

UNDERSTANDING HOW MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS BECOME FULL MEMBERS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

by Elizabeth S. Ackert, University of Washington

Several decades ago, most immigrants to the United States settled in a few urban areas in California, Texas, and Illinois. But that has changed in the past twenty years, as immigrants have spread out to build their lives in communities all over the country – including suburbs, smaller cities, and even rural towns. Mexican immigrants and their families account for many of the new arrivals living in what scholars call “new destination” communities, and the best estimates suggest that about one-third of people from Mexico live in communities outside of the original big three immigrant states. Are the Mexican immigrants who have settled in new places doing better than their counterparts who settled in traditional immigrant hub locations?

To understand how readily immigrants are becoming fully part of American life, we can track key processes, ranging from finding and holding jobs to learning English and voting regularly. Another important process is school enrollment for youngsters. My research looks at how many young people of Mexican origin aged 15 to 17 years are *not* enrolled in school. Comparing rates of non-enrollment in different states sheds light on where immigrants are less fully integrated into routines of U.S. society – in this case the schools that help young people build their futures.

Patterns of School Enrollment Vary

My research shows that non-enrollment rates vary widely among the states to which Mexican immigrants have recently moved in significant numbers.

- In Iowa, for example, only about 6.1 percent of 15 to 17 year old immigrants of Mexican origin are not enrolled in school – a lower percentage than the 6.7 percent not enrolled among all U.S. residents of Mexican origin. In Alabama by contrast, more than one of every four adolescents from Mexico is not enrolled in school.
- Living in one of the traditional gateway states does not make adolescents more likely to be enrolled in school than living in newer-destination states. Specifically, adolescents of Mexican origin living in Ohio, Nebraska, Michigan, and the state of Washington have levels of school non-enrollment comparable to those for adolescents from Mexico residing in California, Illinois, and Texas.
- In all the U.S. states, there are gaps between the enrollment of non-Latino white students and adolescents of Mexican origin. In more than one third of the states, the enrollment gap favors whites by more than ten percentage points.

Why are Mexican-Immigrant Adolescents Not Enrolled in School?

What explains why adolescents from Mexican immigrant backgrounds are less likely to be in school in some states compared to others? In my research, two factors turn out to be important in explaining variations in enrollment across states:

- One key factor is *whether a lot of a state's foreign-born residents from Mexico have been in the United States for only for a short time*. Perhaps not surprisingly, immigrant youngsters with less exposure to the U.S. schooling system are more likely not to be enrolled in school. They may never have started school, or they may have dropped out. Some states have more newly arrived immigrants than others, and the share of newcomers partly accounts for their varied records of enrolling immigrant children in school.
- Tellingly, another key factor is *the effectiveness of a state's schools for all children, regardless of background*. This turns out to matter more than new versus traditional destinations for immigrants. In states that have a poor track record of educating white schoolchildren, students from Mexican immigrant families also suffer – even more. Non-enrollment is a general problem in these states, even as adolescents from Mexican-origin families experience even higher rates of non-enrollment than children from non-Latino white families.

So far, I have made comparisons of entire states. Future research may be able to further pinpoint the factors that encourage or discourage school enrollment and other forms of immigrant integration into American life by making more precise comparisons of experiences in different local communities and even in particular schools.

Toward a Greater Understanding of Immigrant Integration

I set out to test the possibility that “new destination” states might create a different context from traditional destination states for drawing immigrants from Mexico fully into American life. By looking at school enrollment as one key process, I discovered other factors that matter more than whether new arrivals from Mexico settle in traditional or newly attractive states.

Across the United States, non-enrollment in school is a problem for many immigrant youngsters of Mexican heritage. Failure to go to school of course hurts individuals' prospects – yet it is also a broader problem, because young people with less education cannot reach their full potential to contribute to American society. Part of the explanation for failure to be in school is simply how long newcomers have been in the United States. But educational effectiveness also matters. States vary in how effectively they manage to enroll eligible children from all segments of their population, and adolescents from Mexican immigrant families fare worse when they live in states that perform relatively badly at enrolling all of their young people.

My research, in short, suggests that the places where Mexican immigrants end up are not “better” or “worse” because they are “new” or “old” destinations. What matters more is the effectiveness of the policies and institutions that serve all the people alongside whom the immigrants settle.

Read more in Elizabeth S. Ackert, “Beyond Typologies: A Multilevel Approach to Understanding the Impact of Destinations on Immigrant Outcomes,” *Population Association of America*, May 2012.