

# **UCLA**

## **Working Papers**

### **Title**

Mexican Immigrants in an Unequal America: Starting out at the bottom, moving ahead?

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06s2s5jr>

### **Author**

Waldinger, Roger

### **Publication Date**

2008-08-01

IRLE

WORKING PAPERS

---

WP 2009-15

Mexican Immigrants in an Unequal America:  
Starting out at the bottom, moving ahead?

by

Roger Waldinger

Department of Sociology, UCLA

August 2008



INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH  
ON LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

The views expressed in this paper are not the views of The Regents of the University of California or any of its facilities, including UCLA, the UCLA College of Letters and Science, and the IRLE, and represent the views of the authors only. University affiliations of the authors are for identification purposes only, and should not be construed as University endorsement or approval.

**Mexican Immigrants in an Unequal America:  
Starting out at the bottom, moving ahead?**

by

Roger Waldinger  
Department of Sociology – UCLA  
Los Angeles, CA 90095  
August 2008

With the United States experiencing levels of immigration of historic proportions, the central question is whether the immigrants and their children will move ahead. That issue is of particular importance for Mexican immigrants, who comprise almost a third of the U.S. foreign-born population. The Mexican immigrants of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the latest arrivals in a century-long migration. They enter the U.S. economy with disproportionately low levels of schools; many arrive without legal status; they converge on low-level, low-status jobs in which Mexican immigrants have often labored, making it likely that historic patterns of discrimination and prejudice will attach to these latest arrivals. Given this migration's size, its characteristics, and its history, the trajectory of Mexican immigrants and their descendents is a crucial, perhaps *the* crucial, issue in immigration research in the United States today.

As this paper shows, despite these unfavorable conditions, migration does yield mobility, though the extent of upward movement varies depending on the comparative frame. As the migrants experience high employment rates, new arrivals in the United States do much better than their counterparts in Mexico, though the relative gain is much higher among lower skilled migrants. Over time, moreover, the migrants progress, with earnings rising as years in the United States increase. Compared to their immigrant

parents, the children of Mexican immigrants do better as well, acquiring higher levels of education and enjoying higher earnings.

Over time, however, migration's positive impact has declined. Earnings among new arrivals compare unfavorably with those enjoyed by their predecessors; likewise, years of settlement yield progressively weaker impacts on earnings. Mexican immigrants, especially men, are also falling behind, when compared to native whites. While the erosion in male, immigrant earnings reflects the trends experienced by all low-skilled workers, this trend yields a disproportionate impact among Mexicans, as the great majority lacks a high school degree. Although the second generation moves beyond the attainments of the first, college completion rates remain low, threatening earnings prospects in the future.

### **Immigrant Mobility and the two Eras of Mass Migration**

As the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to a close, America has again become a country of mass immigration – much as it was a hundred years ago. Though at 12.5 percent, the 2006 foreign-born share of the U.S. population fell below the comparable level recorded almost 100 years earlier (in 1910), the absolute number is large (37 million) and the rate at which the foreign-born population has been growing (up from 4.7 percent of the population in 1970) is impressive.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast between today and yesterday should provide grounds for optimism. For the most part, the population movements of the last turn of the century involved a migration of peasants: possessing little in the way of schooling, industrial skills, or urban experience, and encountering an unwelcoming environment, the newcomers started at the bottom, taking up the 3D (“difficult, dirty, dangerous”) jobs of the time. Though not

without long-lasting effects (as noted by Borjas, 1994), these initial skill deficits were gradually overcome. While staying within the factory sector, the U.S.-born children of the peasant migrants generally moved on to better paid, and more stable jobs; have to fix this.

By comparison, socio-economic diversity is a salient feature of the new immigration, which means that relatively fewer immigrants currently begin at the bottom. High-skilled immigrants have played a modest but significant role in immigration to the United States ever since the enactment of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965. Arriving with educational levels well in excess of the U.S. average, many immigrants move into jobs at the middle of the ladder, if not its upper rungs; their children progress still further, as evidenced by the large number of Chinese, Korean, Indian, and other, Asian-origin students enrolled in the nation's leading universities.

On the other hand, today's working-class and peasant migrants may face more difficult circumstances than those encountered by their predecessors of a century ago. While yesterday's immigrants arrived with low levels of schooling, the educational levels of the native-born population, among whom a high school education was still far from the norm, were relatively modest. In relative terms, the educational gap distinguishing today's labor migrants from native-born workers, among whom advanced schooling is now common, is greater than ever before. Moreover, the initial disadvantages associated with low skills have been compounded by changes in the US labor market: the shift from a manufacturing to service based economy has increased the earnings premium placed on higher education, while job security and benefits have simultaneously declined. Although the migration process connects immigrants to employers, the social ties that generate

attachment seem less likely to produce the skill acquisition needed for subsequent mobility. As to the immigrants' children, their progress is also in question. While the educational attainments of the second generation surpass those of the first, that might not be enough, as the advent of an hourglass economy is likely to provide limited opportunities for immigrant offspring with schooling levels only modestly higher than those of their parents. These circumstances, as well as deep-seated tendencies toward persistent discrimination against persons of Mexican origin – whether foreign or native – have led some scholars to wonder whether the U.S.-born descendants of Mexican immigrants can surmount the difficult circumstances that they encounter (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

### **Mexican Migration to the United States: A capsule history**

Mexican migration to the United States is a century long phenomenon. Spurred, at the turn of the last century, by the construction of railroads linking Mexico and the United States and growing demands for mining and agricultural workers throughout the southwest, Mexican migration took a decisive shift upwards once World War I, and then the onset of immigration restriction, depleted the supply of European workers. Migration from Mexico climbed in the 1920s: with Mexicans now the major source of unskilled in the southwest, the proportion of the Mexican-born population residing in the United States hit the 4.5 percent level in 1929 – a level not reached again until the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

-----  
See Figure 1  
-----

With the depression, immigrant labor was no longer needed. The tides turned swiftly and hard, as massive deportations sent immigrants as well as their U.S. born

children back to Mexico; by 1940, the Mexican-born population living in the U.S. stood at 377,000, down from 642,000 a decade before. But even before the new decade began, the economy's upswing re-ignited the demand for Mexican labor. Flows across the border accelerated from 1942 onwards: responding to growers' unceasing complaints of a shortage of labor, the U.S. and Mexican governments reached agreement on a program designed to send migrants to the United States, with the goal of securing temporary workers, not permanent settlers.

In that wartime agreement – nicknamed the Bracero program – lie the roots of contemporary Mexican migration. 4.6 million Braceros crossed into between the program's inception, in 1942, and its demise, in 1964, though as the numbers refer to crossings rather than individuals, the precise of persons involved is not known. While most of the migrants appear to have returned, the demand for labor frequently exceeded the supply of workers that the program could legally furnish, leading to a recurrent flow of undocumented workers, who either moved across the border as “mojados” or “dropped out” of the program, opting for longer stays in the United States. Over time, some of the illegals found a path to legal residence in the United States, producing a modest rebound in the numbers of Mexican-born persons living in the United States.

Organized labor had long opposed the Bracero program and with the advent of the Great Society, the program was brought to an end in 1964. But with farmers and other employers having grown used to a migrant labor force, and networks lubricating flows across the U.S.-Mexico border, the migration continued, now taking a largely undocumented flow. Climbing slowly but steadily during the 1960s, migrant numbers then edged up sharply, continuing to climb for the remaining decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century



and on through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Much of the flow took an unauthorized form, generating forces that, in 1986, produced an amnesty for over 3,000,000 undocumented immigrants, of whom 2.3 million were born in Mexico (Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002: 49). As the amnesty did nothing to reduce the demand for immigrants, and ironically strengthened the connections to settlers now legally living in the U.S., undocumented immigration soon resumed. As of the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's first decade, 9 out of every 100 persons born in Mexico were living in the United States, resulting in a population of 11.5 million, of whom roughly 6.2 million were unauthorized (Passell, 2006: 5).

The Bracero program triggered a regionalized emigration, flowing out from Mexico's central plateau (Massey et al. 1987). Due to connections linking daughter communities in the United States with home communities in Mexico, facilitating migration, those same regions continued to dominate the U.S.-bound flow for the next several decades. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, migration diffused widely throughout Mexico, leaving few regions untouched.

-----  
See Map  
-----

Like other long-distance population movements, Mexican migration is a selective process. While the resources required to leave one's home, get started in a new environment, and most importantly, cross the U.S. border tend to exclude the poorest portions of Mexico's population, the migration is of limited selectivity. The traditional emigration zones are areas of relatively low, though not lowest, schooling; schooling

levels are yet lower in many of the new emigration regions, especially those in the south. Data from the Mexican Migration Project, a survey that has sampled Mexican sending communities over a 26 year period, show that migrant schooling levels rose substantially from the 1940s through the late 1980s, but appear to have then leveled out, with the median migrant possessing 8 years of schooling. Migrants in their 20s, the modal group, had 8.2 years of schooling, roughly one year less than their counterparts in the Mexican population.<sup>3</sup> Relative to their share of the population, Mexicans with post-secondary schooling are unlikely to migrate to the United States.

-----  
See Figures 2 & 3  
-----

Historically, the migration involved the movement of men, departing from villages for periods of seasonal migration in the United States, during which time wives and children would be left behind, a pattern that persisted even when seasonal migrations were transformed into multi-year stays. The advent of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 allowed the previously undocumented immigrants to become legal permanent residents, thereby facilitating settlement and encouraging a massive relocation of families across the border (Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002). While gender imbalance diminished, males continued to predominate among new immigrants; data from the Mexican Migration Project, for example, show that men accounted for two-thirds of first time migrants leaving Mexico during the 1990s.

### **Mexican immigrants in the U.S. economy**

The paradox of the new immigration is the simultaneous influx of a large group of low-skilled workers, just as the American economy has shifted to ever higher levels of

skill intensity. Less skilled workers have seen earnings growth stagnate, as demand has shifted to workers with higher levels of education. Production employment in manufacturing has also eroded, as low-skilled jobs have gravitated overseas; in the view of many researchers, the decline of manufacturing accounts for the persistent employment problems experienced by less skilled African American men. While today's economy would seem to preclude a large-scale inflow of immigrants with skills far below the national average, the Mexican immigrant presence has burgeoned, as noted above.

*Skill levels:* The relative size of the low-skilled labor force has been in sharp decline for the past four decades; whereas in 1970, 49 percent of all adults did not possess the high school degree, by 2004, only 12 percent had failed to complete a high school education.<sup>4</sup> The same general trend holds for every group, whether foreign or native-born. However, as the rate of change has been far from uniform, and there were also substantial inter-group differences at the beginning of the period, the pattern at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is one of substantial, and in some cases, expanded disparities.

Among the immigrants, Mexicans have consistently been the least skilled. In 1970, 8 out of 10 adult Mexican immigrants lacked the high school degree; in 2004, the proportion fell to just under 6 in 10, thirty percentage points above the level for any other major demographic group. Relative to whites, moreover, the gap actually grew, as shown in Figure 3, which displays the proportion of adult third generation whites and Mexican immigrants without a high school degree, using the white proportion in 1970 as the base. As of 2004, there were almost half again as many low skilled immigrant Mexicans as among whites three and a half decades before.

-----  
See Figure 4  
-----

At the other end of the skill spectrum, the proportion of adults possessing a college degree or more has grown rapidly over the past four decades, though the rate of growth in high skilled persons has not been as sharp as the rate of decline at the low end. In 1970, college education (or higher) was relatively rare, possessed by 1 in 10 adults; by 2004, it had become a good deal more commonplace, though only a minority (30 percent) had completed college.

While college education has become more prevalent among all groups, there has been no single pattern to the change. Compared to numerous other foreign born or parentage group, college education is actually an indicator on which whites have consistently lagged behind a number of foreign-origin or parentage groups. In 1970, the relatively small group of Asian immigrants residing in the U.S. already possessed a markedly high skilled tilt; by 2004, a college diploma was possessed by more than half of the adults in this group. By contrast, barely two percent of Mexican immigrants possessed a college degree in 1970; by 2004 that proportion had only marginally improved. With 2004 levels of college completion among Mexican immigrants half the level recorded by whites in 1970, the degree of Mexican immigrant disadvantage significantly increased.

*Employment:* Though their skills may be low, Mexican immigrant labor is very much in demand; the connections linking newcomers and settlers connect new arrivals to employers in the United States, leading to a distinctive employment pattern, one that can

best be grasped by focusing on men, who are disproportionately represented among the most recent immigrants. Over the past four decades, job-holding has eroded modestly among men: in 1970, 87% percent of adult males were employed; in 2004, by contrast, only 82% percent of men were holding a job; that shift was closely tracked by the trend among whites and indeed, among most foreign-origin and foreign-parentage group. Paradoxically, the great exception is also the one group that should be most at risk of job loss, given the economy's evolving structure of skills: less likely than white men to be employed in 1970, Mexican immigrant men have consistently become more likely to hold jobs than their white counterparts (Waldinger and Reichl, 2007). Among men, chronic joblessness also occurs with least frequency among Mexican men: data for 2000 indicates that barely 8 percent reported not having worked at all in the previous year, as opposed to 9.5 percent among native whites.<sup>5</sup>

Mexican immigrants enter the U.S. economy via low-level, poorly paid, manual jobs, of the sort in which unskilled immigrant labors have historically been concentrated. One-third of all recent migrant men are employed in five low-level occupations: construction laborers (12 percent); farm workers (8 percent); grounds maintenance workers (7.5 percent); carpenters (7 percent); and cooks (5 percent). By contrast, these same occupations employ few than 6 percent of native white males.

-----  
See Figure 5  
-----

While exemplifying the type of 3D – difficult, dangerous, and dirty – jobs on which migrant laborers converge, these occupations nonetheless offer significant

advantages over the alternatives in Mexico, advantages that can be accessed by the most recent arrivals. Recent male immigrants employed as farm workers in the United States made 75 percent more than the average Mexican male employed in Mexico, 160 percent more than the average Mexican male employed in the high emigration states, and 200 percent more than the average Mexican male employed in Mexico's poorest states.

-----  
See Figure 6  
-----

While all Mexican immigrant workers benefit from movement to the United States, the gains are greatest for the least skilled migrants. Young migrants in their twenties with one to four years of schooling enjoy earnings four times higher than those of their counterparts working in Mexico; as shown in Figure 7, the benefit from migration declines as level of schooling grows, with the wages enjoyed by college educated migrants barely 50 percent above the level received by their counterparts in Mexico. Among migrants in their thirties, the greatest gains are actually enjoyed by those with no schooling at all, with the benefits from migration again inversely related to level of schooling.

-----  
See Figure 7  
-----

*Job Quality:* Relative to Mexico, migration to the United States yields mobility; nonetheless, Mexican immigrants move into jobs that can be considered to be of "low

quality”, using a variety of different indicators. Earnings are one such measure: calculating 2005 earnings deciles for adult men and women separately, we see that 17 percent of Mexican immigrant men and 18 percent of Mexican immigrant women fell into the lowest decile for men and women, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Fringe benefits – most notably pensions and health insurance – provide another, less frequently examined dimension of job quality (Waldinger and Reichl, 2007: 37-9). In the United States, health and pension benefits are largely provided by employers. Analysis of data from the Current Population Survey shows that two-thirds of white males receive some form of health coverage from their employer. Foreign-born workers, however, all lag far behind whites, with Mexican immigrants – among whom only a third receives any form of health insurance – the most disadvantaged. Health insurance coverage is uniformly lower among women than among men. Mexican immigrant women are particularly unlikely to receive health coverage, a pattern that may be related to the prevalence of household employment and other similar jobs.

When provided by employers, health insurance usually entails partial premium coverage; only 17% of men and 11% of women workers have the entire cost paid by the employer. Among men, all immigrants are less likely than whites to receive full premiums. Mexican immigrants are particularly disadvantaged, enjoying full premium coverage at half the rate received by whites.

Employers are more likely to provide health than pension coverage, though the disparity is generally greater among women than among men. Just over half (56 percent) of white males are covered by a pension. Foreign-born men are all less likely to be covered by a pension plan; for Mexican immigrants, pension coverage is particularly low

– just over one third the white rate. Among women, Mexican immigrants are again highly disadvantaged, with just under a fifth covered by an employer-provided plan.

*Intragenerational mobility:* Comparing the earnings of migrant cohorts – that is to say, migrants who entered the U.S. at the same time – shows that earnings rise with years spent in the United States, with the sharpest gains typically occurring during the first decade of residence.<sup>7</sup> But while migrants advance as they acquire U.S.-based skills, of which English-language competence is often a basic component, successive cohorts have not consistently progressed at the same rate. As shown in Figure 8, the rate of progress among men has declined. Thus, male migrants who had lived in the United States for less than five years made 2,200 more in constant dollars in 1969 than in 2004; male migrants with 10-14 years of residence made \$5,000 more in 1979 than in 2004 (as again measured in constant dollars); male migrants with 20-24 years of residence made \$1000 more in 1989 than in 2004. While no such decline is evident among women, employment rates are far lower among women, as are earnings; in 2004, for example, recently arrived Mexican immigrant women with earnings made less than 60 percent of their male counterparts, who in turn enjoyed earnings equal to those of Mexican immigrant women who had lived in the United States for 20-24 years.

-----  
See Figures 8 & 9  
-----

The declining *rate* at which Mexican immigrants progressed reflects the changing circumstances into which the migrants have been moving, most notably, growing wage pressure on low-skilled earnings among men and the growing returns to workers with



higher levels of schooling. Applied across the American economy, those pressures are experienced by native as well as immigrant workers: in 1969, for example, the earnings of male, white workers with less than a high school degree averaged 59 percent of the earnings enjoyed by their college educated counterparts; by 2004, the earnings ratio had dropped to 42 percent. Relative wages among Mexican immigrant men plummeted as well: by 2004, earnings among Mexican immigrant men without a high school degree were a third among those of college-educated white males. While the decline in relative wages was slightly more severe among low-skilled whites than among the immigrants, it yielded modest repercussions, as only 5 percent of all white males lacked a high school degree. As most male Mexican immigrants, by contrast, lacked a high school degree, the decline in the relative wages of low skilled workers had a broad, ripple effect. Again, the pattern for women takes a different form, as the relative wage for low skilled workers – whether native or foreign-born -- has undergone little change. On the other hand, the gap is large: in 2004, earnings among Mexican immigrant women without a high school degree were 30 percent of the earnings enjoyed by native-born white college educated women.

-----  
See Figures 10 & 11  
-----

Further evidence of declining rates of relative progress emerges by tracking shifts in immigrants' position in the distribution of earnings. Since increased immigration and growing polarization in the structure of earnings have taken place simultaneously, the earnings distribution is tracked with a constant measure, one that reflects conditions prior

to both changes. This measure takes the dollar cutoffs for men's annual earnings deciles for 1969, adjusts for inflation, and applies those same cutoffs across years, moving from 1969 to 2004. 9 percent of native white males were in the top decile in 1969; by 2004, that proportion had doubled, rising to 18 percent. While a growing proportion of white male workers also found themselves among the ranks of the lowest earners, the change was slight: 8.4 percent were in the lower decile in 1969, as opposed to 12 percent in 2004. By contrast, examination of trends for Mexican immigrant men offers clear evidence of polarization. Mexican immigrant men were already over-represented among the ranks of low earners in 1969, with 24 percent in the lowest decile. That concentration then grew, reached its apogee in 1989, when 37 percent of Mexican immigrant men fell into the lowest decile, falling slightly to 33 percent in 2004.

*Intergenerational mobility:* Although rates of progress may have slowed, the comparison to the circumstances left behind makes it clear that Mexican immigrants do well for themselves by moving to the United States. In the long run, however, the fate of the immigrants is likely to be less important than that of their children. For these new Americans, a home country legacy characterized by little schooling, rural backgrounds, and possibly limited literacy, combined with difficulties engendered by the immigrant situation itself, may put progress in doubt. Getting ahead in the next America is likely to require skills far above the modest competencies – in reading, math, and writing – with which their parents arrived. While there is little doubt that the offspring of the Mexican immigrants will advance well beyond the schooling levels attained by their parents, a high school degree is unlikely to be enough.

As the trajectory of today's second generation is still unfolding, research has not so much produced a definitive analysis as a proliferation of plausible scenarios, all seeking to identify the paths that the children of working-class immigrants are likely to follow. The most pessimistic scenario, formulated by sociologists, and associated with the hypothesis of "segmented assimilation" contends that a sizeable portion of today's second generation may be a "rainbow underclass" in the making, stumbling beneath the ranks of the lower working class in which their parents have established themselves (Portes and Rumbaut, 2002). The more conventional perspective posits assimilation; if defined in terms of progress beyond the parental station, that view is almost surely correct, at least as concerns the great majority (Alba and Nee, 2003).

On the other hand, relative, *not* absolute progress may be the more important factor: divergence from the parental generation does not necessarily imply convergence with the dominant or majority group. For example, convergence may be postponed or precluded if the second generation never quite succeeds at educational catch-up and even more so, if income growth is largely concentrated among workers with the most schooling. Which contrast counts is also a matter of perception: the high school educated children of barely literate dishwashers or factory workers may well outpace their parents, but if unable to attain that very middle class American dream, which teachers, media, and peers have been exhorting from day one, they may also conclude that their search for advancement has stalled. Should lower than average skills persist from first to second generation, the ramifications may also extend broadly: future job growth likely depends on a highly educated workforce capable of both adapting to rapid technological change and contributing to new ways of making and doing things. However, those workers may

prove scarce if second generation Americans fail to obtain the skills that tomorrow's economy will want, with consequences likely to be felt by all Americans, first, second, third generation or beyond.

Results from a variety of studies find little support for the point of view that the offspring of Mexican immigrants will experience downward assimilation into a "rainbow underclass."<sup>8</sup> While U.S.-born Mexican men do not retain the extraordinary job-holding rates of the foreign-born generational groups, the shift takes them to the levels that characterize native-born whites. As the second generation is significantly better educated than the first, U.S.-born, Mexican parentage men find jobs associated with greater stability (as measured by weeks worked), significantly higher levels of pay, and much greater fringe benefit coverage. Taking gender in account alters the picture still more. The labor force behavior of Mexican immigrant men and women sharply diverge: regardless of the indicator, Mexican immigrant women show much lower levels of labor force attachment than do their counterparts among men. By contrast, the labor force behavior of U.S.-born Mexican-origin women looks a good deal more like the pattern evident among native whites. Though second generation, Mexican-origin women do less well than white women, with respect to job stability, pay, and fringe benefit coverage, the disparity is of greatly diminished proportions. As with their male counterparts, Mexican parentage women enjoy higher levels of schooling, which in turn generate more handsome economic rewards.

But if Mexican Americans have moved from marginal to "mainstream" employers, it is not clear that they have succeeded in shifting from "bad" to "good" jobs. Relative to whites, second generation Mexicans are far more likely to be working in jobs

that fall at the low end of the earnings distribution. Furthermore, as noted above, they are less likely to receive fringe benefits of any sort. While controlling for background characteristics that might depress receipt of fringes – most notably experience and education – diminishes the disparity, it still leaves Mexican immigrant offspring lagging well behind whites. Those lags are principally related to differences in characteristics, suggesting that the Mexican-origin groups would receive better jobs were they to possess the skills (and other relevant attributes) of native whites. However, the prospects for narrowing that gap are at best uncertain, as disparities in educational attainment between whites and Mexican Americans seem to be deeply entrenched (Grogger and Trejo, 2002). While college completion has a strongly positive effect on a broad range of economic outcomes, second and third-plus generation Mexican Americans complete college at far lower levels than whites, with the most recent evidence on young Mexican American adults pointing to a persistent college completion gap (Fry, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

The “new immigration” is the label conventionally applied to the growing number of foreigners that have moved to the United States from the Americas, Asia, and, in recent years, Africa over the past several decades. Ironically, however, the single largest source of today’s U.S. immigrants – Mexico, the birthplace of roughly one-quarter of all foreign-born persons living in the United States – involves a century long migration. Ebbing and flowing, the movement of Mexicans to the United States has been a continuous experience. Mexican migration is a peasant migration, in which displaced

agriculturalists, coming with educational backgrounds well below those of the U.S. population, have taken up positions at the bottom of the job structure.

Two features have consistently characterized the Mexican immigrant: convergence on low skilled, poorly paid, stigmatized jobs; and a negative reception context, of which the most salient feature has been unauthorized status. In recent years, these initial disadvantages have been compounded by changes in the US labor market: the shift from a manufacturing to service based economy has increased the earnings premium placed on higher education, while job security and benefits have simultaneously declined. This background, as well as deep-seated tendencies toward persistent discrimination has led many to wonder whether Mexican immigrants and their descendents can surmount the difficult circumstances that they encounter.

While not providing a definitive answer, this paper provides ample reasons for concern. As we shown, migration from Mexico to the United States is propelled by motivation and opportunity. The long history of migration ensures that newcomers are well connected to established residents, who in turn are deeply embedded in a broad swath of occupations and industries throughout the American economy. Those connections move newcomers into the economy, where they quickly find jobs, maintaining employment at high rates, and enjoying earnings that significantly exceed the alternatives available in Mexico. Over time, moreover, the immigrants' earnings improve.

While opportunities in the United States compare favorably with Mexico, narrowing the frame of reference to the United States put things in a different perspective. Relative to other U.S. workers, the jobs on which Mexican immigrants converge are of poor quality: Mexican immigrants are over-represented in the lowest

earnings decile and their jobs are especially unlikely to offer fringe benefits. More importantly, perhaps, rates of progress have slowed, as the gap between Mexican immigrants and the best paid workers has grown over the past four decades.

There are also reasons to worry about the fate of the Mexican second generation. The progress of Mexican parentage men and women exemplifies assimilation – but only if one defines assimilation in absolute terms. Relative to the majority, that is to say, whites, there remains a very substantial gap. Catching-up will require continued schooling, indeed persistence through the college years; for many of the offspring of Mexican immigrants, that achievement still seems far off. Enrollment patterns in the high school and college years clearly leave much to be desired. While Mexican parentage school leavers do find jobs, at rates very close to their counterparts among whites, whites are far more likely to remain enrolled; further, while college completion rates among Mexican parentage persons have grown, the pace of change is very modest. The consequences of the college completion gap might be different, were the economy moving along a different path. But under current conditions, the best educated are the best rewarded, and to a much greater extent than was true a quarter or a half century ago – that is to say, when the offspring of the last great migration came of age. If today's second generation adults are struggling to catch up, one also wonders how tomorrow's will manage: after all, these are the children of the immigrant working poor, for whom things have surely not gotten better over the past twenty years. And their future is not an academic issue, as demography ensures that the second generation will be a force, with dimensions not to be ignored.

## References

- Alba, Richard and Victor Nee (2003) *Remaking the American mainstream : assimilation and contemporary immigration*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Bean Frank and Gillian Stevens. 2003. *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Blau, Francine D. and Kahn, Lawrence M., 2005 "Gender and Assimilation Among Mexican Americans", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. W11512
- Borjas, George. 1994. "Long-run Convergence of Ethnic Skill Differentials: The Children and Grandchildren of the Great Migration," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*. V. 47, 4: 553-73.
- Fry, Rick (2004) *Latino Youth Finishing College: The Role Of Selective Pathways*, Report of the Pew Hispanic Center, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/30.pdf>, accessed May 4, 2005.
- Grogger, Jeffrey and Stephen J. Trejo, (2002) *Falling Behind or Moving Up? The Intergenerational Progress of Mexican Americans*, Report of the Public Policy Institute of California, [http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/R\\_502JGR.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/R_502JGR.pdf)
- Massey, Douglas *et. al.* (1987) *Return to Aztlan*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Massey, Douglas S., Jorge Durand, and Nolan Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.
- Passel, Jeffrey S. 2006, "Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S. Estimates Based on the March 2005 Current Population Survey," Report of the Pew Hispanic Center, <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=61>, accessed August 20, 2008.
- Portes, Alejandro and Ruben Rumbaut (2001) *Legacies : the story of the immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Portes, Alejandro and Min Zhou (1993) 'The new second generation: segmented assimilation and its variants among post-1965 immigrant youth,' *Annals* No. 530: 74-96.



Steven Ruggles, Matthew Sobek, Trent Alexander, Catherine A. Fitch, Ronald Goeken, Patricia Kelly Hall, Miriam King, and Chad Ronnander. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 4.0* [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2008;  
<http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>

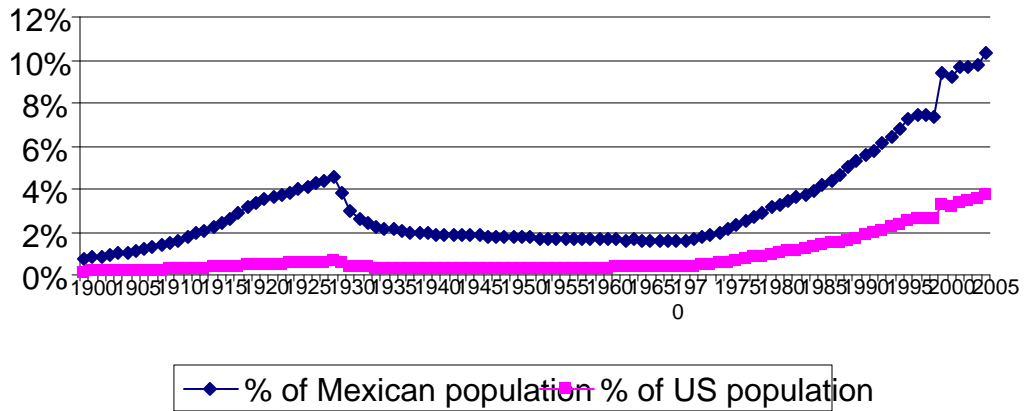
Waldinger, Roger and Cynthia Feliciano (2003) "Will the new second generation experience 'downward assimilation'? Segmented assimilation re-assessed," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, V 27, 3 (2004): 376-402.

Waldinger, Roger, Nelson Lim and David Cort. (2007) "Bad jobs, good jobs, no jobs? The employment experience of the "new" second generation." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, V. 33, 1 (2007): 1-35.

Waldinger, Roger and Renee Reichl, 2007 "Today's Second Generation: Getting Ahead or Falling Behind?," in Michael Fix, ed. *Securing the Future: US Immigrant Integration Policy, A Reader*, Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, pp. 17-41.

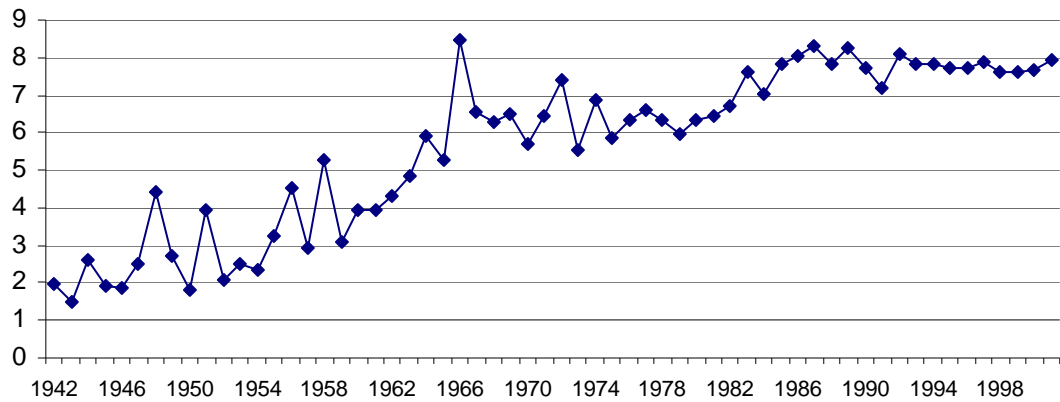
**Figure 1: Mexican immigrants, 1900-2005, as percent of US and Mexican populations**

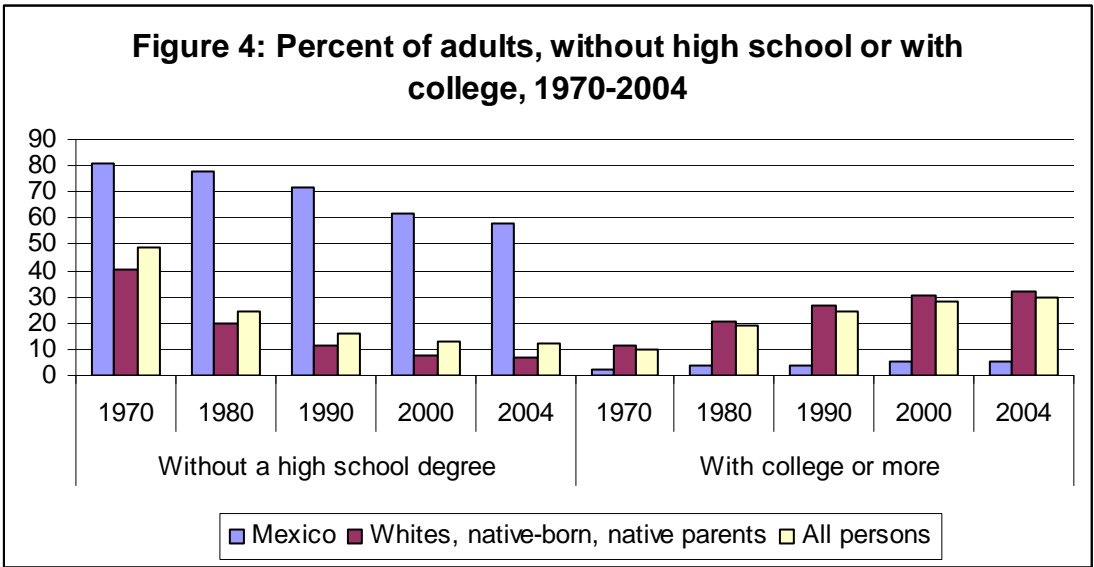
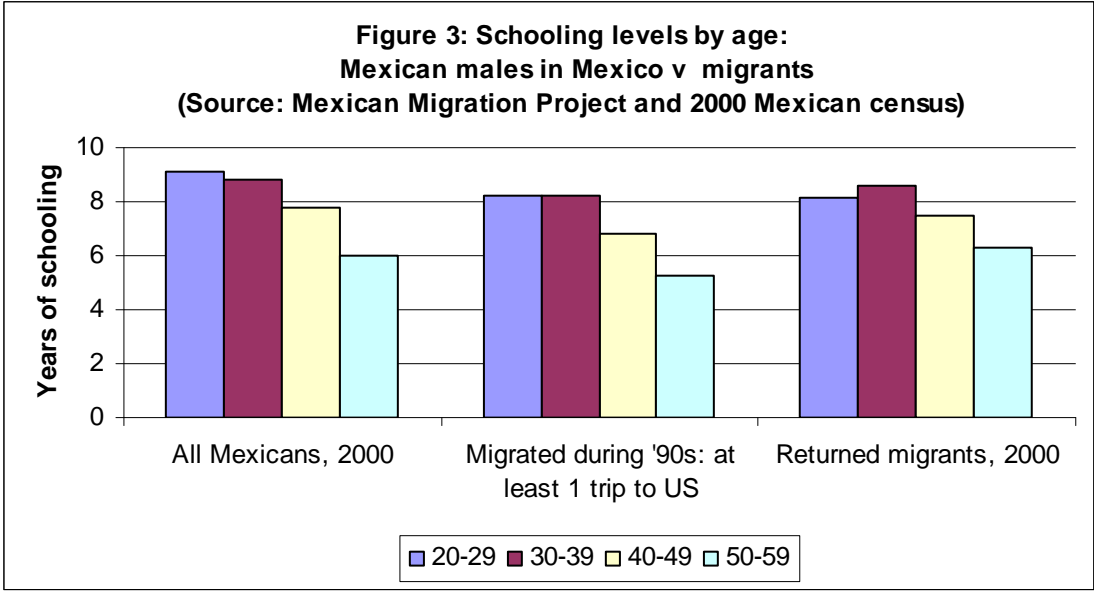
(source: Mexican Migration Project)



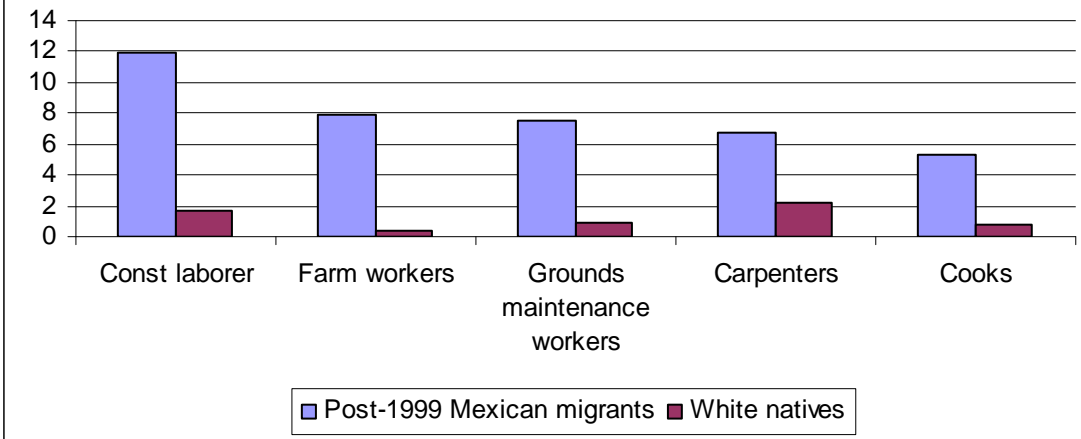
**Figure 2: Average years of schooling, Mexican male migrants at time of first migration**

(Source: Mexican Migration Project)

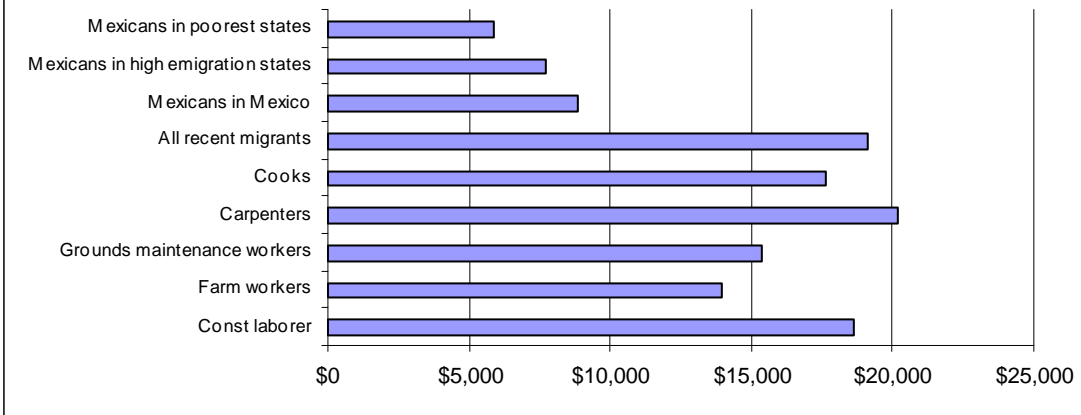




**Figure 5: Percent employed in 5 top migrant occupations, 2005**

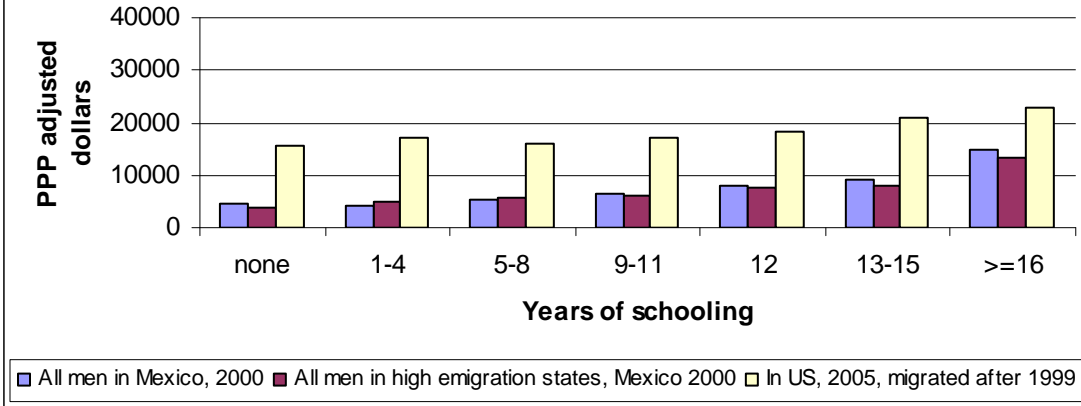


**Figure 6: Earnings of Mexicans in Mexico v recent Mexican migrants in US (most common migrant occupations)**

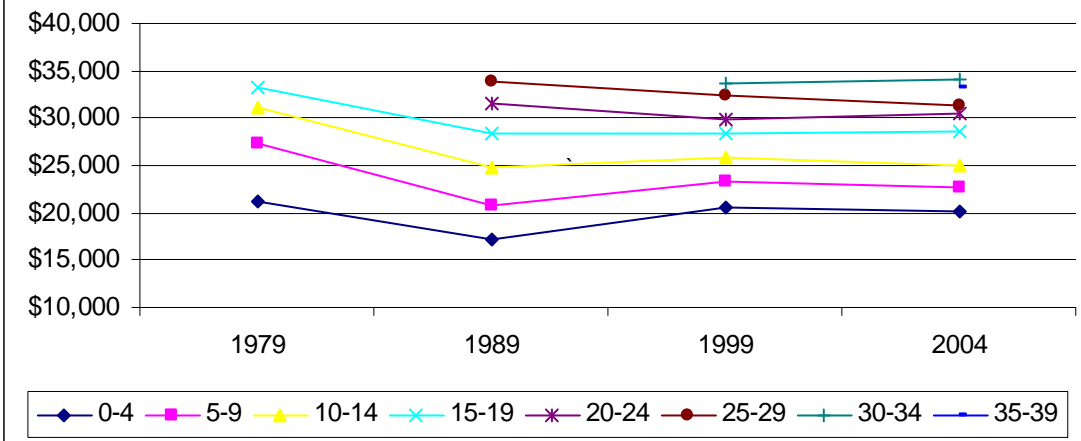


**Figure 7: Comparative earnings: Mexico v recent Mexican migrants, Males, 20-29**

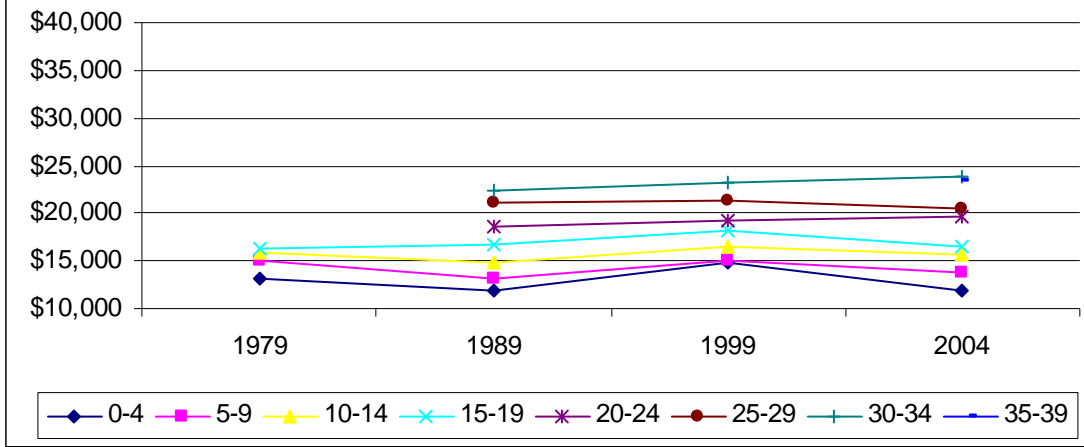
(Source: 2000 Mexican Census and 2006 American Community Survey)



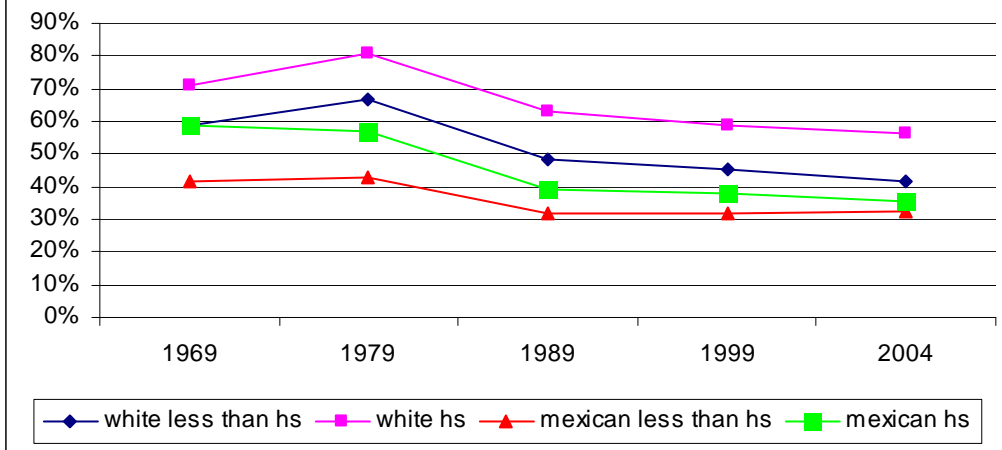
**Figure 8: Annual earnings by year and years in US: Mexican immigrant men**



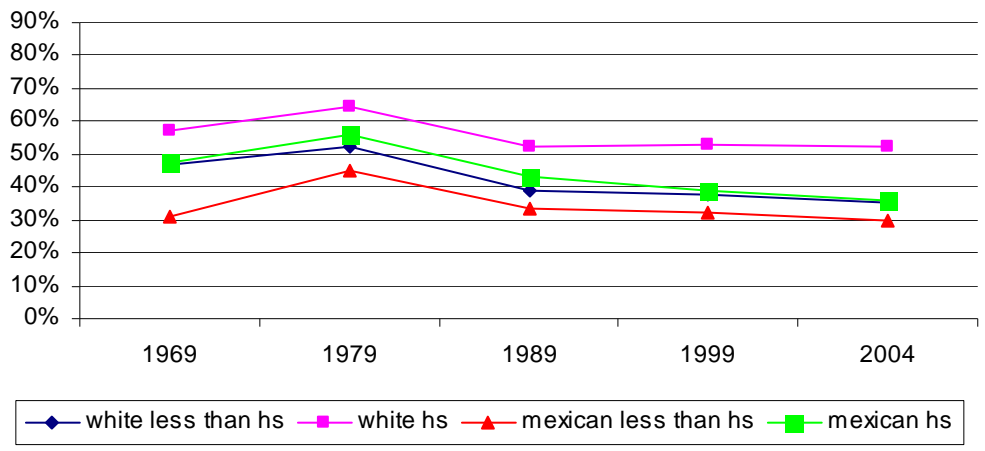
**Figure 9: Annual earnings by year and years in US:  
Mexican immigrant women**



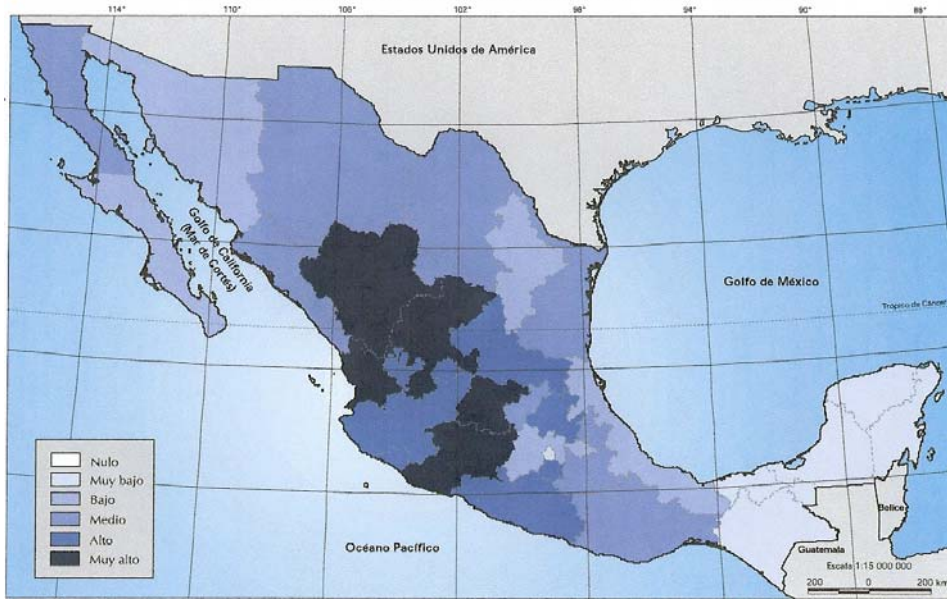
**Figure 10: Earnings as percent of college educated  
white males**



**Figure 11: Earnings as percent of college educated white females**



**Mapa A.1.**  
México: grado de intensidad migratoria a Estados Unidos por entidad federativa, 2000



## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Data on characteristics of 2006 U.S., native- and foreign-born population, from American Community Survey, as reported in U.S. Census Bureau, American Factfinder; Historical data from Gibson, Campbell and Emily Lennon, US Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 29, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Data in the first three paragraphs of this section are calculated from “**NATLHIST**”, longitudinal supplemental file downloaded from the Mexican Migration Project, containing selected indicators of Mexico-U.S. migration, border enforcement, population, and trade for each year from 1900 through 1998; <http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/databases/supplementary-en.aspx>; accessed August 20, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Data on the characteristics of the Mexican population calculated from XII General Population and Housing Census, Mexico, 2000, downloaded from Minnesota Population Center. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series — International: Version 4.0*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> This section draws on Waldinger and Reichl, 2006: 28-31.

<sup>5</sup> Calculated from 2004 Current Population Survey.

<sup>6</sup> Calculated from 2006 American Community Survey, for persons 25-64 with non-zero earnings in 2005 (Ruggles et al, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Data in this section calculated from Censuses of Population, 1970-2000 and 2005 American Community Survey; data are for adults, 25-64, with non-zero earnings in prior year (Ruggles et al, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Key studies include: Bean and Stevens, 2003; Blau and Kahn, 2005; Grogger and Trejo, 2002; Waldinger and Feliciano, 2003; and Waldinger, Lim, and Cort, 2007