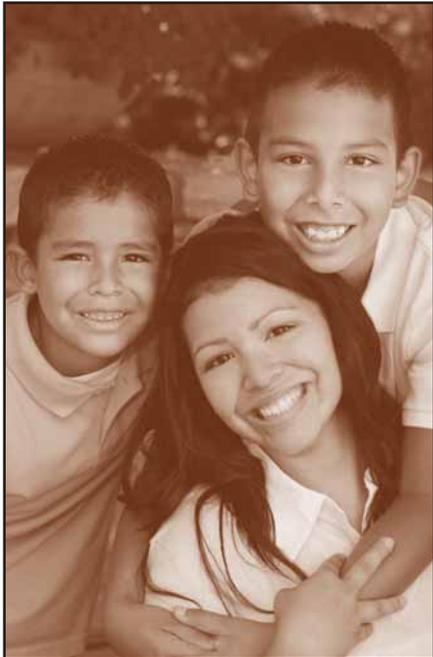


LATINO CHILDREN



The Cultural Strengths of Latino Families

Firm Scaffolds for Children and Youth

Most Latino children come from poor families and suffer from various maladies. Right? Well, not exactly.

Take Cinthya Felix, who arrived from Mexico at age 14, just in time to enter Garfield High School on the eastside of Los Angeles. "I got onto the basketball team," she said, "I had to learn English and do well with my grades to keep playing."

Cinthya soon noticed that a lot of kids "who started in ESL classes never left that track. So, she started asking questions and maneuvered into advancement placement classes. "Once the counselors saw my grades," they started to help in getting ready for college. "The AP kids would talk about SATs, ACTs," Cinthya quickly discovered.

She went on to graduate from UCLA with honors, a double major in English and Spanish literature, emblematic of her agility in moving between two worlds. She's grateful to have come of age in L.A.'s immigrant area of Boyle Heights. "That's why I was able to hold onto my culture, my own identity." Cinthya is now working on her public health degree at Columbia University.

Asked how she persevered against the odds, Cinthya speaks with emotion about her family. "It's my parents," she said. "They have sacrificed so much to give us the opportunity to go to school, to grow." Cinthya talks of a valuable set of cultural assets that still enriches her life. Working at a retirement home before starting grad school, she knew how to relate to the elderly residents. "We always show respect when we address older people. We had that cultural bond."

*New Journalism on Latino Children offers fresh perspectives and scientific findings on diverse Latino families and schools, a project of the Education Writers Association and the National Panel on Latino Children and Schooling, based at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development.
For details: www.ewa.org.*

FIGURE 1 Most Latino children grow up in two-parent homes

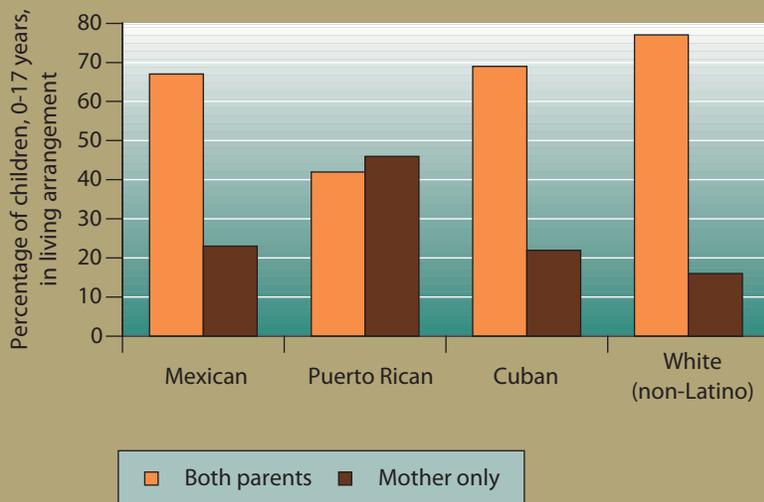


FIGURE 2 Mexican-American mothers display low school attainment

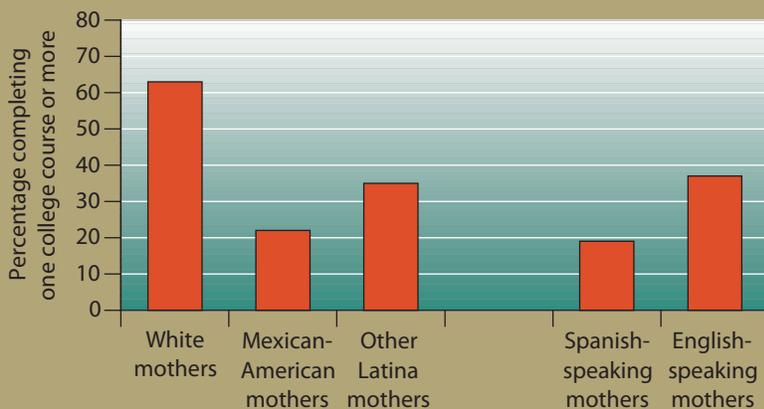
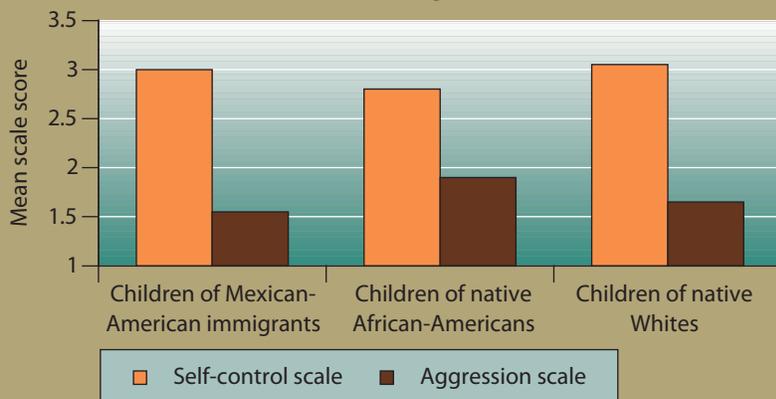


FIGURE 3 Mexican-American kindergartners show robust social skills



Immigrant Paradox: Poor Families, Rich Resources

Daily news reports portray Latinos—especially immigrant families—as suffering from a variety of problems. Latino men increasingly fill our prisons. Teenagers dropping from high schools. Young children entering kindergarten already behind.

Yes, many Latino families are struggling to raise their children in poor communities, especially immigrant parents pushing to find reliable jobs and good schools. About two-thirds of Mexican-American parents with a young child earned under \$25,000 in 2002.¹

But newborns of Latino immigrants are remarkably healthy, and children display robust levels of social development in their early years, often achieving high grades in school—despite growing-up in poor communities. Most Latino children are raised in two-parent families, often supported by a strong kin network. This is called the *immigrant paradox*, now being detailed by researchers, keen on discovering how these cultural assets persist.

These vital signs of robust childhoods often fade for second- and third-generation youngsters, from cognitive growth in the preschool years to higher rates of leaving high school,



Scholars Illuminating Strengths of Latino Families

Cynthia García Coll, a developmental psychologist at Brown University, examines how the history and daily practices of Dominican and Portuguese families shape their children's growth in her new book, *Immigrant Stories: Ethnicity and Academics in Middle School*.

Andrew Fuligni, a developmental psychologist at UCLA, reports on how Latino youths' strong family obligations both fuel motivation to succeed in school and can interfere with achievement when assisting the family economically.

Claudia Galindo, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, examines the generally robust social development of young Latino children and how this contributes to school performance.

Don Hernandez, a demographer at SUNY-Albany, studies census data to understand differing education and health outcomes among diverse Latino subgroups.

Marta Tienda, a Princeton sociologist, chaired the National Research Council panel that compiled evidence on the immigrant paradox, appearing in *Hispanics and America's Future*.

even as these acculturating children become fluent in English. Cultural strengths benefit children of immigrant parents, yet learning problems do emerge for kids.

Healthy Births, Lifting Early Cognitive Growth

Demographers first noticed that immigrant mothers of Mexican origin give birth to quite healthy infants, atypical for most low-income groups. New research details that—

- The risk of giving birth to unhealthy infants is very low among immigrant Latina mothers—especially those of Mexican heritage—comparable to that of white middle-class mothers.
- Healthy prenatal practices by immigrant Latinas largely explain strong birth outcomes, practices that begin to weaken as young parents acculturate to American dietary norms.
- Healthy infants display stronger cognitive growth during infancy and toddlerhood, benefiting the children of first-generation Latina mothers.²

Robust Social Development, Contributing to Early School Achievement

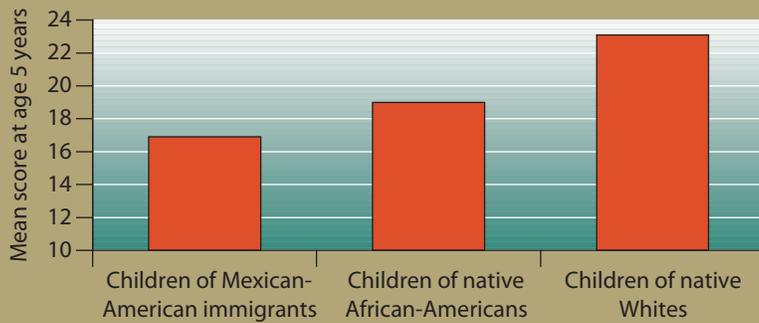
When diverse Latino children are lumped together—often defined as “at risk” for all sorts of social ills—educators and policy makers assume that misbehavior and poor achievement will inevitably emerge. But new research shows that—

- Latino children enter school with strong social skills and emotional confidence, quite similar to levels displayed by middle-class white youngsters. In turn, this social agility contributes to the learning curves of Latino children.³
- Limited fluency in English does slow the school progress of many Latino children. Yet math scores are strong for first-generation Latinos in elementary school, declining among second- and third-generation youngsters.⁴
- First-generation Latino youths gain strong grades from teachers in high school, even when objective test scores range lower, suggesting robust levels of effort and engagement.⁵

Family Values

Strong families offer a sturdy foundation for Latino children, again most vibrant among immigrant households, declining among later-generation Latino families in poor communities.

FIGURE 4 Latino kindergartners are behind in knowledge of numbers and math concepts



- Over 8 in 10 Latino toddlers are being raised in two-parent families, comparable with middle-class white families.⁶
- Dietary and health habits of immigrant Latino parents are stronger than the habits of average Americans, especially in their greater reliance on fresh fruits and vegetables and lower rates of smoking and alcohol consumption.⁷
- Latino adolescents show high levels of obligation to the family, but the very real need for some to assist the family on a daily basis can compromise their performance in school.⁸

Reporting on Diverse Latino Populations

Media coverage often accents the problems facing Latino children and families, advancing public awareness and policy action. Stories focus on the challenges facing undocumented families, economic poverty, or troubling high school drop-out rates. Often lost

in this coverage is a careful understanding of the cultural strengths and colorful diversity of Latino groups.

Writers and editors might ask, what factors drive this eye-opening paradox, lifting many Latino children despite their impoverished surroundings? What does the diversity of Latino students tell us about differing cultural origins and contemporary communities? Do public policies build from these family strengths, or inadvertently erode cultural assets?

Recent stories have begun to illuminate the strengths of Latino parents and their children. *Washington Post* writer, Theresa Vargas details how three young men finished their high school diplomas while working construction during the day. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Education Week* have run pieces focusing on unexpectedly strong health indicators and school achievement of many Latino children, drawing from recent research on the immigrant paradox.⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ National data analyzed by Bruce Fuller and colleagues, University of California, Berkeley and UCLA, 2009. Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort.
- ² Landale, N., Oropesa, R., & Bradatan, C. (2006). Hispanic families in the United States: Family structure in an era of family change. Pp. 138-178 in *Hispanics and the Future of America*, edited by M. Tienda and F. Mitchell. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- ³ Crosnoe, R. (2007). *Mexican roots, American schools*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- ⁴ Hernandez, D. (2009). Generational patterns in the United States: Children in immigrant families. Research paper presented at the Brown University Immigrant Paradox Conference, March.
- ⁵ See research review by Cynthia García Coll, Brown University, Immigrant Paradox Conference, March, 2009.
- ⁶ Landale, N., Oropesa, R., & Bradatan, C. (2006).
- ⁷ Escarce, J., Morales, L., & Rumbaut, R. (2006). The health status and health behaviors of Hispanics. Pp. 362-409 in *Hispanics and the Future of America*, edited by M. Tienda and F. Mitchell. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- ⁸ Telzer, E., & Fuligni, A. (2009). A longitudinal daily diary study of family assistance and academic achievement among adolescents from Mexican, Chinese, and European backgrounds. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 560-571.
- ⁹ Hayes-Bautista, D. (2007). Latinos as health care saviors. *Los Angeles Times*, October 6. Vargas, T. (2008). Graduating ASAP, if not on state timeline: Some Latino students fit school in as life allows. *Washington Post*, November 11. Zehr, M. (2009). Scholars mull the “paradox” of immigrants. *Education Week*, March 18.

Sources for Figures

- [1] Landale et al. (2006), [2] ECLS-B analysis by B. Fuller and colleagues, [3 and 4] Crosnoe (2007).