



- ✓ Home
- ✓ Research
- ✓ Library
- ✓ Publications
- ✓ Events

UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Facts and Education Needed for Immigration Reform

By Vilma Ortiz

Professor of Sociology, UCLA

With immigration reform on the table there have been an abundance of editorials concerning U.S. immigration policies, most of them focused on Latinos, and specifically Mexicans. Two recent op-eds in *The New York Times* are indicative of widely shared assumptions and hypotheses that actually stand in the way of addressing the underlying problems and improving opportunities. In effect, these and other writers ignore the realities faced by Mexicans in the U.S. and how these realities also have detrimental consequences on our society at large. In addressing immigration policy, it is critical that we understand the facts.

On April 21, *The New York Times* published the column “**Hispanics, the New Italians**” by David Leonhardt in which he compares the assimilation trajectory of Latinos, especially Mexicans, with Italians. Leonhardt ultimately identifies strong similarities among the first and second generations of these groups but ignores the differences in how the third and fourth generations become “integrated.”

Scholars have extensively studied how European immigrants of a century ago integrated into U.S. society. Europeans varied by country of origin; for instance, Italians were of especially low socioeconomic backgrounds—many uneducated and illiterate. Because of these class disadvantages, Italians were expected to assimilate very slowly. Yet, by 1980, Italians had reached similar levels of education and occupational status as other third-generation Europeans. Scholars have asserted that Italians benefited from being white Europeans.

Scholars have debated how the experience of past European immigrants applies to understanding Latino immigrants today. In particular, the experiences of Italians and Mexicans have been compared as Leonhardt’s title indicates. Somewhat similar to the historical European case, numerous studies have documented that the children of Mexican immigrants do well compared to their parents. It is understood that the second generation benefits from taking advantage of greater educational opportunities in the U.S. Studies focused on the first and second generation usually take the optimistic view that Mexicans and other Latinos are easily incorporated into U.S. society.

While Mexicans are frequently considered a “new” immigrant group, Mexicans have immigrated to the U.S. for more than a century. This is the longest, most continuous, and one of the largest immigrations to the U.S. This means there are many third and fourth generation Mexican Americans now, and yet their

integration diverges from that of Europeans, including Italians. In *Generations of Exclusion*, Edward Telles and I document that the education and economic status of the third and fourth generations are essentially the same as the education and economic status of the second generation. In other words, Mexicans do not experience the steady progress into the third and fourth generation that has been documented for Europeans.

On April 28, *The New York Times* published the column “**When Assimilation Stalls**” by Ross Douthat. Douthat refers to our findings in *Generations of Exclusion* but then proceeds to make several erroneous points and conclusions. For instance, he presumes that because Mexicans have not reached the educational levels of the white U.S. population, they are failing as a group, entering the “rainbow underclass” or primarily becoming part of the urban poor. The reality is that many Mexicans pursue education but make insufficient progress as a result of inadequate educational opportunities.

Moreover Douthat fails to consider historical and structural factors. Mexican immigration results from the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, the historical role of Mexicans in the U.S. economic system, and the manner in which U.S. society accepts Mexican immigrants. Throughout a century of immigration, Mexican Americans have immigrated primarily to fill low-wage jobs and are thus held in low regard, a status shared by many of their descendants. Consequently, Mexican Americans suffer from negative expectations, poorer schooling, workplace discrimination, residential segregation and other disadvantages. Other Latinos—especially Salvadorians, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans—also appear to experience similar disadvantages. These disadvantages, coupled with their non-white racial status, have racialized Mexican Americans and other Latinos

To argue against regulating the status of undocumented immigrants and allowing future immigration of less skilled workers means that the immigrants themselves are considered responsible for the structural barriers they face. The solution is not to exclude immigrants. The solutions lie in addressing broader issues identified by Douthat, that of “a working class that’s already in crisis” and “our dysfunctional educational system.” Improved education opportunities not only help immigrants but help the entire U.S. population.

*Vilma Ortiz is a professor of sociology at UCLA. She is co-author with Edward E. Telles of the book **Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race** (Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).*

Authored on May 7, 2013