

The Slow Assimilation of Mexicans in the United States

Edward P. Lazear

Hoover Institution

and

Graduate School of Business

Stanford University

January, 2005

This research was supported by CRESST.

Abstract

By almost any measure, immigrants from Mexico have performed worse and become assimilated more slowly than immigrants from other countries. But Mexico is a huge country, with many high ability people who could fare very well in the United States. Why have Mexicans done so badly? The answer is primarily immigration policy. The US lets in far more immigrants from Mexico than from any other country. As a result, there are large Mexican enclaves in the US. Theory and evidence suggests that those who live in highly concentrated communities do not assimilate as quickly, have lower wages, and poorer educational attainment. The fact that Mexicans live in highly concentrated communities explains some, but not all of the difference between their performance and that of other immigrants. The rest may be a result of immigration policy, through which the bulk of Mexicans enter the US on the basis of family ties, rather than job skills.

Immigrants to the United States from Mexico become assimilated into American society much less rapidly than do other groups. A few facts from the 2000 US Census make the slowness of Mexican integration apparent.

1. About 80% of non-Mexican immigrants are fluent in English. Among Mexicans, the number is 49%.

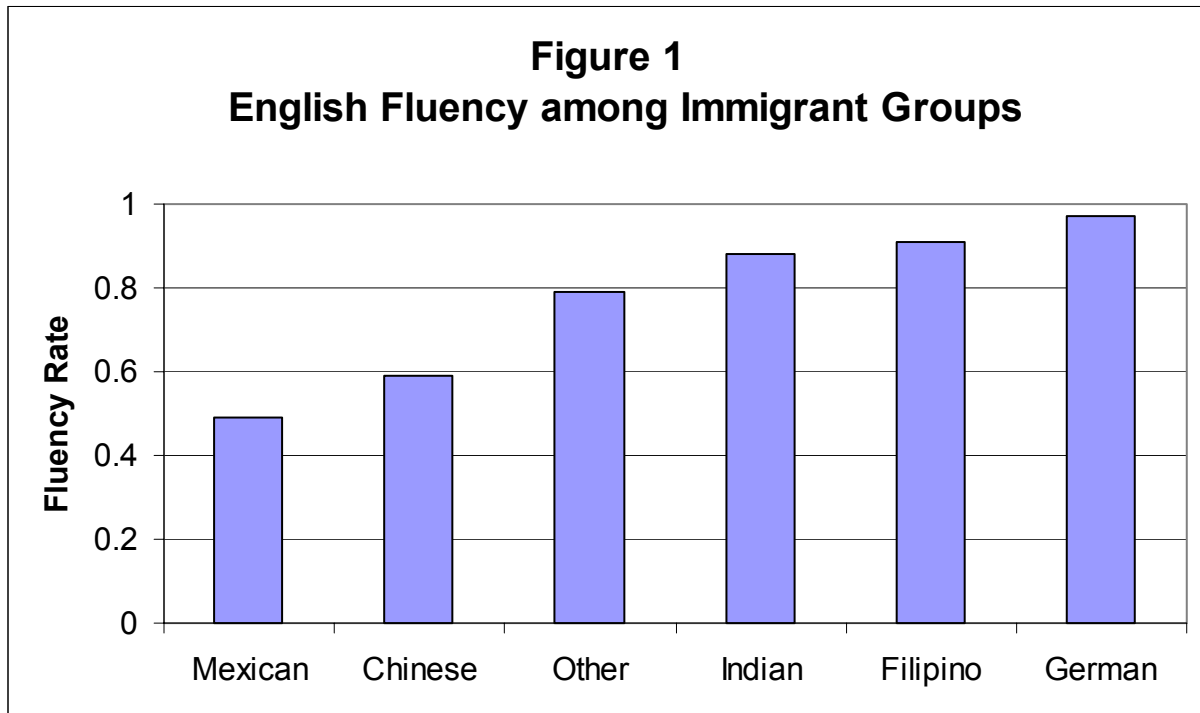
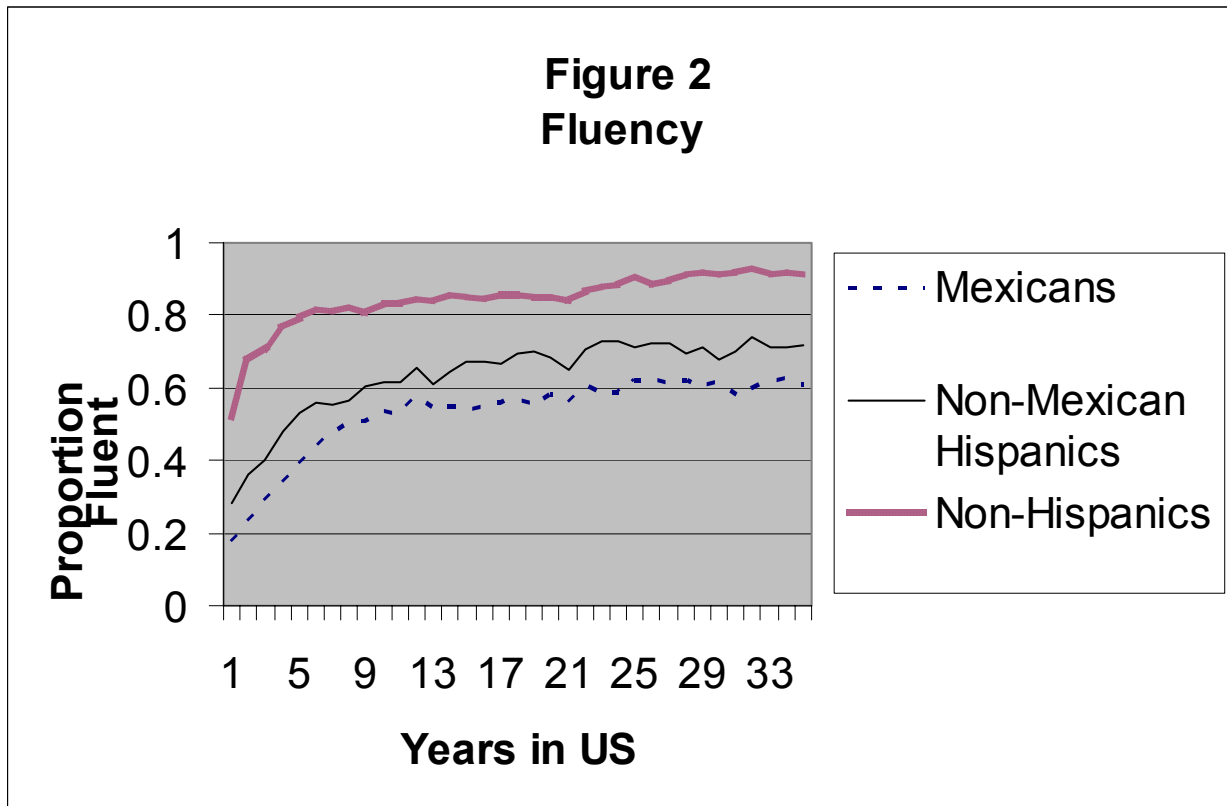


Figure 1 shows the differences across groups in graphic detail. The groups depicted in the graph are the largest subgroups in the 2000 Census. Mexicans clearly have the lowest average levels of fluency.

English fluency depends on the amount of time that an individual has been in the country. Figure 2 makes clear that Mexicans start below other groups in levels of English fluency when they arrive in the US and never catch up. The curves never converge. Other Hispanics start above and stay above Mexicans. Non-Hispanics are significantly more fluent in English than Hispanics at all times after arrival in the US.



2. Non-Mexican (working) immigrants have average wage income of on average \$21,000 per year. Mexican immigrants have average wage income of on average \$12,000 per year.

3. The typical non-Mexican immigrant has a high-school diploma. The typical Mexican immigrant has less than 8th grade education. Part of this may reflect differences in educational systems of the native country. This is not the whole story. Even among immigrants who came to the US before they were five years old and whose entire schooling was in the US, those Mexican born have average education levels of 11.7 years whereas those from other countries have average levels of education of 14.1 years.¹

4. Even when compared to other Hispanics, Mexican immigrants fare badly, with 62% of non-Mexican Hispanics being fluent in English as compared to only 49% for Mexican immigrants. Mexican average incomes are about 75% that of other Hispanic immigrants and Mexican immigrants have about 2 ½ fewer years of schooling.

The numbers leave little doubt that Mexican immigrants do not move into mainstream American society as rapidly as do other immigrants.

Three other facts are worth noting. First, Mexican immigrants live in communities² where about 15% of the residents are also born in Mexico. Non-Mexican immigrants live in counties where fewer than 3% of the residents are from their specific native land. As I have argued elsewhere, the incentive to become assimilated depends in large part on the proportion of individuals

¹The sample is restricted to those who are now at least 23 years old so that schooling is completed for most in the sample.

²Strictly speaking, the Census 5% sample uses “PUMA,” which is a geographic unit that is akin to county, but not the same thing in most cases.

in one's community who do not speak his native language or share his culture. Correcting for the difference in living patterns eliminates just about half of the fluency difference between Mexicans and other immigrants.

Second, Mexican immigrants account for a much higher proportion of the immigrant population than any other single group. Mexicans are 29% of immigrants in the 2000 Census. Other larger groups are from the Phillipines, Germany, China, and India, and have shares roughly an order of magnitude smaller. Mexico is about 20% larger in population than the Phillipines, but has about one tenth the population of either India or China. This suggests that it is easier to obtain entry to the US from Mexico than it is from most other countries.

Third, Mexicans come to the US disproportionately on the basis of family connections. Other groups, most notable, Indians, come in at high levels based on job performance.

Model

The model used here comes from Lazear (1999). Only a sketch of the theory is provided here.

Culture facilitates trade. This is most clear in the case of language. If two agents speak the same language, they can negotiate a contract without the use of a translator. While language may be the most important manifestation of a shared culture, a common culture allows the traders to have common expectations and customs, which enhances trust.

The focus is on incentives to become assimilated and the model presented here defines trade

to include non-market interaction as well.³ In the simplest structure, assume that an individual randomly encounters one and only one other individual in each period. Let the expected value to one party of meeting another individual with whom one can trade be normalized to be 1. For simplicity, let there be only two cultures in a country, labeled A and B . Define p_a as the proportion of individuals who belong to culture A in equilibrium and p_b as the proportion of individuals who belong to culture B in equilibrium. The majority culture is A , which means that $p_a > p_b$. It is possible that $p_a + p_b > 1$ since one individual can belong to two cultures as, for example, in the case of bilingual persons. In order for trade to occur, an individual must encounter another individual with his own culture. If the per-trader value of a trade is 1, then the expected gains from trade that accrues to A s and B s are

$$(1) \quad a. \quad R_a = p_a$$

and

$$b. \quad R_b = p_b .$$

Since $p_a > p_b$, $R_a > R_b$. Individuals from the majority are richer than those from the minority.

Either type of individual can acquire the culture of the other group. The interest here is in

³The empirical literature on the economic returns to assimilation began with Chiswick (1978). More to the point of this analysis is the work by McManus, Gould, and Welch (1983), which shows that English speaking Hispanic Americans do better in the labor market than non-English speaking ones. Also, Chiswick (1991) finds that both speaking and reading fluency affect earnings, with reading fluency playing the more important role. Chiswick (1993) studies the acquisition of Hebrew language skills in Israel. As in the US, Chiswick finds that the ability to speak the majority language increases earnings in Israel.

minorities who acquire or choose not to acquire the language or culture of the majority. By becoming assimilated, they have the ability to trade with the majority group as well as members of their own minority. In the case of language, this can be thought of as becoming fluent in the majority language, while retaining the ability to speak the native tongue.

It is costly to acquire the new culture or to learn the new language. Define t_j as an individual specific cost parameter that measures (inversely) the efficiency with which individual j acquires the new culture with $t_j \sim g(t_j)$ having distribution $G(t_j)$.

A monocultural B receives income p_b . If the minority member becomes bicultural, every encounter results in a trade, but t_j is spent learning the ways of the majority. Thus, the B acquires the A culture iff

$$(1 - t_j) > p_b$$

or iff

$$(2) \quad t_j < 1 - p_b .$$

It follows that

$$(3) \quad \text{Proportion of } Bs \text{ who learn } A = \text{prob}(t_j < 1 - p_b)$$

$$= G(1 - p_b) .$$

Proportion $G(1 - p_b)$ of the B s are sufficiently efficient at acquiring the new culture to make it worthwhile.

Since $G(1 - p_b)$ is decreasing in p_b , the proportion of a minority group that becomes assimilated into the majority culture is decreasing in the proportion of the population comprised of

the minority group. Also, $p_a > p_b$ guarantees that the proportion of majority members who learn the minority language is smaller than the proportion of minority members who learn the majority language.

As p_b decreases, the minority group becomes smaller relative to the majority, which means that random contact with another is less likely to result in a trade. When p_b is very small, minority members must be assimilated in order to survive in the society.

The key insight from this model is that high proportions of similar-cultured individuals in a community retard the rate of assimilation. This effect goes part of the way to explaining the slow assimilation of Mexicans into American society. Because Mexicans live in communities with other Mexicans to a larger degree (by far) than other ethnic groups, Mexicans incentives to assimilate are reduced relative to other immigrants. But this is not the entire story. As will be shown below, were Mexicans in communities that resembled those of other immigrants, about half of the gap between their fluency rates and that of other immigrant groups would be closed.

Empirical Analysis

Data

The data come from the 2000 US Census, 5% sample. The 5% sample provides far more observations than are needed, but only the 5% sample contains the detailed information on residential location that is necessary to perform the analysis. As a result, the 5% Census Public Use sample was the starting point, but from it, only 1 in 5 individuals were selected (randomly) to be included in the sample used for analysis.

The variables, their definitions and means are given in table 1.

The basic argument is that slow assimilation is a characteristic of those who live in concentrated communities where a large proportion of individuals are born in their native land. The fundamental result is shown in table 2. Linear probability models are presented for ease of interpretation. Logit result, also provided, are virtually identical.

The basic result is clear in column 1. Those who live in concentrated areas are far less likely to be fluent in English. The coefficient is around -1, which implies that going from a PUMA where everyone was born in the respondent's native land to one in which no others were born in the respondent's native land would change fluency rates from zero to 1.

It is useful to do the same analysis for Mexicans and non-Mexican immigrants separately. This is done in columns 3 and 4. The coefficients are smaller for Mexicans than for non-Mexicans, perhaps reflecting non-linearities that will be discussed below.

For now, it is most instructive to use these results in order to find out how much of the difference between Mexican and non-Mexican immigrant fluency can be explained by living patterns. The mean level of *cntypct* is .151 for Mexicans and .027 for non-Mexicans. The mean level of *yru* is 13.8 for Mexicans and 18.8 for non-Mexicans. Using the coefficients from column 3 and the means for Mexicans gives a predicted fluency rate of 65%. The actual fluency rate among the Mexican immigrants is 49% and the fluency rate among non-Mexican immigrants is 80%. If Mexicans had the same level of *cntypct* and *yru* as the non-Mexican population, half of the

differential between groups would disappear. Reducing α from the Mexican value of .151 to .027 would increase the probability of being fluent by about 12%. This is sizeable and important, but does not eliminate the fluency gap between Mexican and non-Mexican immigrants.

Two Mechanisms

There are two interpretations of the results of table 2 that both of which are consistent with the theory. One is that English is learned more rapidly by immigrants who are in integrated communities, viewing locational choice as exogenous.

The second interpretation is one of endogenous location choice. Immigrants who do not speak English may be more likely to locate in areas where there are many others who speak their language. This second view reflects the same mechanism described in this paper. Individuals who are not fluent in English move to high α areas precisely because they cannot interact with others unless they do. If it were unnecessary to be with individuals who share language to interact, the locational pattern of immigrants would be uncorrelated with English fluency. Immigrants might still cluster just because different areas settle at different times and immigrant waves are time dependent. But there would be no reason to expect that those who did not live in highly immigrant concentrated neighborhoods would be more likely to attain English fluency.

The two interpretations are more a question of timing than of substance. Immigrants who know English had to make a decision to learn it at some point in the past. That decision was likely influenced by their desire to trade with other English speakers. Those who learn English after coming to the U.S. perform the same calculation, but do so at a later stage. Thus, the sorting story

differs from the learning story primarily on the timing at which English was learned, not on the motives for learning English.

The coefficients in column 5 of table 2 allow these effects to be disentangled. If learning while in US is the primary mechanism, then one would expect the effect of clustering to operate through the an interaction with the yrs variable. Each year in the US should be less valuable to English fluency for individuals who are in high cntypct areas. In fact, that is what is found. Both mechanisms seem operative. Even when yrs=0, the effect of cntypct on fluency is large and strong. Those who move to concentrated areas start out with a fluency deficit relative to other immigrants. But it is also true that those who live in concentrated areas are less likely to become fluent with each additional year in the US than those who live in less concentrated areas. Comparing the typical Mexican residence where cntypct equals .151 to the typical non-Mexican immigrant's residence where cntypct equals .027 implies a reduction in the effect of years in the US by

$$(.151-.027) (-.055)/ .05 = -.136$$

or by 13.6% of the effect of years in the US. Both mechanisms are large and important.

Incidentally, country of origin, not merely language, is important. Natives of Mexico do not live in the same neighborhoods as natives of Cuba or Puerto Rico. The correlation between the proportion of a community that is Mexican and the proportion that is non-Mexican Hispanic is actually negative (-.27). If language were the driver, one would expect the correlation to be

positive.⁴

Column 6 of table 2 allows non-linear terms to enter the logit. Not surprisingly, effects are highly non-linear. Initial years in the US matter more than subsequent years for fluency and going from .01 to .02 cntypct has a larger negative effect on fluency than going from .30 to .31 cntypct.

The same logit of reported in column 7 of table 2 shows that Hispanics are less fluent in English than other groups and that Mexicans are less fluent than Hispanics. The cntypct variable is not the whole story as already discussed above. Both Latin and Mexican variables are important even when cntypct is included in the logit. The difference between Mexicans and other Hispanics in fluency is more pronounced than the coefficient on the Mexican dummy in column 7 would suggest. The average level of fluency among non-Mexican Hispanics is 62% , whereas the average level of fluency among Mexican Hispanics is 49%. Recall that the logit holds cntypct constant, but Mexicans live in more concentrated communities than other Hispanics. Non-Mexican Hispanics live in communities where the average value of cntypct is .06. Mexicans live in communities where the average value of cntypct is .15. But note that the non-Mexican Hispanic value of .06 is well above the .02 value for non-Hispanics. The average level of fluency among non-Hispanic immigrants is 84%.

The Role of Income and Education

Not surprisingly, education is closely associated with English fluency. Those who acquire

⁴See Kalnins and Chung (2004) for a study that shows that large hotels that are run by Indians do better when there are other Indians in the community, the interpretation being that individuals learn from others who share culture.

more education become fluent in English and those who plan to attain high levels of education tend to be more fluent in English. Column 8 of table 2 is identical to column 7 except that column 8 holds constant years of education attained. The shape of the relation of fluency to cntypct changes slightly, but remains almost the same. But it is clear that education is importantly related to fluency. Every additional year of education increases fluency by 2.7%, so going from an 8th grade education to high-school graduation increases expected fluency by 11%.

Education is not independent of cntypct. Those who live in high cntypct areas get fewer years of education. Table 3 reports the results. In the regression in column 1, only individuals who grew up in the United States and who have likely completed their education are included. Specifically, only individuals who were older than 23 and who were younger than 6 when they came to the United States are included.

Just as in the logit on fluency, the relation of education to cntypct is negative and convex. There are two addition points worth noting. First, even holding cntypct constant, Mexicans and other Hispanics obtain fewer years of education than other immigrants. Second, cntypct is a measure of current residence, not necessarily the residence where the individual was raised. So again, the exact mechanism is in question. Is living in a highly concentrated area detrimental to educational attainment or do those who fail to get educated choose to live in concentrated areas?

The effect of concentration on fluency is more pronounced for the highly educated. Although having high levels of education implies more fluency, this is less true when the education is obtained in concentrated areas. Again, to make this claim, it is necessary that current cntypct is a good proxy for that when the individual was growing up.

Income and Concentration

Income is lower for individuals who live in highly concentrated areas, given education, and years in the US. As before the direction of causation is unclear. Those who have low incomes might choose to live in concentrated areas because rents are lower. Alternatively, those who live in concentrated areas never acquire the skills that are relevant to communities outside the concentrated ones in which they reside.

There is some suggestion of causation from concentration to income, however, which comes from comparing columns 3 and 4 of table 3. If the causation went the other way, there would be little reason to expect that holding education constant will kill off so much of the effect, as it does when it is included in the income regression. The most natural interpretation of the results is that those who live in concentrated areas obtain less education and this has very detrimental effects on earnings. The rest of the effect in column 4 may reflect additional reductions in earnings that come from living in a concentrated area, or it may simply reflect an income effect.

The failure to identify causation in the results makes clear that it is very difficult to draw policy conclusions from the results. For example, it might be tempting to suggest that individuals might be subsidized to move out of concentrated areas.⁵ But the choice of living in a concentrated area may simply be one of allocating income optimally. Even if the causation runs from concentration to income, there are costs of transition when individuals move to other areas and those costs need to be taken into account. However, the estimates in table 3 can provide an upper bound to the benefits from moving from concentrated to less concentrated areas.

⁵See Kling, Ludwig and Katz (2004) on moving to opportunity.

There may also be effects on subsequent generations. Having parents who live in concentrated areas implies that children grow up in concentrated areas. The spillover effects across generations may be quite large, suggesting additional gains to subsidizing moves outside of concentrated areas.⁶ (The effect must be a general equilibrium one, however. If one individual in a concentrated area is simply replaced by another similar immigrant as rent prices adjust, nothing is gained.) Unfortunately, these effects cannot be identified in the data because we only know current residence and not residence during childhood for those who are already in the labor market.

Welfare

Can welfare explain some of the difference between Mexican and non-Mexican assimilation? Theory suggests that it might. When an individual can obtain government support, the value of assimilation is reduced. Welfare places a floor on the amount that an individual can earn. In the absence of government transfers, the condition for acquiring the majority culture, from (2), is

$$1 - t_j > p_b .$$

A government transfer program can be thought of as guaranteeing some average level of surplus, S . If

$$S > 1 - t_j > p_b,$$

then an individual who would have become assimilated in the absence of the government transfer will remain monocultural and will merely accept the transfer. Reducing the size of government transfers would increase the rate of assimilation in the society.

⁶See Lazear (1986) for analysis of the effects of parental education and residential location choice on income.

Is this what is going on and does it affect Mexican immigrants differently from non-Mexican immigrants. The evidence suggests that it is not the explanation.

Mexicans are somewhat more likely (13.1 % v. 9.5%) to be on welfare than other immigrants and have almost the same amount received given that they are on welfare. The welfare explanation may have some force, but given the not-enormous differences between the groups, this is unlikely to be the source of assimilation differences.

There is some evidence, consistent with Borjas (date), that immigrants from Mexico disproportionately go to states that have high welfare benefits. In table 5, column 1, a logit is run where the dependent variable is a dummy for whether the person in question is Mexican. The independent variables are the proportion of the native born population on welfare in the state in which the immigrant resides and the average level of +welfare among the native born population in the state of immigrant's residence.

Immigration Policy

Concentration of individuals in enclaves explains some of the differences in the assimilation of Mexican and non-Mexican immigrants. But it is not the entire story. Welfare may account for a small fraction of the residual, but cannot be the major issue. And even if welfare differences were pronounced, it is still necessary to explain why Mexicans and non-Mexicans differ in their use of welfare.

The facts suggest that US immigration policy is the culprit. Mexico is a very large country, having over 100 million people. In 2003, the US admitted (legally) about 115 thousand immigrants

from Mexico. In a country as large as Mexico, it is inconceivable that there are not a sufficient number of talented potential migrants who would not assimilate more slowly than other immigrants to the US.

The US admits more Mexicans than any other group, accounting for 16% of immigrants in 2003. This ignores the illegal immigrants entirely, who are more likely to come from Mexico. Because so many come from Mexico, it is not surprising that Mexican immigrants find it easier to locate in concentrated communities.

Also revealing is the effect of admission policy. The US admits a far greater proportion of immigrants from Mexico on a family basis (sponsored or immediate relatives) than from any other country. Put differently, the proportion of Mexicans who are admitted on employment based preferences is much lower than that for other immigrants. About 3% of Mexicans come in on employment (skills) preference, whereas 13% of non-Mexican immigrants come in through this channel. Some countries, like India, have a very high proportion of immigrants entering the US on job-based visas.

Those who are admitted to the US because they have desirable skills are more likely to speak English, have high levels of education, and obtain higher salaries than those who are admitted on a random or family basis. The fact that those who come in from Mexico do worse than those from other countries may well reflect admission policy of the US, and not necessarily anything about the country of origin. In fact, in an earlier study, (Lazear, date), it was found that the immigrants with the highest levels of education and English fluency came from North Africa. The reason is clear: It was so difficult to get into the US from North Africa that the only individuals who succeeded in

obtaining admission were those with very high skill sets.

Conclusion

Mexican immigrants assimilate more slowly than other immigrants as reflected in English fluency. They also have lower levels of education, lower wages, and live in more concentrated areas than other immigrants.

The source of the problem seems to be US immigration policy. By admitting large numbers of Mexicans relative to other groups on a family rather than job basis, the US selects a group of immigrants from Mexico who are already at a disadvantage. The large numbers allow highly concentrated ethnic enclaves to form, which is not conducive to assimilation. Additionally, the fact that such a small proportion of Mexican immigrants are admitted on an employment preference basis means that the average level of skills of incoming Mexicans is lower than that for other immigrant groups.

Mexico is a large country with an abundant supply of highly skilled potential immigrants to the US. Changes in US immigration selection policy that moved in the direction of employment based preferences for Mexican immigrants would likely close the gap between assimilation of Mexicans and other immigrants to the United States.

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Table 1

Immigrant Sample

Includes All in Sample not Born in US

Variable	Definition	Mean	Std. Dev.
fluent	Dummy: 1 if respondent claims fluency in English	.71	.45
cntypct	proportion of other residents in PUMA who are born in respondent's native country	.06	.10
yus	years in US	17.3	14.9
cnty2	(cntypct) ²	.014	.037
cntyyr	(cntypct)(yus)	.98	2.22
edyrs	highest grade of schooling completed in years	10.8	5.1
mexican	dummy: 1 if born in Mexico	.29	.45
latin	dummy: 1 if hispanic origin	.44	.5
cntyed	(cntypct)(edyrs)	.55	1.0

Table 2

Fluency Results

Variable	1 Regres- sion	2 Logit	3 Regres- sion no Mexicans	4 Regres- sion Mexicans	5 Logit	6 Logit	7 Logit	8 Logit
cntypct	-1.062 (.007)	-5.108 (.040)	-.988 (.012)	-.241 (.014)	-4.212 (.066)	-10.778 (.114)	-4.874 (.140)	-4.315 (.146)
yvus	.00650 (.00005)	.04585 (.00038)	.00497 (.00005)	.00868 (.00014)	.04998 (.00046)	.08112 (.00087)	.07914 (.00089)	.06220 (.00094)
cntyyr					-.055 (.003)	-.087 (.003)	-.076 (.003)	-.047 (.003)
cnty2						19.95 (.29)	10.06 (.32)	8.11 (.34)
yvus2						-.00067 (.00002)	-.00070 (.00002)	-.00048 (.00002)
mexican							-.13 (.01)	.12 (.01)
latin							-1.09 (.01)	-.95 (.01)
edyrs								.1348 (.0009)
constant	.662 (.001)	.552 (.007)	.729 (.001)	.408 (.003)	.492 (.008)	.478 (.009)	.859 (.010)	-.518 (.014)
r-square	0.1083		.0675	.0426				
log likeli- hood		-168137			-167989	-164919	-158468	-147397
N	308345	308345	218330	90015	308345	308345	308345	308345

Table 3
Education and Income Results

Variable	1 Education Regression	2 Fluency Logit	3 Log Income Regression	4 Log Income Regression
cntypct	-4.48 (.99)	-3.51 (.16)	-1.41 (.02)	-.37 (.02)
yrs		.0618 (.0009)	.0089 (.0002)	.0087 (.0002)
cnty2	6.22 (2.43)	8.07 (.34)		
mexican	-1.78 (.10)	.11 (.01)		
latin	-.29 (.07)	-.94 (.01)		
edys				.0715 (.0005)
constant	14.19 (.02)	-.58 (.02)	9.614 (.004)	8.712 (.008)
r-square	.0967		.0305	.1078
log likelihood		-147343		
N	19711	308345	226664	226664

Table 4

Welfare

	Non-Mexican		Mexican	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
On Welfare	9.5	.29	13.1	.34
Dollar amount received if on welfare	3584	3826	3595	3566
Number with positive welfare values	4271		2042	

Table 5

Welfare

Variable	1 Logit Dependent Variable=Mexican	2 Logit Dependent Variable=Mexican
Proportion of native born in state who receive welfare (welfnatv)	6.99 (1.26)	
Average welfare received among native born in state (welfnave)		.0059 (.0002)
constant	-1.03 (.02)	-1.09 (.02)
Log Likelihood	-168454	-115228
N	281995	180477

Table 6

2003 Immigrants to the United States by Class of Admission and Country of Origin

Country	Total Immigrants	Employment Based Preference	Family Sponsored	Immediate Relatives	Other	Percent Employment Based
All	705827	82137	158894	332657	132139	12%
Mexico	115864	3261	29664	78782	4157	3%
Non-Mexico	589963	78876	129230	253875	127982	13%
India	50372	20560	15359	12693	1760	41%