

Upward Mobility for Hispanic Immigrants?

The statistics say 'no'

by Linda Thom

Increasingly, demographic studies of immigrants show that many live in poverty. But what of their children and grandchildren? Many folks hold the hope that the descendants of hard-working immigrants will rise from the underclass of American society. Sadly, the numbers do not support this view.

Data Sources

In an effort to simplify the numbers, only two major data sources are used in this article. One is the October 2001 Current Population Survey (CPS) produced by the Bureau of the Census and the other is "Births: Final Data for 2001" which is produced by the National Center for Health Statistics, a division of the Center for Disease Control (Martin).

The CPS is a small sample taken in the years between the decennial censuses. Because of the small sample size, errors can occur. The table is: "Enrollment Status of the Population 3 years old and over by Age, Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin and Nativity."

Only a small sample of the CPS numbers is included. To see if the numbers might be skewed by small sample size, the author compared the 2000 data and the 2001 data. The numbers were consistent between the years and among various age, racial, and ethnic groupings.

Linda Thom is a retiree who fled north out of California several years ago. She formerly worked as an officer for a major bank and as a budget analyst for the County Administrator at Santa Barbara.

The data on births have no reliability issues. Local public health departments collect data for birth certificates. This is transmitted to the state and then to the Federal Government. The numbers used are total, actual numbers and not samples. In addition, the trends are the same dating back over many years so that the data for 2001 is consistent with that of 1992, for example.

Education

One of the primary causes of poverty is poor educational attainment. In "School Enrollment: 2000," the Bureau of the Census reports that between 1990 and

Table 1
High School Dropouts Aged 20 and 21, by Nativity, Oct 2001

(Numbers in thousands)	All	Not HS Grads	Rate
* Natives & their children	5,046	304	6%
* Immigrants	1,002	317	31.6%
* Children of Immigrants	1,806	412	22.8%
* Both immigrants & children	2,808	729	26%

2000, "the total number of 16- to 19-year-old dropouts decreased by 2 percent, [but] **the number of dropouts in the Hispanic population increased by 52 percent**" – emphasis by the author (Day). Jennifer Cheeseman Day, the author of the Census report, attributes this to "rapid population growth." With the exception of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, the number of high school dropouts decreased in all racial and ethnic groups, including Asians. Obviously, the "rapid population

growth” is immigration-driven and the Current Population Survey statistics confirm this.

The CPS enrollment data for October 2001, show that among the 7,854,000 U.S. residents aged 20 and 21, over a million did not complete high school. Of the 1,033,000 dropouts, 71 percent were immigrants and their U.S.-born children but they only make up 36 percent of the people in this age group. Table 1 gives the “raw” data.

The dropout rate, number of dropouts per 100,000 of population group, is especially troubling because the dropout rate for the U.S.-born children of immigrants is 22.8%. This rate is almost quadruple that of native-born residents and their children and is driven by the high dropout rate of Hispanics. The dropout rates in this age group for major racial and ethnic groups are: Non-Hispanic Whites- 8.3%; Blacks who may be Hispanic- 15.6%; Asian-Pacific Islanders- 3.9% and Hispanics- 30.7%. Note, however, that the non-Hispanic black dropout rate for 16- to 19-year olds was 11.7 percent in the 2000 census. Therefore, the Hispanic dropout rate is almost triple the rate of non-Hispanic African-Americans.

Births to Immigrants

Natural increase of immigrants is a growing portion of U.S. population increase. Because of this, the second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants have become a growing portion of the U.S. population.

According to the Bureau of the Census, in 1983, native-born women accounted for 93 percent and immigrant women accounted for 7 percent of the total annual births of 3,896,000. In 1992, U.S. births were 4,065,015. Of these, 84.2 percent were to native-born mothers and 15.8 percent to foreign-born mothers – 3,422,743 and 642,272 respectively.

In 2001, annual births were 4,025,933 and native-born women made up 77.5 percent of new mothers while immigrants made up 22.5 percent, almost a fourth of all annual births. In the decade between 1992 and 2001, births to native-born women decreased both numerically and as a percentage of total annual births. Table 2

summarizes data for 2001 from the National Center of Health Statistics. (Martin).

Because the immigrant share of births rose from 7 percent to 22.5 percent of annual births in less than twenty years, it is clear that in the next twenty years, many births to U.S. mothers will be to U.S.-born mothers whose parents or grandparents were immigrants.

Note that Hispanic births, both to native- and foreign-born women comprised over a fifth of all births. Of the U.S.-born Hispanic women – 313,481 – many are likely children or grandchildren of immigrants. Asian/Pacific Islander (API) women comprise a rapidly growing portion of total births, mostly to immigrant women.

How will these children fare? If they follow the patterns of their parents, in general, Hispanic children will make up a growing portion of America’s underclass. Asian children, overall, will fare better but some groups such as Southeast Asians, display social patterns that result in poverty.

Poverty and Demographic Characteristics

In 1998, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia School of Public Health released a statistical report on the percentage and number of children under age six in poverty. The study covered almost 20 years of data. The NCCP found that in 1996, 56 percent of all poor children under six lived in mother-headed households. In 62 percent of poor households, the most educated parent had less than a high school education while only 10 percent had a parent with more

Table 2
Births in 2001 by Race, Ethnicity, and Nativity

	Total Births	US-Born women	Immigrants
All	4,025,933	3,120,098	905,835
Hispanics	851,851	313,481	538,370
Non-Hisp Whites	2,326,578	2,107,182	219,396
Non-Hisp Blacks	589,917	523,256	66,661
Asian/Pac Island	200,279	33,647	166,632

than a high school education. Sixteen percent of the children were born to teen mothers.

The NCCP study states, “Individuals with higher levels of education generally have more job opportunities, higher wages, and greater job full-time security than those with lower levels of education. In 1996, among children under six whose more educated parent had more than a high school education, 84 percent lived in families in which at least one parent held a job. The poverty rate for this group was less than 4 percent” (Li and Bennet, 1998). Besides lack of education and families headed by teens or single parents, many people are poor because there are many children in the family.

Using actual birth data from 2001, some trends emerge. Immigrant women are less likely to be teen- or unmarried-mothers than are their U.S.-born racial and ethnic counterparts but they have higher fertility rates and so have larger families. Except for Hispanics, immigrant women tend to be better educated than their American-born peers.

“In 2001, 16.1 percent of the foreign born were living below the poverty level, compared with 11.1 percent of natives” (Schmidley). Education makes a difference. But as the data will demonstrate, unmarried mothers, teen pregnancies, and large families lead to dismal lives for generations.

Level of Education of Immigrant Mothers

As a whole, Asian/Pacific Island (API) women are the best educated of all the racial and ethnic groups whether foreign- or native-born. Hispanic women are the least educated of all the groups. For example, among Asian women immigrants 89.4 percent completed 12 or more years of school. Among Hispanic, immigrant mothers only 41.5 percent attained this level of education. Of the 851,851 births to Hispanic mothers in 2001, almost 400,000 were to Mexican immigrant women, only a third of whom had completed high school. Of the total 177,652 mothers giving birth in 2001 who had 0 to 8 years of

Table 3
2001 Births to Unmarried and Teen Mothers
by Nativity, Race, and Ethnicity

US-Born Mothers	Unmarried	Teenagers	Not HS grads
Hispanic	47.9%	22.3%	32.2%
NH White	23.2%	8.5%	10.1%
NH Black	72.1%	20.6%	25.9%
Asian/Pac Is.	32.9%	14.2%	11.4%
Immigrant Mothers			
Hispanic	39.2%	11.6%	58.5%
NH White	10.6%	3.1%	9.3%
NH Black	40.6%	9.7%	15.8%
Asian/Pac Is.	11.2%	2.3%	10.6%

school, 121,078 or 89 percent were Hispanic (Martin).

According to Census data, as of March 2002, **among all immigrants 25 years and older, 21.9 percent had less than 9 years of school as compared to 4.4% of Americans** (emphasis by the author). “The percentage of the foreign born with a bachelor’s degree or more was not statistically different from that of the native population – 26.8 percent” (Schmidley).

In the second and third generations, Hispanics continue to lag in educational attainment. Again, referring to data from birth certificates, a third of American-born Hispanic new mothers did not complete high school as compared to 15 percent of non-Hispanic American-born mothers. (Martin). The Columbia University study found that among 62 percent of poor children, the most educated parent had less than 12 years of school.

Education matters.

Unmarried- and Teen-Mothers

In every racial and ethnic group, U.S.-born, new mothers are more likely to be unmarried or teens or both (under 20 years). Think about the significance of this as it relates to poverty. In the Columbia University study

cited above, 16 percent of poor children had teen mothers and 56 percent lived in single-parent households. (See Table 3.)

No matter the nativity of Hispanic women, the numbers of births are appallingly high. Of the 851,851 births to Hispanic women in 2001, 611,000 births were to Mexican-origin women of whom 221,182 were U.S.-born and 389,818 foreign-born. Mexican women accounted for 327,233 of the total 532,249 births to Hispanic women in 1989. Total annual Hispanic births, therefore, rose by 319,602 between 1989 and 2001 and Mexican-origin women accounted for 89 percent of the increase in that period (Martin). Central and South American women contributed the next greatest increase in births – 72,443 births in 1989 and 121,365 births in 2001.

Note also, that among U.S.-born Asian/Pacific Islander mothers, the percent of unmarried women is triple, and the percent of teen mothers are 6 times higher than the percentage for their immigrant peers. No single Asian immigrant group accounts for this.

Among U.S.-born non-Hispanic Blacks, teen births to unmarried and poorly educated mothers make up a huge portion of the total population of new mothers, but the teen birth rate among them decreased by 36 percent between 1991 and 2001 (Martin). In 2001, Hispanic teenagers had the highest birth rate, 92.5 per 1,000, followed by non-Hispanic Black (75.6), non-Hispanic White (30.0) and API teenagers (20.4). Hispanics also had the highest birthrate among unmarried women – 98 per 1,000 births. Black women, including some Hispanics, had an unmarried birth rate of 70.1 as compared to non-

Hispanic White women, 27.7, and API women, 23.2 per 1,000 births (Martin).

Overall, educational attainment among Hispanic

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women increased for U.S.-born women. In all other cases, the bad news for U.S.-born mothers overwhelmed the good news.

Family Size

Obviously, low income causes poverty but another contributing factor is household size. As every parent knows, children make one financially poorer, albeit richer in other ways. Children are consumers of income and adults are both consumers and producers of income. The more consumers per household, the more likely are the members to live in poverty. Fertility, therefore, matters.

As a group, immigrants have higher fertility than do American women. High fertility is closely correlated with low educational attainment. Hispanics are poorly educated; they have higher fertility than do non-Hispanics.

The total fertility rate (TFR) estimates the number of births that a group of 1,000 women would have if they experienced throughout their childbearing years the same age-specific rates observed in a given year (Martin). TFR declined for most race/ethnic groups for 2001, but increased among Hispanics. Table 4 shows the TFR’s for the years 1990 and 2001. If for, example, a cohort has a TFR of 1,853 births per 1,000, that means that an individual woman’s total fertility rate would be 1.853 or below replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.

Non-Hispanic white and API women have below replacement fertility but both have risen slightly since 1990. The total fertility of Non-Hispanic Blacks may be above replacement level but note the significant decline in TFR since 1990. Hispanic fertility at 3,165 per 1,000 births, on the

Table 4
Total Fertility Rates for 1990 and 2001
by Race and Ethnicity
 (Births per thousand women)

Race/Ethnicity	2001	1990
Non-Hispanic White	1,853	1,850.5
Non-Hispanic Black	2,190.5	2,547.5
Hispanic	3,165	2,959.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2,035.5	2002.5

other hand, increased markedly between 1990 and 2001 and is one child above replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Obviously, immigrant fertility rates are driving this.

Conclusion

While scholars may debate the cause of American poverty, the numbers show clearly that for many immigrants and their descendants the American dream is a nightmare. The negative numbers for American Blacks are instructive because Americans understand that poverty among Blacks continues generation after generation. Although African-Americans continue to steadily climb out of poverty, the improvement proceeds slowly. Moreover, millions of uneducated Black immigrants are not replenishing the legions of the poor as are millions of immigrants of other races and ethnicities. For African-Americans, hope for a better future is justified.

Even if Congress reverses the direction of current immigration policy by declaring a moratorium, America will have an ever-expanding underclass because of high fertility rates among Hispanics and some Asian populations. Many of the children and grandchildren of

immigrants are failing to thrive and will continue to do so for generations. •

SOURCES

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