



Early cognitive skills of Mexican-origin children: The roles of parental nativity and legal status



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ABSTRACT

Although one-third of children of immigrants have undocumented parents, little is known about their early development. Using data from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey and decennial census, we assessed how children's cognitive skills at ages 3 to 5 vary by ethnicity, maternal nativity, and maternal legal status. Specifically, Mexican children of undocumented mothers were contrasted with Mexican children of documented mothers and Mexican, white, and black children with U.S.-born mothers. Mexican children of undocumented mothers had lower emergent reading skills than all other groups and lower emergent mathematics skills than all groups with U.S.-born mothers. Multilevel regression models showed that differences in reading skills are explained by aspects of the home environment, but the neighborhood context also matters. Cross-level interactions suggest that immigrant concentration boosts emergent reading and mathematics skills for children with undocumented parents, but does not similarly benefit children whose parents are native born.

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1. Introduction

The changing composition of the child population of the United States has drawn attention to new sources of diversity in children's outcomes. Immigration has contributed to well-known shifts in the ethnic landscape and the nativity of parents (Frey, 2011), but it has also driven changes that are less readily observable but potentially critical to children's life chances. One such change that is of widespread interest is the growing share of children with undocumented parents (Glick, 2010). Nearly one in every four U.S. children has at least one immigrant parent and one-third of children in immigrant families have undocumented parents (Guerrero et al., 2013; Nwosu et al., 2014).

Although knowledge about the children of immigrants has accumulated rapidly in recent years, much less is known about the roughly 5.5 million children with undocumented parents (Passel and Cohn, 2011). Research on these children has been severely limited by the lack of information on the legal status of immigrants in the vast majority of large-scale surveys. The scarcity of such data is particularly problematic for studies of Mexican-origin children, who currently comprise about 17% of all U.S. children but about 40% of children with immigrant parents and 70% of children with unauthorized immigrant parents (Passel and Cohn, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

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A key issue for understanding the life chances of Mexican children of immigrants is whether having unauthorized parents negatively affects early development (Yoshikawa and Kholoptseva, 2013). As noted, this issue is understudied because few data sources include measures of parental legal status, and even fewer also assess child development (Yoshikawa and Kalil, 2011). Apart from ethnographic research, the existing literature is based on studies that draw inferences from comparisons of: (a) ethnic groups that differ with respect to the proportion of immigrants that are undocumented and (b) citizens and non-citizens. Such studies provide useful information, but fail to demonstrate whether and how children with undocumented parents differ from children with documented or U.S.-born parents. Thus, scholars increasingly argue that more systematic collection and analysis of data from direct questions about the legal status of immigrant parents is necessary to address how this relatively neglected dimension of diversity affects child development (Glick, 2010; Yoshikawa and Kalil, 2011).

Young children's cognitive skills are fundamental building blocks for later success. In particular, extensive research demonstrates that reading and mathematics skills at the point of school entry are critical to later academic achievement (Duncan et al., 2007; Entwisle and Alexander, 2002). Prior studies also document that Mexican-origin children are disadvantaged with respect to early cognitive development and those with immigrant parents have lower cognitive skills than their counterparts with U.S.-born parents (Fuller et al., 2009; Guerrero et al., 2013; Padilla et al., 2002). In addition, indirect evidence from one study suggests that early cognitive achievement is lower among children with undocumented versus documented immigrant parents (Yoshikawa, 2011). However, this issue has not been investigated with representative survey data and direct measurement of parental legal status.

Using one of the few representative data sources with detailed questions on the legal status of immigrants, the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS), this research focuses on the cognitive skills of children ages 3 to 5. We first examine whether and how emergent reading and mathematics skills vary by ethnicity, maternal nativity, and maternal legal status. This involves contrasts between Mexican children with undocumented, documented (permanent resident and naturalized), and U.S.-born mothers. Although we focus primarily on Mexican-origin children, white and black children with U.S.-born mothers are also incorporated into the analysis as benchmarks for assessing relative standing.¹ Several potential explanations for the observed associations are evaluated and discussed.

2. Background

2.1. Immigration status

Approximately 91% of children under the age of six who have undocumented parents are American citizens by birth (Yoshikawa and Kholoptseva, 2013). Nonetheless, these children face unique disadvantages as a result of a constellation of factors related to their parents' unauthorized status. Immigration statuses reflect hierarchical positions established by institutions through laws, rules and administrative procedures. Among the foreign born, naturalized citizens are at the top of this hierarchy. Petitioners for naturalization must meet a strict set of requirements, including continuous residence in the United States, knowledge of English and civics, compliance with laws, and evidence of "good moral character," before taking an oath of allegiance. Lawful permanent residents (LPRs) are in a middle position; they are authorized to live and work in the United States and to receive public benefits after a probationary period. These documented immigrants are issued "green cards" that verify their legal status. At the bottom of the hierarchy are undocumented residents without a green card or a visa permitting temporary residence (Romero, 2009).

These legal status distinctions both influence and are influenced by the characteristics of immigrants. For example, immigrants with lower human capital (education, skills and abilities valued by employers) are more likely to enter the United States without legal authorization than those with higher levels of human capital. In turn, lack of documentation reinforces disadvantage because it limits access to desirable jobs and benefits that are restricted to legal residents (Flippen, 2012).

Among Mexicans, undocumented immigrants have very low human capital and often work in low-wage jobs with little security (Flippen, 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Massey and Gentsch, 2014). Consequently, children with undocumented parents have a high rate of poverty, relative to children with documented or citizen parents. In addition, unauthorized parents are ineligible for federal benefits for adults that might improve family well-being (Yoshikawa and Kholoptseva, 2013). While their citizen children are eligible for public benefits, undocumented parents' unfamiliarity with public programs and fear of detection may decrease their likelihood of accessing these benefits for their children. These disadvantages may be compounded by psychological distress resulting from perceived social exclusion and a lack of legal rights (Louie, 2012).

The relatively low human capital and earnings of undocumented immigrants, a desire to remain unnoticed, and preferences for living near Spanish-speaking co-ethnics also may influence the types of neighborhoods in which the undocumented settle. One recent study (Hall and Greenman, 2013) of subjective assessments of neighborhood quality in a nationally-representative sample suggests that Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants live in less-advantaged neighborhoods than their documented counterparts. In unadjusted comparisons, undocumented immigrants ranked at or near the bottom on multiple dimensions of neighborhood quality in comparisons with documented Mexican/Central American immigrants and U.S.-born Latinos, whites and blacks. In multivariate models that controlled for various

¹ For ease of presentation, non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks are referred to as whites and blacks throughout this article.

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