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# Undocumented migration and the residential segregation of Mexicans in new destinations <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study uses data from the 2000 Census and 2005–2009 American Community Survey to examine the impact of undocumented Mexican migration to new destinations on residential segregation between Mexican immigrants and native-born whites and native-born blacks. We find that Mexican-white and Mexican-black segregation is higher in new Mexican gateways than in established areas and that, for Mexican-immigrant segregation from whites, this heightened level of residential segregation in new destinations can be explained by the high presence of unauthorized Mexican immigrants living there which tends to bolster segregation between the two groups. By contrast, Mexican-immigrant segregation from native-born blacks tends to be lower in areas with larger undocumented populations, a pattern that is especially true in new destinations. Neither of these opposing effects of legal status on Mexican-immigrant segregation can be explained by compositional differences in assimilation (English ability and earnings) between documented and undocumented immigrants nor by structural variation in metropolitan areas, suggesting a unique association between legal status and segregation.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, America has been witness to a demographic transformation brought about by enormous growth in the number of immigrants. While the US foreign-born population is much more diverse than popularly perceived, Mexican immigrants accounted for more than a quarter of all arrivals since 1970 and currently compose nearly a third of all immigrants living in the US. This momentous and sustained growth in the Mexican population has had profound consequences for American social, economic, and political life, but perhaps none as visible as those occurring in US neighborhoods. The arrival of Mexican and other immigrants has been credited for reductions in multigroup segregation (Iceland, 2009) and in the declining isolation of both white and black Americans (Logan et al., 2004; White and Glick, 1999). The segregation of Latinos, however, has been stubborn to change, remaining relatively stable or even increasing (Logan and Stults, 2011). Timberlake and Iceland (2007) even foresee a future in which Latinos will overtake blacks as the most segregated group in America.

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The recent dispersal of Latinos and Mexicans out of gateway cities and into non-traditional destinations has raised questions about whether the durability of Mexican segregation can be linked to their emergence in communities unfamiliar to Mexican faces and immigrant issues. While not entirely conclusive, there is growing evidence that Mexicans are more highly segregated in these new destinations than in more established ports of entry (Fischer and Tienda, 2006; Hall, 2013; Lichter et al., 2010; but see Alba et al., 2010; Park and Iceland, 2011). Existing research, however, has been unable to explain the heightened levels of segregation in emerging destinations. One critically-important omission for understanding residential inequality among immigrants is recognition that Mexican immigrant populations in new destination areas are composed heavily by individuals lacking legal authorization. Current estimates indicate that there are more than 6 million undocumented Mexicans in the US (Passel et al., 2013); and while a majority of them live in traditional immigrant-receiving states, undocumented migrants as a percent of the local Mexican immigrant population are more strongly represented in states and communities outside of traditional gateways (Massey et al., 2010; Passel and Cohn, 2009a).

Due in part to the fears associated with being identified as an unlawful resident and to potential challenges in securing housing, undocumented immigrants may be more likely to congregate in segregated, ethnic communities where they are better able to hide away in the shadows of their peers or to tap into ethnic-based networks that ease the acquisition of housing. Similar processes of occupational segregation have been reported in studies of undocumented immigrants' economic well-being (see Donato and Armenta, 2011; Flippen, 2012; Hall et al., 2010), but research assessing how legal status influences residential sorting within housing markets is lacking. This potential for stratification by legal status may be especially pronounced in new destinations where the arrival of Mexicans has sometimes been met with nativism, political backlash, and native flight.

Evaluating the connection between undocumented migration and neighborhood inequality is important not only because it sheds light on potentially new forms of residential stratification, but because patterns of segregation often correspond with broader disparities and can be used as a lens through which to view the pace of Mexican incorporation into the mainstream (Iceland, 2009; Telles and Ortiz, 2008; White and Glick, 2009). It is also relevant to ongoing discussions about the changing terrain of race/ethnicity, particularly whether Mexicans and other Latinos will fit within the existing hierarchy or will forge a new one (Lee and Bean, 2010). Thus, an understanding of how undocumented migration influences residential patterns can provide insight into the evolving shape of the American color line.

Our aim in this study is to examine the connection between legal status and residential inequality by exploring how undocumented migration is related to patterns of segregation among Mexican immigrants. Guiding our efforts are four key questions: First, are Mexican immigrants more segregated from native whites and native blacks in new destinations than in established ones? Second, can the share of unauthorized migrants among local Mexican immigrant populations explain observed differences in segregation between new and established destinations? Third, does undocumented migration impact segregation differently in new gateways than in established ones? Lastly, does undocumented migration influence Mexican-immigrant segregation from native whites and native blacks in different ways? To answer these questions, we use tract- and metropolitan-level data from Census 2000 and the 2005–2009 American Community Survey to estimate levels of and trends in Mexican-immigrant dissimilarity from native-born whites and native-born blacks, linked to metro-level estimates of the undocumented population derived from the 2000 Census and 2006–2008 ACS Public Use Microdata Samples.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Background

Over the last several decades, Mexican migration to the US has surged. In California alone, the Mexican (both foreign- and US-born) population grew from 1.1 million to 11.4 million and their share of all Californians rose from 5.5% to 30.7%, between 1970 and 2010. However, the rapid growth in this population was especially pronounced in areas further from the border. For example, the 1960 Census recorded only 1562 Mexicans in Georgia, but by 2010 more than half a million called the state home. Thus, while the Mexican population in the US remains concentrated in areas with long-standing ties to Mexico, it is considerably more dispersed than in previous times.<sup>2</sup> The redistribution of Mexicans, and other immigrant groups, has motioned in a substantial research literature focused on “new destinations” (Gozdziak and Martin, 2005; Lichter and Johnson, 2009; Light, 2006; McConnell, 2008; Marrow, 2011; Massey, 2008; Singer et al., 2008; Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2005) and the implications of their emergence for immigrant incorporation and racial/ethnic dynamics.

Why exactly the great dispersion of Mexican immigrants occurred remains uncertain, but a complex array of processes was likely at work. Some scholars have drawn attention to the need for low-skill laborers in non-traditional areas resulting from the restructuring of labor intensive industries (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2000; Kandel and Parrado, 2005; Parrado and Kandel, 2008) or from the demands created by native population growth (Kaushal and Kaestner, 2010). Others have focused on the saturation of labor pools in established areas (Durand et al., 2005; Hernández-León, 2008), elevated fertility rates and limited opportunities for work in Mexican states with little prior history of migration to the US (Hernández-León, 2008; Riosmena and Massey, 2010; Weeks et al., 2011), the militarization of major border entry points (Massey et al., 2002; Orrenius, 2004), and municipal regulations governing employment and housing (Light, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> Our focus on Mexican immigrants (rather than all Latinos) is motivated not only by the sheer size of their population but also by challenges in inferring legal status for non-Mexican immigrants, for whom refugee or temporary protected statuses are likely to increase measurement error.

<sup>2</sup> In 1970, 84.4% of ethnic Mexicans lived in a border state; by 2010, this share had dropped to 68.0%.

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