



# Do less-skilled immigrants work more? Examining the work time of Mexican immigrant men in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Using data from the US Current Population Surveys 2006–2008, I examine the weekly work hours of Mexican immigrants. Mexican immigrant workers on average work 2–4 h less than non-Hispanic whites per week, which contradicts the popular portrait of long immigrant work hours. Four mechanisms to explain this gap are proposed and examined. Results show that the work time disparity between non-Hispanic white and Mexican immigrant workers is explained by differences in human capital, ethnic concentration in the labor market, and selection process into employment. English proficiency has limited effect on work time after location in labor market is specified, while the effect of citizenship status remains robust.

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“You get five or six [Mexican] guys living together, sometimes ten. The places are messy – they’d never live that way at home – but they work all the time.”

A Social Worker in New York (Piore, 1979, p. 55)

“Yes, the immigrants just want to work, work long hours, just want to do anything. They spend a lot of money coming up from Mexico. They want as many hours as possible.”

A Fast-food Manager (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003)

## 1. Introduction

Less-skilled immigrants have long been considered to have a strong commitment to work. This commitment is supported by contemporary scholarly analyses showing their high labor force participation rates (Waldinger and Feliciano, 2004; Waldinger et al., 2007), and a willingness to take demeaning or riskier jobs which are rejected by their native counterpart (Foner, 2000; Orrenius and Zavodny, 2009; Piore, 1979; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Waters, 2001). However, one crucial aspect of labor force participation and socioeconomic incorporation of immigrants, that is, their work time, has seldom been systematically examined in recent literature (the few exceptions are Allensworth, 1997; Lopez and Lozano, 2009; Massey et al., 2002).<sup>1</sup>

The importance of work time for immigrants is explicit: the majority of less-skilled immigrants work in hourly-paid jobs. Their work time thus directly affects their economic well-being and social mobility (Allensworth, 1997). Studying work time differentials also improves our understanding of ethnic-racial inequality in labor market, to the extent that we can compare immigrants to natives of different race-ethnic backgrounds. For example, race-ethnic disparities in wages could be amplified

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<sup>1</sup> These studies treat work time as a supplementary variable for labor supply rather than the variable of interest. They also do not situate immigrant work time in the broader work time opportunity structure literature or consider the possibility of selection bias. Both are addressed in this paper.

if immigrant workers obtain fewer hours than white or black natives. Likewise, disparities in aggregate earnings might over- or under-estimate actual inequality if the role of work time is not examined.

Traditionally, long work time has been portrayed as a critical vehicle for less-skilled immigrant to climb the socioeconomic ladders. From the supply-side point of view, less-skilled immigrants are expected to have longer work hours than native-born workers because of their relatively low reservation wage, low social constraints, and a different evaluation of work, let alone the fact that in many cases working itself is the motive for migration. In addition, the need to send back remittances and anticipated return migration should also drive labor migrants to maximize their work time (Piore, 1979, pp. 52–59; Roberts, 1995).

However, the appetite for work does not ensure opportunity (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Portes and Zhou, 1993). Table 1 presents the means of hours worked last week (denoted HL) and usual hours per week (denoted HU) for employed men aged 25–64 from the Current Population Survey 2006–2008. It shows that Mexican immigrants, especially recent arrivals, on average work 2–4 h less than any other ethnic-racial groups. The disparity between native white and recent Mexican immigrant is most substantial: Mexican men who arrived in the 1990s and 2000s work about 4 h less than third-generation-plus white men. The gap narrows for earlier Mexican arrivals. Those who arrived in 1980s or before in general have similar HL to third-generation-plus non-Hispanic blacks. The means of the second-generation Mexican workers slightly exceed that of black workers for both indicators. Nevertheless, even by the third generation the work time of Mexican-origin workers is still 2 h less than that of third-generation-plus whites.

These results contradict both the popular portrait of a strong immigrant work ethic and the supply-side expectation that less-skilled immigrants should have longer work hours than native-born workers. This paper seeks to investigate and contextualize the work time of less-skilled immigrants in a changing labor market. To be more specific, I ask why less-skilled immigrants *do not* work more than native-born workers. Focusing on Mexican immigrant male workers<sup>2</sup>, the largest less-skilled immigrant group in the United States, I argue that less-skilled immigrants today are likely to obtain less work time than their native-born counterpart because of the changing work time structure of the US economy, where high-skilled workers are demanded to allocate more time to work than in the past, while low-skilled workers have less access to work hours than their counterpart did in the past (Aguiar and Hurst, 2007; Coleman and Pencavel, 1993; Costa, 2000; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004, pp. 31–40).

This shifting work time structure could limit recent less-skilled immigrants' work time through four mechanisms. First, immigrants on average possess less human capital (educational attainment, US labor market experience, and English proficiency). Thus, they are likely to have less access to work hours than native-born workers. Second, even when holding comparable human capital constant, less-skilled immigrants are more likely to take hourly-paid and non-exempt jobs because of ethnic segregation and channeling in the labor market (Pager et al., 2009; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Third, work time is becoming positively associated with the possibility of being employed in this shifting work time distribution. If less-skilled immigrants are more likely to work, their average work hours would be lower because their counterpart in the native-born population stays out of employment. Lastly, since work time has become a rare resource competed over by workers, the ethnic-racial hierarchies in the labor market might hinder immigrant workers from obtaining preferred work schedules. For example, past work finds that, while black men constantly express the preference for more work hours, they obtain 20% fewer annual hours than white men (Bell, 1998). Similarly, given that racial antagonism against less-skilled immigrants has been increasing (Massey, 2007, chapter 4), it is reasonable to suspect that the work time of immigrants could be limited by discriminatory practices in labor markets, especially for those with no citizenship. Even if there is a supply-side preference for longer work hours among less-skilled immigrants, it is unlikely to be observed prior to accounting for these four mechanisms, all of which will tend to depress the work hours of immigrants.

This study intends to advance both immigration and time use studies. It shows that, due to constraints in the labor market, less-skilled immigrants on average have shorter workweeks than their native-born counterpart. It also illustrates that the selection process into employment has non-trivial effect on the labor market performance. Because less-skilled immigrants are more likely to work than the native-born population, on average they tend to have lower labor market performance. Moreover, this study suggests that work time bifurcation (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004) is primarily a "white" phenomenon. Immigrant and minority workers are far less likely to hold an excessively long workweek than their white counterpart.

In the next section, I review the restructuring of work time distribution since the turn of last century to contextualize the work time of Mexican immigrant. I then discuss respectively why differences in human capital, ethnic concentration in labor market, selection process, and discrimination might lead to fewer work hours for Mexican immigrant workers.

## 2. The restructuring of work time

It is well-documented that the distribution of work time went through a dramatic change in the 20th century. In her investigation on the length of workday, Costa (2000) found that, in 1890s, most highly-paid workers on average worked

<sup>2</sup> An alternative strategy for this study is to compare multiple immigrant groups and to include both women and men in the analysis. I focus exclusively on Mexican immigrant and self-identified Mexican American men for two reasons. First, different immigrant groups often face fundamentally different modes of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), including multiple groups would certainly increase the length of this paper and distract readers from the main points of this paper. Second, a significant proportion of Mexican immigrant women are employed in the informal economy. Conventional survey data such as CPS might not accurately capture their labor market performance.

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