

Mexican Immigrants in an Unequal America:
Starting out at the bottom, moving ahead?

By

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With the United States experiencing levels of immigration of historic proportions, the central question is whether the immigrants and their children will move ahead. That issue is of particular importance for Mexican immigrants, who comprise almost a third of the U.S. foreign-born population. The Mexican immigrants of the turn of the 21st century are the latest arrivals in a century-long migration. They enter the U.S. economy with disproportionately low levels of schools; many arrive without legal status; they converge on low-level, low-status jobs in which Mexican immigrants have often labored, making it likely that historic patterns of discrimination and prejudice will attach to these latest arrivals.

As this paper shows, despite these unfavorable conditions, migration does yield mobility, though the extent of upward movement varies depending on the comparative frame. As the migrants experience high employment rates, new arrivals in the United States do much better than their counterparts in Mexico, though the relative gain is much higher among lower skilled migrants. Over time, moreover, the migrants progress, with earnings rising as years in the United States increase. Compared to their immigrant parents, the children of Mexican immigrants do better as well, acquiring higher levels of education and enjoying higher earnings.

Over time, however, migration's positive impact has declined. Earnings among new arrivals compare unfavorably with those enjoyed by their predecessors; likewise, years of settlement yield progressively weaker impacts on earnings. Mexican immigrants, especially men, are also falling behind, when compared to native whites. While the erosion in male, immigrant earnings reflects the trends experienced by all low-skilled workers, this trend yields a disproportionate impact among Mexicans, as the great majority lacks a high school degree. Although the second generation moves beyond the attainments of the first, college completion rates remain low, threatening earnings prospects in the future.