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Disparities in high school completion among Latinos: The role of the age-at-arrival and immigration status

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ABSTRACT

In comparing educational outcomes among Latino immigrants and their native-born peers, prior research has largely overlooked the potential roles of age-at-arrival to the United States and immigration status. To address these oversights, this study considers the relationships between age-at-arrival and immigration status (citizen, authorized, and unauthorized) on high school completion among a sample of Latino adults ($N = 932$) from the 2001 Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (LA FANS). Results from weighted logistic regression models suggest that, irrespective of age-at-arrival to the United States, having an authorized or unauthorized immigration status is significantly associated with a lower likelihood of high school completion. Moreover, no significant differences were found in high school completion between early and later childhood arrivals once accounting for immigration status and other covariates. This study suggests that immigration status plays an important role in high school completion and should be considered in efforts to improve educational outcomes among Latino immigrants.

1. Introduction

A substantial number of adult Latino immigrants living in the United States arrived during childhood. Indeed, between 2010 and 2012, half of the 10.3 million immigrants under the age of 35 arrived to the United States as children, and 57.5% of this group identified as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In response to the substantial number of Latino childhood arrivals, a large body of research has focused on the outcomes of this population in comparison to their native-born Latino peers. This line of research has made critical contributions to our understanding of risk and protective factors that affect the educational outcomes of Latinos including the roles of family background (Alba & Nee, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco, Abo-Zena, & Marks, 2015), cultural capital (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015), and the context of reception in different locales (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Comparisons between Latinos childhood arrivals and native-born Latinos have contributed greatly to our understanding of the processes and mechanisms that impact the educational outcomes of this population. Yet, past research has not fully disentangled competing explanations in the educational outcomes of childhood arrivals and their native-born peers. In particular, two aspects relevant to this line of research remain under-examined. First, among foreign-born Latinos, the impact of age-at-arrival on educational outcomes has not received sufficient attention. This is an important oversight because childhood arrivals immigrate at varying stages of development ranging from infancy to adolescence. Available data suggests substantial variation in the age at which immigrant children arrive to the United States; 42% of childhood arrivals immigrated in early childhood (no later than age 8) while the remaining 58% arrived in later childhood (Fry, 2005). Despite the substantial variation in age-at-arrival to the United States and its potential relationship with educational outcomes, past research in this area has typically overlooked the relationship between age-at-arrival and high school completion. Moreover, past research has often excluded immigrants that arrived during adolescence resulting in little understanding of how adolescent childhood arrivals fare educationally (Oropesa & Landale, 2009).

The potential impact of immigration status on educational outcomes is also understudied. While immigration status can refer to whether someone is native or foreign-born, in this paper, we use immigration status in reference to citizenship and legal authorization to reside in the United States. More specifically, we categorize immigration statuses into three categories: citizens (born and naturalized); authorized immigrants with legal permanent residence or valid visas; and unauthorized immigrants who do not possess authorization to reside in the United States. Different immigration statuses result in differential access to resources among immigrants including childhood arrivals. For example, unauthorized immigrants cannot access legal employment and are excluded from most social welfare benefits, while authorized immigrants may work legally and have some access to social welfare benefits

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depending on their visa type and/or length of time in the United States (Bitler & Hoynes, 2011). Additionally, research has found that unauthorized immigrants live with the fear of deportation for themselves and their family members and may avoid public systems altogether due to fear of exposure (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2011). Despite the increasingly recognized importance of immigration status on socioeconomic outcomes, it remains understudied in quantitative studies due to a lack of measures that adequately capture the complexity of immigration statuses, especially unauthorized status (Bachmeier, Van Hook, & Bean, 2014). Consequently, there is a dearth of information on potential differences in educational outcomes by immigration status.

To address this knowledge gap, this study aimed to disentangle the effects of age-at-arrival and immigration status on the likelihood of high school completion among Latinos, including childhood arrivals and native-born Latinos. Using data from the 2001 Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (LA FANS), this study examines the likelihood of high school completion among (and between) early and later childhood arrivals (1.5 and 1.25 generation) and native-born Latinos (2nd and 3rd plus generation) while accounting for individual and family-level characteristics.

2. Age-at-arrival and educational outcomes

Childhood arrivals have been categorized by age-at-arrival into the 1.75, 1.5, and 1.25 generations (Rumbaut, 2004). This categorization positions childhood arrivals in-between the first-generation (adult arrivals) and the second-generation (U.S. born children of immigrant parents). Although in this classification the 1.5 generation consists of children immigrating between the ages of 6 and 12, in practice scholars tend to define it as including everyone arriving at the age of 12 and under (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Following this approach, we classify childhood arrivals into the 1.5 generation (arriving prior to age 13), and the 1.25 generation (arriving between the ages of 13 to 17).

Notably, the 1.5 and 1.25 generations undergo distinct school experiences (Rumbaut, 2004). The 1.5 generation encounters most of their formal schooling and socialization in the United States, and are more likely to speak English fluently and without an accent (Rumbaut, 2004). On the other hand, the 1.25 generation spends their formative school years outside of the United States. Provided the underlying differences in schooling experiences by age-at-arrival, it is logical to consider that timing matters to educational outcomes and reasonable to expect that the 1.5 generation will outperform the 1.25 generation. The 1.5 generation benefits from more time to learn English and exposure to the curriculum taught in U.S. schools. In addition, both child and parents have a greater period of time to become familiar with the U.S. school system. The 1.25 generation, on the other hand, must manage various transitions, such learning a new language and assimilating to U.S. society, along with the biological, cognitive, and socioemotional changes encountered during adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Collins & Steinberg, 2007).

Various studies have examined the educational outcomes of immigrant children and have found disparities by age-at-arrival. In general, these studies have found that as age-of-arrival increases educational attainment decreases (Allensworth, 1997; Beck, Corak, & Tienda, 2012; Chiswick & DebBurman, 2003; Hirschman, 2001; Landale, Oropesa, & Llanes, 1998). Family characteristics, however, play a significant role in attenuating existing disparities. For instance, in several studies, after controlling for family background gaps in educational attainment decreased but still remained significant (Allensworth, 1997; Beck et al., 2012; Hirschman, 2001). In one study, however, the gaps between Latino childhood arrivals and their native-born peers disappeared once family background was incorporated (Landale et al., 1998).

Although past research finds a generally negative relationship between high school completion and age-at-arrival, family background characteristics are also significant predictors that attenuate or eliminate the impact of age-at-arrival. This leaves remaining questions on the role of age-at-arrival on educational outcomes and highlights the need for additional research that sorts out other factors that might contribute to disparities between childhood arrivals and their native-born counterparts. In particular, when a child immigrates is intricately related to a host of factors including immigration status. However, education related studies tend to pool immigration statuses because many survey datasets do not adequately capture complex immigration statuses, particularly unauthorized status (Bachmeier et al., 2014).

3. Immigration status and educational outcomes

Lacking authorization to live in the United States directly impacts access to education. For example, although access to K-12 public education is constitutionally protected, this right does not extend to post-secondary education and creates significant educational barriers for unauthorized childhood arrivals. In addition, unauthorized childhood arrivals are not eligible for federal financial aid to support college attendance. Given these barriers to postsecondary education it is possible that having an unauthorized status impacts high school completion by reducing educational aspirations. Indeed, a growing body of qualitative literature sheds light on the educational experiences of unauthorized childhood arrivals and the importance of high school experiences (Abrego, 2006; Diaz-Strong & Meiners, 2007; Perez, 2009; Gonzales, 2011). It is during high school, upon being excluded from important milestones such as attaining a driver's license and legal employment that unauthorized youth first come to understand the implications of their immigration status for their future educational prospects. In some cases, unauthorized students lower their aspirations when they realize that the "normal" routes after high school, such as college, are closed or difficult to achieve (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011).

Although few, available quantitative studies suggest that unauthorized immigration status impacts the educational outcomes of childhood arrivals. One study found that children with unauthorized mothers obtained less education (one year and a quarter) compared to those with mothers who were authorized (Bean, Leach, Brown, Bachmeier, & Hipp, 2011). Greenman and Hall (2013) found that unauthorized Mexican and Central American youth were less likely to complete high school and enroll in college compared to their authorized peers. Notably, differences in high school completion disappeared when controlling for family background (Greenman & Hall, 2013). Hence, the authors note that their findings "yield mixed conclusion on how legal status relates to high school completion" (Greenman & Hall, 2013, p. 1492).

To date most of the research examining outcomes of childhood arrivals have been limited due to survey datasets that have not incorporated measures to distinguish between complex immigration statuses (Bachmeier et al., 2014). Moreover, studies that have examined the relationship between immigration status and educational outcomes have drawn on national samples that only allow for state level analysis and might mask important local-level factors (Greenman & Hall, 2013). Given that school quality and policy typically occur at the local level (Ainsworth, 2002), related research likely benefits from analysis focused on particular local contexts.

4. Immigrant generation and educational outcomes

To understand how childhood arrivals fare in the United States, studies often incorporate comparisons to their native-born peers. Although an assimilation perspective would predict that educational outcomes increase with each generation, studies examining the relationship between immigrant generation and educational outcomes among Latinos have provided mixed results. In some studies, significant differences do not emerge in high school completion rates (Driscoll, 1999; Lutz, 2007) and academic test scores (Glick & White, 2003) between childhood arrivals, the second-generation, and the third-generation. On the other hand, research has also found increasing high school completion rates