The South American Immigrant Journey Through the American Educational System

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Policy makers, demographers, economists and scholars recognize that immigrants are shaping the future of our society and economy. The national focus on immigration has centered on the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States with an emphasis on Mexican immigrants. However, what fails to make the national headlines is the second generation, especially those who come from other Latin American nations. In her Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Jessica Vidal examines the factors shaping the educational experience of second-generation South American immigrants and the implications of their different academic trajectories.

Although South American immigrants are relatively neglected in the world of academia, this immigrant group constitutes a significant portion of Latin American immigrants. However, they have very different migration histories and educational outcomes when compared to other Latino immigrant groups. Focusing on the second-generation Colombian, Peruvian and Ecuadorian immigrants in New York and California, Vidal concludes that South Americans have outperformed other Latino groups in the United States largely due to education selectivity, class reproduction and favorable migration policy in the late 20th century.

Vidal uses statistical data and interviews with highly successful South American second-generation young adults to highlight the role socioeconomic status and paternal education has in the educational attainment of a child. Overall, South American immigrants are more likely to have higher levels of education, professional occupations, higher incomes, legal status, and live in suburban areas; thus their children are at an advantage in the educational system. Even second-generation South Americans living in poverty have higher levels of educational attainment than other second-generation Latino immigrants—relaying the influence of parental education and well-resourced public education. The second-generation South American immigrants are an example of how allocating appropriate resources to public school systems benefits immigrant groups.