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Emigration and Schooling among Second-Generation Mexican-American Children¹

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Abstract

In this Research Note, we investigate the prevalence and patterns of second-generation Mexican-American children's migration to and return from Mexico during childhood and consider the consequences of this migration for their schooling. Around one in ten second-generation Mexican-American children live in Mexico for some of their childhood. Strong patterns of return to the U.S. through childhood argue for their being considered as part of the Mexican-American second generation even when in Mexico. Their rates of school enrollment in Mexico are much lower than for second-generation Mexican-American children remaining in the U.S. and cannot be explained by their weakly negative selection into emigration. We conclude that country of residence is a far more important determinant of schooling outcome than is migrant status in that country.

Introduction

The literature on migration between Mexico and the U.S. indicates a very high prevalence of circular and return migration. Return migration to Mexico has been estimated to offset as much as 80 percent of both period and cohort migration to the U.S. (Massey and Singer, 1995; Durand, Massey, and Zenteno, 2001). The literature on the childhood outcomes of second-generation Mexican-Americans, meanwhile, assumes that a negligible amount of this return migration includes the parents of children born in the U.S. accompanied by those children. Farley and Alba, for example, assert that “second-generation individuals, with few exceptions, have lived their entire lives in this country, were educated in English-language schools” (2002:679). Closer scrutiny of this assumption is warranted given that Mexican-origin children now account for almost half of all second-generation children.² A contradiction is otherwise suggested between the temporary and circular movement that is described in the migration literature and the permanent migration that is assumed by the second-generation immigrant literature. This contradiction would be resolved if these children were born to a small proportion of more or less permanent Mexican immigrants, but their large numbers and the interconnected family, kin, and community nature of the migration process (Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Curran and Rivero-Fuentes, 2003) work against an assumption of distinct temporary and permanent migrant streams.

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²Mexican-origin mothers accounted for 42 percent of all births to foreign-born women in 2000 and 43 percent of all births to foreign-born women in 2004 (calculated from Martin *et al.*, 2002: Table 14, 2006).

Our study addresses the above contradiction with empirical estimates of the size and character of U.S.-born children's migration between the U.S. and Mexico over their school ages. Census microdata from both the U.S. and Mexican censuses of 1990 and 2000 (Ruggles *et al.*, 2008; Minnesota Population Center, 2006) are used, together with U.S. birth registration data, to conduct these analyses. We additionally compare the school enrollment of emigrant Mexican-American children in Mexico to that of Mexican-American children who remain in the U.S. We explore emigrating children's selectivity by comparing their mothers' education to that of both their U.S.- and Mexican-resident peers, and then analyze the extent to which this selectivity can account for differences in school enrollment between the groups. A detailed description of the data and method used in this study, together with additional results not shown in this Research Note, is found in Rendall and Torr (2007).

Results

Using life table methods, we estimate that one in ten second-generation Mexican-American children live some of their childhood in Mexico (*see* Table 1). This result holds for both the 1995–2000 and 1985–1990 periods of estimation. While 9 percent live *any* of their school-age years in Mexico, only 3 percent live *all* of their school-age years in Mexico. Very high rates of return migration to the U.S. explain the very small proportion of children living all of their school-age years in Mexico. In results not shown, we found that the highest rates of emigration to Mexico in both periods occurred just after birth in the U.S. and declined steadily with age over childhood. Rates of return migration to the U.S., however, had two peaks: The first was during the preschool ages, and the second was at the end of the school ages. As a consequence of these high return migration rates, we estimate that more than half of the children who migrated to Mexico before age 12 will be living in the U.S. again by age 17. A high degree of residential attachment to the U.S. is therefore implied by these patterns of return migration, making it appropriate to consider U.S.-born children living in Mexico as part of the Mexican-American second generation.

Two features of migration to Mexico in childhood should be considered when interpreting studies of the Mexican-American second generation that use U.S. data sources alone. First, emigrant second-generation children may have characteristics and socioeconomic origins that differ from those of second-generation children who remain in the U.S. This issue of emigrant selectivity has been addressed in the literature investigating the unexpectedly low infant mortality of members of the Mexican-American second generation (Hummer *et al.*, 2007). Emigrant selectivity has not, however, been given serious consideration in the literature on second-generation schooling outcomes. Second, and separate from the issue of selectivity, is that growing up in Mexico and not the U.S. will influence children's educational and cultural development. The importance of taking into account time lived in the U.S. versus in the country of origin has been recognized for first-generation immigrants, leading to consideration of the “1.5” generation that arrived in the U.S. as children (Rumbaut, 2004). We show here that the effect of time spent in the parents' country of origin is likewise very important for the educational attainment of second-generation immigrants.

We present school enrollment results for 2000 only. While enrollment rates rose significantly in both countries between 1990 and 2000, patterns of enrollment by age, migrant status, and country of residence changed little over the decade (results not shown). The year 2000 is also instructive due to the convergence in the legal framework of compulsory school attendance between Mexico and the U.S. Until 1992 in Mexico, school attendance was required by law only up to the completion of primary school. Beginning in 1993, children in Mexico were legally required to also complete lower secondary school education (Zuñiga and Hamann, 2006), although implementation of this law has been incomplete (Behrman, Parker, and Todd, 2007). Lower secondary school in Mexico ends at the equivalent of 9th grade in the U.S., and

is normally completed at around age 15 or 16. The age at which school attendance is no longer legally required in the U.S. is 16 in most states (Department of Education, 2005).

The association of country of residence with school enrollment is dramatic (*see* Figure I). At ages 7 to 11, there was near complete enrollment in both countries. At age 6 and at ages 12 to 17, however, the rates of school enrollment were much lower in Mexico than in the U.S. Only at ages 16 and 17, when school enrollment is no longer compulsory, are there significant levels of nonenrollment in the U.S. Second-generation Mexican-Americans in the U.S. were at greater than average risk of not being enrolled in school at ages 16 and 17 years old, a result that is already well established in the literature (*e.g.*, Driscoll, 1999). The contrast with second-generation Mexican-American children living in Mexico, however, is far greater. By age 15, more than a quarter (27 percent) of all second-generation Mexican-American children who were living in Mexico were no longer enrolled in school. By age 17, 42 percent were no longer enrolled. In contrast, 87 percent of second-generation Mexican-American children in the U.S. were enrolled in school at age 17.

School enrollment rates among second-generation Mexican-American children living in Mexico are nevertheless above the Mexican average (compare the circle- and triangle-marked broken lines in Figure I). This higher enrollment of U.S.-born children in Mexico is due mostly to their positive selectivity, as we show in Table 2. We use mother's education and whether the child is living with the mother to analyze the effect of socioeconomic origins on school enrollment. Mexican children who were not living with their mother are typically from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic origins (Saucedo, 2002). Our objective is to compare the school enrollment in Mexico of Mexican-American second-generation children (middle two columns) with the school enrollment of their Mexican-resident peers (the two columns to the left) and of their U.S. second-generation peers (the two columns to the right). We limit comparisons to ages 12 to 17, when significant proportions of children in Mexico have already left school, and we standardize the two comparison groups to have the same age distribution over ages 12 to 17 as our target group of U.S.-born children living in Mexico. This controls for the migration processes that lead to differences in age distributions from those growing up in their respective countries of birth.

Two main conclusions may be drawn from the comparisons between U.S.-born and all children in Mexico. First, being born in the U.S. is associated with higher school enrollment among children from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic origins. The proportions of 12-to-17-year-olds enrolled in school in Mexico were 58 percent and 67 percent, respectively, for U.S.-born children not living with their mother and for those whose mother did not complete primary school, compared with 54 percent and 60 percent for all Mexican children from these origins. For children whose mothers at least completed primary school, however, being born in the U.S. confers no school-enrollment advantage in Mexico.

Second, U.S.-born children in Mexico are positively selected: The mothers of U.S.-born children living in Mexico are, on average, more educated than are all mothers of Mexican children. The first and third columns of Table 2 show the proportions of the two groups not living with their mother and living with a mother having one of four levels of education. One-third (32 percent) of all children in Mexico lived with a mother who did not complete primary school, and the same proportion lived with a mother with some secondary education. Among second-generation Mexican-American children living in Mexico, only 17 percent lived with a mother who did not complete a primary school education, while 39 percent lived with a mother with at least some secondary education. The proportion of second-generation Mexican-American children in Mexico who were not living with their mother was, at 16 percent, twice as large as that for all Mexican children. However, it is not large enough to change the conclusion that they are positively selected on mother's education.

The positive selectivity of U.S.-born children in Mexico, moreover, explains almost all of their higher-than-average school enrollment there. The “Total” row of Table 2 shows the difference in school enrollment that remains after standardizing on the Mexico-resident second-generation's distribution of ages and levels of mother's education. The proportion of all Mexican 12-to-17-year-olds enrolled in school (77 percent) is only slightly lower than for 12-to-17-year-olds born in the U.S. and living in Mexico (79 percent). This result is somewhat surprising given that birth in the U.S. confers citizenship and therefore the potential to realize higher returns to education in the U.S. labor market. The result is consistent, however, with a very strong influence of country norms and laws on school enrollment.

The results presented in Table 2 also allow for examination of selectivity into emigration among all Mexican-American second-generation children. Comparing the third and fifth columns, we find a moderately negative selection into emigration, or positive selection into remaining in the U.S. Similar proportions of second-generation children in Mexico and in the U.S. live with a mother who completed primary school or who attended secondary school. A lower proportion of second-generation children living in Mexico, however, live with a mother who completed secondary school (18 percent) compared to children living in the U.S. (22 percent). Thus, the negative selectivity of emigrating second-generation children is limited to the top portion of the socioeconomic distribution. This amount of negative selectivity into emigration is nowhere near large enough to explain the overall school-enrollment differences between Mexico-resident and U.S.-resident second-generation children. After controlling for differences in age and socioeconomic origins (*see again* the “Total” row), enrollment of 12-to-17-year-olds in the U.S. was 96 percent, far above the 79 percent for 12-to-17-year-olds in Mexico. In summary, country of residence is by far the most important determinant of school enrollment. Being a migrant either in Mexico (as a U.S.-born child) or in the U.S. (as a second-generation immigrant) has a much smaller impact.

Discussion

Potentially, both the selectivity of emigrating children and the effects of emigration on school performance are relevant for second-generation analyses. Our findings indicate first that the negative effects of second-generation children's emigration from the U.S. to Mexico on their school enrollment are very strong. Second, negative selectivity into emigration is weak and contributes very little to their much lower school-enrollment rates than among second-generation Mexican-American children remaining in the U.S. An important implication of the first finding for the interpretation of studies of second-generation Mexican-American adults in the U.S. is that some “high school dropouts” in these studies will not have dropped out of a U.S. high school. Instead they will have dropped out of a Mexican high school or stopped at an even earlier stage of schooling. While the prevalence of emigration in childhood is overall quite low, because of the very much larger rates of non-enrollment among those who do live part of their childhoods in Mexico, these children may nevertheless go on to account for a significant proportion of second-generation Mexican-American adults in the U.S. who did not complete high school. Analyses that ignore Mexican-American children's migration to and schooling in Mexico may in this way overestimate the negative impacts of growing up as a disadvantaged ethnic group in the United States. Further, childhood emigration to Mexico is likely to be determined in part by U.S. immigration policy toward their first-generation parents, many of whom may be undocumented. The strongly negative effect of emigration on children's educational attainment merits consideration in the overall cost-benefit calculus of this policy.

Our findings of significantly higher levels of education among the mothers of second-generation Mexican-American children in the U.S. than among mothers in the country of origin represent an important addition to the literature on the selectivity of Mexico-U.S. migration. We find that second-generation Mexican-American children growing up in the U.S. are doubly

positively selected, first and foremost through being *born* in the U.S., and second through *remaining* in the U.S. Overall, this selectivity is consistent both with Kanaiaupuni's (2000) finding that women migrating from Mexico (a flow sample) are positively selected, and with Feliciano's (2005) finding of positive selectivity of the Mexican immigrant stock. The additional information provided by the present study is that this positive immigrant selectivity carries through first into first-generation Mexican-Americans' childbearing in the U.S., and second into their U.S.-born children's remaining in the U.S.

Finally, our findings of an overall low prevalence of emigration among second-generation Mexican-American children suggest that having children in the U.S. is a major part of the transformation of sojourner migration streams into settler migration streams. While the claim of such a transformation has been made previously (Marcelli and Cornelius, 2001), this has been without the support of population-representative data. The present study's findings from population-representative data on the strong residential attachment of second-generation Mexican-American children to the U.S., together with their very large numbers, further point away from the characterization of the Mexican immigrant flow as being largely temporary and circular in nature. They instead point toward a large settler flow from Mexico that is associated with family-building in the U.S.

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Figure I. School Enrollment of Children in the United States and Mexico, 2000

TABLE 1
Life Table Statistics: Proportions of All Second-Generation Mexican-American Children

Period	Any Years Ages 1 to 17 Lived in Mexico (%)	Any School-Age Years Lived in Mexico (%)	All School-Age Years Lived in Mexico (%)
1995–2000	10.4	9.1	3.3
1985–1990	11.0	9.3	3.5

Source: Authors' analyses of U.S. birth registration and U.S. and Mexico Census microdata.

TABLE 2
School Enrollment of 12-to-17-Year-Olds in Mexico and the U.S., by Migrant Status

	All Children Ages 12 to 17 in Mexico in 2000		Mexican-Americans Ages 12 to 17 in Mexico in 2000		Mexican-Americans Ages 12 to 17 in the U.S. in 2000	
	Distribution ^a (%)	Enrolled in School ^a (%)	Distribution (%)	Enrolled in School (%)	Distribution ^a (%)	Enrolled in School ^a (%)
No Mother	8.1	53.5	16.2	58.3	19.1	87.8
No School/Some Primary	32.4	60.2	16.9	66.5	14.9	96.7
Completed Primary	27.1	78.3	27.8	78.4	27.0	97.4
Some Secondary	17.4	89.4	20.7	89.1	16.8	97.7
Completed Secondary and Higher	15.1	96.4	18.4	95.9	22.1	98.4
Total ^b	100.0	76.9	100.0	78.6	100.0	96.0
Sample N	1,480,722		7,728		44,834	

^a Standardized on the 12-to-17-year-old age distribution of second-generation emigrant (Mexico-resident) children.

^b Standardized on the 12-to-17-year-old age by mother's education distribution of second-generation emigrant children.

Source: Authors' analyses of U.S. and Mexico Census microdata.