

# REVISITING THE “AMERICANNO DREAM”

BY VAN C. TRAN

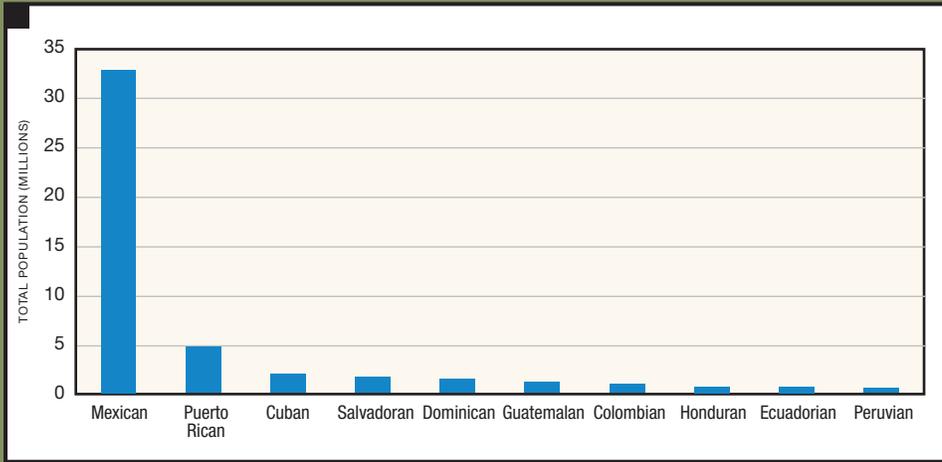
**A DECADE AGO**, the late political scientist Samuel Huntington concluded his provocative thought piece on Latinos’ failure to assimilate into American society by emphatically noting that “[t]here is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English” (Huntington 2004). Although targeting Mexicans, the article, “The Hispanic Challenge,” and Huntington’s subsequent book, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, raised broad concerns that Latinos’ concentrated presence in certain regions of the United States threatened the social fabric of local communities because many Latinos lack English proficiency, have no legal status, and concentrate in low-wage work.

The conventional view, rooted in much careful research, has been that Huntington got it wrong. Very wrong. In the aftermath of the book’s publication, Huntington’s argument came under serious attack by scholars of immigration, who noted that much of the empirical evidence pointed to clear intergenerational progress among Latinos, despite the many barriers that they face. The simple consensus coming out of this research: Latinos have (slowly) assimilated over time and across generations.

Why, then, is it important to revisit this debate? Wasn’t it resolved long ago? Although perhaps it has been, it’s troubling that some of the relevant evidence is now about a decade old. In the intervening decade, there are three key developments that give pause and raise the possibility that Huntington may partially be right, at least as regards the speed with which Latinos are assimilating. The most obvious concern, as laid out by Massey in his article in this issue, is that the growing threat of deportation may have slowed down the rate of economic incorporation. Although Massey notes that deportations averaged only 29,000 per year from 1975 to 1995, they have since surged and reached an all-time record of 438,000 deportations in 2013. Because employers can exploit this threat, and because many Latinos may accordingly feel obliged to lower their profile, one might anticipate a resulting slowdown in economic assimilation.

But that’s not the only reason why it’s important to revisit the evidence. Equally important, the Great Recession may have hit Hispanics unusually hard, not only because they work disproportionately in industries (e.g., construction) that fared poorly in the downturn, but also because they may have a more tenuous hold on their jobs by virtue of seniority or status. At the same time, Latinos are increasingly settling in “new

FIGURE 1. Top 10 Latino ethnic groups in the United States in 2010.



Source: U.S. Decennial Census (2010).

immigrant destinations” in smaller towns and rural regions, a development that may work to dead-end Latinos in local economies that are isolated and discriminatory, and mainly offer low-wage jobs lacking pathways for upward mobility. Although these mobility-reducing forces are different from those proffered by Huntington, they nonetheless lead to renewed concerns that the prospect of Latino incorporation could be undermined.

This article thus focuses on recent trends in Latino incorporation by exploiting the pooled 2008–2012 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS ASEC). It is important to carry out this comparison with multiple reference groups. As Kasinitz and his colleagues (2008) have observed, there are two related questions in the assessment of second-generation progress: “Assimilation into what?” and “Progress compared with whom?” A century ago, the European immigrants who arrived were integrated into an American society that was predominantly white in racial composition, with African Americans in a position of extreme disadvantage. Today, Latino immigrants and their children encounter an American society in which the mainstream is much more diverse, a development that motivates me to compare socioeconomic outcomes among young second-generation Latinos (a) with their non-Latino native peers of the same age group, (b) with their proxy first-generation parents, and (c) by immigrant destinations. Moreover, because the Latino population is very heterogeneous, most of the comparisons will focus on outcomes among the top 10 Latino groups (see Figure 1).

### Latino Assimilation in Young Adulthood

It is useful to begin by assessing how second-generation Latinos fare in terms of their educational and occupational attainment. Figure 2 presents predicted probabilities from multivariate models pertaining to (a) the likelihood of an especially good outcome (having a graduate degree or more; holding a professional occupation), and (b) the likelihood of a less desirable outcome (having no high school education; holding a service occupation). Although it’s conventional to focus on group averages, this

approach is sensitive to the increasing heterogeneity within each ethnic group by examining the two extreme ends of the distribution. The three explicit reference groups are native whites, native blacks, and third- and higher-generation Puerto Ricans.

The educational results reveal that second-generation Mexicans fare worst. As Figure 2 shows, they have the highest probability of being a high school dropout and the lowest probability of being a graduate degree holder, in both cases registering outcomes worse than those of all three native reference groups. In contrast, second-generation Cubans, Central Americans, South Americans, and CEPs (Colombian, Ecuadorian, and

Peruvian) have achieved educational parity with native whites, whereas second-generation Dominicans and SGHs (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran) register better educational outcomes than native blacks and Puerto Ricans, although they are still disadvantaged compared with native whites.

Are the occupational results materially different? No. Here again, second-generation Mexicans fare poorly, registering the highest probability of being in a service occupation and the lowest probability of being in a professional occupation. At the other extreme, Cubans report the best outcomes, with a lower concentration in service work and a higher concentration in professional occupations, even compared with native whites. Although the other ethnic groups have yet to achieve parity with native whites, they have all surpassed native blacks and Puerto Ricans in terms of their occupational profile.

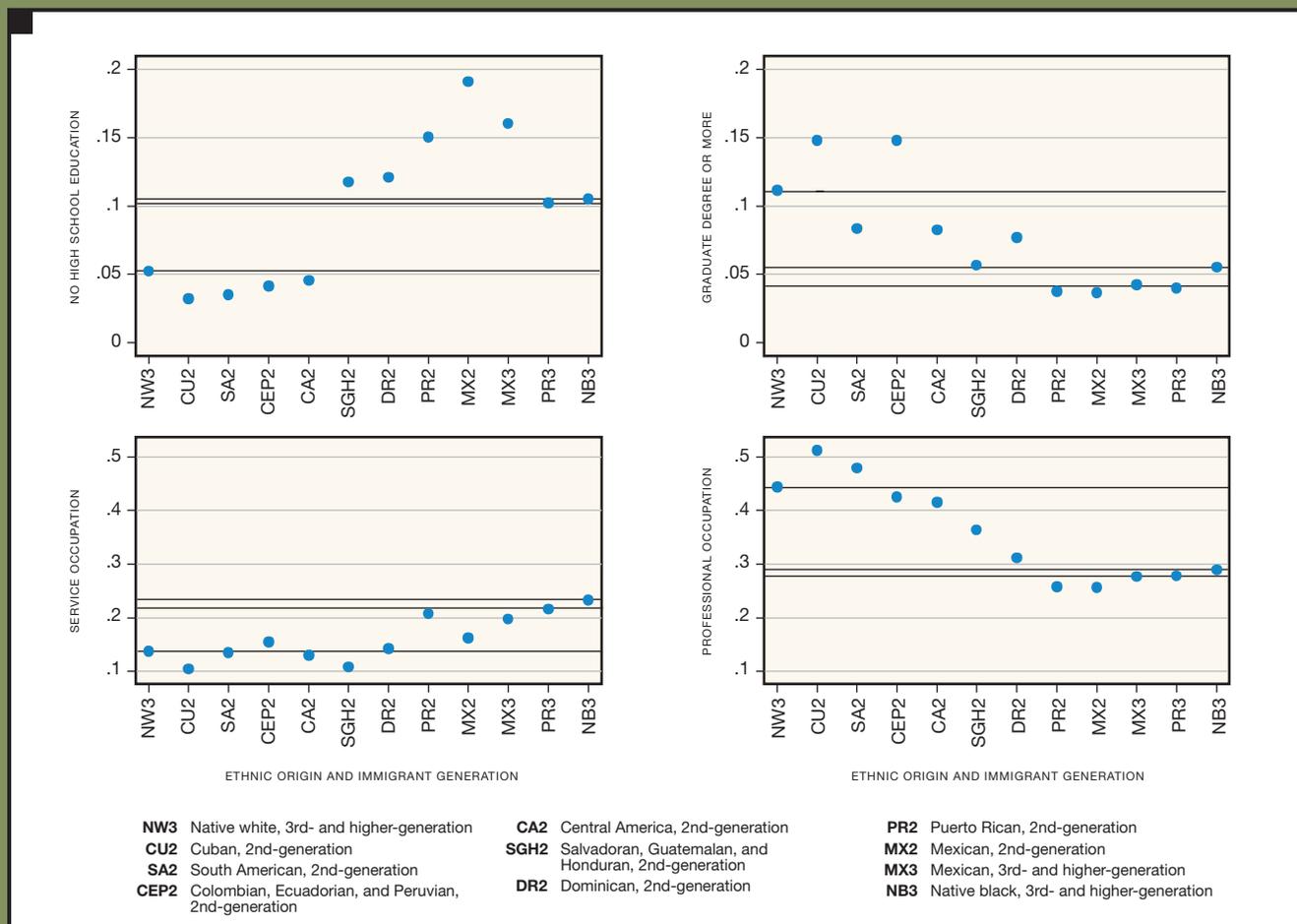
That many Latino groups have achieved parity with native whites within the course of two generations is remarkable. This suggests a rate of assimilation that compares well to the historical record among European groups (especially when one takes into account the many disadvantages that Latinos have faced). The comparatively poor outcomes among Mexicans are likely due to their legal status and to the relatively low levels of human capital among the immigrant first generation. The occupational disadvantages of Mexicans may also reflect, in part, the effects of the recent recession.

### Latino Assimilation across Immigrant Generations

Although second-generation Mexicans fare poorly relative to other second-generation groups, it is still possible that they are doing better than their parents (given that their parents often have low levels of human capital). The next set of analyses, which pertain to intergenerational mobility, allows us to ask how second-generation Mexicans fare relative to first-generation Mexicans.

It is possible to take on this question only indirectly and imperfectly. That is, given the cross-sectional nature of CPS data, the first-generation Mexicans in the sample are not the

FIGURE 2. Predicted probabilities of socioeconomic attainment in young adulthood.



Source: Pooled CPS ASEC 2008–2012.

actual parents of second-generation Mexicans. This makes it impossible to speak directly to the matter of intergenerational mobility. Following other scholars, I use the lagged birth-cohort method to compare cohorts of first-generation Latinos with cohorts of second-generation Latinos who are 25 years younger. This method assumes that a 25-year period approximates one immigrant generation. It allows us to compare first-generation Latinos to cohorts of Latino individuals who are most likely to be around the age of their own children (second generation). This comparison will be based on the 1945–1965 birth cohort of first-generation respondents, and the 1970–1990 birth cohort of second-generation respondents.

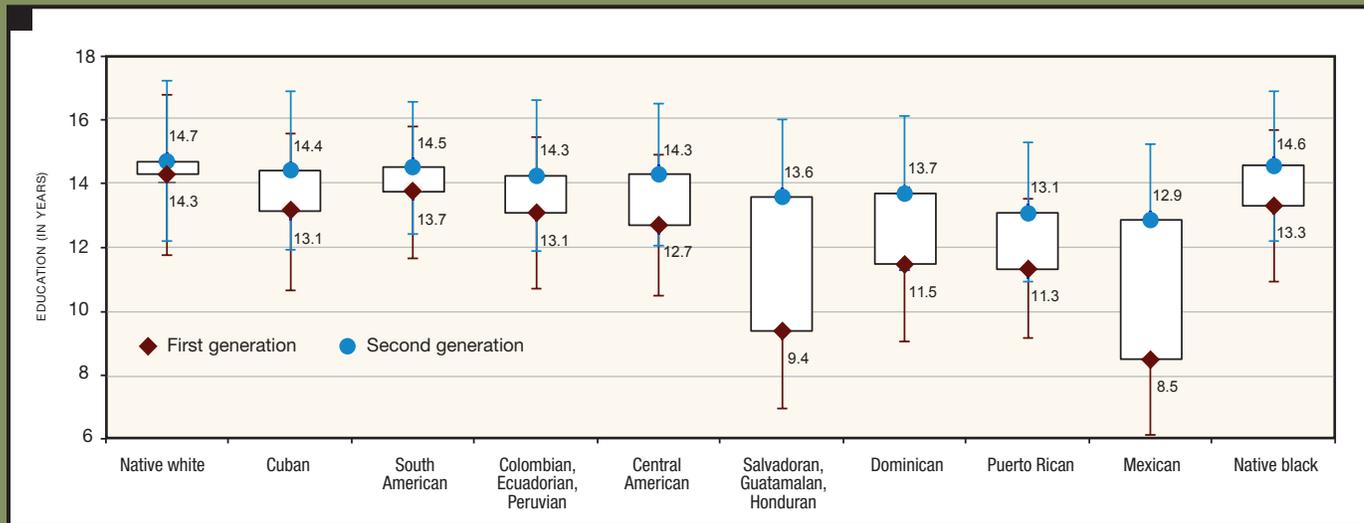
Figure 3 presents the average educational attainment (in years) for each generation, while also showing the gap that has been closed between the first and the second generation. Among the first generation, Mexicans, along with Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans (SGH), fare worst. Among the second generation, these two ethnic groups still report the lowest educational attainment, but the gaps between them and the other Latino groups shrink. However, the pattern of intergenerational progress is clear. Between the first and second generation, these two ethnic groups also reported an average gain of four years

of education. Put differently, the children significantly outpace the parents in their educational attainment in young adulthood, despite their parents' modest educational profile. Or perhaps because of it: The parents have only 8.5 to 9.4 years of education on average, so their children simply cannot fare worse, given compulsory education until about age 16 in the United States. Across the other Latino groups, the adult children from every ethnic group report more education compared with their proxy parents, with the average gain being about one additional year of education.

### Latino Assimilation in Old and New Destinations

The rise of new immigrant destinations, one of the most prominent changes of late in immigrant experiences, may also work to undermine Latino incorporation. Although there is much demand for low-skilled workers within these destinations (in both the agriculture and manufacturing sectors), there have been concerns that immigrants in these destinations are not always faring well, in part because the native population can be hostile, in part because institutional resources that help integrate newcomers are unavailable (e.g., language classes, bilingual education), and in part because the jobs are especially low skill, dead

FIGURE 3. Educational attainment by ethno-racial origin and generation.



Source: Pooled CPS ASEC (2008-2012). Notes: Combined samples are limited to those between the ages of 25 and 85. The data are arrayed so that the results represent the average years of education for the first generation in the 1945/1965 birth cohort, along with the second generation born 25 years later in the 1970/1990 birth cohort, thus representing the assumption that the latter group is the second-generation children of the first-generation cohort. Gap bars between two data points for each ethnic group illustrate the extent of intergenerational progress by each ethnic group.

end, and sometimes exploitative.

Are these concerns warranted? How do second-generation Latinos fare across immigrant destinations? Figure 4 addresses this question by presenting predicted probabilities by ethnic origin and destination. The overall pattern is clear: The outcomes for second-generation Latinos are worse in new destinations than in traditional gateways. Here again, we find that Mexicans fare especially poorly in new destinations, with Figure 4 revealing that they have the highest probability of being a high school dropout, the lowest probability of being a graduate degree holder, and the lowest probability of holding professional occupations. There are, however, only very small differences across groups and destinations in the concentration in service occupations. This is hardly surprising given that new immigrant destinations are dominated by farming, meat packing, and construction (rather than service work).

It is striking that all groups, even native whites and blacks, fare poorly in new destinations, as compared with traditional ones. These are, in other words, equally bad destinations for everyone. If the main problem with the new destinations were the lack of immigrant-focused services (e.g., language classes and other services), then one might expect immigrants to especially bear the brunt of living in these destinations. But in fact we find that everyone—immigrants and natives alike—underachieves in these destinations. It follows that, rather than discriminating especially against immigrants, these locations seem to be unfavorable to every group quite indiscriminately.

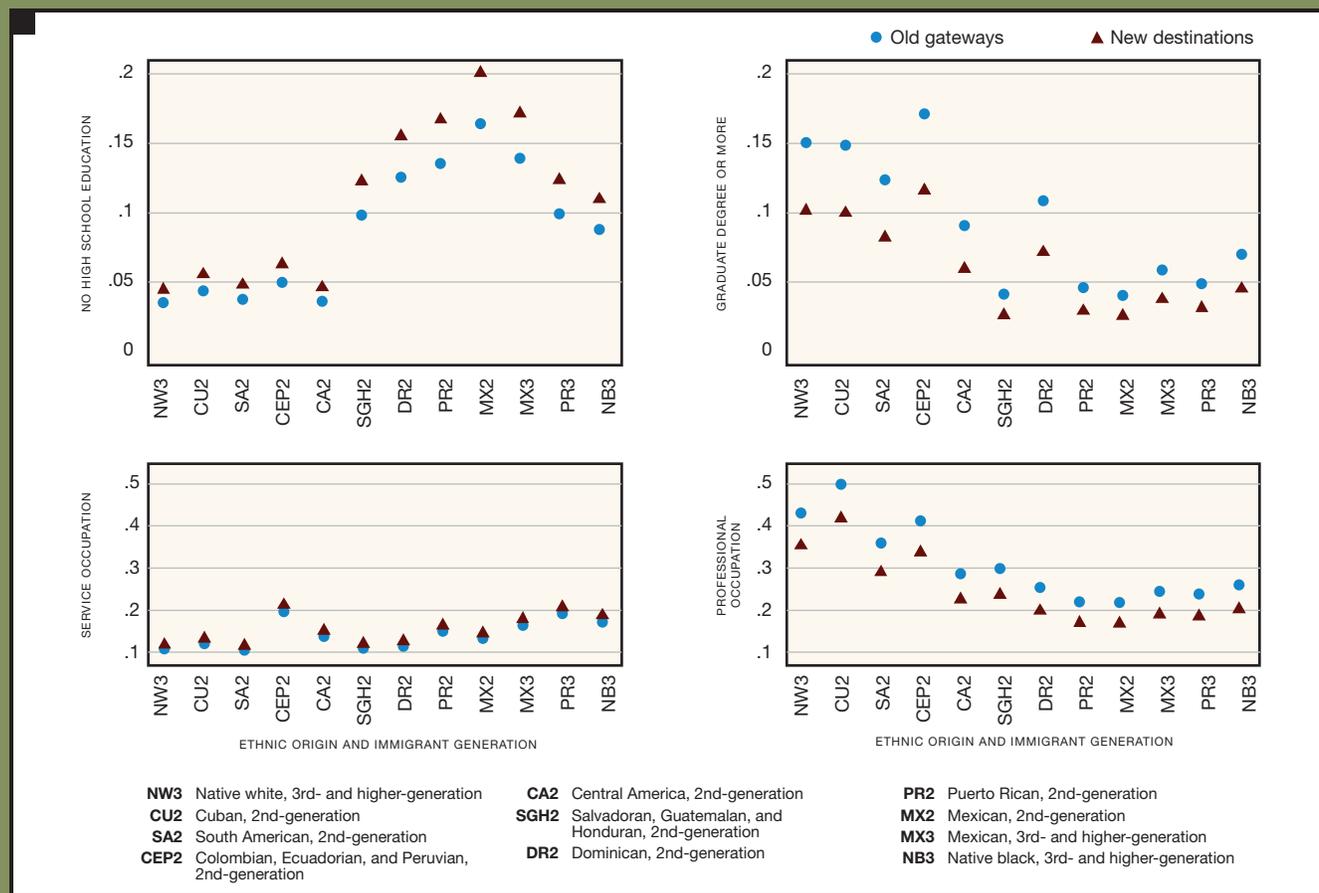
### Latino Assimilation and the “Americano Dream”

The consensus view has long been that Latino immigrants are assimilating at a rate broadly consistent with that of previous immigrant groups. However, recent evidence on Latino assimilation is in short supply, and there are accordingly new concerns that various new forces at work—such as the recent recession, the rise of new destinations, and rising deportation rates—may be slowing down Latino assimilation. Are these concerns warranted?

This article addresses that question with one of the first post-recession snapshots and the most recent profile of Latino assimilation. The evidence is not without its complications, and obviously, only a partial assessment is possible. But a simple conclusion emerges: Overall, significant progress over time across Latino groups is evident, although there is also a clear and persistent Mexican disadvantage. Compared with their *native peers*, second-generation Mexicans are among the most disadvantaged. Compared with their *first-generation proxy parents*, however, second-generation Mexicans are doing reasonably well, although here the evidence is necessarily ambiguous (as longitudinal data are unavailable). Compared with their *counterparts in traditional gateways*, second-generation Latinos in new destinations are also more disadvantaged.

It is not possible on the basis of the evidence provided here to identify *why* second-generation Mexicans are not faring as well as other Latino groups. This deficit is of course partly due to the relatively low human capital of their parents. Additionally, the analyses presented here suggest that immigrants in “new destinations” have lower socioeconomic outcomes, with the implication that Mexican assimilation may slow down insofar as their shift to new destinations continues apace. The contrast between Mexicans and the remaining Latino groups further suggests that the lack of legal status is hindering the assimilation process. The evidence for this claim is of course indirect: For example, Mexicans are more likely to be undocumented than Colombians, Ecuadorans, and Peruvians (CEPs),

FIGURE 4. Predicted probabilities of socioeconomic attainment by immigrant destination.



Source: Pooled CPS ASEC 2008–2012.

and their socioeconomic outcomes are also worse (see Figure 2). Although the evidence is ambiguous, we cannot rule out the possibility that we’re creating a new legally defined underclass by burdening so many Latinos with an undocumented status. In this sense, if no other, some of the concerns voiced by Hunting-

ton may in the end be on the mark, albeit for different reasons. Looking forward, President Obama’s recent executive action on immigration may reverse the forces creating this new underclass, thus providing Latino families with a new opportunity to achieve their American dream. ■

**Endnote**

1. The CPS does not contain the information to test this hypothesis.

**Additional Resources**

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