



Unemployment among Mexican immigrant men in the United States, 2003–2012 [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Based on their socioeconomic characteristics, Mexican immigrant men should have very high unemployment. More than half do not have a high school diploma. One in four works in construction; at the height of the recent recession, 20% of construction workers were unemployed. Yet their unemployment rates are similar to those of native-born white men. After controlling for education and occupation, Mexican immigrant men have lower probabilities of unemployment than native-born white men – both before and during the recent recession. I consider explanations based on eligibility for unemployment benefits, out-migrant selection for unemployment, and employer preferences for Mexican immigrant labor.

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1. Introduction

Based on their socioeconomic characteristics, Mexican immigrant men should have very high unemployment. In addition to the language and legal challenges that accompany the migration experience, Mexican immigrant men have, on average, low levels of education. According to the Current Population Survey (CPS), 60% of Mexican immigrant men do not have a high school diploma. In contrast, high school dropouts make up just 28% of native-born Mexican men, 13% of native-born black men, and less than 10% of native-born white men. Education matters because it is negatively associated with both the incidence and the duration of unemployment (Farber, 2004; Mincer, 1991). Education provides qualifications for employment, and it protects against job loss. During the most recent recession, 78% of the job losses were experienced by workers with a high school diploma or less, a group that constitutes less than half of the total workforce (Carnevale et al., 2012). Less than 5% of male workers in the U.S. are Mexican immigrants, yet they represent over 15% of male high school drop-outs in the U.S.¹

There is at least one additional reason why Mexican immigrant men should have high unemployment: they are over-represented in construction, an industry that has frequent surges in unemployment. One in four Mexican immigrant men in the CPS works in construction, compared to 11% of native-born Mexican men, 12% of native-born white men, and 8% of

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¹ I exclude women from this analysis for two reasons. First, the pathways into and out of employment vary by sex. Second, female employment is far more selective in Latin American countries than in the U.S. (Parrado and Flippen, 2005). Compared to native-born women, a much larger share of foreign-born Mexican women do not have any work experience (Tienda and Stier, 1996). Ethnographic research suggests that among Mexican immigrants in the U.S., female employment is often viewed as a temporary necessity for families in which the men have insufficient income (Parrado and Flippen, 2005).

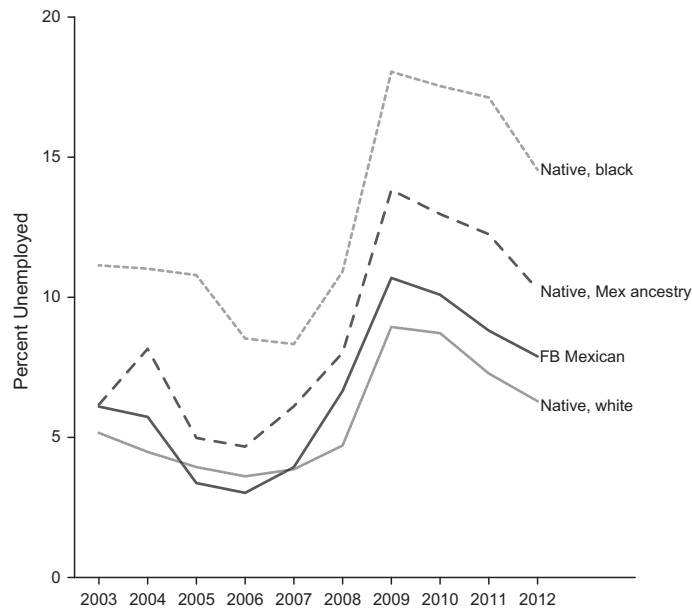


Fig. 1. Male unemployment rates by ethnicity, 2003–2012. *Note:* Sample restricted to male workers in the labor force between the ages of 18 and 64 in their fourth interview. *Source:* Data come from the CPS-MORG files.

native-born black men. During the Great Recession, construction workers were hit particularly hard. According to the CPS, nearly one-fifth of male construction workers were unemployed in 2009.²

And yet, Mexican immigrant men have *lower* unemployment rates than both native-born Mexican and native-born black men (see Fig. 1).³

Despite their lack of education, foreign-born Mexican men reached a recession peak unemployment rate of only 10.7%, a rate that is closer to the peak of 8.9% for native white men than the peak of 13.8% for native Mexican men. During the pre-recession period between 2005 and 2007, foreign-born Mexican men had *lower* unemployment than white men. Duncan et al. (2006) and Duncan and Trejo (2012) have noted that immigrant men with low levels of education have higher employment rates than similarly-educated native-born men. While Duncan et al. focus on employment (not unemployment), high employment and low unemployment together suggest that Mexican immigrant men have more favorable employment outcomes than their education would predict. What prior research has not yet empirically addressed are the reasons *why* so few Mexican immigrant men are unemployed. Given their lack of education and the disproportionate effects of recessions – especially the Great Recession – on the least educated (Elsby et al., 2011; Hoynes et al., 2012), Mexican immigrant men should have had exceptionally high unemployment during the Great Recession.

This is the most comprehensive analysis to date of potential explanations for the low unemployment rates among Mexican immigrant men. This is also the first investigation of the unemployment gap between native-born and Mexican immigrant men during the Great Recession, a recession that took unemployment to unprecedented heights (Hout et al., 2011). Consistent with prior economic research, I consider factors associated with employment, unemployment, and not being in the labor force. I take advantage of the extensive amount of employment information provided in the CPS to examine whether the data are consistent with theories about out-migrant selection for unemployment, disparities in reservation wages based on access to unemployment benefits, or employer preferences for non-citizen Mexican immigrant workers (most of whom are unauthorized to work in the United States). Prior research on disparities in male unemployment largely focuses on the concentration of unemployment among black men (Sampson, 1987; Wilson, 1987, 1996) and employer preferences for Hispanic immigrant men over native-born black men (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). While low unemployment among immigrant men may seem inconsistent with sociological research on the ubiquity of joblessness among Mexican day laborers (Valenzuela, 2003), day laborers are a relatively small proportion of the foreign-born Mexican population, and their employment status is highly visible to the public. Though not often observed in public, unemployment among low-skill native-born men may be more prevalent.

² Why focus on Mexican men as opposed to other immigrant groups? Based on their education and their occupational distribution, Mexican immigrants should have higher unemployment rates than other immigrant men. Compared to non-Mexican Hispanic and non-Hispanic immigrants, Mexican immigrant men have much lower levels of education (greater percentage of high school dropouts), and they are more heavily concentrated in the construction industry.

³ I use the *tile* package in R to produce the figures in this analysis (Adolph, 2012).

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