



## The Mexican Origin Middle Class in Los Angeles

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## **Introduction**

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The context of the new immigration, especially the growing proportion of America's population with Latino roots, continues to elicit controversy. Mexicans, by far the largest group of immigrant newcomers, are of particular concern because the majority arrive as unauthorized migrants, have low levels of human capital, and live in poor and working class communities upon arrival. As a result, some scholars and public commentators maintain that Mexican immigrants and their descendants are not following the traditional path of upward mobility into the white middle class, but rather, a trajectory of downward mobility into a permanent underclass. Media reinforces this doom and gloom scenario by portraying the descendants of Mexican immigrants as uneducated gang-bangers in the inner-city where dropping out of high school and teenage pregnancy are the norm.

In this essay I argue that research and media depictions that are preoccupied with the downwardly mobile greatly contribute to the notion that the Mexican-origin population is monolithic in terms of class, education, income and occupation. In contrast, much can be learned by studying the pathways to success of those who enter the middle class.

This report summarizes key findings from a recent study of the 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation middle class Mexican-origin population in Los Angeles. Based on 80 in-depth interviews,<sup>1</sup> 1200 hours of fieldwork among civically active Latino professionals and data from the 2008 Current Population Survey, I find that a Mexican middle class is thriving in Southern California and that this population defies the range of predicted outcomes for the children of Mexican immigrants. I use a new economic indicator of incorporation, the retention of family obligations and patterns of giving back, to demonstrate the various paths to mobility the Mexican-origin population follows. I then detail how a civically active group of Latino professionals mobilize ethnic resources to promote the mobility of co-ethnics and to combat the immigrant shadow that follows them despite their class status.

I conclude by assessing what this research means for studies of immigrant integration and I offer several policy prescriptions that can help secure the class status of upwardly mobile Mexican Americans. As many are coming to recognize, California's economic future depends on the successful socioeconomic integration of immigrants and their children.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, examining challenges to integration and pathways to mobility among those who succeed can inform policy debates at local, regional and national levels.

## **The Mexican-Origin Middle Class**

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The Los Angeles metropolitan area provides a strategic research site to study the growing middle class since more than four-fifths of the Mexican-origin population are either immigrants or the children of immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Despite the prevailing image in media and scholarly research that Mexican immigrants and their children are persistently poor and uneducated, a growing proportion exhibit traditional indicators of middle class status, such as incomes above the median, homeownership and employment in white collar occupations.<sup>4</sup> For example, 22% of Mexicans in Los Angeles

made more than the average household income of \$74,686 in 2008. Of these 1.3 million Mexicans, 67% are native-born, 74% are homeowners and 61% work in middle-to high status occupations.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars primarily use income and homeownership to define middle-class status among immigrants, but I employ a combination of indicators: college education, income over the median, white collar occupation and homeownership.<sup>6</sup> Sixty percent of my respondents display all four of these middle-class markers, while the remaining 40 percent hold no less than three.<sup>7</sup> Thirty percent of the respondents are 1.5 generation meaning that they were born in Mexico and migrated to the United States as children. Most notable is that 70 percent of middle-class Mexicans in my sample grew up 'poor' in disadvantaged ethnic communities. Their intergenerational mobility, from poor to middle class in one generation, is remarkable considering that their parents have less than a sixth grade education on average. Conversely, 30 percent of the respondents characterize their upbringing as middle class. Those who grew up in middle-class households have parents with higher levels of education or parents who started small businesses after they migrated.

## **Pathways of Integration into the Middle Class**

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### ***Family Obligations and Patterns of Financial Support***

Middle-class Mexican Americans evince traditional indicators of middle-class status and look very similar to whites on paper. However, there are distinct and unique challenges that prohibit some, specifically those who grow up poor, from incorporating directly into the white middle class. Unlike middle-class whites, middle-class Mexicans' social ties are class heterogeneous. Those who grew up poor retain stronger ties to disadvantaged kin who live in communities that are predominantly Latino, foreign-born, and very low income. Consequently, they must manage inter-class relations with less advantaged co-ethnics who drain their resources through repeated requests for financial and social support.<sup>8</sup>

Those who have achieved their mobility are significantly more likely to offer financial and social support to kin than those who grew up in middle-class households, and they give back in several different ways: they provide for the daily survival of their parents and siblings; they are their families' 'safety net' in times of economic crises; or they offer a continuous flow of financial and social support that supplements and sustains the lifestyles of their parents and extended kin. The freshly minted Mexican American middle class use their student loans to support family members' businesses, they loan siblings sizable sums so they can fend off home foreclosures and some must drop out of prestigious universities to become primary breadwinners when parents experience medical emergencies.

Why do those who have achieved their mobility in one generation give back to poorer co-ethnics even though it drains their resources? Scholars have argued that Mexican culture is simply more familistic than other racial/ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> However, I find that giving back stems not from familistic cultural values, but from an 'immigrant narrative' rooted in a shared sense of struggle for upward mobility born out of the marginalized economic context of the Mexican immigrant

experience. All of the respondents who grew up in low-income neighborhoods underscored how much their parents had sacrificed in order to migrate to the United States, and they also described the back-breaking, low-wage and low-status jobs their parents took upon their arrival to their new host country. Now that they have achieved economic success, they feel that it is their turn to give back to the less affluent, a behavior they feel sets them apart from middle-class whites, whom they view as individualistic.

Conversely, those who grew up solidly middle class more closely resemble the middle-class white model of individualism; they do not ask for nor do they extend help to poor kin and co-ethnics. In fact, many of my respondents who grew up middle class explained that their upbringing was just like middle-class whites where flows of financial and social support are strictly unidirectional from parents to children.<sup>10</sup> Hence, divergent patterns of familial support arise out of class background, not familistic or cultural orientations, and intersect with the economic context of Mexican migration.

### ***Civic Participation in the Middle-Class Ethnic Community***

Classical theories of assimilation suggest that upwardly mobile immigrants and their children will incorporate into the white middle class where their ethnic background becomes inconsequential to their mobility. Those whose lives are cloaked in middle-class privilege seem to be following this trajectory as they are more easily able to blur the boundary with whites; however, the story is much different for those who have achieved their mobility in one generation. Mexican Americans who grow up poor must cross ethnic and class boundaries as they increasingly enter professions that are largely white and affluent. Mexican American professionals and entrepreneurs are keenly aware that whites do not always view them as bona fide members of the middle class. Like middle-class African-Americans who suffer from a shadow of race and class, middle-class Mexicans also suffer from a shadow of being poor and uneducated and they are often questioned about their legal status, or that of their kin, by their white coworkers.<sup>11</sup>

One response to the unwelcome reception they receive as they move into middle-class business institutions is to create civic organizations that revolve around a minority middle-class identity. The stated goals of these civic organizations are to promote the mobility of co-ethnics by instituting the professional resources the ethnic community has traditionally lacked such as business education, financial literacy and networking opportunities. These organizations also attempt to promote a more mainstream image of Mexicans by socializing upwardly mobile Mexican Americans to white middle class standards of business, such as playing golf, styles of dress and speech patterns, factors that often play a pivotal role in the success of racial/ethnic minorities, even if they are unrelated to job performance.<sup>12</sup>

First generation middle-class Mexican Americans engage in a minority culture of mobility<sup>13</sup> by drawing on a class-based identity to assemble ‘middle-class ethnic capital’ to create civic institutions in L.A.’s Latino community that advance the mobility of co-ethnics.<sup>14</sup> This finding is important because scholars maintain that Mexican ethnic communities are lacking in the “high quality resources” that can advance the mobility of co-ethnics and buffer against downward

mobility. However, I find it takes an extra generation to produce and harness ethnic social capital because of the marginalized economic context of Mexican migration. Participation in these civic organizations is also an attempt to produce a new narrative about Mexicans, one that shows the other side of an ethnic community that is often touted as poor, unassimilable, and uneducated.

## Conclusion

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While I find considerable economic incorporation in terms of education, homeownership, income and occupation, there are multiple pathways of integration into the middle class. Some Mexican Americans in my sample seem to be following the expected trajectory of straight-line assimilation into the white middle class. Those who grow up in affluent households display an individualistic orientation to mobility and they are not civically active in ethnic professional associations.

Conversely, the alternative to straight-line assimilation for Mexican Americans does not mean incorporating in a downward direction as a racialized minority. Middle-class Mexicans who have achieved their mobility in one generation seem to be incorporating into a minority middle class, rather than the white middle class. As newly middle-class Mexican Americans enter the mainstream economy, they must manage relationships with whites who view them as crossing class and ethnic boundaries. They balance on a precarious precipice because their strong inter-class networks also keep them entrenched in the immigrant struggle for mobility and the financial and social demands made by poorer co-ethnics drains their resources threatening to upend the mobility they have achieved.

What does this mean for the study of immigrant integration? Immigrant integration involves improved economic mobility, enhanced civic participation and the receiving society's openness to immigrants. Policy makers should focus on two key efforts that will facilitate integration. While giving back stabilizes the economic status of poorer co-ethnics, financial support drains the resources of the upwardly mobile and poses consequences to further mobility and wealth accumulation. Policy should therefore focus on promoting the economic status of low-income immigrants. As Manuel Pastor and Rhonda Ortiz argue, targeted efforts to raise the skills and wages of immigrants will pay off in overall regional productivity and prosperity.<sup>15</sup> In addition to improving wages, local, state, and national governments might also create institutional resources, such as micro-lending agencies, which could offer small loans with low interest rates to low-income populations. Taken together, higher wages and micro-lending will not only help the less advantaged, they will also solidify the status of the Mexican origin middle-class, especially those who are one generation removed from poverty, and ensure the transfer of that status to the next generation, something California's future depends on.

Second, policy makers should institute programs that invest in and provide grants to ethnic professional associations that promote civic engagement and professional development in ethnic communities. Through civic engagement, these organizations facilitate the success of upwardly mobile Mexican Americans via business education and also by socializing them to normative standards of business which help them cross ethnic and class boundaries as they enter into the mainstream economy. These civic organizations also promote integration by fostering a new narrative of the Mexican-origin population by dispelling the myth, so prevalent in research and media, that Mexican immigrants and their descendants are likely to remain poor for generations to come.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Using data from Summary File 4 of the 2000 Census, I attempted to draw my initial sample in the most systematic way possible by identifying three middle-class census tracts in Santa Ana that have household incomes above the median, high rates of home ownership and low rates of poverty among Latinos. The City of Santa Ana is divided into 57 neighborhoods, each with a distinct name and neighborhood association. I recruited a third of the sample from the neighborhood association meetings in these middle-class tracts and then used a snowball sampling technique to recruit additional participants resulting in the inclusion of middle-class Mexicans from the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area.

<sup>2</sup> Myers, D. 2007. *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Bean, F., Brown, S., and Rumbaut, G. 2006. "Mexican Immigrant Political and Economic Incorporation," *Perspectives on Politics* 4 (2), 309-313.; Rodriguez, G. 1996. 'The Emerging Latino Middle Class,' Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver, M. L., and Shapiro, T. M. 1995. *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Source: 2008 Current Population Survey. High and middle status occupations are calculated using the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI). Higher occupations are professional and technical white-collar jobs with SEI scores above 50 and middle-status occupations are services and skilled blue collar jobs with SEI scores above 25.

<sup>6</sup> See Clark, W. A.V. 2003. *Immigrants and the American Dream: Remaking the Middle Class*. New York: The Guilford Press.; also Rodriguez, G. 1996. 'The Emerging Latino Middle Class,' Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy.

<sup>7</sup> Mexicans have the lowest levels of educational attainment of all racial/ethnic groups over the generations. My research reveals that some upwardly mobile Mexican Americans face structural barriers to educational mobility; however, this does not preclude them from attaining middle-class status as many forge alternative paths to success through entrepreneurship. Therefore, a college education is not a necessary condition of middle-class status and the combination of other class indicators, such as income, occupation and homeownership, means that the definition of middle-class status remains robust.

<sup>8</sup> Agius Vallejo, J., and Lee, J. 2009. "Brown Picket Fences: The Immigrant Narrative and 'Giving Back' among the Mexican Origin Middle-Class," *Ethnicities* 9 (1), 5-23.

<sup>9</sup> Del Castillo, R.G. 1987. *La Familia: Chicano Families in the Urban Southwest, 1848 to Present*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>10</sup> Mabry, J. B., Giarusso, R., and Bengston, V. 2004. "Generations, the Life Course, and Family Change," in Scott, J., Treas, J., and Richards, M.P. (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Families*, pp. 87-108. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

<sup>11</sup> Franklin, R. 1992. *Shadows of Race and Class*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.; Jiménez, T. 2008. "Mexican-Immigrant Replenishment and the Continuing Significance of Ethnicity and Race." *American Journal of Sociology*. 113 (6), 1527-1567.; Lee, J., and Zhou, M. 2007. "Becoming Ethnic or Becoming American? Reflecting on the Divergent Pathways to Social Mobility and Assimilation among the New Second Generation," *Du Bois Review* 4 (1), 189-205.

<sup>12</sup> Light, I., and Gold, S.J. 2000. *Ethnic Economies*. San Diego: Academic Press.

<sup>13</sup> Neckerman, K., Carter, P., and Lee, J. 1999. "Segmented Assimilation and Minority Cultures of Mobility," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (6), 945-965.

<sup>14</sup> Agius Vallejo, J. 2009. "Latina Spaces: Middle-Class Ethnic Capital and Professional Associations in the Latino Community," *City and Community* 8 (2), 129-154.

<sup>15</sup> Pastor, M., and Ortiz, R. 2009. "Immigrant Integration in Los Angeles: Strategic Directions for Funders." [http://csii.usc.edu/documents/immigrant\\_integration.pdf](http://csii.usc.edu/documents/immigrant_integration.pdf)



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