Ethnic and Racial Studies Vol. 27 No. 3 May 2004 pp. 376–402

Will the new second generation experience 'downward assimilation'? Segmented assimilation re-assessed

Roger Waldinger and Cynthia Feliciano

Abstract

Research on the "new second generation" in the United States has been deeply influenced by the hypothesis of "segmented assimilation", which contends that the children of immigrants are at risk of downward mobility into a "new rainbow underclass". This article seeks to assess that assertion, focusing on the experience of Mexicans, the overwhelmingly largest of today's second-generation groups, and a population of predominantly working- or lower-class origins. The empirical component of this article rests on analysis of a combined sample of the 1996–2001 Current Population Survey.

Keywords: Second generation; children of immigrants; assimilation; segmented assimilation; underclass; Mexican Americans.

Concern with the prospects and experience of the 'new' second generation stands at the top of the immigration research agenda in the United States. The emergence of the second generation has naturally occurred with a lag, given the protracted nature of immigrant settlement and the gradual process by which the foreign-born population has grown over the past forty years. But demography does not automatically shape minds. The intellectual catalyst for the shift in orientation was delivered by Portes and Zhou with their seminal article on 'segmented assimilation (1993)'. With the more recent appearance of Portes and Rumbaut's landmark study, *Legacies* (2001), based on a longitudinal survey of immigrant children in Florida and California, as well as *Ethnicities* (Rumbaut and Portes 2001), a companion volume on individual ethnic groups, the

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ISSN 0141-9870 print/1466-4356 online
DOI: 10.1080/01491987042000189196

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conceptual framework sketched out more than a decade ago has gained considerable reinforcement.

Portes, Zhou and Rumbaut have argued that the children of today's immigrants will assimilate in several ways – as opposed to the single, straight-line path supposedly followed by earlier immigrant waves. The offspring of middle-class immigrants will move sprightly ahead, using the resources linked to their parents' class and the opportunities furnished by the U.S.'s system of higher education to join the American 'mainstream' at a pace unequalled by the second generation of old. But the children of low-skilled immigrants, visibly identifiable and entering a mainly white society still not cured of its racist afflictions, face a different, more difficult set of options. While immigrant parents arrive willing to do the jobs that natives won't hold, the children want more; not clear is whether the children's careers can live up to 'their U.S.-acquired aspirations (Portes and Zhou 1993, p. 85)? The conundrum of the contemporary second generation is heightened by the continuing transformation of the U.S. economy. Though low-skilled jobs persist, occupational segmentation has 'reduced the opportunities for incremental upward mobility through well-paid, blue-collar positions'. The advent of the hourglass economy confronts the immigrant children with a cruel choice: either acquire the college, and other advanced degrees needed to move into the professional/managerial elite, or else accept the same menial jobs to which the first generation was consigned. However, the children's experience of growing up as stigmatized strangers, exposed to the 'adversarial culture' of native-born minorities, may lead them to act in ways that imperil school success. And without extended schooling, the immigrant offspring will be relegated to jobs at the bottom of the queue – to which, if they have absorbed the consumption norms of the American mainstream, and the oppositional values of the U.S. underclass, they may simply say, 'no thanks'.

Thus, the hypothesis of segmented assimilation yields a distinctive prediction: as clearly specified by Portes and Rumbaut in their recent book (2001, p. 59), the children of peasant and working-class immigrants are at risk of 'downward assimilation'. In this 'alternative path', immigrant offspring face the prospect of dropping from their 'parents' modest starting position (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 59)' into 'a new rainbow underclass . . . at the bottom of society' (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 45). Though not always stated with the clarity one might desire, it is not difficult to infer just who makes up the 'masses of the dispossessed . . . in America's inner cities (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 45)': the existing native-born underclass of urban, low-skilled African-Americans, and their less numerous Puerto Rican counterparts. That contention is what this article seeks to assess, focusing on the experience of Mexicans, the overwhelmingly largest of today's second-generation groups, and a population of predominantly working- or

lower-class origins, which makes it the perfect case for a test of this particular point of view.

The empirical component of this article rests on an analysis of a combined sample of the 1996–2001 Current Population Survey [CPS]. Later in the essay, we will describe both the dataset and the indicators that we use to identify the 'underclass' into which the theory of segmented assimilation expects immigrant offspring to fall. Before doing so, however, we return to a discussion of the underlying intellectual issues involved and provide background on the Mexican case.

Second-generation prospects: A reconsideration

While the hypothesis of segmented assimilation has been deeply influential, it has not escaped scepticism. In this section, we will summarize and extend the established lines of critique:

The minority model: Bane . . . or boon?

Portes and his associates argue that exposure to the ways of America's native minorities serves immigrant children ill; not all observers agree. Methodologically, the conclusions are suspect: the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey includes only the children of the foreign-born and therefore cannot identify the elements distinctive to second-generation youth as opposed to those shared with native-born counterparts (see Waters 2002). Results from a recent survey of young New Yorkers – including immigrant offspring as well as native whites, native blacks, and native Hispanics – suggest a good deal more overlap among these groups than segmented assimilation would allow. As noted by Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2002), adversarial behaviour (as denoted by arrest records) was evident among all groups: the *impact* of arrest varied greatly, however, exercising much slighter effect among native whites (who actually experienced the second highest arrest rates) than among immigrant or native blacks and Hispanics. If greater exposure to discrimination is a source of second-generation vulnerability, institutional factors, Kasinitz and his colleagues argue, may yield an offsetting effect. Coming of age in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the options open to today's immigrant offspring are positively affected by the minority rights revolution (Skrentny 2003) and its impact on the institutionalization of ethnicity. It is precisely because they are members of minority groups, that the contemporary second generation can access power in ways not true for the children of the working-class immigrants at the turn of the century or the offspring of the black sharecroppers who moved to northern U.S. cities after World War II. And regardless of future class position, the immigrant offspring of contemporary labour migrant groups can expect at least some discrimination from

Euro-Americans, in which case, exposure to native minorities and their practical strategies for responding to the unfair practices of the ethnic majority is likely to help, not hinder, second-generation progress (Neckerman *et al*, 1998).

Second-generation decline . . . or advance?

Proponents of segmented assimilation forecast downward mobility for the children of immigrant garment workers and dishwashers. But as Alba, Farley, and Nee (Farley and Alba 2002; Alba and Nee 2003) have argued, the fact that the parents begin at the very bottom of the occupational ladder makes upward – not downward – mobility the more likely outcome. Indeed, as shown by Farley and Alba (2002), analysing data from the same source used for this article, while second-generation persons originating in labour migrant groups do not possess the educational attainment of native-born whites, their schooling performance represents significant advance as compared to the first generation. The same holds for occupational attainment, where sizeable growth in second-generation white-collar employment points to a major departure from the parental pattern.

Class, culture, and historical experiences

As argued by Perlmann and Waldinger (1997; Waldinger and Perlmann 1998), the hypothesis of segmented assimilation conflates class and cultural factors, thereby dismissing the relevance of earlier second-generation experiences. Though not entirely unmindful of class, the proponents of segmented assimilation actually place greater emphasis on cultural considerations and historically contingent factors. Today's immigrants, we are told, converge on poor, central cities, where they come 'into close contact with the urban underclass', characterized by 'the development of an adversarial outlook towards middle-class *culture* (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: emphasis added)'. Geographic proximity to the underclass matters because it leaves second-generation kids hanging around with the wrong crowd, not a good thing since immigrant offspring then pick up the wrong attitudes of their native-born peers. Native-born underclass youth 'exercise a powerful influence on newly arrived youth by reinterpreting for them the difficult conditions of adaptation. . . . creating the conditions for a problematic mode of dissonant *acculturation* (pp. 248–9; emphasis added)'. Through a '*socialization* process' (emphasis added), newcomers' loyalties 'shift toward the common adversarial stance of their native-born peers' (p. 249).

However, Portes and his collaborators also argue that a generational shift in aspirations inheres in the processes of migration and settlement. While labour migrants arrive willing to do the jobs that natives won't

hold, the children of these working-class immigrants want more, having been exposed to different wage and consumption standards from the start; consequently, the question is whether their 'careers . . . keep pace with their U.S.-acquired aspirations' (Portes and Zhou 1993, p. 85).

If a change in second-generation expectations is endogenous, it follows that the contemporary second generation will bear greater similarity to its predecessors among the descendants of the southern and eastern Europeans than Portes and his associates would allow. Indeed, the historical literature (Ware 1935; Covello 1943; Gans 1962; Morawska 1985) is filled with evidence of recurrent 'second generation revolt', suggesting that the working-class offspring of southern and eastern European immigrants were as adversarial in schools and workplaces as are their second-generation contemporaries of today.

These historical parallels should come as no surprise: an oppositional culture is not distinctive to America's rejected 'minorities', but generic to 'negatively privileged' groups pure and simple. Outsiders, whether defined in class or ethnic terms, respond to exclusion through solidarity. People in need have to help each other out: my assistance today is the best guarantee that you'll come to my aid when I'm out of work, short of cash, or needing a hand to steer my boy out of the streets and into a job. One does not have to subscribe to any version of the extant Marxist teleologies to realize that those lower down the ladder understand the world in terms of 'them' and 'us'. Workers, whether 'ethnic' or otherwise, may not be ready to overthrow the boss, but they neither love him, nor obey each and every one of his commands. Though partial, the rejection of the views of the dominant group usually go a good deal deeper: knowing that the unfairness of life is played at their expense, the excluded respond by inverting the values of their betters (Willis 1977; Foley 1990).

Clearly, parents want their children to do better; however, exit threatens the system of reciprocity on which less advantaged communities are built. My success in school will reduce my need for any help you could provide, which means that you won't have any favours to cash in when trouble hits; that fear, in turn, generates the levelling pressures prevalent in working-class families and communities. It is also worth remembering the point emphasized by Bowles and Gintis (1976) a quarter of a century ago: as schools in working-class neighbourhoods have been run as factories designed to prepare factory workers, they have provided plenty of good reasons for extended adolescent revolt, without, however, leading to either revolution or a permanent withdrawal from work.

Gendered paths

Thus, the segmented assimilation hypothesis invokes a causal mechanism that operates in a population wider than the specific category in question,

and usually without producing the predicted effects: far more persons subscribe to some aspect of an 'oppositional culture' than ever fall into an 'underclass'. Proponents of segmented assimilation also extend the same syndrome in broad brush fashion, without considering its likely gendered nature. In its original incarnation, after all, the 'underclass' hypothesis concerned the fate of black men. That preoccupation can be readily understood: it has been black men whose participation in the urban economy has steadily, and so severely declined over the past several decades. But the object of explanation then assumes an underlying causal mechanism that conflicts with the intellectual framework: the latter emphasizes the devastating consequences associated with the decline of low-skilled, manual jobs, in which case one wonders why the lack of the appropriate skills affect African-American men, without exercising comparable impact on their female counterparts.

One answer, not considered by the proponents of segmented assimilation, would point to the oppositional culture's gendered cast. As the ethnographic literature indicates, gender heavily influences the adversarial relationships that develop in schools: the mix of working/lower-class boys taught by female, middle-class teachers proves particularly combustible. Historically, the subcultures of the street *and* the manual workplace both provided outlets for the elaboration of a masculine identity in an all- or mainly-male environment, in contrast to which the school stood distinct, in part, because of its apparent femininity. The decline of the blue-collar sector did not simply put lower skilled men at greater risk of joblessness: it deprived them of work experiences that would validate the street-generated sense of male worth, in part, by increasing the probability that one's boss and co-workers would be members of the other sex. In effect, the shift to a service economy, with its requirement for a friendlier, more feminine presentation of self, means that poorly schooled, young men face greater pressures for conformity than ever before, with precious little coin in compensation. That some young working-class men should therefore refuse to abandon the action-orientation of the streets should hardly be a surprise (Schneider 1999). On the other hand, a protracted transition from rebellious adolescence to a more settled adult life is also a well-documented phenomenon, its likelihood heavily influenced by the ability to make connections that might provide an entrée to blue-collar jobs of adequate status and compensation (Osterman 1980; Sullivan 1989). Whether young men's oppositional styles persist or transmute into more socially acceptable forms is therefore often a matter of neighbourhood or ethnic social capital, on which more, below.

Young immigrant women of working-class background, however, face a rather different match between communal expectations and broader, societal possibilities. Insofar as both schools and workplaces present a more 'feminine' environment, expectations are more confirming than

conflicting, As noted by Herbert Gans (1962), in a study that highlighted the oppositional orientation of ethnic teenagers more than four decades ago, schools have a place for the traditional sex role behaviour of the sort that might be valued by immigrant parents, as do secretarial pools. As suggested by Nancy Lopez's (2003) ethnographic study of Caribbean and Dominican immigrant and second-generation youth in New York, gendered differences of a similar sort remain no less prominent today.

As the second generation differs from its parents in its subscription to the native-born standard of living and working, the implications for men and women are unlikely to be quite the same, precisely because gender differences in economic activity are usually greater among the immigrants than among the native-born. Consequently, 'becoming American' can be expected to increase the probability of paid employment among the daughters of the foreign-born, as compared to their mothers. If it also turns out that second-generation women enter the labour market with schooling levels that, while still modest relative to the U.S. distribution, compare favourably with those of their parents, the prospects for gradual upward mobility may turn out to be brighter than a literature insistent on the likelihood of 'second-generation decline (Gans 1992)' would have us think.

A 'Rainbow' 'Underclass'? The possibility that we have a new, expanded 'rainbow' underclass in the making lends the edge to research on today's second generation. But the underclass is a chaotic concept, whose origins in the world of media and politics should caution us to use it only when surrounded by quotation marks, as in *The 'Underclass' Debate* book edited by the historian, Michael Katz (1993). Just who comprises the 'underclass', and according to which criteria, appears not to be clear, notwithstanding the large amounts of ink spilt on the question. One might do better, as Jencks (1992) has suggested, to talk about 'underclass*es*', each one distinguished from the other by such traits as gender or low schooling or tenuous relationship to the labour market. Thought of in stratificational terms, the 'underclass' seems anomalous, as it lacks a clear positional referent. For example, the low-skilled immigrants employed at poverty wage jobs in so many American cities might seem a more fitting *class* of workers *under*neath all others, as contrasted to the persons identified by William J. Wilson (1987) as *the truly disadvantaged*, who, having been extruded from the employment system, could be better characterized as an '*out*class'. In this light, the 'underclass' appears more as a syndrome, in which a series of traits – low rates of employment, low rates of marriage, high rates of out-of-wedlock births, etc – are bundled together, as opposed to a class, as understood in the conventional, sociological sense.

For our purposes, it is enough to say that the 'underclass' is what emerges *when work disappears* (Wilson 1996). Work, after all, is the crucial element in the Wilsonian framework: the residents of traditional

black ghettos were poor, but comprised a community regulated, in the Durkheimian sense, by the rhythms of work, and the expectations and resources engendered by employment, pure and simple. By contrast, work in the contemporary ghetto is an episodic event, in which all too few residents are engaged, which is why the structures that previously bound residents together, and governed their behaviour operate with such limited effect. While a vast literature has arisen to assess the empirical validity of these historical and contemporary generalizations, that issue need not attend us here, as the hypothesis of segmented assimilation takes the Wilsonian perspective as its taken-for-granted, point of departure. And in any case, that a disproportionate number of less-skilled African-Americans are out of work is beyond dispute; whether the same fate is now befalling the emerging second generation comprises the crux of the matter at hand.

Mexican immigrants and their offspring: The crucial test case

As noted above, the hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation' tells us that not all immigrant children are equally at risk. While the offspring of the large population of middle-class immigrants are 'slated for a smooth transition into the mainstream' (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 45), trouble, however, awaits the children of working-class immigrants

The national origins of these children of working-class immigrants are exceedingly diverse. But Portes and his associates tell us that there is one crucial case, at once standing out from all others and exemplifying the theoretical claims that the hypothesis of segmented assimilation seeks to advance: the Mexicans. As noted in the final concluding chapter of *Legacies*: 'Mexican immigrants represent *the* textbook example of theoretically anticipated effects of low immigrant human capital combined with a negative context of reception' (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, p. 277; emphasis in the original) Reviewing the book's findings, as regards the offspring of Mexican immigrants, Portes and Rumbaut conclude that the 'cumulative results clearly point to a difficult process of adaptation and to the likelihood of downward assimilation . . .' (p. 279) and insist that these results warrant special attention, 'given the size of the Mexican immigrant population and its all but certain continuing growth in future years'. As further pointed out by Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, the authors of an article on Mexican Americans in the companion volume, *Ethnicities*, the Mexican case is of 'unique importance', especially in California and the southwest, where Mexicans are 'by far the largest minority and are rapidly becoming the single-largest ethnic group . . .' (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001, pp. 58–9).

If the Mexican experience provides the benchmark against which the theory of segmented assimilation should be assessed, the social character of Mexican migration to the United States provides ample reason

for scepticism, as regards the theory's claims. After all, the master narrative of contemporary Mexican migration to the United States tells a story of the inexorable and progressive implantation of immigrant networks (Massey *et al*, 1987; 1994). Instability at the bottom of the labour market creates vacancies for bottom-level jobs, which immigrants, impelled by a different set of tastes and expectations than natives, are especially likely to obtain. Immigrant ranks quickly proliferate, as veterans tap the newest arrival to fill each subsequent vacancy; the process consolidates, once the best established among the immigrants moves up the pecking order, gaining influence over hiring decisions, a factor which further opens the door to kith and kin. As the immigrant network expands, and immigrant niches proliferate, immigrants are only mildly penalized for the few skills they possess, but are rewarded instead for *whom* they know. In the memorable phrase coined by Douglas Massey and his collaborators, landless Mexican *campesinos* 'may be poor in financial resources, but they are wealthy in social capital, which they can readily convert into jobs and earnings in the United States' (Massey *et al*. 1987).

Of course, it is one thing when brand new immigrants, having crossed over to *el otro lado*, then take advantage of the support and information furnished by their established kin and *paisanos*. What is in dispute is the possibility that those same processes could operate in ways that facilitate labour force attachment among the second generation.

One can certainly imagine a scenario characterized by inter-generational discontinuity, as suggested by the hypothesis of segmented assimilation, but we caution against going down that road too fast. The analogy does seem overdrawn: East Los Angeles bears little resemblance to the south side of Chicago, in either its past or present incarnations. If the concept of social capital has any meaning at all, it implies that social structure has an independent effect (as argued by Coleman 1988, S96). While the children of Mexican immigrants may grow up in high poverty areas, those same places are characterized by high immigrant job-holding rates, quite in contrast to the pattern among African-Americans, where high poverty is associated with low levels of employment (Johnson *et al*. 2000). Following Portes and Rumbaut, who tell us that 'social capital depends less on the relative economic or occupational success of immigrants than on the density of ties among them (p. 65)', we should therefore expect higher employment rates among Mexican second-generation school-leavers or high school completers, as compared to their African-American counterparts.

It is also worth recalling that the embedding of immigrant communities is, at least in part, a response to employers' favourable views of the work ethic and behaviour of the foreign-born; for that reason, one can expect that immigrant children enter a reception context quite different from that encountered by their African-American counterparts. The

penetration of immigrant networks is also now very deep, which, in southern California or Texas, means that there are still plenty of Mexican sweepers and sewing machine operators, but also quite a few foremen and skilled workers, which in turn provides the second generation with access to job opportunities well above the bottom. As immigration itself generates ample needs for bilingual speakers (whether in hospitals, department stores, or factories), it creates positions for which the children of immigrants are ideally suited (Waldinger and Lichter 2003), Consequently, the social embedding of Mexican migration, with densely knit ties that span the population and connect it to workplaces, provides ground for thinking that first- to second-generation trajectories may take the form well known to the working-class, labour migrations from Eastern and Southern Europe in the century before ours. At the very least, contentions of likely 'downward assimilation' warrant sceptical examination: it is this task to which we shall now turn.

Comparisons, indicators, data

Comparisons

The argument that the children of Mexican immigrants may be joining the ranks of a 'rainbow underclass' suffers from all the ideological problems associated with the underclass concept itself, as we have noted above. Nonetheless, the two literatures in question – on the second generation and on the 'underclass' – make the identities of the relevant contrast groups clear. As we are interested in the *within group* comparison *across generations*, we will contrast a first generation born and raised in Mexico with a second generation born in the United States of Mexican immigrant parents[1] Simultaneously, we want to pursue *across group* comparisons, focusing first on those native-born populations whose patterns of labour force activity are likely to exemplify the 'rainbow underclass' future forecast by the hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation'. In keeping with the concerns of the 'underclass' literature, we examine African-Americans, here defined as non-hispanic 'black' native-born persons born to native parents of native parentage. The relevant contrast to native-born minorities also encompasses mainland-born Puerto Ricans. Though this group is relatively small, its disadvantaged situation has led many observers to worry that a disproportionately large number of Puerto Ricans may be falling into the 'underclass' (Tienda 1989). The Puerto Rican case also plays a role in the segmented assimilation literature: Portes and Rumbaut have explicitly drawn attention to Philippe Bourgois' (1995) ethnographic study of a small group of Puerto Rican youth in New York's East, which, in their view, 'exemplifies this . . . oppositional ideology . . . reinforcing the very blockage of opportunities that it denounces (2001, p. 60)'.[2] We extend the across group comparison to include native-born 'whites' born to

native-born parents. In addition, we examine *within group* and *across group* differences *across gender*.

Indicators

In assessing the hypothesis that the Mexican second generation might experience 'downward assimilation', we need to remember that the Mexican first generation is concentrated in jobs that lie at the very bottom of the labour market. From that standpoint, 'downward' really means *out* of the labour market, a statement consistent with the view that an 'underclass' emerges 'when work disappears'. Since the relevant spotlight, therefore, should be cast on the working-age population, we restrict our discussion to prime age adults, 25–64 years old; following Jencks (1992), we focus on three indicators of labour market attachment:

First, we examine differences in (1) *employment*, a dichotomous category separating those people with a job from those who are either out of work and looking for a job as well as those who are out of the labour force altogether. This indicator, alone, however, is likely to be too restrictive. If low-skilled workers experience high levels of frictional unemployment, as suggested by the literature on segmented labour markets (Doeringer and Piore 1971), a snapshot taken at any one point in time is likely to miss a recent, previous experience of employment. Consequently, we also examine differences in (2) *average weeks of work employed in the previous year for all those with at least one week of employment during that period*. As opposed to workers caught in the secondary labour market, where they churn from one job to another with a high frequency, persons in an 'underclass' would experience long-term, chronic joblessness. Thus, to capture the population with the weakest attachment to the labour market, we examine differences in the proportion with (3) *no weeks of employment during the previous year*.

Following the literature, the terms of the comparison reflect those factors that put the groups at risk, most notably space and skill. On the one hand, low-skilled workers are at risk, marginalized by the decline of manufacturing and its replacement by a new economy, whose employers demand a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' skills that even high school educated workers – let alone drop-outs – are unlikely to possess. On the other hand, these transformations yield their greatest impact in the nation's metropolitan centres, with the most severe effects felt in inner cities (Holzer 1996; Holzer and Danziger, 2000; Moss and Tilly 2001).

However, the literature leaves considerable ambiguity as to how controls for these factors should affect the comparison to native-whites. The hypotheses of skills and spatial mismatches, from which the underclass literature derives, imply that disparities should diminish *after* application of the relevant controls. From the standpoint of segmented assimilation, however, 'downward assimilation' entails a distinctively

subcultural component; if less skilled members of the second generation adopt an 'adversarial culture' inimical to sustained work effort, immigrant offspring should show lower levels of employment, and more chronic forms of joblessness than comparably educated native whites. Consequently, the segmented assimilation hypothesis implies that disparities should either *persist* or *widen* after application of controls for education and location.

If the underclass literature emphasizes the importance of skills and space, and the hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation' underscores the additional role of ethnicity, neither has much to say about gender. By contrast, we hypothesize that acculturation should lead to labour force patterns among second-generation women that converge with those of their third generation white counterparts, as opposed to the divergent patterns characteristic of the foreign-born. Since access to employment is affected by the presence of children, which in turn systematically differs among the groups in question, we add an additional set of controls for children under 18 in the household, when examining women.

Data

This article uses data collected as part of the March demographic files of the Current Population Survey [CPS], a monthly survey of a national probability sample of approximately 60,000 households, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Since 1994, questions about place of birth and parents' place of birth are a permanent feature of each month's survey, making the CPS the only, large-scale, dataset capable of identifying foreign-born, U.S.-born of foreign-parentage, and U.S. born of U.S. born parentage subgroups within the larger population.[3] Though the CPS universe is far smaller than the Census, one can combine surveys from subsequent years to build up a sample of very respectable size; this article makes particular use of a combined sample concatenating observations from the 1996 through 2001 Current Population Surveys. The CPS retains respondents during a two-year period, interviewing individuals for four consecutive months, dropping them from the sample for the next eight months, and then re-interviewing them for another four consecutive months, after which time they are dropped from the sample completely. Consequently, half of the persons interviewed in any given month reappear in the following year's sample in the same month. To avoid duplicate cases, we have retained non-overlapping halves of the 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 samples, and have included the entire 2001 sample. This procedure produces a sample of 239,255 prime age adults, 172,000 more than the number available in any single year.

Our contrast of the five groups in question proceeds through a set of cross-tabulations, in which we first show the zero-order difference, relative to native whites (the percentages for whites are shown in

Appendix Table A1), and then apply a set of successive controls, derived from the relevant literature. For some groups, the additional controls create sample size problems; we therefore excluded from the analysis any subgroups with less than 100 cases (see Appendix Table A2). We also standardized for age, based on the age distributions of white men and women, to adjust for any confounding influences of age. After showing the net difference for each indicator, we first display differences for the two least skilled categories (high school graduates with no further schooling and less than high school). Within each of these two educational categories, we then show differences by place, moving from total U.S., to the twenty-seven largest metropolitan regions, and then to the central cities of those regions.[4] When examining women, the presence of children in the home provides the first axis of variation; we then apply the skill and locational controls to women with children in the household.

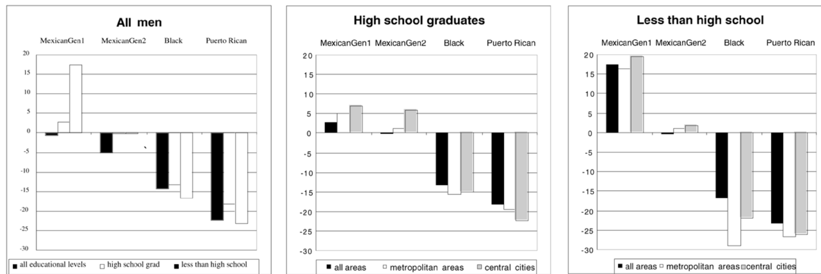
Findings

Men: Our discussion begins with men. To reiterate, the hypothesis of segmented assimilation forecasts that levels of labour force attachment among Mexican-origin men will diminish as generational status increases, leading to convergence with the patterns for native-born minorities. By contrast, we hypothesize continuity among the two groups of Mexican-origin men, leading to persistent difference in labour force attachment as compared to native-born minorities.

1). *Employment*: As Figure 1 shows, the comparison between native whites and Mexican immigrants shows only slight, if any difference; employment rates for Mexican second-generation men marginally fall below those of whites. By contrast, employment levels for all black and all Puerto Rican men fall considerably short of the pattern characteristic of native whites. The literature offers little guidance to this initial comparison: given the highly unfavourable skill levels of the Mexican-origin groups, we should expect that the gap in employment rates should exceed the disparity evinced in the black and Puerto Rican cases. Applying educational controls barely affects the native minority groups, and actually enlarges the gap at the lowest skill levels. For the Mexican-*born*, however, the same procedure yields far greater impact and in the opposite direction, as the least educated sustain employment rates well above the level achieved by comparable native whites. As for the second generation, applying educational controls yields effects in the same direction, reducing the second-generation/native white gap to near zero.

The next two frames in the figure, which repeat the same exercise, though now controlling for space among two categories of less skilled men, yield similar and similarly counterintuitive results. Spatial factors modestly increase the native minority/native white gap; the impact is

Figure 1. *Percentage difference in employment rates: comparison to native-born white males*

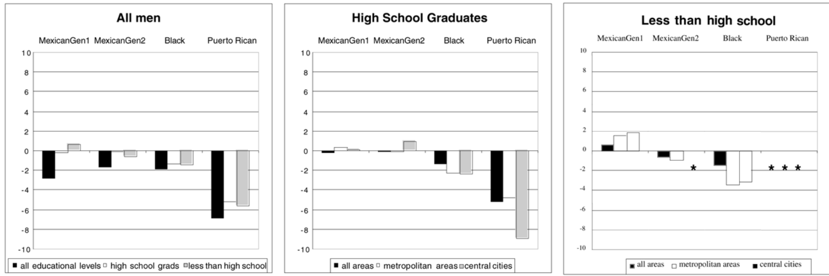


Source: CPS 1996–2001; persons 25–64 years old; standardized for age based on age distribution of native whites

greater for all metropolitan residents as opposed to those living in central cities only; likewise, location[5] has a more powerful effect on the very least skilled workers. The effect of space for the Mexican-origin groups contradicts the argument that metropolitan or inner-city locations is a source of exposure to risk. Regardless of location, employment rates among the Mexican-born workers compare favourably with their white counterparts, with the disparity widest among the least skilled workers located in central cities. Among male high school graduates, employment rates for Mexican second-generation workers are the same as those enjoyed by native-born whites, but then exceed the native white level with each locational control. Regardless of location, the *least* skilled second-generation Mexicans display slightly higher employment rates than do comparable native-whites.

2) *Weeks worked*: Notwithstanding their very low skills, male Mexican immigrants maintain high employment rates, and regardless of location, as demonstrated by Figure 1. But, as Figure 2 shows, this snapshot taken at a single point at a time obscures the vulnerabilities associated with the labour markets on which these foreign-born workers converge: namely, the unstable nature of the jobs and their susceptibility to short-term shifts in demand, whether of a seasonal or cyclical nature. Thus, on average, Mexican-origin men work fewer weeks than do native whites, a disparity that hits its widest point when the contrast compares all Mexican first generation and white native-born men. The disparity, however, either diminishes or reverses direction once controls for schooling are applied, suggesting that the lesser instability of employment among Mexicans principally stems from the inherent vulnerability associated with their very low skills. Controls for location further reduce the advantages enjoyed by native whites, a change consistent with the pure spatial mismatch hypothesis, though one that leaves one wondering why central cities should be the places where the lowest skilled Mexican-origin men are particularly likely to work more weeks than comparable

Figure 2. *Difference in average weeks worked: comparison to native-born white males*

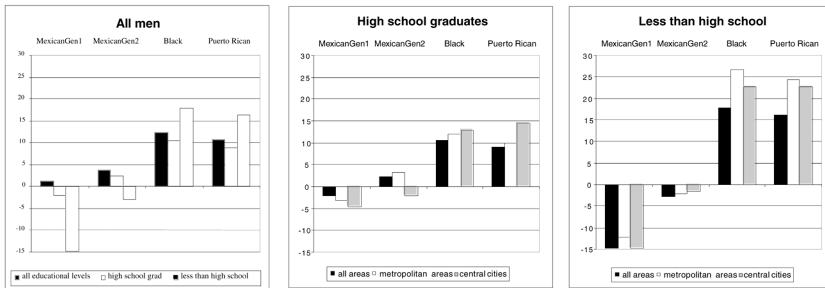


Source: CPS 1996–2001; persons 25–64 years old; standardized for age based on age distribution of native whites
*Subgroup N < 100; excluded from analysis

native whites. Similarly, Mexican second-generation men lag behind white native men by a gap of almost two weeks. But the disparity virtually disappears when the contrast is restricted to high school graduates, and, while reappearing among those without a high school degree, takes a more modest form. Controlling for spatial differences among the high school graduates leave Mexican second-generation men at an advantage in precisely that location where they should be most vulnerable: central cities. By contrast, the high school dropouts experience a very slight disadvantage, nationwide and in all metropolitan areas, relative to the native whites. Most crucially, the situation of second-generation Mexican high school graduates and non-completers compares very favourably to the patterns shown by native minority men. Not only do all black and Puerto Rican men work fewer weeks than do all native white men; application of educational controls leaves a substantial gap. The same holds true for the locational controls, a factor that actually widens the disparity experienced by Puerto Rican high school graduates, as predicted by the spatial mismatch hypothesis.

3) *Chronic joblessness:* Figure 3, which shows differences in long-term joblessness, provides the mirror image of Figure 1. Among *all* men, long-term joblessness is only slightly higher among the Mexican-born group as among native whites. But once the comparison narrows to men of lower skills, advantage passes to the immigrants, and by a very considerable margin among those in the least educated category. As in the previous contrasts, locational controls work in favour of Mexican immigrants. Overall, the Mexican second generation displays a slightly higher rate of chronic joblessness than appears among native whites. Among the least educated and among high school graduates in central cities, however, the balance shifts in favour of the Mexican second generation. By contrast, chronic joblessness is far more prevalent among blacks and Puerto Ricans than among whites or either Mexican-origin group.

Figure 3. *Percentage difference in long-term joblessness: comparison to native white men*



Source: CPS 1996–2001; persons 25–64 years old; standardized for age based on age distribution of native whites

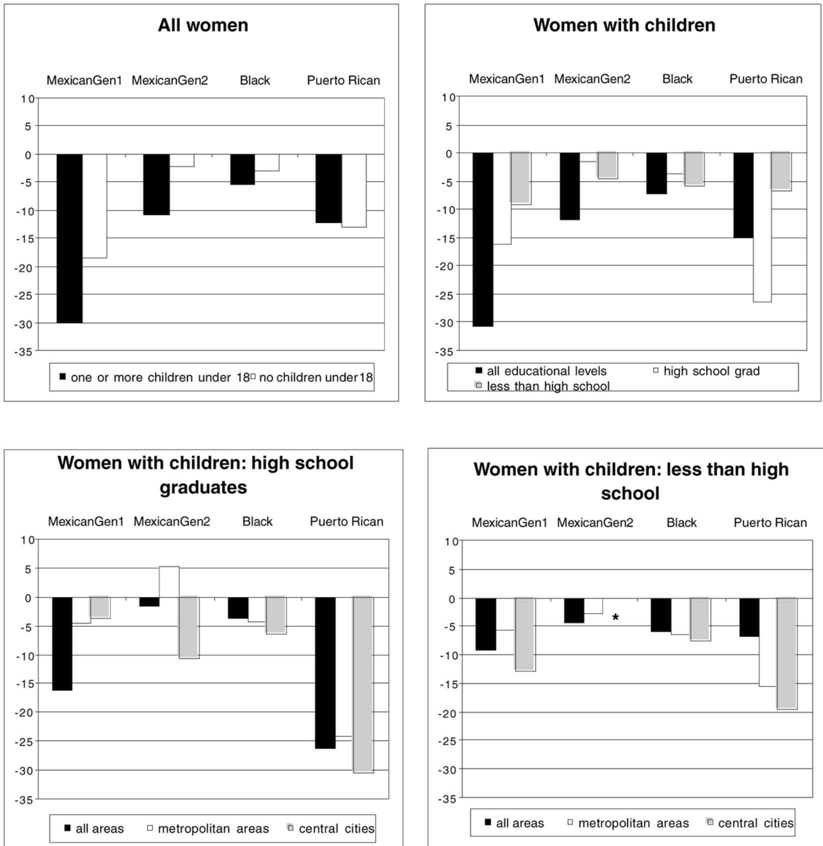
Moreover, that disparity widens significantly, as one shifts the comparison to less skilled groups, and within skill groups, from the entire U.S. population to those in metropolitan regions.

Women: Much of the underclass literature concerns women, but through a prism that sees their destinies largely determined by the fate of 'their' men. The skills and spatial mismatch literatures, from which the Wilsonian underclass view derives, make much of the baleful consequences of the decline of the heavy manufacturing industries with their well-paying jobs – but those were never the places in which women found work. The same point holds for the 'segmented assimilation' hypothesis, which claims that today's new economy will impede the gradual transition from labourer to well-paid blue-collar worker enjoyed by the second generation of old. Perhaps, perhaps not; but in any case, only a delimited subset of yesterday's second generation got ahead this way. Unlike their menfolk, Italian, Polish, and Slovak second-generation women mainly worked in light industry, service, or low level clerical jobs – in other words, not so different a mix than that available to the adult immigrant offspring of the early twenty-first century.

There are further ironies to the way in which the entire discussion has been framed. While Mexican men enjoy high rates of employment and labour force participation, Mexican immigrant and – origin women have historically displayed the opposite pattern. If the argument implies that the behaviour of the second generation shifts as a result of 'acculturation' into the norms of native minorities, then it is the historically high labour force participation rates of African-American women that should provide the model for their second-generation Mexican-origin counterparts.

1) Employment: Thus, the literature does not prepare us well for Figure 4, which displays employment rates, distinguishing between women with children under 18 in the household, and those without. Of all the groups, black mothers work at rates that most closely approach

Figure 4. *Percentage difference in employment rates: comparison to native white women*



Source: CPS 1996–2001; persons 25–64 years old; standardized for age based on age distribution of native whites

those enjoyed by native whites. For the Mexican-origin groups, the pattern stands in stark contrast to the configuration we first saw in looking at men. Mexican-origin mothers are all less likely to hold jobs than native whites, but the gap declines from 30 per cent among the first generation to 11 per cent among the U.S.-born; at 12 per cent, the Puerto Rican disparity is comparable. In general, restricting the comparison to women without young children diminishes the gap, though yielding its greatest effect among the Mexican second generation, and leading to a slight widening of the disparity, in the case of Puerto Ricans.

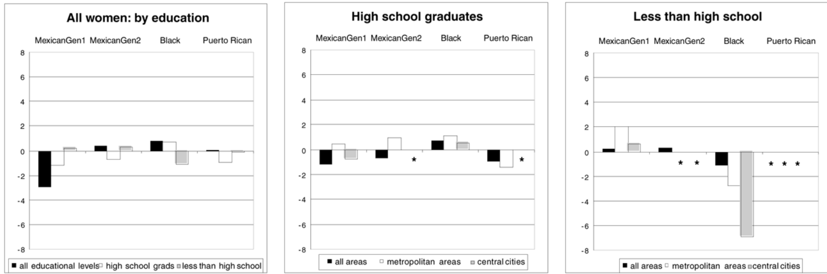
While the patterns for *all* women diverge sharply from the configuration for *all* men, adding controls for education (and restricting the focus to women with children) pushes the two pictures towards alignment. As Figure 4 shows, the gap between Mexican immigrants and native white

women diminishes considerably as one narrows the contrast to less skilled groups. Among high school graduates, Mexican second-generation women and African-American women hold jobs at rates slightly below those of native whites, although the gap increases among those with less than a high school diploma. Among women, the native white/African-American gap takes on a far more compressed form than among men. But among Puerto Rican women, the same procedure yields the opposite effect: the gap is greatest for high school graduates and less for the least skilled. . Controls for location, which are applied only to less skilled persons, produce inconsistent effects for both Mexican-origin groups. However, space seems to strongly affect the job-holding patterns of blacks and Puerto Ricans. Though location has a negative impact on African-American women, the gap among female central city residents remains smaller than among comparable men.

2). *Weeks worked*: Once again, extending the inter-group comparison to women highlights a pattern that stands in stark contrast to the configuration displayed by men. As Figure 5 shows, African-American and Mexican second-generation women work slightly more weeks overall than white women; Puerto Rican women look similar to white women on this count; Mexican immigrant women experience the sharpest disadvantage. Controlling for schooling, however, yields inconsistent change among all groups. Narrowing the focus to high school graduates slightly improves patterns among African-Americans; on the other hand, the gap, relative to whites, widens to the disadvantage of Mexican second-generation and Puerto Rican women. Among the least skilled women, Puerto Ricans do not differ substantially from native whites, African-Americans fall below whites, while both Mexican-origin groups are at a slight advantage. Locational controls also yield inconsistent effects. Nonetheless, the impact of central city location exercises its greatest, negative effect on the least skilled black and Puerto Rican women.

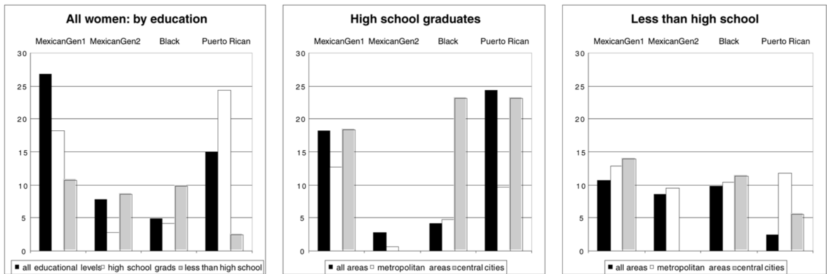
3) Chronic joblessness: This last indicator, which identifies the population with the weakest attachment to the labour market, underscores the generational changes at work among Mexican-origin women. As we have seen, job holding among Mexican immigrant women falls substantially below the native white level; when we turn to chronic joblessness, however, we observe a gap of virtually the same size, but in the opposite direction. As shown in Figure 6, the gap narrows substantially as one moves from first- to second-generation Mexican-origin women, who in turn, do slightly worse than black women, among whom chronic joblessness is 5 per cent higher than the level recorded by whites. Controlling for education alters inter-group differences, clearly reducing the gap in the case of the Mexican immigrants, on the one hand, and yielding inconsistent effects for the other groups. In the case of Mexican second-generation women, the gap declines substantially when the contrast

Figure 5. *Difference in average weeks worked: women with children, comparison to comparable white women*



Source: CPS 1996–2001; persons 25–64 years old; standardized for age based on age distribution of native whites
*Subgroup N < 100; excluded from analysis

Figure 6. *Percentage difference, long-term joblessness: women with children, comparison to comparable white women*



narrows to high school graduates, a finding that is surely relevant if we argue it is when *work* disappears that the 'underclass' emerges. Subsequent controls for location produce varying and inconsistent effects across group and skilled category. The most notable pattern is the one observed among the Mexican first generation, where joblessness bears little relationship to location, suggesting that the barriers to employment derive largely, if not entirely, from some other source.

Conclusion

The recent scholarship on the 'new' second generation has begun on a note of inflected pessimism, of which the hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation' is the best and most influential example. Concern for the prospects of the children of today's immigrants is certainly warranted. While low-skilled immigrants are moving to the United States in large numbers, they are entering an economy that provides little reward for workers of modest schooling, regardless of ethnic stripes. The liabilities associated with foreign-birth exercise a further penalty, adding to the difficulties that derive from low schooling as such. And although the migration

process operates in such a way as to connect immigrants – or at least the men among them – to employers, the social capital that generates attachment seems less able to produce the skill acquisition needed for occupational mobility. So if less skilled immigrants make up a working poor, locked into low wage jobs, and therefore confined to inner cities and their failing school systems, can we expect that their U.S.-born and – raised children will find progress?

The hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation' suggests that the answer should be no. But this article, comparing first- and second-generation Mexicans with African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and native whites, finds little support for the point of view that the offspring of working-class immigrants will experience 'downward assimilation'. While U.S.-born Mexican men do not retain the extraordinary job-holding rates of the foreign-born generational groups, the shift takes them to the levels that characterize native-born whites. As the second generation is significantly better educated than the first, U.S.-born men find jobs associated with lower levels of frictional unemployment, as indicated by the smaller gap, compared to native whites, in weeks worked. Most importantly, the U.S.-born and – raised groups display patterns that consistently diverge from those observed among African-Americans or Puerto Ricans, that is to say, those groups comprising the putative 'rainbow underclass' whose ranks today's second generation are supposedly fated to join.

Taking gender into account, not considered in any of the formulations in which the hypothesis of 'segmented assimilation' has been developed, alters the picture still more. The segmented assimilation story line is one of diminishing labour force attachment as one moves from foreign-born to U.S.-raised to U.S.-born generations, a scenario that might be plausible for men, but immediately runs into problems in the case of Mexican women, among whom rates of labour force participation have historically been low. As we have shown, the labour force behaviour of U.S.-born Mexican-origin women looks a good deal more like the pattern evident among native whites. Though a gap persists on all three of the indicators that we have examined, the disparity is of greatly diminished proportions.

So if the Mexican second generation is not travelling the road of 'downward assimilation' into a 'rainbow underclass', what type of future can one forecast? In our view, the evidence compiled in this article suggests that the experience of today's second generation is consistent with the earlier pattern, in which the children of immigrants progressed by moving ahead within the working class. To begin with, the second generation enters the labour market with levels of education that greatly exceed the schooling obtained by the parental generation. Yes, levels of schooling are not such as to produce parity with native whites, but they do mitigate the negative effects associated with the very low skills of the foreign-born and – raised generations. And one needs also to take account of the changes at work among women – among whom the

increase in average schooling levels is greater still – which implies that the effect of higher levels of labour force activity are amplified by the greater earnings power generated by further education. If the high rates of marriage, characteristic of the first generation, persist among women, and fertility falls, the levels of living enjoyed by second-generation families, not quite so large as among the first, and in which mothers are a good deal more likely to work, should compare favourably with the pattern that characterizes the first generation. While the empirical evidence needed to make this case convincing requires another article, we do note support in the literature. For example, Vilma Ortiz's (1996) study of the Mexican experience in Los Angeles underscored the persistent disadvantage endured by the region's Mexican Americans, all the while pointing out that the native-born population had evolved into a group that was of distinctly working-class character. Ortiz's conclusions resonated with the findings of an earlier effort to assess the relevance of the underclass hypothesis for Latinos (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993), which concluded that the sources of Latino poverty had far more to do with the problems of the working-poor, as opposed to the difficulties experienced by those for whom 'work has disappeared'. And the historically minded reader can turn to the pages of Douglas Monroy's (1999) history of the Mexican American second generation of the 1920s and 1930s, which shows that Americanization powerfully affected this earlier group of immigrant offspring, and in contemporary-sounding ways, without ever producing an 'underclass' along the lines projected today.

But it would not do to conclude without impugning our own evidence. The analysis is, of course, preliminary. While all parties to the debate concede that the Mexican case is crucial, the particular comparison we have achieved is not definitive. After all, we have restricted ourselves to a working-age population, whose youngest member was 25 in 2001, and therefore, was born in 1976. By definition, therefore, these are the offspring of the cohorts that pioneered today's migration; the older members in our sample may be the children of the still earlier wave of the 'teens and 1920s. As other research has suggested (Borjas 1994) Mexican immigration appears to subsequently have become less selective, which might imply a more difficult future for the children; alternatively, the reception context may have deteriorated, at least as regards the safety level of immigrant neighbourhoods and the quality of inner-city schools. And even without a change in either selectivity or reception context, we do know that the more recent immigrant cohorts have experienced slower wage gains than their predecessors, which in turn, might have negative consequences for their children.

So the patterns observed here might change, as younger, possibly vulnerable cohorts move into the labour market. And it is certainly the case that multivariate analysis, focusing on the indicators used in this article as well as a broader range of outcome measures, are required for

a more compelling test of 'segmented assimilation' or any alternative hypothesis. In the end, therefore, we will be satisfied if the reader has simply concluded that the debate has successfully been engaged. There is much more work to be done.

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to the Russell Sage Foundation and to the University of California, Institute of Labor and Employment, for grants supporting this research; responsibility for the results reported herein is that of the authors alone. Appreciation also to Joel Perlmann, for critical comments and continuing conversation on this article and the issues it raises.

Notes

1. Members of the second generation were identified using two criteria: if the father was born in Mexico; or, in those cases in which the father was born in the United States, if the mother was born in Mexico.
2. For the purposes of this article, 'Puerto Ricans' refers to Puerto Ricans born in the continental United States, unless otherwise indicated.
3. Since 1994, the Current Population Survey [CPS] has often been used for studies of the second generation. Other notable studies drawing on the CPS include: Card *et al.*, 2000; Hirschman 2001; Zhou 2001; Farley and Alba 2002.
4. As noted by a reviewer of this article, the Current Population Survey shares many of the shortcomings that afflict other similar sources of official data used for the study of immigration: in particular, it does not ask about legal status. However, this lacuna is unlikely to matter for the purposes at hand, which entail studying those children of immigrants who are born in the United States, and for whom U.S. citizenship is a birthright status. While it is true that legal status affects the foreign-born, it is unlikely that a problem in measuring legal status would account for some of this article's most basic findings: that low-skilled, Mexican-born men have high employment rates and very low rates of chronic unemployment. As concerns this essay, the first generation is of interest only insofar as it provides a baseline against which the situation of the second generation can be assessed; the article is not concerned with the first generation in and of itself.
5. The metropolitan areas included are Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Miami, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Portland, Sacramento, Seattle, Washington, Atlanta, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Norfolk, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, San Diego, and Tampa.
6. Note, however, that the number of Puerto Rican men in the sample without high school degrees drops below the 100-person threshold used, throughout this article, for making comparisons.

Appendix Table A1. *Percent employed, average weeks worked, and percent long-term jobless for native born whites, ages 25–64, by gender, education, and location, 1996–2001*

Males			
	All educational levels	High school graduates	Less than high school
Percent employed:			
All areas	85.02	83.30	65.89
Metro areas		84.12	69.44
Central cities		80.22	63.17
Average # weeks worked			
All areas	49.23	48.89	46.67
Metro areas		49.03	47.00
Central cities		48.83	46.05
Percent long-term jobless:			
All areas	9.33	10.54	25.56
Metro areas		10.09	22.75
Central cities		12.88	27.17

Females			
	All educational levels	High school graduates	Less than high school
Percent employed:			
All areas:			
With children	72.81	71.11	48.78
Without children	72.21		
(For women with children):			
Metro areas		68.88	48.01
Central cities		71.76	51.65
(For women with children):			
Average # weeks worked			
All areas	45.15	44.85	40.89
Metro areas		45.00	40.52
Central cities		45.55	41.23
Percent long-term jobless:			
(For women with children):			
All areas:	20.84	21.73	39.68
Metro areas		24.46	39.14
Central cities		22.86	38.89

Appendix Table A2. *Sample sizes across categories, ages 25–64, CPS 1996–2001*

	Whites	Mexican (by generation) 1st	Mexican (by generation) 2nd	Black	Puerto Rican	Total
Males and Females	109356	11333	3585	13704	1822	139800
Males:						
All males	53588	6023	1656	5720	783	67770
High school graduates:						
All areas	17685	1184	584	2261	281	21995
Metro areas	5217	766	275	1170	212	7640
Central cities	2281	495	175	1052	144	4147
Less than high school						
All areas	4814	4160	425	1057	157	10613
Metro areas	1186	2469	157	480	118	4410
Central cities	602	1643	112	498	107	2962
Males who worked at least 1 week in the previous year:						
All educational levels	48787	5573	1468	4591	647	61066
High school graduates						
All areas	15898	1125	519	1847	239	19628
Metro areas	4698	733	243	943	179	6796
Central cities	2012	470	156	818	120	3576
Less than high school						
All areas	3626	3818	335	588	95	8462
Metro areas	920	2279	126	239	69	3632
Central cities	452	1500	87	258	59	2356
Females:						
All females	55768	5310	1929	7984	1039	72030
With children < 18	24769	3815	1093	3688	661	34026
Without children < 18	30999	1495	836	4296	378	38004
With children <18:						
High school graduates:						
All areas	8469	701	370	1396	218	11154
Metro areas	2549	446	175	684	150	4004
Central cities	988	275	103	684	111	2161
Less than high school:						
All areas	1455	2701	268	529	142	5095
Metro areas	388	1596	118	258	113	2473
Central cities	241	1099	77	275	104	1796
Females who worked at least 1 week in the previous year:						
With children <18:						
All educational levels	19806	1988	800	2889	489	25972
High school graduates						
All areas	6651	407	270	1067	169	8564
Metro areas	1917	255	126	499	116	2913
Central cities	765	154	76	496	83	1574
Less than high school						
All areas	896	1324	143	280	69	2712
Metro areas	233	740	56	123	48	1200
Central cities	144	510	33	132	49	868

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ROGER WALDINGER is Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles
ADDRESS: 264 Haines Hall, Box 951551, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1551, USA; Email: <waldinge@soc.ucla.edu>
CYNTHIA FELICIANO is Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine
ADDRESS: 2265 Social Science Plaza B, Irvine, CA 92697–5100, USA; Email: <felician@uci.edu>