



Experiencing discrimination in Los Angeles: Latinos at the intersection of legal status and socioeconomic status[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 October 2016

Received in revised form 16 March 2017

Accepted 14 May 2017

Available online 17 May 2017

Keywords:

Discrimination

Latino

Immigrant

Legal status

Neighborhood diversity

ABSTRACT

Despite its recent slowdown, immigration from Latin America continues to be a controversial issue. Some scholars argue that the social climate is increasingly inhospitable to Latinos, potentially fueling discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. However, little research has examined Latinos' experiences with discrimination, especially variation by nativity and legal status. We address this issue with research on perceived discrimination among Mexican and Central American residents of Los Angeles County, a major destination for Latin American immigrants. Using data from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey and the American Community Survey, the analyses consider immigrants' legal status, intersectionality, and competing perspectives on assimilation. The results show that undocumented immigrants do not report especially high levels of discrimination. Instead, young U.S.-born Latinos are the most likely to report mistreatment in interpersonal and institutional domains. Neighborhood ethnorracial and income diversity also have implications for perceived exposure to different types of discrimination.

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1. Introduction

The ongoing “diversity explosion” in the United States has profoundly transformed racial and ethnic relations. In the mid-twentieth century, African Americans were the largest minority group and a major focus of research on intergroup relations, including studies of actual and perceived discrimination (Allport, 1954; Anderson and Massey, 2004). Since that time, sustained immigration from Asia and Latin America has contributed to an increasingly multi-ethnic society (Frey, 2014; Lee et al., 2012). It is only recently, however, that studies of discrimination have shifted their focus to reflect this trend. Attention is turning to questions about the experience of being a “new minority” and an immigrant in an increasingly diverse society.

In recognition of their growing prominence and unique constellation of structural disadvantages, Latinos occupy an important place in this nascent literature (Arellano-Morales et al., 2015; Becerra et al., 2013; Flippen and Parrado, 2015; Oropesa and Jensen, 2010).¹ But because fully half of Latino adults are foreign born, continued progress in understanding their experience with discrimination requires expansion of theoretical and analytic frameworks (Krogstad and Lopez, 2014).

[☆] This study was supported by NICHD grants 5P01HD062498-05 and 5 R24 HD041025-13.

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¹ Most studies of perceived discrimination among Latinos do not focus on discrimination per se, but instead examine its effects on physical and mental health (e.g., Alamilla et al., 2010; Finch et al., 2000; Flores et al., 2008; Molina et al., 2013).

Dimensions of inequality that are unique to immigrants must be considered, including those that are grounded in distinct legal statuses. Such factors intersect with traditional axes of inequality in ways that may affect Latinos' actual and perceived encounters with negative treatment. Nonetheless, we know little about how interlocking social statuses are related to experiences with discrimination among Latinos.

Intersectionality provides a useful sensitizing framework for understanding how multiple forms of structural disadvantage jointly influence experiences and perceptions of discrimination. Ethnoracial group membership can be viewed as a potential master status that intersects with other statuses such as gender, age, socioeconomic position, and authorization to live in the United States (Arellano-Morales et al., 2015). Because statuses that shape social interactions and access to opportunities overlap, discrimination based on one form of disadvantage may increase in the presence of another form of disadvantage. Individuals who are structurally positioned to experience multiple forms of disadvantage are likely to have the highest levels of perceived discrimination (Grollman, 2012).

Using data from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS) and the 2005–2009 American Community Survey (ACS), this research focuses on perceived discrimination among Mexican and Central American residents of Los Angeles County.^{2,3} We consider the experiences of both native-born and foreign-born Latinos as well as non-Latino whites. Importantly, these data provide a rare opportunity to examine the role of legal status in perceived discrimination. This is important because increased immigration enforcement and restrictions on access to social benefits may have heightened distinctions based on legal status (Waters and Pineau, 2015). As a result, legal status may increasingly intersect with other forms of disadvantage in ways that have implications for actual and perceived discrimination. However, even though it is critical to processes of incorporation and assimilation, legal status is an unmeasured source of heterogeneity in most empirical studies of immigrant groups (Massey and Bartley, 2005).

Guided by an emphasis on intersectionality and competing perspectives on immigrant assimilation, our analysis first delineates the multiple dimensions of disadvantage experienced by Latinos of Mexican and Central American descent as well as non-Latino whites in Los Angeles County. This is accomplished with latent class analysis (LCA), a methodological approach that is ideally suited for identifying a set of underlying statuses that reflect the multidimensional nature of social disadvantage (or advantage). We then examine the relationships between latent class membership and two distinct aspects of perceived discrimination: everyday encounters with interpersonal discrimination and major experiences with discrimination in institutional settings. These analyses extend prior research by explicitly considering intersectionality using a novel method for delineating subgroups and by including legal status as a major axis of inequality among Mexican and Central American immigrants. Additionally, multilevel modeling is used for insights into the implications of neighborhood ethnoracial diversity and income diversity for perceived discrimination. Neighborhood characteristics are potentially important because they may affect interactions with other residents or representatives of institutions (e.g., police, employers, merchants, etc.).

2. Background

Immigration continues to be a contentious issue in the United States due to the long-term growth of the foreign-born population and large numbers of unauthorized immigrants in some national-origin groups. Since 1970, the immigrant population has quadrupled in size; roughly 13 percent of U.S. residents are now foreign born. During the same period, there has been a twentyfold increase in the immigrant population from Mexico and Central America. About 60 percent of these immigrants are unauthorized (Baker and Rytina, 2013; Brick et al., 2011). Thus, the potential impact of undocumented status on immigrants and the larger social consequences of their presence are at the forefront of national debates about the future of the United States. Because immigration from Mexico and Central America is a “flashpoint” in public debates, there are heightened opportunities for conflict around national origins (Menjívar and Kanstroom, 2013; Motomura, 2014).

Unauthorized immigrants are highly vulnerable due to their position at the bottom of multiple status hierarchies. First, they are at the bottom of an institutionally-derived legal status hierarchy that places naturalized citizens at the top and lawful permanent residents (LPRs) in an intermediate position among the foreign born. After meeting a strict set of requirements, naturalized citizens have rights that are identical to those of native-born citizens. LPRs occupy a lower position in the hierarchy because they have fewer rights overall. Although authorized to live and work in the United States, LPRs are ineligible to vote in elections that have candidates for federal offices on the ballot and they cannot receive most public benefits prior to completion of a probationary period. LPRs are issued green cards verifying their legal status that they must carry at all times. At the bottom of the hierarchy are undocumented residents without a green card or a visa permitting temporary residence (Romero, 2009).

Mexicans and Central Americans experience this hierarchy in tandem with other disadvantaged statuses. Relatively low education, employment in unskilled jobs, and a high rate of poverty place these groups on the bottom rungs of society in

² For ease of presentation, individuals of Mexican or Central American descent are termed Latinos in parts of this paper, even though they do not represent the full spectrum of national-origin groups that could potentially be included under this pan-ethnic label.

³ The terms “experiences” and “perceptions” are occasionally used interchangeably to avoid redundancy. Our use of these terms interchangeably is consistent with the idea that individuals' experiences encompass perceptions, understandings, and interpretations. This does not mean that perceived experiences correspond precisely to real events that might be evident to an outside observer. Although perceptions of negative treatment are highly likely to be grounded in actual treatment, some instances of discrimination are not perceived as such and some individuals erroneously attribute an outcome to discrimination.

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