

Decades of Assimilation

Andrew Murr

NEWSWEEK

Updated: 11:44 AM ET Mar 15, 2008

Social scientists rarely get more than a passing glimpse as minority groups struggle to achieve the American Dream. But a pair of UCLA experts have just published a new book that offers a unique, 35-year, time-lapse view of economic and social changes among Mexican-American families. In 2000, Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz led a team that interviewed more than 1,500 Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio whose families had taken part in a novel, mid-1960s survey designed to gauge how successive generations are assimilating into mainstream America. The short answer: full integration remains a long way off.

The original questionnaires that propel the book, titled "Generations of Exclusion," were lost for years before being unearthed during a library renovation project. In some ways, recent generations of Mexican-Americans follow typical patterns blazed by earlier, European immigrants. Countering critics who say Mexican-Americans don't want to learn English, the study found that nearly everyone spoke and read English by the second generation, though they remained bilingual. "Retaining Spanish wasn't done at the expense of English," Ortiz says. Later generations were more likely to become Protestants, vote Republican and marry non-Latinos. Even musical tastes shifted: three quarters of the immigrants liked Mexican styles best; half of later generations preferred black American music.

But other findings are less rosy. Mexican-American neighborhoods are more segregated today, thanks largely to a new influx of immigrants. The study also found that, unlike earlier Europeans, who caught up to American averages in income, wealth and education by the third generation, Mexican-Americans continue to lag. The authors blame the loss of middle-class manufacturing jobs, prejudice fueled by the immigration debate and subpar school systems. Overall, years of education rose substantially for the children of immigrants, but high-school graduation rates actually decreased slightly by the fourth generation. "I can't think of another [immigrant] group" for whom that's been true, says Telles. To reverse the slide, the authors call for an education-focused "Marshall Plan" to boost school spending. Without it, they say, too many Mexican-Americans may be running in place for generations to come.

URL: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/123498>
