

RELATIVE VERSUS ABSOLUTE MEASURES OF INTEGRATION: SPATIAL
ASSIMILATION IN THE MEXICAN-ORIGIN POPULATION OF LOS ANGELES

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Extended Abstract

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Immigrants to U.S. metropolitan areas have historically funneled themselves into neighborhoods of co-ethnics and only slowly moved into the residential areas of the general population. In periods of high immigration, as immigrants initially cluster in enclaves, their segregation rises. In immigration lulls, such as from the mid-1920s through the 1960s, segregation has diminished. The speed and extent of integration have varied by group, with black immigrant groups facing especially strong barriers, but the basic tendency has held across time periods and socioeconomic status (Park 1926; Philpott 1978; Logan, Alba, and Zhang 2002; Rosenbaum and Friedman 2007). Today the location of the initial ethnic settlements may differ; where once enclaves developed in central cities, they now sometimes emerge in established suburbs (Logan et al. 2002, Fong 1994). But unusually longstanding and high levels of immigrant flows can mask the gradual process of immigrants fanning out from enclaves. In Los Angeles, for example, flows of Mexican immigrants have become so high that some analysts have labeled Hispanics “hypersegregated” from non-Hispanic whites or claimed that a “mega-barrio” has developed (Wilkes and Iceland 2004, Clark 1996: 136). Determining the extent to which such high-volume immigration may be obscuring integration in general and spatial integration in particular is an important key to understanding the overall pace of integration among immigrants and certainly among Mexicans, who comprise by far the largest immigrant group in the United States (Bean and Stevens 2003).

Using both census data and a survey of multiple immigrant generations of Mexican-origin respondents, this paper examines the degree of spatial assimilation in metropolitan Los Angeles. The paper assesses the change between respondents’ neighborhoods in childhood and

adulthood in terms of both ethnic and immigrant composition and cultural (linguistic) concentrations. The paper decomposes that change into two parts: the secular part caused by high immigration levels during respondents' lifetimes and the individual-level part caused by moving. If spatial assimilation is occurring, the co-ethnic, immigrant and Spanish-language concentrations of the neighborhoods between childhood and adulthood should be declining *relative* to their concentration within the entire metropolitan area, regardless of the absolute level of co-ethnics. The paper also examines these changes from childhood to adulthood by generation since immigration. While high levels of immigration are likely to affect all generations, the effect between childhood and adulthood should be greatest for the newest generations, because they are least likely to have moved from immigrant settlement areas.

Under conditions of high immigration and rising segregation, as in LA, the use of relative versus absolute measures of spatial assimilation is critical to interpreting research results. Spatial assimilation has traditionally been taken to mean greater integration with the general population and access to higher-income neighborhoods with better amenities (Massey 1985, Alba and Nee 2003). When analysts have emphasized absolute levels of co-ethnic concentration – on the ground that absolute concentration shapes “the neighborhood experience as actually lived” – they have concluded that “there was virtually no spatial assimilation for Mexican Americans” (Telles and Ortiz 2008: 167-168). But others examining spatial distribution of Mexican immigrants in LA relative to the mean have found that spatial assimilation is occurring (Wright, Ellis and Parks 2005). This current research introduces both relative and absolute levels of co-ethnic concentration to show how adult Mexican- Americans can be moving to neighborhoods with relatively fewer co-ethnics and immigrants than in their childhood even as the proportion of Mexican-Americans and immigrants in the neighborhood is rising.

As the city with the largest and oldest population of Mexican origin, Los Angeles is a critical test site. Those of Latino origin (about three-quarters of them Mexican) constitute Los Angeles' single largest ethnic group. Historically, they have been consigned to *barrios*, although early farm settlements of Mexican-Americans were also absorbed as the city grew (Deverell 2004; Grebler, Moore, and Guzmán 1970). Segregation indices dating from 1960 onward show moderate and now high levels of Mexican-Anglo segregation in Los Angeles and surrounding areas (Grebler et al. 1970; Massey and Denton 1989; Wilkes and Iceland 2004), with much of the segregation stemming from the large-scale settlement of new immigrants. Even in the 1960s, the entrance of Hispanics into Anglo neighborhoods did not necessarily precipitate an ethnic turnover in the neighborhood (Massey and Mullan 1984), suggesting that many Anglos accepted Mexicans as neighbors. Indeed, a study by Charles (2000) shows that 45 percent of Anglos in Los Angeles County indicated that they were comfortable moving into a neighborhood that was half Hispanic. Meanwhile, the availability of service jobs in suburbs has proved a magnet for the suburban settlement of Hispanics (Marcelli 2004).

Empirical studies of Hispanic residential settlement patterns have tended to show results that appear consistent with classic spatial assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003; Iceland and Wilkes 2006; Massey and Mullan 1984), although only recently have studies begun to focus on Mexicans in particular, as opposed to Hispanics in general (see Brown 2007; Massey and Denton 1989; South, Crowder and Chavez 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Telles and Ortiz 2008; Wright, Ellis, and Parks 2005). However, given that in most cities, the level of segregation of Hispanics has been rising over the last decade, and they still face discrimination in the housing market (Logan, Stults, and Farley 2004; Ross and Turner 2005; Yinger 1995), the degree to which Mexicans may be experiencing spatial incorporation still needs to be examined closely.

Moreover, as predicted by the conventional spatial assimilation model, residential mobility may be tied to socioeconomic status, and Mexicans' status has been held back by poor schools and low (though rising) educational levels (Neidert and Farley 1985; Trejo 1997). For example, Mexicans are less likely than blacks to leave high-poverty neighborhoods (South et al. 2005a). Studies of the residential incorporation of Hispanics or those of Mexican origin are thus inconclusive, with some showing varying degrees of assimilation (Alba and Logan 1993; Alba and Nee 2003; Brown 2007; Massey and Denton 1987, 1988; South et al. 2005b, 2005c) and others continuing segregation and residential inequality (Allen 2002; Flippen 2004; Krivo and Kaufman 2004; Telles and Ortiz 2008). More specifically, nativity, low socioeconomic status, and high levels of ethnic concentration help to sustain separation of the Hispanic population from Anglos (Denton and Massey 1988; Hwang and Murdock 1998; Massey and Denton 1988; Massey 1979; and South et al. 2005b).

Data for the paper come from a telephone survey called Intergenerational Immigrant Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA), carried out in the fall of 2004. The survey reached 4,780 young adults (ages 20-40) of the 1.5 and second generations for a variety of Latino and Asian immigrant groups, with an oversampling of persons of Mexican origin to include the third and fourth or higher generations as well, because of the size and long settlement of the Mexican immigrant group in Los Angeles. Through random-digit dialing, the IIMMLA surveyors targeted 800 persons of Mexican origin from the 1.5 and second generations and 400 more from the third or higher generations, as well as an additional 125 from the first generation. The actual sample totaled 1,369 persons of Mexican-origin; in addition, several dozen of the Central American respondents also reported some Mexican ancestry. By using the census tract as an approximation of neighborhood and geocoding with tract-level data from Summary File 3

of the 2000 Census, IIMMLA data permit analysis of locational attainment *across* immigrant generations as well as *within* the same family. It was possible to geocode current addresses for 1,328 of the Mexican-origin respondents and childhood addresses for 984 (childhood addresses were collected only for those respondents who grew up in greater Los Angeles).

IIMMLA identified those of Mexican origin by asking respondents their country of birth, their parents' and grandparents' countries of birth, as well as whether they had *any* ancestors from Mexico. The first generation was identified as those who were born in Mexico but came to the United States in late adolescence or adulthood. The 1.5 generation arrived at age 15 or earlier. The second generation was born in the United States but had at least one parent born in Mexico, and the third generation at least one grandparent. The fourth and higher generations were the children and grandchildren of the native-born but reported at least one ancestor born in Mexico. This set of questions allows for the specification of a true third generation distinct from later and earlier generations. Of all the Mexican ancestry respondents, 97.2 percent also identified themselves ethnically as Hispanic or Latino (including 95 percent of the people who had been in the United States for four or more generations), so the persistence and salience of measures of subjective ethnic self-identification are clear. Because of that stability of self-identification across generations, it is reasonable to compare residential differences between those of Mexican origin and other groups.

The results will be discussed in terms of their implications for developing relative and absolute measures of other dimensions of integration (economic, sociocultural, and political).

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