



Human Development  
Research Paper  
2009/43

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# Restrictive Immigration Policies and Latino Immigrant Identity in the United States

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# Abstract

The United States is presently characterized by rising anti-immigrant sentiment, repressive immigration enforcement, and the negative framing of Latinos as threatening and undesirable. As a result, social boundaries between immigrants and natives have hardened and boundary crossing has become more difficult. Under these circumstances, the prediction of classical assimilation theory is turned on its head: the more time that immigrants spend in the United States and the more contact they have with Americans and American society, the more aware they become of the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination and the more they come to experience the rampant inequalities of the secondary labor market. Rather than ideologically assimilating, therefore, the greater their experience in the United States, the more likely immigrants are to express a reactive ethnicity that rejects the label “American.” Our work suggests that the greatest threat to the successful assimilation of immigrants comes not from foreign involvements or transnational loyalties, but from the rejection, exclusion, and discrimination that immigrants experience in the United States.

Keywords: Immigration, Exclusion, Discrimination, Latinos, Identity.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

People generally migrate to improve their circumstances on some dimension, either psychological, social, cultural, political, or economic, and sometimes all of the above. Migration is a principal mechanism by which human beings expand their choices, increase their opportunities, and enhance their capabilities. Migrants thus tend to be self-selected for drive, motivation, and ambition; and because migration inevitably entails costs, they are also selected for access to capital—financial, human, social, and cultural. Whether or not migrants are able to translate their intrinsic motivations and capital endowments into improved circumstances depends very much on the context of reception—the economic opportunities they encounter in the receiving society and the relative freedom they have to pursue them.

The United States often celebrates its identity as a nation of immigrants and opportunity, but in recent years as the origins of immigrants shifted from Europe to Latin America, the thrust of public policy, popular discourse, and private practice in the United States has been to curtail the rights of immigrants, derogate their character, and undermine their capacities. These trends have created a negative context of reception that is unusually harsh and by U.S. historical standards. In this paper, we document the rise of this negative context of reception and analyze its effects on the realization of aspirations and the construction of identity among Latino immigrants to the United States.

## **RECENT TRENDS IN IMMIGRATION**

During the last half of the 20th Century, immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean came to dominate flows into the United States. As shown in Figure 1, which presents U.S. immigration by region of origin and decade, Europeans constituted the overwhelming majority of immigrants to the United States early in the last century. Of the 8.2 million persons who arrived during 1900-1909, for example, 7.6 million were from Europe. The outbreak of global warfare in 1914 curtailed immigration from Europe and in response U.S. employers looked southward and recruited migrants from Latin America. The imposition of quotas limiting immigration from Europe in the 1920s further increased the representation of Latinos. Of the 4.3

million immigrants who arrived from 1920 to 1929, 2.6 million were European and 1.6 million were from the Americas.

The Great Depression brought U.S. immigration to an abrupt halt in 1930 and another round of global warfare during the 1940s prevented its re-emergence. From 1930 to 1950, U.S. immigration averaged just 156,000 persons per year. Immigration revived during the 1950s, with 1.4 million coming from Europe and 922,000 from the Americas. During the 1960s, however, immigration from Europe declined while that from the Americas continued to rise. After the elimination of national origin quotas in 1968, immigration from Asia also increased whereas entries from Europe continued to decline. By the last decade of the 20th century, Europeans had been reduced to a small share of total immigration. Of the 9.8 million immigrants who arrived from 1990 to 1999, 5.1 million were from the Americas, with 2.9 million from Asia and just 1.5 million from Europe.

In the first decade of the new century an absolute majority of U.S. immigrants originate in the Western Hemisphere. As Figure 2 clearly shows, most of these new immigrants are from Latin America and the Caribbean. Whereas Canadians dominated immigration from the Americas from 1910 through 1950, their share among immigrants fell steadily in the ensuing decades to reach a nadir of just 4% in the 1990s. In contrast, from 1950 to 2000, the share of Mexicans rose from 30% to 54% while that for Caribbeans went from 13% to 20%, Central Americans from 4% to 12%, and South Americans from 9% to 11%. The share of Mexicans fell somewhat after 2000, and the representation of immigrants from elsewhere in Latin America rose, with the fastest growth being registered among immigrants from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, and Venezuela, each of whose flows more than doubled.

## **RECENT TRENDS IN IMMIGRATION POLICY**

This spectacular growth in Latino immigration occurred despite increasingly restrictive policies towards the entry of people from the Americas. Prior to 1965, there was no numerical limitation on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, and from 1942 through 1964 the United States sponsored a large temporary worker program that, at its peak, brought in 450,000 Mexicans per year. In 1965, however, the temporary worker program was suspended and

immigration from the Western Hemisphere capped at 120,000 persons per year. In 1976, annual immigration from the Americas was further limited to 20,000 persons per country, and in 1980 separate hemispheric quotas were abolished and the worldwide cap was reduced to just 270,000 persons (Zolberg 2006).

These restrictions hit Mexico particularly hard. Whereas in 1959 its citizens had access to 450,000 guest worker visas and an unlimited number of residence visas, two decades later there were no work visas and just 20,000 residence visas available to Mexicans. In the wake of these restrictions, undocumented migration inevitably rose. According to estimates by Passel (2006), as of 2005 the undocumented population of the United States had risen to 11.1 million persons, 56% from Mexico and 22% were from elsewhere in Latin America, compared with only 6% from Europe and Canada combined.

The United States responded to the rise in undocumented migration by implementing even more repressive immigration and border policies. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 criminalized the hiring of undocumented workers and began what would prove to be a two-decade militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border (Massey 2007). In an effort to curtail family immigration, the Immigration Act of 1990 reduced the number of visas for the immediate relatives permanent resident aliens, and in the name of “law and order” the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act provided for the “expedited exclusion” of any alien who had ever crossed the border without documents or who ever had committed a felony, instantly rendering tens of thousands of otherwise legal immigrants deportable. The string of restrictive acts culminated with the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act in 2001, which granted the President new power to deport, without any hearing or presentation of evidence, all aliens—documented or undocumented—who the Attorney General had “reason to believe” might commit, further, or facilitate acts of terrorism (Zolberg 2006).

Under the new policy regime, the number of officers in the Border Patrol increased from 4,000 to 14,000 between 1987 and 2007 and the agency’s budget rose by a factor of at least eight (after 2001 the Border Patrol budget became classified information). Over the same period, 25.2 million persons were arrested at the border and 1.9 persons were deported from the U.S. interior. Rather than reducing the inflow of undocumented migrants, however, the repressive policies

backfired, paradoxically lowering the rate out-migration rather reducing than the rate of in-migration and thus accelerating the net inflow (see Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

## **THE DEMONIZATION OF LATINOS**

As the undocumented population grew, Latin Americans and particularly Mexicans were singled out for negative stereotyping in public and private discourse. Conservative economists such as George Borjas (1995) warned Americans about the “declining quality of immigrants.” Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (2004) stated that “the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages [because] unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture.” The conservative pundit Patrick Buchanan (2006) went so far as to allege a nefarious “Aztlán Plot” on the part of Mexican elites to “reconquer” lands lost in 1848.

The portrayal of Latin Americans as a threat to American society, in turn, affected U.S. public opinion, turning it steadily against immigrants in general and Latino immigrants in particular. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Charitable Trust, as late as 2000 only 38% of Americans agreed that “immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care.” By 2005 the percentage had risen to 44% and as the drumbeat of hostile rhetoric reached a crescendo in 2006 it became a majority view at 52% (Kohut and Suro 2006). In keeping with this shift, the percentage of Americans who rated immigration as a moderately big or very big national problem rose from 69% in 2002 to 74% in 2006. As of the latter year, almost half of all Americans (48%) opined that “newcomers from other countries threaten traditional American values and customs” and 54% said that the United States needed to be “protected against foreign influence.” Not surprisingly, given these views, 49% said they believed that “immigrants kept to themselves and do not try to fit in;” 56% said they “don’t pay their fair share of taxes;” and 58% believed that immigrants “do not learn English in a reasonable amount of time.”



## THE DIVERSITY OF LATINO IMMIGRANTS

In order to assess the effects of this negative social context on immigrant adaptation and integration in the United States, we launched special ethnographic survey of Latino immigrants in the urban northeast. Specifically, we recruited a quota sample of first and second generation immigrants in the urban corridor from New York City through New Jersey to Philadelphia. Our quotas were defined by the cross-classification of location (Philadelphia, New Jersey, and New York), origin (Caribbean, Mexican, Central American, South American), and generation (first or second), yielding a 3x4x2 social space of 24 cells. Within each cell we sought to complete 5-10 interviews roughly balanced between males and females and in the end we recruited 159 first and second generation immigrants to the study. Fieldwork began in January of 2001 and was completed in January of 2004, a period that coincides with the rise in anti-immigrant discourse that followed the events of September 11. Detailed data about sampling and interviewing are available in the book forthcoming from Massey and Sánchez R. (2009).

The Latino immigrants in our sample are a very diverse group. Although they are concentrated in the working ages they are heterogeneous in other ways, containing males and females, second as well as first generation immigrants, people with and without documents, and 15 different nationalities from throughout the region. Cutting across this differentiation by nationality, however, are diverse racial and ethnic origins. Although Latin Americans generally descend from a blend of European, African, Asian, and Indigenous roots, the mixture varies substantially from place to place and even from class to class within nations.

Given the legacy of race in the United States and the salience of the historical boundary between blacks and whites, it is likely that race and color play significant roles in determining immigrant identities and in defining the boundaries between Latin Americans and European Americans, while also complicating relations with African Americans. It is therefore essential to understand the racial and ethnic roots of Latino immigrants before considering patterns and processes of integration into the United States. The encounter between immigrants and U.S. natives is also confused by contrasting conceptualizations of race that prevail north and south of the border. In United States race has historically been characterized by a dichotomy between black and white, yielding a history of discrimination, segregation and abuse based on the “one

drop rule” of racial identification. In contrast, race in Latin America is generally conceived in terms of a continuum that includes a range of different mixtures and categorical labels, each of which connotes subtle variations in color, class, and racial-ethnic origins (Wade 1997).

Although racial distinctions clearly exist in Latin America and race is an important stratifying variable, racial categories are multiple and the boundaries are blurred rather than bright (Telles 2004). Rather than a one drop rule, the prevailing ideology in Latin America is one of *mestizaje*, or mixture, and what differs from place to place is the nature of that mixture. After some trial and error we settled on a categorical definition of skin tone that contained five ordinal labels---light, medium light, medium, medium dark, and dark, and the top panel of Table 1 summarizes respondents according to this scheme. As one might expect in a *mestizo* society, the majority of immigrants in our sample fell into the range that goes from light to medium. Across all immigrants, 32% were classified as light and 53% as medium with 8% being rated in-between. There are, however, significant differences in the distribution of skin tone by region. At one end of the continuum are South Americans, who generally display the lightest complexions and at the other end are Caribbeans who are generally darkest.

In addition to measuring skin tone we also sought to discern the specific racial and ethnic roots of each respondent. In consultation with the respondents, we identified the existence of ancestral roots in Europe, Africa, Pre-Columbian America, or Asia, and the results of this classification are presented in the bottom panel of Table 1. Given the realities of *mestizaje* in Latin America, these classifications are not mutually exclusive, of course. Indeed, most respondents reported at least two and often three or four racial-ethnic origins, with average number being 2.3. Owing to the common history of European colonization and miscegenation, there is very little variance in European origins by region. Across all regions, between 82% and 98% report at least some European roots. Likewise, given that colonization throughout Latin America involved mixing with indigenous peoples, 90% to 100% of all respondents claimed indigenous roots as well.

Relatively few respondents of any origin reported Asian and other roots—always under 10% but ranging from 2.5% in the Caribbean to 9.5% in Central America. The greatest heterogeneity across regions occurred with respect to African origins. As we expected, the prevalence of African roots was greatest in the Caribbean at 93%. African ancestry was least

frequent among Mexicans, with only 7% reporting such roots. In-between were South Americans at 30% and Central Americans at 52%. Thus, African origins is a critical variable that differentiates Latin Americans from one another.

Our data thus confirm the diversity of racial and ethnic roots, skin tone, and phenotype among immigrants from Latin America. If we assign ordinal values to the five skin tone categories such that 1 corresponds to light and 5 to dark, then Mexicans and Central Americans both have an average of 2.5, compared with 1.9 for South Americans and 2.7 for Caribbeans. In regressions we estimated, we found variation in skin tone to be explained mostly by the relative prevalence of African roots in different regions and to a lesser extent by the prevalence of Indigenous roots. Although having European roots is strongly associated with lighter skin tone, European origins are so common across all regions that they do not account for much cross-national variance in skin tone.

## **MOTIVATIONS TO MIGRATE**

Whatever their racial-ethnic characteristics, immigrants are active agents in negotiating identity and the content of immigrant identity depends greatly on aspirations and expectations people have about life in the United States. If the ultimate goal is permanent settlement and socioeconomic advancement north of the border, then they have a strong incentive to challenge negative stereotypes and work hard to overcome barriers to mobility. If they seek only to work in the United States temporarily, and to earn money in anticipation of an eventual return home, then the path of least resistance may be to tolerate exploitation and derogation in the short run, in return for the opportunity to accumulate savings and repatriate earnings in the long run.

Many factors potentially bear upon the decision to come to the United States. Massey et al. (1998) classified them into three basic categories: those pertaining to the place of origin, those pertaining to the place of destination, and the social structures and interpersonal organizations that arise to connect these two places. Average incomes and wages are lower in Latin America, of course, and rates of unemployment and underemployment are also higher than in the United States, yielding significantly lower expected wages and significantly lower lifetime earnings in every Latin American nation compared with the United States, a persistent earnings

gap that predicts sustained south-north migration under neoclassical economic assumptions (see Todaro and Maruzsko 1986).

Although the size of this gap has fluctuated historically, at any given time it is large enough to be a constant from the perspective of individual decision makers. No matter what epoch we consider, expected lifetime earnings are always much greater in the United States, yet movement between Latin America and the United States varies dramatically over time and displays markedly different trajectories in different countries (Durand and Massey 2010). Moreover, variations in the size of the earnings gap are not strongly associated with fluctuations in the rate of migration northward, suggesting the need to move beyond simple wage differentials to account for the dynamics of movement (Massey et al. 1998).

What has changed markedly over time in Latin America is the structure of its political economy (Massey, Sánchez, and Behrman 2006). Through the 1980s, economies in the region were guided by the philosophy of import substitution industrialization (ISI), which held that economic development was best achieved through a set of deliberate government interventions to create internal markets. After 1982, however, a series of economic crises swept through the region, bringing about conditions of hyperinflation, falling employment, declining production, and stagnating wages and living standards, earning the 1980s sobriquet “the lost decade” from people throughout the region (Fiscia and Kovacs 1994). The failure of ISI to sustain growth and prosperity cleared the way for the implementation of a “neoliberal” model of economic growth that lowered tariffs, eliminated quotas, ended restrictions on capital mobility, privatized state owned firms, downsized government, and opened nations to the forces of global trade and investment, a package of policies that came to be known as “the Washington Consensus” (Williamson 2000).

The structural shift from ISI to neoliberalism proved to be a wrenching adjustment for Latin America, bringing about widespread job displacement, falling real wages, and rising commodity prices, which led to a decline living standards and increasingly bleak prospects for socioeconomic mobility (Portes 1997; Portes and Hoffman 2003). This structural shift was linked to the onset of mass international migration in some nations (Massey and Capoferro 2006) and regions (Massey, Kalter, and Pren 2008). As economic conditions deteriorated, levels of

crime and violence rose in many quarters, which also increased the propensity for out-migration (Lundquist and Massey 2005; Sánchez R. 2006; Alvarado and Massey 2010).

The consolidation of neoliberal reforms throughout Latin America in the 1990s coincided with a sustained economic boom in the United States that produced record low levels of unemployment, tight labor markets, and rising wages throughout the country. Although the United States tightened immigration policies and accelerated border enforcement, American authorities suspended internal enforcement during the late 1990s in response to complaints from employers (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). As a result, undocumented flooded into the country, not just to traditional receiving areas, but to a variety of new destinations as well (Massey 2008). At the same time, the increased costs and risks of undocumented border crossing promoted longer trips, lower rates of return migration, and higher probabilities of settlement (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

Falling wages, rising unemployment, and dimming mobility in Latin America (Cohen and Centeno 2006) coincided with a surge in labor demand and productivity in the United States, yielding an economic boom known as “the roaring nineties” (Stiglitz 2003) and new links arose to connect regions of labor supply and demand (Massey et al. 1998). Globalization produced new transportation and communication links that made movement between periphery and core cheaper, faster, and more reliable (Sassen 1988). Once people began moving in significant numbers, interpersonal networks formed to provide an expanding social infrastructure that encouraged additional migration (Massey 1990), yielding a positive feedback loop wherein international migration expanded migratory networks that, in turn, facilitated additional migration (Massey and Zenteno 1999).

Thus, the coincidence of structural adjustment in the south, an unprecedented economic boom in the north, and proliferating networks in-between, yielded a “perfect storm” for migration between Latin America and the United States during the 1990s . Our review of the literature suggests five basic categories of motivation for international migration: economic conditions at origin, economic conditions at destination, network connections, violence at origin, and family reunification. We therefore carefully read through the answers to a general question we asked respondents about “what made you want to come to the United States?” and classified

the motivations for migration into one of six mutually exclusive categories, five pertaining to the above rubrics plus a sixth residual “other” category.

The results of this exercise are shown in Table 2 to reveal the motivations for migration expressed by respondents who were born abroad. The last column shows the distribution of motivations for the sample as a whole and reveals a fairly even distribution of motivations across four of the six categories. Violence in the country of origin—both in and outside of the home—figured prominently in just 3% of the cases. Likewise, the mobilization of network ties either by the migrants themselves (Massey et al. 1987) or by friends and relatives in the United States (Bashi 2007) provided the motivation in just 13% of the cases. All of the other categories—origin economic conditions, destination economic circumstances, family reasons, and other reasons—varied quite narrowly in the frequency range 20% to 22%.

## **DREAMS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS**

Latin American immigrants generally have one broad goal in common in coming to the United States. One way or another, they seek to improve their lives. It is the details that differ. Whether they are pushed out by poverty and violence or pulled in by economic opportunity and family ties north of the border, migrating to the United States usually involves some dream of betterment. Indeed, our respondents often referred to their “dreams” in talking about their decision to migrate to the United States; and one person explicitly referred to the “American Dream.” The dream metaphor implies some kind of cognitive comparison of conditions at home and abroad. In the course of the interviews, therefore, we directly asked respondents to describe their perception of opportunities in the United States versus their country of origin, yielding a rich body of qualitative data on what immigrants expect to achieve by migrating to the United States.

Dreams are always tempered by reality, of course, so after discussing opportunities we also asked respondents to reflect on the inequalities they perceived in the United States versus their origin country. By asking this question we sought to learn about perceived constraints to social mobility before and after migration. In order to examine further into possible gaps between dreams and realities, we also asked respondents whether they had experienced

discrimination in the United States. Answers to these three questions enable us to assess both the dreams and disappointments faced by immigrants in the United States.

Whatever the specific definition of opportunities, respondents generally saw more in the United States than at home. Table 3 shows the distribution of answers to our query about where opportunities and inequalities were greatest. As can be seen from the top panel, 81% of all respondents said that opportunities were greater in the United States, compared with just 4% judging them to be more abundant at home and 9% saying they were about the same in both places. A key component of the immigrant dream, therefore, is the conceptual framing of the United States as a land of opportunity.

Despite this perception, economic success in the United States is hardly a given, especially for those who lack education and legal documents. We therefore followed up by asking whether “in terms of inequalities—do you see more here or there?” Empirically, of course, inequalities of wealth and income are much greater in Mexico, Brazil, and other countries of Latin American than in the United States (Smeeding 2005), but we are not interested in facts so much as perceptions.

Overall, a little more than a third of all respondents saw inequality as greater in the United States than at home; and somewhat surprisingly, this perception did not vary much by legal status. Whereas 33% of undocumented migrants saw the United States as more unequal, the figure was only slightly higher at 37% among those without documents. Greater differences were observed between migrants on the basis of gender and generation. Although relatively more women than men perceived the United States to offer greater opportunity (85% versus 76%, as shown in the prior chapter), more women also perceived the United States to be a place of greater inequity (40% versus 31%). Likewise, although second generation immigrants were more likely than those in the first to perceive opportunities in the United States (94% versus 75%), they were also more likely perceive inequalities (44% versus 31%).

In sum, although Latin American immigrants overwhelmingly perceive the United States as a land of opportunity, a large share of them also see it as a place of greater inequality, and the greater the tendency to perceive opportunity, the greater the tendency also to perceive inequity. The perception of inequality in the United States appears to be connected quite directly with experiences of American racism, which in the minds of immigrants makes the inequalities here

seem worse than those at home. The difficulty that most immigrants reported in their daily brokering of boundaries with Americans suggest a more problematic trajectory of integration and identity formation and more durable inequalities.

## **PATTERNS OF SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY**

Despite the hopes commonly expressed by respondents, the prevailing picture we derive from in-depth interviews is not sanguine about the prospects for occupational mobility and earnings growth in the United States. Interviews reveal immigrants to be entangled in a repetitive cycle of dead-end jobs whose demands take a physical and emotional toll while offering few chances for earnings or occupational mobility, a profile that is characteristic of circumstances of what institutional economists and economic sociologists call the secondary labor markets (Piore 1979). The only people seemingly able to get better jobs in the primary labor sector are those with documents and education, which excludes the large majority of recent Latino immigrants.

In order to achieve occupational mobility and earnings growth, one must first enter the labor force. The top panel of Table 4 presents two measures of labor supplied to U.S. markets by our respondents. Given the salience of economic goals discerned in the interviews, it is not surprising to find a high rate of labor force participation among the immigrants in our sample, a rate that varied little by legal status. Overall, 77% of respondents reported being employed or looking for work at the time of the survey. Among documented migrants the figure was 75% and among undocumented migrants it was 78%. The top panel also shows the number of hours of work respondents per day. In general, immigrants put in rather long workdays, with an overall average of 8.7 hours but with undocumented migrants putting in significantly more time (9.1 hours) than those with documents (7.9 hours).

Having entered the labor market, most immigrants readily find a job and begin to move through the U.S. occupational hierarchy in pursuit of greater status and higher earnings. The second and third panels of Table 4 summarize occupational outcomes for immigrants our sample. We coded occupations into one of eleven broad categories: unpaid laborers, students, farm workers, unskilled manufacturing, skilled manufacturing, transport workers, unskilled service



workers, skilled service workers, small business owners, a combined white collar category of professional-technical-managerial workers, and retired workers. In order to summarize the data, each occupational category was matched with its associated international socioeconomic status index (from Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996), yielding a scale that ranged from 16 (unpaid workers) to 70 (professional-technical-managerial workers).

In order to establish a baseline for mobility assessments, we considered parental occupational status, relying primarily on the status of the father, though if the father's occupation was missing we substituted the mother's. The parental average of 38.5 on the 16-70 status scale, suggesting that family origins were mostly in the middle of the occupational distribution. In migrating to the United States for work, the average migrant does not move very far from the occupational status of parents. On average, the status on the first U.S. job was 41, compared with 39 for parents. In terms of overall status, therefore, entry into the U.S. labor market generally seemed to involve a lateral move relative to the status of parents.

Over time, there is some occupational mobility, though it does appear to be somewhat greater for documented than undocumented migrants. Overall, average occupational status shifts from 41 on the first U.S. job to 47 on the current job. Among undocumented migrants, however, the shift is only four points, from 40 to 44, whereas among documented migrants the shift is from 45 to 51 points. The next panel in the table pairs first and current U.S. jobs and classifies the pairing by whether it involved a move upward or downward in terms of status. In general, there was little downward mobility over time in the United States. Only some 12% of respondents moved downward in status between their first and most recent U.S. job. In contrast, 43% moved upward, with the rate being about the same for documented and undocumented migrants.

Despite evidence of upward mobility, however, the modal category was stasis. Across all columns in the table, the percentage remaining in the same status occupation equaled or exceeded the share moving upward, with the share remaining in the same status ranging from 44% to 47%. If we add the percentage staying at the same status together with the percentage moving downward, we can see clearly that the odds are stacked against occupational mobility. Overall, 57% of all respondents moved downward or stayed the same in the occupational

hierarchy, with corresponding figures of 58% for documented migrants and 56% for those lacking documents.

Another dimension of interest is earnings. Rising occupational status is well and good, but at the end of the day wages are more central to immigrants' economic projects. The bottom two panels of Table 4 therefore consider wages earned in the United States. On average, immigrants reported hourly earnings well above the legal minimum wage that prevailed at the time of data collection, which was \$5.15 in all three states. The average wage reported on the first U.S. job was \$11.22 per hour, with a figure of \$12.50 for undocumented migrants and \$8.92 for those possessing documents.

By the time of the survey, wages had risen for both groups of migrants, but very modestly. Among legal immigrants the average hourly wage had risen by 40 cents to \$9.32 whereas among undocumented migrants the average had risen by 48 cents to reach \$12.98. Although average wages may have exceeded the minimum at both points in time, this does not mean that no one earned less than the legal minimum. Indeed, there was great dispersion in the distribution of wages and quite a few respondents reported earning sub-minimum wages on their current job. Among documented the figure was 33% and among undocumented 28%, with about 30% overall.

We thus find considerable evidence of wage exploitation among the immigrants in our sample and little evidence of earnings mobility over time. Across all immigrants the shift in wages from first to current job was \$11.22 to \$11.66, just 44 cents or 4%. Given that the average respondent had spent seven years in the United States, this implies a wage gain of only 0.6% per year—not enough to keep up with inflation. In general, then, we find rather strong constraints on possibilities for socioeconomic mobility among Latino immigrants in urban labor markets of the northeastern United States.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR IDENTITY**

The foregoing data offer a decidedly mixed picture of life for Latin American immigrants in the United States. Most arrive with dreams of social or material improvement and initially perceive the United States as a land of opportunity. Over time, they encounter a harsh world of

work and experience the indignities of prejudice, discrimination, and blocked opportunities. Over time many come to see the United States as a place of inequality and racism. This dual reality of ongoing engagement and growing disillusion with the United States suggest a fundamental tension between “American” and “Latino” identities that Latin American immigrants must somehow finesse in their daily lives.

Immigrants arrive in United States with specific national identity of course—as Mexicans, Colombians, Dominicans, Argentines, and so on. Most also come with aspirations to “the American dream” and ultimately hope to be received as fellow “Americans.” After arriving in the United States, however, immigrants undergo two formative experiences that tend to engender ingroup solidarity but promote a reactive rejection of American identity. First, they run into the realities of life in the secondary labor market during a time of rising inequality; and second, they find themselves experiencing these things alongside other immigrants from Latin America who may have different national origins but who nonetheless share many affinities.

The sharing of experiences with similar others offers fertile ground for the emergence of a new “Latino” identity in the United States, an identity that extends beyond any particular country to embrace people from throughout Latin America. We therefore asked respondents whether they perceived a common identity among Latin American immigrants in the United States. The coded responses presented in the top panel of Table 5 clearly indicate that immigrants do indeed perceive a common identity. Overall, 82% of respondents perceived a shared Latino identity among immigrants in the United States, with only 7% denying it and just 4% saying they were unsure or didn’t know. Although the perception of an emergent Latino identity bordered on the universal, it was slightly higher among males (84% compared with 79% among women), undocumented migrants (84% compared with 77% among legal immigrants), and among migrants in the second generation (85% versus 80% in the first generation).

We also asked whether or not respondents perceived themselves as American, and the responses to this question are shown in the second panel of Table 5. Whereas more than 80% of respondents perceived a common Latino identity, more than 60% explicitly rejected an American identity. Our detailed analyses of responses by immigrants to questions about American and Latino identities suggest that the difference between the enthusiastic endorsement of the former and the limited endorsement of the latter reflects a fundamental contrast in the meaning and

content of the two categories in the minds of respondents. Whereas Latino identity is seen as warm, accepting, and caring, American identity is perceived as cold, competitive, and calculating. American society may be efficient, well organized, and affluent, but to migrants these benefits come at the cost of intimate personal relationships and enjoyments and most oppose it.

## **CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The United States is presently characterized by rising anti-immigrant sentiment, repressive immigration enforcement, and the negative framing of Latinos as threatening and undesirable. As a result, social boundaries between immigrants and natives have hardened and boundary crossing has become more difficult. Under these circumstances, the predictions of classical assimilation theory is turned on its head. Regression analyses we performed clearly show that the more time that immigrants spend in the United States and the more contact they have with Americans and American society, the more aware they become of the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination and the more they come to experience the rampant inequalities of the secondary labor market. Rather than ideologically assimilating, therefore, the greater their experience in the United States, the more likely immigrants become to subscribe to a reactive ethnicity that rejects the label “American.”

Our work suggests that the greatest threat to the successful assimilation of immigrants comes not from foreign involvements or transnational loyalties, but from the rejection, exclusion, and discrimination that immigrants experience in the United States. Resistance to an American identity is something created in the United States through the accumulation of experience with U.S. people and institutions. Rather than berating immigrants for a lack of assimilative zeal, American citizens would do better to look closely at how their own attitudes and policies toward immigrants affect the proclivity of newcomers to seek acceptance as Americans.

The promotion of socioeconomic and ideological integration and the enhancement of human capabilities among Latino immigrants requires a marked shift in the direction of U.S. policy. First and foremost, the United States must eliminate the burden of undocumented status by legalizing the 12 million immigrants who are currently unauthorized, granting an amnesty to

those brought into the country as minors, offering temporary work visas with full labor rights to those who have only recently arrived in the country, and setting out a path to earned legalization for those who entered as adults but have accumulated long durations of residence and legitimate ties to U.S. society (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002).

Second, moving forward the United States must provide for larger numbers of Latin Americans to enter the United States in legal statuses, a desideratum that is especially relevant for Mexico. As the free trade agreements proliferate in the Western Hemisphere and economic integration proceeds to unit the Americas into a common market, rigid country quotas must be made more flexible to accommodate the inevitable movement of people that accompanies the lowering of barriers to cross-border movements of goods, capital, information, services, and commodities (Massey and Taylor 2006).

Finally, the United States must do a better job of enforcing anti-discrimination laws that are currently on the books to protect the rights not just of immigrants, but of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, birthplace, or legal status (Massey 2007). The large majority of respondents we interviewed reported experiencing discrimination in multiple venues in American life, including labor markets, housing markets, retail establishments, and public settings such as streets, parks, and restaurants. Such discrimination is currently illegal under U.S. law, but over the past eight years as anti-immigrant legislation and rhetoric has multiplied, the resources devoted to civil rights enforcement have been cut back. If immigrants and indeed citizens of the United States are to enhance and fully express their human capabilities, social, economic, and political rights must be vigorously enforced. Such enforcement is not an immigrant rights issue, but a human rights issue transcends national boundaries.

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Table 1 Skin tone and racial-ethnic roots exhibited by Latin American immigrants from different regions.

Characteristic	Mexicans	Caribbeans	Central Americans	South Americans	Total
<b>Skin Tone</b>					
Light	23.6	25.0	19.1	55.8	32.1
Medium Light	7.3	7.5	19.1	4.7	8.2
Medium	65.5	50.0	57.1	37.2	52.8
Medium Dark	1.8	12.5	4.8	2.3	5.0
Dark	1.8	5.0	0.0	0.0	1.9
<b>Racial-Ethnic Roots</b>					
African	7.2	92.5	52.4	30.2	40.9
European	81.8	97.5	95.2	93.0	90.6
Indigenous	98.2	90.0	100.0	93.0	95.0
Asian	9.1	2.5	9.5	7.0	6.9
Total (N)	55	40	21	43	159

Table 2 Motivations for migration by gender and legal status among Latin American immigrants to the United States.

Reason for Migration	Males	Females	Doc	Undoc	Total
Problems at Origin	22.5	17.0	5.7	25.8	20.3
Opportunities at Destination	22.5	17.0	17.1	21.6	20.3
Network Links	18.8	3.8	11.4	13.4	12.8
Violence at Origin	1.3	5.7	2.9	3.1	3.0
Family Reasons	20.0	24.5	37.1	16.6	21.8
Other	15.0	32.1	25.7	19.6	21.8
Total Born Abroad (N)	80	53	35	97	133

Table 3 Perceptions of relative economic opportunities and inequalities in the United States and country of origin.

Variable	Gender		Generation		Legal Status		Doc	Undoc
	Females	Males	First	Second	Second	Doc		
<b>Total</b>								
<b>Opportunity</b>								
Greater in US	76.9	85.3	74.8	93.8	87.7	79.6		80.5
Greater at origin	5.5	2.9	5.4	2.1	1.8	5.1		4.4
Same in both	11.0	5.9	11.7	2.1	3.5	12.2		8.8
No answer	6.6	5.9	8.1	2.1	7.0	3.1		6.3
<b>Inequality</b>								
Greater in US	30.8	39.7	30.6	43.8	33.3	36.8		34.6
Greater at origin	37.4	32.4	36.9	31.3	29.8	38.8		35.2
Same in Both	24.2	20.6	24.3	18.8	26.3	21.4		22.6
No Answer	7.4	7.7	8.1	5.3	10.5	3.1		7.5
N	68	91	111	48	57	98		159

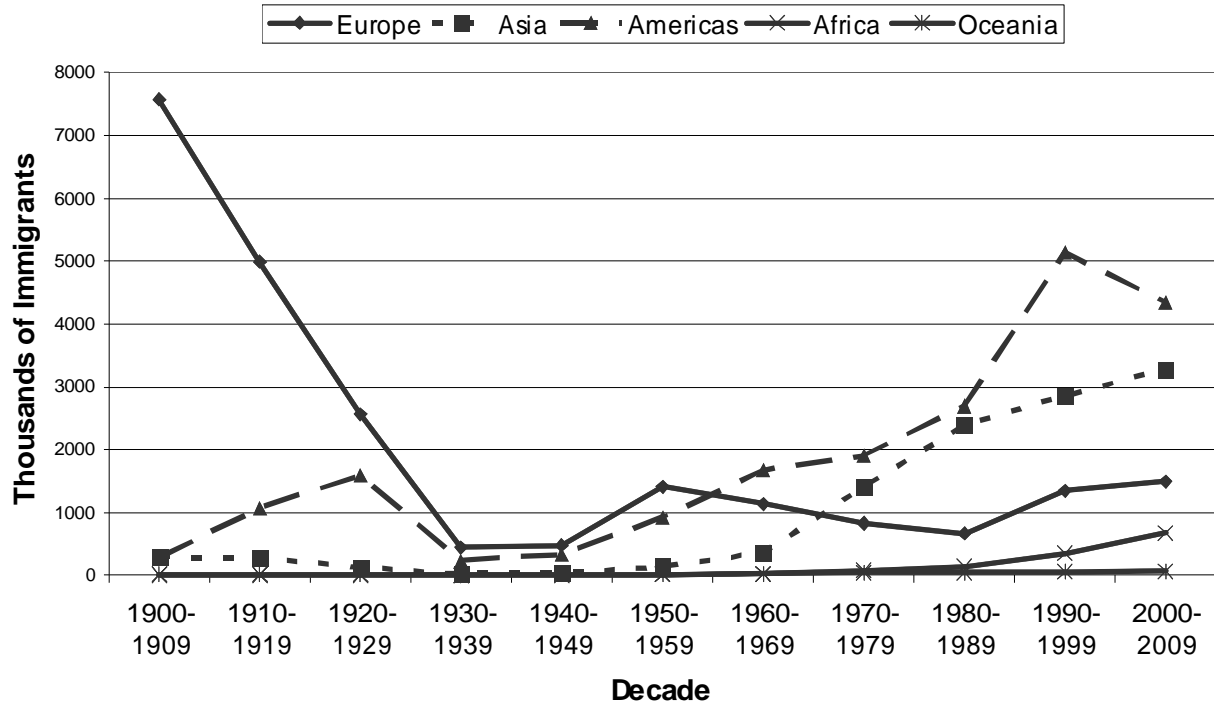
Table 4. Labor market outcomes for Latin American migrants to the United States by legal status.

Labor Market Outcome	Documented	Undocumented	Total
<b>U.S. Labor Force Participation</b>			
In Labor Force	0.754	0.775	0.767
Hours Worked per Day	7.857	9.149	8.705
<b>U.S. Occupational Outcomes</b>			
Parental Occupational Status	42.19	36.44	38.53
Status of First U.S. Occupation	44.65	39.53	41.35
Status of Current U.S. Occupation	51.25	44.63	46.98
<b>Occupational Mobility in U.S.</b>			
Downward	0.116	0.128	0.124
Upward	0.419	0.436	0.430
Same	0.465	0.436	0.446
<b>U.S. Wage Outcomes</b>			
First Hourly Wage	8.92	12.50	11.22
Current Hourly Wage	9.32	12.98	11.66
Earns Under Minimum Wage	0.325	0.282	0.298
<b>U.S. Wage Mobility</b>			
Downward	0.000	0.000	0.000
Upward	0.070	0.090	0.083
Same	0.930	0.910	0.917
Difference	0.39	0.48	0.45
N	57	98	159

Table 5. Whether Latin American immigrants to the United States share a common identity classified by gender, generation, and legal status.

Intergroup Identity	Gender		Legal Status		Generation		
	Female	Male	First	Second	Doc	Undoc	
<b>Total</b>							
<b>Common Latino Identity</b>							
Yes	83.5	79.4	77.2	84.3	80.2	85.4	81.8
No	5.5	8.8	7.0	6.9	6.3	8.3	6.9
Don't Know	3.3	5.9	5.3	4.0	5.4	2.1	4.4
<b>Identifies as American</b>							
Latino Only	64.8	60.3	57.9	65.7	69.4	47.9	62.9
American Only	24.2	19.1	15.8	25.5	25.2	14.6	22.0
Both	9.9	17.7	26.3	5.9	2.7	37.5	13.2
N	68	91	111	48	57	98	159

**Figure 1. Legal Immigration to the United States by Decade and Region of Origin**



**Figure 2. Origins of legal immigration from the Americas by decade**

