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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics  
April 22, 2014

Latinos and Socioeconomic Status:

*Understanding the Link Between Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement of Mexican American Youth*

**Key Words:**

Socioeconomic Status, Income, Parental Involvement, Parental Education, Mexican-Americans, Academic Achievement

**Description:**

Many socioeconomic factors influence the academic achievement (e.g. grades, standardized test scores) of Mexican-American youth in the United States.

**Key Points:**

- Mexican-Americans are significantly underperforming (academically)
- Lower socioeconomic status results in lack of academic success
- Parental Involvement is a strong predictor of academic success
- Programs to help underperforming students are necessary

**Issue Brief:**

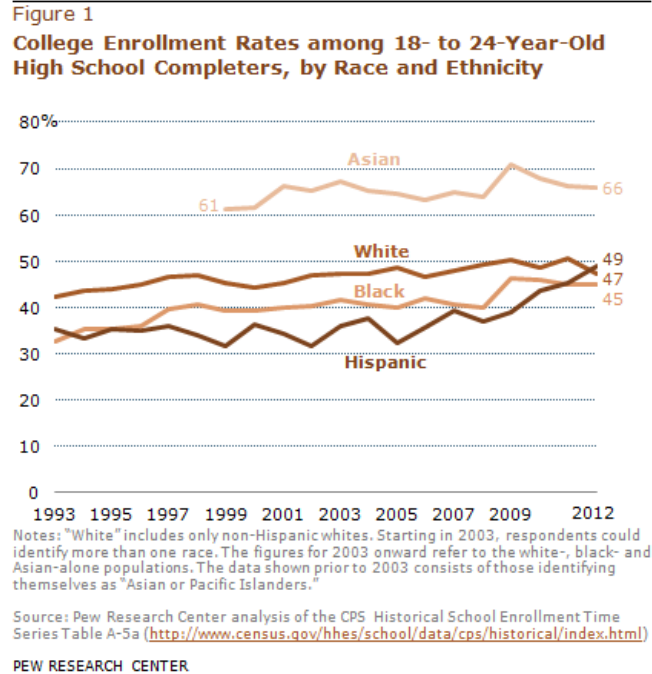
Mexican-Americans are the fastest growing segment of the United States population, constituting 65-percent of the Hispanic population and 10.3-percent of the United States population as of 2011. Because the Mexican-American population in the U.S. is increasing, Mexican-American youth should be our country's main concern, specifically in the academic sense. Academic performance (grades and standardized test scores) is lower among Mexican-American youth than among other native and non-native born groups. The poor academic success of Mexican-American students can be attributed to different socioeconomic factors, but the degree to which each factor contributes to their low academic achievement varies.

Lincoln H. Hall performed a study in 1972 to observe correlations between socioeconomic status and academic success of Mexican-American students entering community college, particularly because they were a main concern for the southwestern part of the United

States. Comparing the academic success of Mexican-American students from middle and lower socioeconomic statuses, Hall found that significantly fewer Mexican-American students of lower socioeconomic statuses graduated from community college or transferred to a four-year university than those from middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Because Hall's results also showed similar levels of academic achievement among the Anglo-American student body, ethnicity was dismissed as a possible determinant for academic success. Clearly, socioeconomic factors were large contributors to the academic success of Mexican-American students in 1972.

However, a recent University of Southern California study found that even Latinos in some of the best California public high schools show little advancement relative to other ethnic groups; most Californian Latinos go to community colleges. One such student said, "My parents, they didn't go to college. They had some schooling, but they didn't know how to enroll in college." One can conclude that children who grow up in a household with "more educated" parents tend to outperform students whose parents have not attained a post-secondary education.

It is not to say that income does not affect Latinos' academic success. Parental socioeconomic status has played a major role in children's available resources. Specifically among Latinos, low-income students are ultimately underperforming in school and are underrepresented in 4-year college institutions. In 2000, 24.6-percent of Hispanic earnings were in the lowest income quartile. Nonetheless, college enrollment among Latinos is increasing (see image).



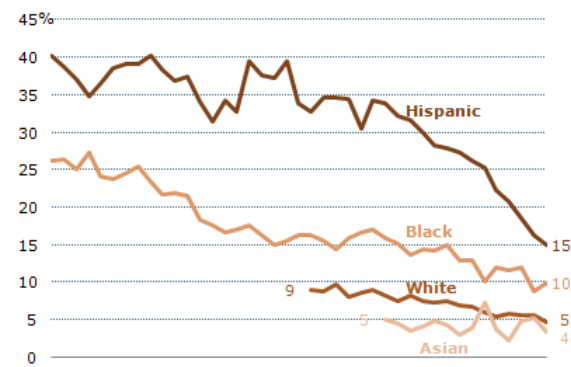
Clearly, Hall did not perform a comprehensive study in which different socioeconomic factors were assessed. For example, he did not study factors such as family income, parental involvement, parental education and occupation. Few Mexican-American adults have high school diplomas, college degrees, or any post-secondary education. Consequently, many Mexican-American children come from uneducated backgrounds. Mexican-Americans' little educational background has contributed to their high dropout rates. These low poverty levels and lower socioeconomic backgrounds serve as barriers for the academic success of Mexican-American students.

Although many socioeconomic factors contribute to the academic achievement of Mexican-American students, some are stronger predictors than others. For example, a study performed by Rosigno in 2012 showed that parental education is a strong predictor of youth's academic achievement, particularly in math and reading. In fact, it showed to be a stronger predictor than family income. However, higher academic achievement runs much deeper than parental education; Inn Altschul studied the effects parental involvement in children's education

affects academic outcomes. The study’s results showed that positive parental involvement (raising academic expectations, investing financial and personal resources) is the dominant determinant for Mexican-American youth’s academic success. Ultimately, the results proved that family socioeconomic factors affect academic achievement.

Because Mexican-Americans lack resources, increasing the parental social intervention in children’s education would improve the students’ overall academic success, especially because it would take longer to improve their overall socioeconomic statuses. However, resources like extracurricular instruction and mentoring would be a more direct effort to help underperforming students. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education has implemented programs like Upward Bound that provide academic support to students, specifically for college entry. Considering the Hispanic dropout rate is nearly three times that of whites, Hispanic (particularly, Mexican-American) youth would benefit from a college preparatory program like Upward Bound. This would serve to increase the opportunities for academic advancement available to Hispanics, particularly Mexican-Americans, of low socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Figure 2**  
**High School Dropout Rates Among 18- to 24-Year-Olds, by Race and Ethnicity**



Notes: The high school dropout rate is the share of 18- to 24-year-olds who had not completed high school and were not enrolled in school. "White" includes only non-Hispanic whites. Starting in 2003, respondents could identify more than one race. The figures for 2003 onward refer to the white-, black- and Asian-alone populations. The data shown prior to 2003 consists of those identifying themselves as "Asian or Pacific Islanders."

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the CPS Historical School Enrollment Time Series Table A-5a (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/data/cps/historical/index.html>)

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