emerge into adulthood in 2025 or beyond. The third or fourth generation observed today descends from grandparents of a very different era with potentially misleading insights for the intergenerational process going forward.

## CONCLUSION

The extent to which immigrants in general, and ethnic Mexicans in particular, are assimilating in the U.S. is in the eye of the beholder. Scholars who focus on assimilation in general, and Mexican-origin assimilation in particular, conceptualize their research and gaze upon the resulting evidence through often diverging theoretical lenses (*see e.g.*, Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters, 2011; Haller, Portes, and Lynch, 2011). Our aim here was not to definitively settle the debates that emerge from relying on these competing theoretical lenses. Either perspective affords an incomplete view. The aim was to offer a framework that provides a more comprehensive view of the evidence from which to draw conclusions about the extent and kind of progress, which rests at the center of these debates. In the main, all theories of assimilation rest on conceptions of change over time, context, and comparison groups. However, the assimilation picture is often made fuzzy when the methods do not clearly align with the concepts upon which the theory rests.



We make explicit these conceptual underpinnings by developing a contingent research framework that makes apparent the temporal, contextual, and comparative dimensions that assimilation theories employ. On the temporal dimension, changes from 1980 to 2005 are shown for a suite of socioeconomic outcomes, comparing the average attainments of the parents' and children's generations, and simultaneously contrasting the level and trend in the mainstream over the time period. This analysis also offers clarity to the contextual dimension of assimilation analyses. We emphasize geographically specific reference groups, distinguishing the sons and daughters born in the selected state from other U.S.-born whites who later migrated into the reference sample. The latter group raises the bar for judging Mexican-American progress and might be useful when assessing market competition in adult years (*e.g.*, earnings and occupation). However, the adaptation of children growing up in a state is better judged by comparing those sons and daughters to others also born in the same state. And, the analysis refines the comparative aspect of assimilation theories by examining progress by gender, a component of assimilation whose import has become apparent in recent research, including ours. Differences between men and women are quite substantial, such that the neglect of women would lead to an underestimation of immigrant progress.

In addition to these methodological contributions, the empirical findings from the paper have significant implications for the understanding of Mexican-American assimilation. Echoing findings from other studies (Telles and Ortiz, 2008; Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow, 2014), we show a mixed picture of assimilation. The second generation is doing much better than their immigrant parents on all indicators of assimilation. Although this may not be surprising given the low average attainments of Mexican immigrants, the finding is still significant in that it shows that the second generation is not relegated to their parents' humble socioeconomic station. But relative to a mainstream standard, the portrait of Mexican-American advancement shows some deficiencies. Second-generation Mexican Americans are faring extraordinarily well relative to native-born whites along some dimensions, such as homeownership and the proportion who are poor, but not nearly as well in other dimensions, including income and schooling (though the gap has narrowed a good deal).

The findings do not necessarily square well with any of the dominant theoretical paradigms, which either predicts a bleak situation for second-generation Mexican Americans (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) or offers a more optimistic prognosis (Alba and Nee, 2003; Perlmann, 2005).

Instead, variation in outcomes emerge, lending support to a growing body of research focusing on within group variation, especially among people of Mexican descent (Rumbaut, 2005; Jiménez, 2010; Agius Vallejo, 2012; Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow, 2014). An important part of the story contributed by the present study is that the context of comparison has shifted precisely because upwardly mobile, U.S.-born whites have moved in, changing the field of comparison and competition. This in-migration of higher status whites indicates that young Mexican Americans must compete in the labor market with ever more skilled age peers. A rising bar due to in-migration implies a growing disadvantage that lends support to a policy response of intensified educational investment in Mexican-American youth. However, for purposes of judging second-generation assimilation, progress converging toward age peers in the mainstream, it suggests that comparison to a reference group born in the same state is more appropriate. Accordingly, for greater clarity of interpretation, modeling of intergenerational mobility that emphasizes gaps relative to a reference group should distinguish between those who were born in the state and an all U.S.-born reference group.

Furthermore, the portrait that emerges from our analysis is a gendered one. Perhaps, the most notable gender component in the results is not found among Mexican-American women, but in the female, mainstream population that has seen more extraordinary intergenerational advancement than anyone, especially with respect to education. Thus, Mexican-American women have a hard time keeping pace with their white counterparts precisely because the latter's fortunes have dramatically improved. Still, Mexican-American women have narrowed the gap along important indicators of advancement even more than men and that supports a more optimistic assessment than if men alone are used to judge Mexican-American progress.

Though our analysis focuses on the Mexican-origin population, it offers a framework for further comparative analyses of assimilation involving other groups of interest and other reference populations. The larger lesson that emerges is that, given the many choices scholars must make about how to model assimilation, it is essential to be explicit about the rationale behind the choice of a particular conceptualization of assimilation, selection of relevant reference groups, and choice of outcomes on which to focus. The prominence of these contingencies requires that conclusions drawn should account for potential counter conclusions and place necessary assumptions in plain view. Failing to do so will muddy rather than clarify our collective understanding of assimilation because it will

APPENDIX A  
FULL LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR MODELS PRESENTED IN TABLE 4

	California					
	High school completion	College completion	Upper white-collar occupation	Mean earnings	150% Above poverty	Homeownership
Women						
Intercept	2.286***	-1.193***	-0.863***	32,357***	1.851***	0.684***
Year	0.535***	0.608***	0.886***	19,187***	-0.389***	-0.223***
Out of state	0.332***	0.718***	0.087***	8,185**	0.606***	-0.313***
Generation	-3.594***	-3.014***	-2.281***	-11,604***	-1.609***	-0.868***
Year*Generation	2.277***	1.835***	1.368***	-5,489*	1.436***	0.708***
Age	-0.011***	0.000***	0.002***	334***	0.011***	0.057***
N	12,087	12,087	9,044	3,807	12,087	11,220
-2Log Likelihood	693,509	723,046	723,709	0.076†	891,351	901,415
Men						
Intercept	2.487***	-0.589***	-0.617***	55,198***	2.100***	0.641***
Year	0.413***	-0.114***	0.298***	7,033***	-0.392***	-0.290***
Out of state	0.209***	1.153***	0.336***	13,368***	0.209***	-0.350***
Generation	-3.613***	-3.072***	-2.278***	-21,031***	-1.632***	-0.879***
Year*Generation	2.412***	2.325***	1.629***	4,944**	1.760***	1.169***
Age	0.033***	0.076***	0.055***	1,381***	0.029***	0.108***
N	11,798	11,798	11,320	8,552	11,798	10,641
-2Log Likelihood	796,607	774,408	868,181	0.132†	830,309	766,277
Texas						
	High school completion	College completion	Upper white-collar occupation	Mean earnings	150% Above poverty	Homeownership
Women						
Intercept	1.714***	-1.222***	-1.012***	27,418***	1.982***	1.186***
Year	0.829***	0.633***	1.141***	13,116***	-0.526***	-0.303***

APPENDIX A (CONTINUED)  
 FULL LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR MODELS PRESENTED IN TABLE 4

	Texas					
	High school completion	College completion	Upper white-collar occupation	Mean earnings	150% Above poverty	Homeownership
Out of state	0.1111***	0.289***	-0.038	1,714	0.553***	-0.137***
Generation	-3.183***	-2.484***	-1.820***	-9,880***	-2.462***	-0.927***
Year*Generation	2.083***	1.579***	0.991***	-1,563	1.485***	1.152***
Age	0.028***	0.017***	0.008***	354***	-0.017***	0.106***
N	5,971	5,971	4,369	2,081	5,971	5,658
-2Log Likelihood	427,977	429,507	415,891	0.089†	538,160	468,538
Men						
Intercept	1.830***	-0.701***	-0.774***	52,591***	2.188***	1.036***
Year	0.346***	-0.342***	0.174***	6,493***	-0.641***	-0.134***
Out of state	0.471***	0.727***	0.337***	18,333***	0.428***	-0.345***
Generation	-3.287***	-3.031***	-2.226***	-22,334***	-2.484***	-0.881***
Year*Generation	1.954***	1.835***	1.555***	-386	1.415***	0.744***
Age	-0.067***	0.055***	0.048***	1,543***	-0.006***	0.107***
N	5,719	5,719	5,465	4,511	5,719	5,254
-2Log Likelihood	375,980	294,031	356,974	0.195†	444,104	376,052

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

†Adjusted R-Square for OLS regression.

encourage simplified and discordant findings. The method of comparing the Mexican-American second generation in California and Texas presented here provides opportunity for scholars operating under different theories to make their cases about change over time more transparently.

## REFERENCES

- Agius Vallejo, J.  
2012 *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican-American Middle Class*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Alba, R.  
1990 *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- , and T. Islam  
2009 “The Case of the Disappearing Mexican Americans: An Ethnic-Identity Mystery.” *Population Research and Policy Review* 28:109–21.
- Alba, R. D., T. R. Jiménez, and H. B. Marrow  
2014 “Mexican Americans as a Paradigm for Contemporary Intra-Group Heterogeneity.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37:446–66.
- Alba, R., P. Kasinitz, and M. C. Waters  
2011 “The Kids Are (Mostly) Alright: Second-Generation Assimilation.” *Social Forces* 89 (3):763–774.
- , and V. Nee  
2003 *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bean, F. D., J. Chapa, R. R. Berg and K. A. Sowards  
1994 “Educational and Sociodemographic Incorporation Among Hispanic Immigrants in the United States.” In *Immigration and Ethnicity: The Integration of America’s Newest Arrivals*. Ed. B. Edmonston, and J. Passel. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Pp. 73–96.
- Blau, F. D., and L. M. Kahn  
2008 “Gender and Assimilation Among Mexican Americans.” In *Mexican Immigration to the United States*. Ed. G. J. Borjas. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 57–106.
- Duncan, B., and S. J. Trejo  
2008 “Ancestry Versus Ethnicity: The Complexity and Selectivity of Mexican Identification in the United States.” The Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 3552.
- , and ———  
2011 “Tracking Intergenerational Progress for Immigrant Groups: The Problem of Ethnic Attrition.” *The American Economic Review* 101(3):603–608.
- Emeka, A., and J. A. Vallejo  
2011 “Non-Hispanics with Latin American Ancestry: Assimilation, Race, and Identity Among Latino American Descendants in the U.S.” *Social Science Research* 40:1547–1563.

- Feliciano, C., and R. G. Rumbaut  
 2005 "Gendered Paths: Educational and Occupational Expectations and Outcomes Among Adult Children of Immigrants." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28:1087–118.
- Frankenberg, R.  
 1993 *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gordon, M. M.  
 1964 *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gouveia, L., M. A. Carranza, and J. Cogua  
 2005 "The Great Plains Migration: Mexicanos and Latinos in Nebraska." In *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*. Ed. V. Zúñiga, and R. Hernández-Leon. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Pp. 23–49.
- Haller, W., A. Portes, and S. M. Lynch  
 2011 "Dreams Fulfilled, Dreams Shattered: Determinants of Segmented Assimilation in the Second Generation." *Social Forces* 89(3):733–762.
- Hartigan Jr, J.  
 1999 *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P.  
 1994 *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jiménez, T. R.  
 2010 *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- , and D. FitzGerald  
 2007 "Mexican Assimilation: A Temporal and Spatial Reorientation." *Du Bois Review* 4 (2):337–54.
- , and A. L. Horowitz  
 2013 "When White is Just Alright: How Immigrants Redefine Achievement and Reconfigure the Ethnoracial Hierarchy." *American Sociological Review* 78(5):849–71.
- Kasinitz, P., J. H. Mollenkopf, M. C. Waters and J. Holdaway  
 2008 *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lieberson, S., and M. C. Waters  
 1988 *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- López, D. E., and R. Stanton-Salazar  
 2001 "Mexican Americans: A Second Generation at Risk." In *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*. Ed. R. Rumbaut, and A. Portes. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Pp. 57–90.
- Marrow, H. B.  
 2008 "Hispanic Immigration, Black Population Size, and Intergroup Relations in the Rural and Small-Town South." In *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*. Ed. D. S. Massey. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Pp. 211–48.
- Massey, D. S., ed.  
 2008 *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- McDermott, M.  
2006 *Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- , and F. L. Samson  
2005 “White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31:245–61.
- Myers, D.  
1992 *Analysis with Local Census Data: Portraits of Change*. New York: Academic Press.
- 1999 “Upward Mobility in Space and Time: Lessons from Immigration.” In *America’s Demographic Tapestry*. Ed. J. W. Hughes, and J. J. Seneca. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, Pp. 135–57.
- Park, J., and D. Myers  
2010 “Intergenerational Mobility in the Post-1965 Immigration Era: Estimates by an Immigrant Generation Cohort Method.” *Demography* 47(2):369–92.
- Perlmann, J.  
2005 *Italians then, Mexicans Now: Immigrant Origins and Second-Generation Progress, 1890–2000*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, A., and R. G. Rumbaut  
2001 *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press; Russell Sage Foundation.
- , and M. Zhou  
1993 “The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and its Variants.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530(November):74–96.
- Reardon, S. F.  
2011 “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations.” In *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*. Ed. G. J. Duncan, and R. J. Murnane. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Pp. 91–116.
- Rumbaut, R. G.  
2005 “Turning Points in the Transition to Adulthood: Determinants of Educational Attainment, Incarceration, and Early Childbearing Among Children of Immigrants.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28:1041–86.
- , D. S. Massey, and F. D. Bean  
2006 “Linguistic Life Expectancies: Immigrant Language Retention in Southern California.” *Population and Development Review* 32:447–60.
- Smith, R. C.  
2002 “Gender, Ethnicity, and Race in School and Work Outcomes of Second-Generation Mexican Americans.” In *Latinos: Remaking America*. Ed. M. M. Suárez-Orozco, and M. Pérez. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 110–125.
- Smith, J. P.  
2003 “Assimilation Across the Latino Generations.” *The American Economic Review* 93 (2):315–319.
- Smith, R. C.  
2005 *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, J. P.  
2006 “Immigrants and the Labor Market.” *Journal of Labor Economics* 24(2):203–233.

Telles, E. E., and V. Ortiz

2008 *Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Warner, W. L., and L. Srole

1945 *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Waters, M. C.

1990 *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Wojtkiewicz, R. A., and K. M. Donato

1995 "Hispanic Educational Attainment: The Effects of Family Background and Nativity." *Social Forces* 74:559-74.

Zúñiga, V., and R. Hernández-Leon

2005 "Appalachia Meets Aztlán: Mexican Immigration and Intergroup Relations in Dalton, Georgia." In *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*. Ed. V. Zúñiga, and R. Hernández-Leon. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Pp. 244-74.