

Reconsidering the spatial assimilation model for Mexican Americans: What is the effect of regional patterns of cohort succession?

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Abstract

Accounts of Mexican immigration to the United States generally emphasize the applicability of the spatial assimilation model to this population, whereby immigrants initially locate in immigrant barrios, and then convert acculturation and economic mobility to more dispersed and higher status neighborhoods. While this account of Mexican American settlement patterns is well established in the empirical literature, it may need to be qualified by the strong regional patterns that have characterized Mexican American settlement in the United States, especially the regional concentration of early migrants in a zone of high ethnic concentration near the United States-Mexico border.

The research reported in this paper uses Census summary files and micro data files to explore the interrelationship between regional settlement patterns and measures of spatial assimilation for Mexican Americans. We find that although within area data confirm the applicability of the spatial assimilation model, the interplay between nativity status, time since immigration, and region of residence requires significant qualification of the model. The essential pattern is that Natives and early arrivers appear to be much more concentrated in low-mobility areas near to the Mexico border, while later arrivers are more spatially assimilated on a regional basis. These regional patterns affect patterns of spatial assimilation as measured at the tract level. On-going research will further explore these patterns.

Background: the relevance of regional concentration to the application of the spatial assimilation model to Mexican Americans

The spatial assimilation model has long been used to describe the settlement patterns of the Mexican-origin population in the United States. This model has its origin in the models of Chicago School ecologists, and was developed with respect to the settlement patterns during the waves of immigration from Europe to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Briefly the model suggests that new working class immigrants will tend to cluster initially in ethnically-specific immigrant enclaves in order to benefit from mutual assistance during the settlement process, and because of avoidance and exclusion behaviors by settled native populations. Conditions in neighborhoods of ethnic concentration help to cement identification as a member of an ethnic sub-culture, and to maintain behavioral practices associated with that culture, at least for a time. However, over time and generation, acculturation and economic mobility will increase taste for amenities found in greater supply outside of the enclave, and reduce external barriers to exit. Thus more assimilated and economically successful members of the immigrant and descendent population will convert their rising status into greater residential propinquity with non-ethnic native populations. In the classic assimilation model, this spatial integration will become in turn both an index and mechanism for further acculturation and assimilation.

The basic contours of the spatial assimilates model resonates with the common sense of many Americans of European ancestry, perhaps because it fit the experience of turn of the descendents of the migrants from Europe to America for whom it was developed so well. The model was formalized for social science researchers by Massey (1985), and was evaluated with respect to Hispanic populations in a series of investigations by Massey and several associates. (Massey and Mullan 1984; Massey and Denton 1987; Massey 1981, 1985, 1986; Bean, Tienda and Massey, 1987). These studies found the expected gradient between socio-economic status and increased exposure to non-Hispanic Whites to neighborhoods with higher socio-economic status, lower levels of out-migration by non-Hispanic Whites in response to Hispanic in-migration to a tract compared to African American in-migration within metropolitan areas, and consequently lower levels of segregation of Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites than of Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites.

A series of studies by Alba, Logan and associates (Alba and Logan 1992; Alba et al 1999; Alba, Logan and Stults 2000; Logan, Alba and Zhang 2002) in the past decade both corroborated and qualified the basic findings reported by the researchers working with Massey. These studies identified the expected cross-sectional gradient between Hispanic socio-economic status, neighborhood economic quality, exposure to non-Hispanic Whites, and suburbanization as predicted by the spatial assimilation model. However, comparison across censuses from 1980 to 1990 showed that these relationships were weakening. What appeared to be happening is that Hispanic (and other) immigrant spatial patterning was becoming disorganized, particularly with respect to older vocabularies of distinction such as center city and suburb. New minority communities were opening up in the suburbs, albeit often in declining suburban inner rings. There was

some direct immigration to new suburban enclaves. If the old spatial assimilation patterns were reproducing, the emergence of new immigrant neighborhoods was making patterns harder to detect.

The current study departs from a generalization of this point. Even if we start from the assumption that the spatial assimilation model is essentially correct as a description of an important trajectory of change from ethnic concentration to integration for an important subset of immigrants, it may be the case that the model gives a highly deceptive description of cross-sectional patterns. This can happen, as Massey (2001) points out, in the face of continuing immigration migration flows. If continuing volumes of migration are large enough, shifts in settlement patterns of successive immigrant cohorts may overwhelm the slower trajectories of changing settlement within cohorts, disorganizing cross-sectional patterns with respect to the predictions of the spatial assimilation model. Thus it may be the case that later arriving cohorts are more integrated upon arrival than are previous cohorts after decades or even generations of slow spatial assimilation, and that nonetheless the spatial assimilation models gives an accurate account of trajectories of change for each immigrant cohort.

On its face, there is significant reason to investigate this possibility for Mexican Americans. This is the case for two reasons. First, Mexican Americans have sustained a high volume of immigration for most of the twentieth century, except for a brief period of slowdown in 1930s (Massey, Durand, Malone 2001). Second, this migration has assumed at times extremely distinctive regional patterns. In particular, early 20th century Mexican migration established a regional numerical dominance in parts of the United States-Mexico border region that has in persisted to the present. The numerical dominance created in places a context where the directional arrows for the assimilation process are complex and perhaps to some extent off-setting (Martinez 1994).

One example of this concern is that, in border cities like El Paso, McAllen, Brownsville and Calexico, within region suburbanization and economic mobility cannot lead to much residential propinquity with persons from other ethnic populations, because so few such persons reside in these areas (Massey 2001). This qualification to the spatial assimilation model is not trivial to the significant extent that the Mexican origin populations live in such areas rather than in interior destinations. Thus, impressions of the trajectory of spatial assimilation of Mexican Americans may need to be significantly qualified, compared to a default but only partially correct assumption that non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks set the numerical and cultural context of incorporation. In this context, the use of data about spatial patterns that pertain to the pan-ethnic Hispanic category, which averages the experiences of Mexican Americans with Cubans, Puerto Ricans and others who have radically different settlement histories in the United States, may give an extremely misleading impression of Mexican American settlement patterns, even if the cohort patterns of spatial assimilation within comparable metropolitan areas are the same across groups. The regional marginals may constrain the similarity of spatial patterns, insofar as different national origin groups are distributed to different types of metropolitan contexts.

More broadly, an important question may be raised about how the regional concentrations of Mexican Americans near the Southwestern border function with respect to the assimilation model. One simple possibility would be that the border region functions as a kind of super-barrio within the framework of spatial assimilation theory. That is to say, that the Southwestern border region as a whole may act as an area of first settlement for persons who over time move on, to be replaced by new immigrants. However, other alternatives are possible. Perhaps it is the case that the early-arriving immigrants and their descendents have persisted in these environments, while more recent migrants have tended to bypass the border region for more assimilative environments. These two different tendencies in the data—both probably describe an element of what actually happened—have radically different implications for our understanding of Mexican American settlement patterns.

The questions that are posed in this study is this: how have changing *regional* settlement patterns for Mexican Americans intersected with cohort-specific spatial assimilation processes within regions to shape overall Mexican American settlement patterns in the United States. The starting presumption, articulated in the preceding paragraphs, is that the spatial assimilation model, as qualified by Alba, Logan and colleagues' caveats correctly describes local patterns, but ignores broader trends of changes in regional targets of migration flows.

Data and Methods

The data for this study will consist of a combination of census summary files (primarily Summary Tape File 4A files), which now contain some detailed cross-tabulations for Mexican Americans at the Census tract level, and Census 5% public use microdata data files, for the Censuses of 1980 through 2000.

Census summary file data 4A data will be used to construct measures of dissimilarity, exposure to non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, isolation, average tract poverty, suburbanization, metropolitan vs non-metropolitan status, and median distance from the U.S. Mexico border for sub-populations defined by immigrant status and years since immigration. The most extensive breakdowns will be possible using 2000 data, for which immigrants are classifiable with respect to 8 categories of years since immigration, as well as nativity status for adults and children. This analysis will make it possible to compare these measures with respect to the unique settlement patterns of each immigrant cohort.

For comparisons of spatial distribution of immigrants and natives, we compare, where possible, adults over 18 years of age. This distribution is available in Census 2000 summary 4 data. This step is taken because Native-born children of recent immigrants who live in the households of their parents make up a large fraction of the Native population, and obscure native vs. foreign distinctions.

Distance from the border has been calculated as the great circle distance from the Census Bureau's internal point for each census tract to the nearest port of entry on the United States-Mexico land border.

The Census Bureau suppresses characteristic cell counts in summary file 4 in 2000 where the tract population of a group is small. This requires us to impute the population of suppressed tracts to census tracts environments. This can be done with little loss of precision by distributing the unassigned Mexican American population of the county (i.e., those living in tracts for which characteristic counts are suppressed) to the list of these tracts in proportion to the tract's summary file 1 count of Mexican Americans. Tract environment measures (e.g., % White, % Black, % poor) are available for all tracts from Summary File 3, for which counts are not suppressed.

Limited information is available from summary file 4 about Mexican population distribution in 1980 and 1990. For neither year are cross-tabulations of status as a Mexican American on the Hispanic-origin question and immigrant status available in public release files. However, birth in Mexico is reported in both years at the tract level. In 1990 this measure is cross-tabulated with years since immigration ($>< 10$ years). We will explore the utility of using these counts as estimators for the distribution of the Mexican foreign-born in these years, by comparing the performance of Mexican foreign-born, born-in-Mexico distributions in 2000 Summary File 4 data, and in 1980 and 1990 public use microdata. If the measure appears comparable, we will construct measures of change from decade to decade within cohorts defined by years since immigration, and compare Native/foreign born spatial distributions across these three censuses to identify patterns of change.

We will supplement the analysis of spatial assimilation at the tract level with measures of migration using the 5 percent microdata files for 1990 and 2000, and the 2.5 percent migration file in 1980. For this analysis we will apply variants on the methods pioneered by Alba and Logan (1992) for pooling information for tracts and for public use microdata areas (PUMAs) identified on the public-use individual record files, by overlaying boundary files for the PUMAs on tract boundary files, using ArcGIS 8.2. We will use these data files to calculate mobility measures across different types of environments for the observed 5-year migration interval at each census, for sub-populations defined by immigrant status, and years since immigration for the foreign-born. This analysis will allow us, for example, to classify persons with respect to mover/stayer status across the five-year migration interval, as a function of the average isolation index in PUMA of residence at mid-decade, immigrant cohort, distance from the border, and the interaction of these variables. Thus, we will be able to test hypotheses about the relative mobility of different sub-populations in different environments during the migration interval.

Finally, we will summarize the spatial distribution to different tract environments (e.g. poor vs. non-poor, suburban vs central city) using log-linear models that identify the interactions among nativity status, years since immigration, region, and metropolitan area in sorting Mexican Americans to different types of environments.

Preliminary results—2000 tract files

Tables 1 through 3 and Map 1 show preliminary data that illustrate the importance of cohort breakdowns and regional patterns to understand Mexican American spatial distribution. Table 1 reports the median distance to the border for immigrants by years since immigration, and comparing the native and foreign-born population. We see here several striking relationships.

The median distance from the border for all Mexican Americans in the United States was just 246 miles in 2000. This is a line that passes just north of Los Angeles, near to Las Vegas, Nevada and Albuquerque, New Mexico, and south and west of Houston, Texas. Half of all self-identified Mexican Americans in the United States live south and west of this line. Between this line and the Mexico border, a substantial fraction of the population is of Mexican-origin, reaching an absolute majority of county populations in many areas. Thus the regional mobility dynamics associated with the concentration of Mexican Americans in this region pertain to half of the Mexican American population in the United States.

The median line for immigrants is somewhat further from the Mexico border (289 miles) than is that for native-born Mexican Americans (202 miles). Thus, the Mexican immigrant is in relative terms bypassing the near-border areas where U.S. -born Mexican Americans are especially concentrated. Patterns are even more striking with respect to immigrant cohorts. The median penetration line for immigrants before 1965 was just 125 miles. This line passes through Los Angeles. By contrast, median penetration for immigrants after 1995 was 387 miles, a line that passed north of Dallas and Fresno. These facts assume considerable importance with respect to immigrant/native contrasts, and with respect to comparison of more recent to more distal immigrant cohorts. Immigrants, particularly recent immigrants, are significantly more spatially assimilated on a regional basis than are native-born Mexican Americans, and particularly immigrants before 1965.

Table 2 shows a variety of exposure measures for immigrant and native adults and for immigrants by cohort. With respect to immigrants by cohort, we see an obverse relationship to the one that we might expect with respect to exposure measures on the basis of a straightforward application of spatial assimilation theory. Generally, more recent immigrants are slightly more exposed in census tracts of residence to non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks than are immigrants with longer residence in the United States. Native-born adults are somewhat more exposed to non-Hispanic Whites ($p^*=.42$) compared to the foreign-born ($p^*=.34$), though the contrast may be more attenuated than might have been guessed. There is no discernable pattern linking immigrant cohort to average tract poverty level, and native adults live in tract environments that are just slightly less poor (18% poor) than are those lived in by immigrant adults (21% poor).

Table 3 illustrates regional vs. cohort/nativity effects heuristically by subdividing the Mexican American population into empirical quintiles with respect to distance to the border. That is, an equal number of Mexican Americans lives within each of these five

strips that are progressively more distant from the border with Mexico. We see in the table that within each strip, U.S.-born Mexican Americans adults are more spatially assimilated than are immigrants, as we expect. However, the effects of distance from the border (i.e., which quintile one lives in) are far larger than the within quintile native/foreign distinction. We also see that although the distribution of native and foreign-born to each quintile are not especially dissimilar, there is a striking difference with respect to residence in the most remote of the 5 identified zones from the border. In this area, two-thirds of Mexican-origin adults are immigrants (1.8 million) rather than natives (900,000). Progress into this region by immigrants has placed them into significantly more assimilative environments than those that Native-born Mexican Americans tend to live in, in areas south of Los Angeles.

Discussion

Our preliminary research identifies regional distribution with respect to distance from traditional Mexican American settlement areas in the immediate border region as an important and neglected modifier of processes of spatial assimilation of the Mexican American population in the United States. There are many implications of this distribution with respect to on-going debates about our understanding of immigrant incorporation.

For example, the common formulation of segmented assimilation theorists that immigrants are exposed to “native minorities” may be misleading with respect to this largest of immigrant populations in the United States, insofar as that term may conjure images of propinquity to African Americans. Exposure of Mexican Americans to African Americans is limited in all regions. The minorities to which Mexican immigrants are most exposed are other persons of Mexican-origin, in near-border environments. This appears to be changing only with respect to very recent cohorts. Issues of second-generation decline for Mexican Americans may also be related, viewed from a national perspective, to the different development potentials inherent in different regions of the country.

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Table 1. Median Distance From the Border By Nativity Status and Immigrant Cohort for Mexican Americans, 2000

Immigrant Cohort	Median distance from border in statute Miles
Immigrated...	
1995 to 2000	387.6
1990 to 1994	315.1
1985 to 1989	240.8
1980 to 1984	225.8
1975 to 1979	157.1
1970 to 1974	132.9
1965 to 1969	128.6
Before 1965	125.6
Immigrant adults	289.3
Native Adults	202.9
All Adults	246.1

Table 2. Exposure to Whites, Blacks for Mexican Americans and Tract Poverty by Immigrant Status and Cohort, 2000

Immigrant Cohort	Exposure to Whites	Exposure to Blacks	Isolation	Average Tract Poverty	Percent Suburban	Percent non-metropolitan
Immigrated...						
1995 to 2000	38	10	36	20.6	-	-
1990 to 1994	34	9	40	21.2	-	-
1985 to 1989	33	8	42	21.0	-	-
1980 to 1984	31	8	43	21.1	-	-
1975 to 1979	30	8	45	20.6	-	-
1970 to 1974	29	7	47	20.5	-	-
1965 to 1969	30	6	46	19.8	-	-
Before 1965	31	5	46	20.3	-	-
Adults						
Immigrant	34	9	41	20.7	-	-
Native	42	7	35	17.8	-	-

Table 3. Exposure to Whites, Blacks, Isolation, Average Tract Poverty for Mexican Americans Adults by Immigrant Status and Cohort, 2000

Quintiles of Distance to Border	Status	Median Distance	Exposure to Whites	Exposure to Blacks	Isolation	Average Tract Poverty	% in Region are Immigrants	% of National Population
Quintile 1	Immigrant	35	23	3	58	25	53	22
	Native	21	29	3	52	23		19
Quintile 2	Immigrant	119	16	6	53	24	56	21
	Native	120	27	8	46	19		20
Quintile 3	Immigrant	254	32	8	42	21	52	22
	Native	239	44	9	32	17		18
Quintile 4	Immigrant	448	42	8	33	17	57	20
	Native	457	53	8	22	15		20
Quintile 5	Immigrant	1133	49	11	21	17	67	16
	Native	1135	63	13	13	14		24

Map 1 Median distance to the border for Mexican Americans, Mexican American immigrants, and Mexican American natives, 2000, with county percent Mexican American.

