

Generation: The Story of Mexican Immigrants

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Studying the Mexican immigrant population provides an important window into the future of our country. As the primary sending country for immigrants to the U.S., the future of America is linked to the future of Mexican immigrants. Immigrants come for primarily economic reasons and they are a rapidly growing part of the population. "More than half (55%) of the Mexican immigrants in this country are unauthorized. Overall, Mexicans comprise about six-in-ten (59%) of the estimated 11.9 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S." (Pew 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand their progress from one generation to the next.

First generation refers to children who live in the United States and have one or more parents who were born elsewhere. Second generation refers to children who were born in the United States and have one or two parents who were born in the U.S. When immigrants come to a new country they must develop necessary survival techniques. Some of these strategies are passed from one generation to another while others are rendered obsolete by the process of settlement.

Generation is a way of tracking the change in characteristics from one set of indi-

Introduction



viduals to their offspring. Immigrant families are affected by the changes that takes place when their children are raised in a new country, and "so many first generation parents worry about what will happen to their American children." Therefore, it is important to study immigration to understand its influence on the immigrant populations and society. As we will discuss further in this brief, there is an increase in the level of educational attainment from the first generation to the second. This phenomenon describes an evolutionary trend of immigrants working to improve their lives and subsequently the lives of their children. As a result, immigrants are able to reflect the

positives of assimilation, taking the new ideas gained in the U.S. and combing them with Mexican ideals.

Yet, the outcomes of this acculturation process are not always positive. For instance, the change in diet for immigrants who come from Mexico to the U.S. can have a negative effect on the health of immigrants. As migrants begin to stray from traditional cuisine they consume fewer nutritious foods. It is important to study generation in order to understand how the migration process affects the ways that the members of a culture adapt traditional ideals to new ones.

Education

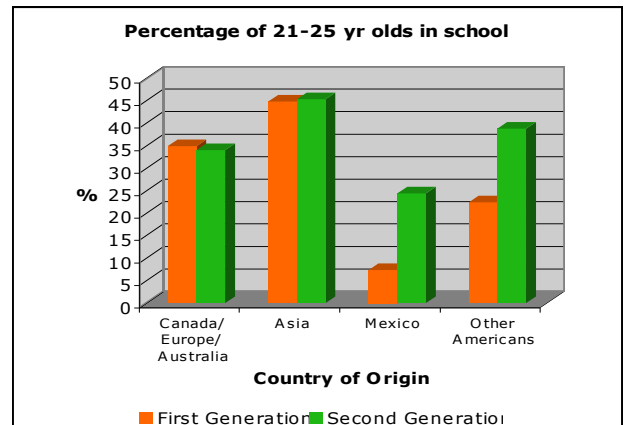
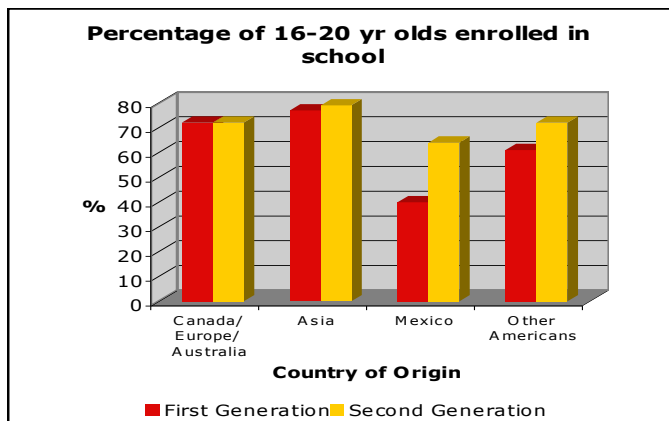
First generation Mexicans are the least likely of any youth group (ages 16 to 20) to be in school, with enrollment hovering right about 40 percent. On the other hand, 64 percent of the second generation Mexicans in the same age group are enrolled in school. This phenomena is indicative of the fact that not many are able to go to college. Only 7.3 percent of 21 to 25 year olds are enrolled in school while 24.4 percent of second generation Mexicans are (Waldinger & Reichl, 2006).

When looking at generational differences of those without a high school diploma, the concept of time must also be addressed. In 1970, 81.2 percent of first generation Mexicans did not have a diploma. That number was down to 58 percent in 2004. The change was even more dramatic for the second generation, which went from 69.1 percent to 16.9 percent. The second generation is not stopping at their high school diploma either—14 percent go on to receive a college degree (up from 3 percent in 1970) but only 6 percent of first generation Mexicans do the

same. Surprisingly, those whose parents were born in Mexico also drop out at a lower rate than those whose parents were born in the US, like themselves. Therefore, third generation Mexicans have higher dropout rates than that of second generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Schmid, 2001). One possible explanation is the vantage point that this gives the second generation. They are able to improvement in their parents' lives based on their stories of life in Mexico to now in the US, and want to continue the trend themselves. Third generation Mexicans are not privy to these same reference points (Schmid, 2001).



photograph by Corbis



Socio-Economic Status

While least likely to be in school, first generation Mexicans are the group most likely to be employed in the US, with 80 percent holding down a job (89 percent of men). US born Mexicans make an average of 30 percent more than immigrants. While only 42 percent of first generation women are employed, the rate is much higher for the second generation (70 percent of 25 to 65 year olds). We speculate that the high drop out rate among Mexican immigrants is largely due to their need to help their families financially. Immigrants often enter on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, taking the low-paying jobs that are available. The work may not be well paid but families will be better off economically than if they didn't have the additional income. (Further discussion on this topic is available in the section "A Possible Explanation for the Drop-off in achievement rate.")

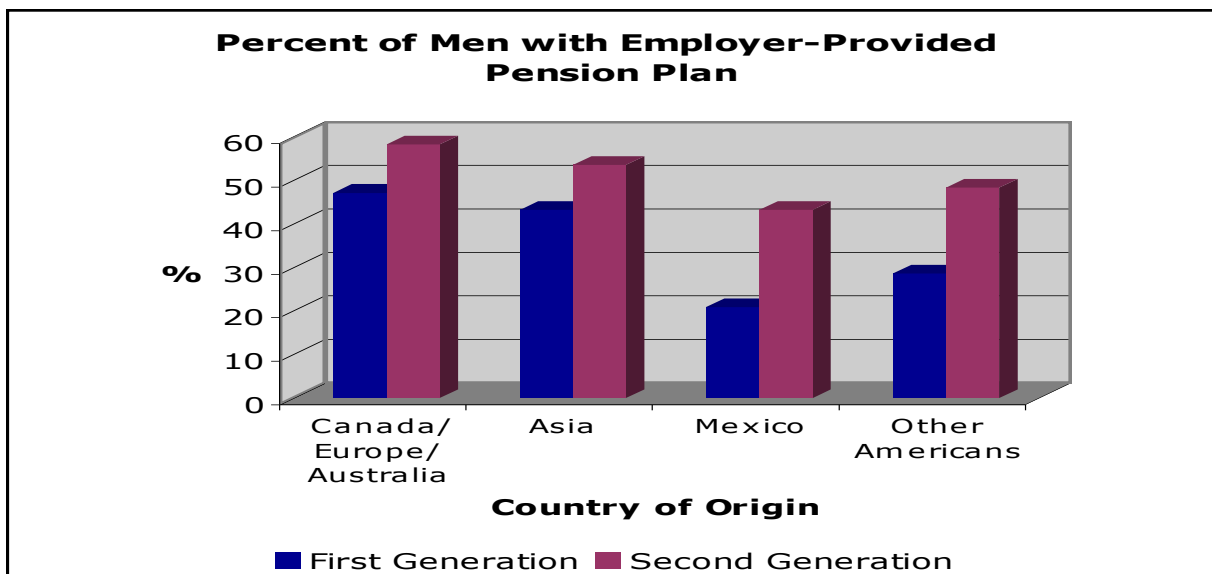
The gap between men and women is significantly

smaller in the second generation. Both of these facts may be attributed to changing gender roles. American culture places significant emphasis of the independence of women. In most cases, the second generation has assimilated more than members of the first generation, who are usu-

ally more closely tied to their home country and traditional roles (e.g. women remain in the house). There are no further increases after the second generation as far as wages are concerned (Groger & Trejo, 2002).

One might argue that first generation men are more likely to be employed than their second generation

counterparts because many migrate solely for economic reasons and secure their jobs before making the move to the US. Only 21% of these men have a pension plan and a third receive some kind of health insurance. These numbers are considerably higher for the second generation (possibly because of higher educational attainment), who are twice as likely to have employer-provided health insurance (Waldenger & Reichl, 2006).



A Possible Explanation for the Decline in Achievement After the Second Generation

In the 1960s, the “damaging culture” theory emerged, claiming that Mexican-American culture was responsible for any negative outcomes that may manifest in the Mexican-American populations, including delinquency, low income and educational attainment. However, this theory has been greatly refuted. Most refutations come from acknowledging the positive values that Mexican-American culture promotes. In general, “immigration is motivated by a desire for change, upward mobility, and achievement” (Buriel, Calzada, & Vasquez, p 43). This should then lend itself to positive mental health.

Generational level is a standard for anticipating one’s level of acculturation. Generally, the higher order generation one is, the further removed they are from mainstays of Mexican-American culture. As an immigrant culture, Mexican-American culture tends to be achievement focused and engrains those ideals of success in first and second generation individuals but less so for the third generation.

These ideas were confirmed by a study that found third generations to have lower educational expectations than first and second generations. The third generation was also found to be more delinquent. In conclusion, it appears as if earlier generations (or those more closely tied to Mexican-American culture and values) achieve more because Mexican-American is inherently achievement oriented.



Dietary Changes

It has been suggested that first generation Mexicans are healthier because they tend to eat a more traditional diet in comparison to their second generation counterparts. The second generation tends to be more acculturated and thus, may have eating behaviors similar to those of non-Hispanic Whites. This includes consuming more alcohol and tobacco. Specifically, first generation Mexican women consume more protein, vitamin A and C, folic acid, and calcium. They report higher numbers of live births and lower instances of low weight births, signifying the implications of having a good diet (Guendelman & Abrams, 1995). These patterns are also supported by data that indicate first generation adolescent Hispanics experience obesity at lower rates than second generation adolescent Hispanics (Popkin & Udry, 1998).



Religious Observance



By the third generation, attendance at religious service is less frequent than attendance of first and second generations, however, there is high consistency in religious affiliation among generations. More specifically, within Mexican American families, older generations go to church more often than younger generations. If your grandparents are Catholic, you are most likely to be Catholic. Religious participation is linked to greater life satisfaction in older generations as it provides a link to their home country. Religion does not serve the same purpose for younger generations but more so serves a protective function against mood disorders (Levin & Markides 1996).

Interview With Students from La Casa de Amistad

We interviewed three junior students at La Casa de Amistad to find out more about trends in immigration. All three of the kids we interviewed had parents who were born in Mexico and were therefore more likely to hold onto traditional Mexican ideals. The highest level of educational attainment was Maria's father who completed the 8th grade.

The primary reason for a drop in educational achievement was the need to work and earn money for the family. Maria was very candid in the

discussion of her family's educational attainment. "My mom was one of twelve so there was constant financial struggle. My Mom completed 3rd grade and my Dad completed 8th grade. It was not a priority for my mother to complete school because in her generation women were to stay in the house. After the 3rd grade, it was time for her to learn to tend to the house. My dad stopped going to school because of the transportation issue. The school was in the city so it was hard to get there."



Another area of interest for our study on generation was religion. Jose talked about the religious conversions that took place in his family. "My grandma became a Jehovah Witness when she came to the U.S. and learned about the religion. I think she was just interested in it because it was new and different. My mom became a Jehovah Witness also. Personally, I believe in God but don't ascribe to a religion."

Contrary to what was suggested by research we found on religion, the lack of commitment to a religious persuasion seemed to be trend for the younger generation. Toni echoed this sentiment: "My family is Catholic but I am currently questioning my faith. There are just some things that I am not sure about." Although Toni's family is Catholic, he did not use that as a reason to practice Catholicism also. His decision to make his own choice about religious observance is representative of the American ideals of free choice. This process is an excellent example of how assimilation may cause one to re-evaluate traditional practices.

In Conclusion

The experience of Mexican immigrants provides an invaluable look at American history. For centuries, immigrants have come to the United States seeking economic opportunity and hoping to improve their lives. In an effort to adapt to their new society, they often take on some of its characteristics while leaving behind others. In some ways, this process of adaptation has had a positive effect. Members of their community have been able to improve the quality of life from one generation to the next.

Yet, in other ways, the process of adaptation has meant moving away from traditional norms and the adoption of negative and destructive behaviors. It is important to understand the effect of these generational trends on the Mexican immigrant community because Mexican immigrants are projected to comprise an important segment of the population of the United States in the next fifty years and beyond. Awareness and understanding of these generational dynamics and patterns will provide significant insight into the future of American society in general.

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