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Second-Generation Latinos in Nebraska: A First Look

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Nebraska's foreign-born population grew faster than that of any other Midwestern state between 1990 and 2000. The state also experienced the second-highest increase in the number of children of immigrants in prekindergarten to fifth grade during the same period. Between 2000 and 2005, the state experienced the eighth-largest proportional increase of foreign-born individuals of all US states, and the foreign born accounted for more than 60 percent of the state's population growth.

Immigrants from Latin America made up 53.8 percent of Nebraska's foreign born in 2004. The majority of those, about 75 percent, are from Mexico. Today, Latino migration is largely — although not entirely — labor migration. Indeed, the loss of non-Latino whites in selected communities has been offset by a burgeoning Latino immigrant workforce and their children (see Table 1). Mexicans and Central Americans arriving in the early 1990s heeded the call for labor from a new breed of meatpacking companies that were expanding or relocating to rural areas.

Also fueling this population growth in the state is a large number of children born to immigrant parents — the second generation. In 2004, a much larger proportion of Latinas (20.6 percent) than white women (13.2 percent) or African-American women (14 percent) were in their 20s, an age band commonly associated with peak levels of fertility.

Not unlike other states experiencing unprecedented immigration, a growing segment of the Nebraska public is expressing concerns about whether these new immigrants, particularly those of Hispanic origin, will "assimilate" into US culture and society.

However, most of the research on the second generation has been conducted in traditional immigrant gateways located in coastal and border states. This report begins to shed some light on what immigrant incorporation and the second generation's journey to socioeconomic adaptation may look like in the country's heartland.

What Makes Nebraska Different from Other States

Much of the debate on the future of the second generation centers on whether the children of these newest arrivals will follow the straight-line assimilation path associated with Europeans arriving in the first half of the 20th century, or a segmented path where upward and downward assimilation are equally plausible. Regardless of where scholars come down on this question, there is a clear consensus that the fate of the second and subsequent generations hinges largely on how their parents and grandparents are received in their places of settlement.

Nebraska appears to lack some of the elements conducive to positive adaptation for large numbers of labor immigrants and their children: the state has little recent experience with immigration; it lacks jobs at the top of the employment scale; it is predominantly white; and its new immigrant community, by definition, lacks the level of social capital and political power associated with older immigrant destinations.

Table 1. Percentage Change in White Alone (not Hispanic/Latino) and Hispanic/Latino Populations in Selected Nebraska Cities, 1990 to 2000

City	White Alone (not Hispanic/Latino)		Hispanic/Latino		Percent change in the white alone (not Hispanic/Latino) population in 2000 (based on 1990)	Percent change in the Hispanic/Latino population in 2000 (based on 1990)
	1990	2000	1990	2000		
Omaha	276,218	293,876	10,288	29,397	6%	186%
Bellevue	26,968	36,916	1,213	2,609	37%	115%
Columbus	19,171	19,209	167	1,395	0%	735%
Fremont	23,261	23,570	165	1,085	1%	558%
Grand Island	36,732	34,960	1,887	6,845	-5%	263%
Hastings	22,192	21,790	268	1,343	-2%	401%
Kearney	23,415	25,525	667	1,118	9%	68%
Lexington	6,231	4,635	329	5,121	-26%	1457%
Lincoln	179,302	198,087	3,764	8,154	10%	117%
Norfolk	20,748	20,834	299	1,790	0%	499%
North Platte	20,994	21,725	1,355	1,596	3%	18%
Schuyler	3,873	2,893	164	2,423	-25%	1377%
Scottsbluff	10,460	10,548	2,720	3,476	1%	28%
South Sioux City	8,704	8,074	545	2,958	-7%	443%

Source: OLLAS Special Report calculations from US Census Bureau, Census 1990 Summary Tape File 1 (STF 1) and Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF1).

However, many of these same factors could conceivably operate as "antidotes" to downward assimilation: labor competition among immigrants is not as intense as in California or New York; there are plenty of jobs at the bottom of the scale where immigrant labor is most wanted; and, in addition, a growing immigrant presence is creating mid-tier jobs that, until now, were nonexistent in the state.

Absent are what would technically qualify as "inner-city" neighborhoods and "inner-city" schools and the disadvantages associated with such contexts in places like Los Angeles or New York. Also, the state lacks some of the most egregious history of segregation and antiminority sentiments found in southern and border states.

Either way, positive outcomes for the second generation will be measured by, or highly correlate with, the extent to which these new destinations provide them with sufficient educational opportunities to shrink the distance between the abundant unskilled jobs their parents occupy and the scarcer well-paid jobs the state's economy produces.

Methodology

This study relies primarily on two data sources, the Current Population Survey (CPS) and findings from the authors' survey, Educational Attainment in Nebraska (EAN).

The results of the March CPS for four years (1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003) were analyzed. Because of the small sample size of CPS, the data from these four years have been merged. As the year 2000 falls in the midpoint among these years, this merged sample is referred to as the "2000" survey. In 2003, the March CPS oversampled Latinos. Therefore, the analysis was weighted to reflect proportions in the population of Nebraska. Due to the small number of respondents from Latin American countries other than Mexico, these respondents were grouped into the single category labeled "other countries."

The EAN survey was conducted in four urban high schools during 2004 and 2005. All racial/ethnic groups were surveyed, and close to 150 students (98 of them Latinos) completed surveys. The findings for Latino students are reported here in order to focus on a comparison between generations.

Several questions were modeled on those used in the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) by sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (see [The Second Generation in Early Adulthood: New Findings from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study](#)). Since the response rate was still quite low (below 20 percent), results should be interpreted with caution as they are descriptive. However, these results do provide a first look at Latino students in Nebraska that has been unavailable prior to this survey.

Results from the Current Population Survey

The data from CPS attest to the newness of this migration wave in several ways. Unlike traditional destinations, where the second generation is often in the minority, CPS reveals that approximately equal proportions of Latino Nebraskans are from the first, second, and third generations (both parents born in the United States): 34.9 percent are first generation, 35 percent are second generation, and 30.1 percent are third or higher generations.

Data from the 2000 census estimated the total Latino population of Nebraska at 94,425. Based on the 35 percent figure from CPS data, the number of Latinos in the second generation is estimated at about 33,000.

The second generation is also much younger than the first and, expectedly, the third: 59.2 percent of second-generation respondents are under 15 years of age, compared to 43.1 percent from the third generation and only 10.7 percent of the first generation, while their parents are primarily of working age. Fifty-two percent of the first generation is between ages 25 and 44, compared to only 12.7 percent of second-generation and 25.1 percent of third-generation respondents.

Approximately 81 percent of second-generation Nebraskan Latinos surveyed trace their origins to Mexico; the remainder have origins primarily in South and Central America. Among all second-generation immigrants in Nebraska, 24 percent are from Mexico and about 8 percent are from other Latin American countries.

Nearly half of all second-generation immigrants, or 48.4 percent, are from Europe/Canada/Australia, and 17.8 percent are from Asia. Second-generation Europeans immigrants tend to be much older than those groups that make up the bulk of newer arrivals, such as Latinos and Asians. From a policy perspective, the number of school-aged Latinos presence in the schools is therefore much more salient and the main concern here.

Table 2 shows the percentage of Nebraskans ages 16 to 24 who are enrolled in school, by generation and area of origin. This table should be interpreted with caution because the percentages of the subgroups are based on very small numbers of respondents, but first impressions can be formed. The table demonstrates that first-generation Mexicans of this age group are unlikely to be in school. This group most likely arrived as young adults to work in meatpacking and similar low-skill occupations.

Other immigrants and their descendants, the majority of whom came as either refugees or professional migrants, are enrolled at a rate of almost 60 percent, with nearly all of them enrolled in school full time.

The picture for Mexican-origin migrants improves dramatically for the second generation, as 54.5 percent of this group is enrolled in school, 90 percent of them full time. Those of the second generation from other countries are enrolled at similar rates to the first generation.

Table 2. Percentage of Nebraskans Ages 16 to 24 Enrolled in School by Generation and Area of Origin (2000)

	Enrollment Types		Unweighted N of group
	Percent of group who are enrolled	Percent of enrolled who attend full time	
First generation			
Mexico	22.30%	59.70%	n=6
Other countries	59.90%	96.00%	n=20
Second generation			
Mexico	54.50%	90.30%	n=15
Other countries	61.00%	93.40%	n=18
Third generation			
Non-Hispanic white	59.10%	92.00%	n=515
Non-Hispanic black	56.40%	66.70%	n=26
Hispanic	49.40%	96.50%	n=15

Source: Current Population Survey (weighted), March 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003

The final section of Table 2 compares third-generation groups, using the categories of non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, and Hispanic. A direct comparison cannot be made between the first and second generations from Mexico and all Hispanic respondents; however, in 2000, 76 percent of Latinos in Nebraska were from Mexico.

Just under half of the Hispanic third generation, slightly below second-generation Mexicans, is enrolled in school. Third-generation Latinos who are enrolled in school are quite likely to be enrolled full time (96.5 percent). While 92 percent of non-Hispanic whites are enrolled full time, only 66.7 percent of non-Hispanic blacks fall in that category. Again, we urge caution with these findings because of the small sample sizes.

Among adults in Nebraska (ages 25 to 65), the percentage of those with less than a high school diploma and the percentage with a college degree or more for first-, second-, and third-generation respondents were calculated. As Table 3 reveals, 73.8 percent of first-generation Mexicans (again, overwhelmingly labor immigrants) have less than a high school diploma, compared to only 20.6 percent of immigrants from other countries. Only 2.6 percent of those from Mexico have at least a four-year college degree, but nearly 40 percent of those from other countries have that level of education.

Table 3. Percentage of Nebraskans Ages 25 to 65 with Less than a High School Diploma or with a College Degree by Generation and Area of Origin (2000)

	Percent with less than than high school diploma	Percent with a BA degree or higher	
First generation			Unweighted N of group
Mexico	73.80%	2.60%	n=128
Other countries	20.60%	39.50%	n=150
Second generation			
Mexico	25.60%	22.80%	n=33
Other countries	8.50%	28.10%	n=115
Third generation			
Non-Hispanic white	4.80%	26.90%	n=3599
Non-Hispanic black	14.80%	14.30%	n=128
Hispanic	18.60%	9.00%	n=78

Source: Current Population Survey (weighted), March 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003

The picture for the second generation again shows substantial improvement: Only about 25 percent of Mexican-origin migrants lack a high school diploma, and nearly one-fourth (22.8 percent) have a college degree.

Those from other countries exhibit similar gains, and only 8.5 percent have less than a high school diploma; 28 percent, a rate not much higher than that of Mexican-origin Latinos, have a college degree.

Hispanic respondents from the third generation are less likely than second-generation Mexicans to lack a high school diploma (18.6 percent and 25.6 percent, respectively). However, they are also less likely than second-generation Latinos to have a college degree. Non-Hispanic whites of the third generation are quite unlikely to have left high school with no diploma (4.8 percent), and 26.9 percent have a college degree, compared to 14.3 percent of blacks and 9 percent of Hispanics.

Overall, we can see that for both school enrollment and college degree completion, second-generation Nebraskans of Mexican origin are attaining higher levels of education than those from the first generation. These results are comparable to those produced by some of the largest studies on the second generation in traditional destinations.

EAN Survey Findings on Parents

It is widely known that parents' educational status is a major predictor of their children's educational and socioeconomic futures. In the EAN survey, a variable was constructed that used the highest level of education for either parent as an indicator of human capital in the family.

Consistent with CPS findings, about 78 percent of the foreign-born Latino immigrant children reported a high school education or less as the highest level of education for either parent. Among second-generation, US-born Latino children, this percentage is just 58 percent. In other words, about 42 percent had a parent with at least some years of college or vocational education beyond high school. This particular factor augurs a slightly better prospect for second-generation children.

The financial situation of these children's parents, however, looms large as a significant barrier to these youngsters' educational achievement. The majority of first-generation high school children in the EAN survey (55.2 percent) and over a third of second-generation high school children (38.4 percent) said they had to work in order to help their parents; only 18.2 percent of third-generation respondents said the same. Predictably, an overwhelming percentage of first- and second-generation children's parents (almost 90 percent) work in relatively low-skilled and low-wage immigrant niches such as the meatpacking, construction, and service industries.

Second-generation high school students reported very high rates of labor-force participation for their parents. Of those who provided information on parent work status, 100 percent of fathers and 69 percent of mothers work.

Despite these high rates, parents' wages are clearly insufficient to support their families, let alone pay for their children's college education. About 70 percent of Latino children surveyed said they would need a scholarship in order to be able to attend college, and most believed their parents' combined income would not disqualify them from need-based scholarships.

When both immigrant parents work long hours, they may not have enough time to supervise their children and help them with homework and other school activities. This lack of parental support can become a barrier to successful incorporation. The following is not an uncommon situation among a relatively large number of second-generation children of parents who work two shifts in Nebraska's meatpacking or office-cleaning companies:

I only get to see my parents like 20 to 30 minutes each day because of work. The only full day we are together is Sunday.

There has also been much written about whether these immigrant children's deep sense of obligation to their families becomes another serious barrier to their socioeconomic advancement. Some, however, believe that such sentiments can serve as a countermeasure to the individualistic and often overly materialistic goals that suffuse mainstream US culture. This latter view was repeatedly corroborated in the survey, if only as a lofty aspiration:

The most important thing that will help me finish high school is the fact that I know that if I keep studying I will be able to help my parents economically until the day comes when they don't have to work. I also do this so that I won't suffer the way they have.

It has become increasingly difficult for many immigrant families to remain together while eking out a living. Research on the second generation shows a correlation between high levels of family fragmentation and their children's downward assimilation.

Ethnographic data collected in Nebraska during the last 15 years reveal that a large, and possibly increasing, number of immigrant children live with only one or neither of their parents. This is because parents remain in their country of origin to care for other family members, and/or because they lack legal or safe means to join the other half of the family in the United States. Many youngsters are now traveling alone to join relatives or friends who help them find jobs upon arrival in Nebraska.

Only about 63 percent of the children surveyed said they live with both parents. In contrast, the 2000 census found that, nationally, this was true for 80 percent of immigrant children.

What Students Think of Their Schools and Their Own Futures

School context and friends can be a powerful influence on the educational future of the second generation. One would be hard-pressed to find in Nebraska the extremely disadvantaged inner-city schools present in larger and older immigrant destinations.

Nonetheless, the majority of Latino immigrant children in Nebraska attend schools with high concentrations of Latinos and other minorities, a pattern that is expected to intensify as the next generation comes of age. This is the case in the state's largest school district, the Omaha Public School District (OPS). As of December 2006, Latino children, overwhelmingly of Mexican origin, made up 22.6 percent of OPS enrollment and are projected to be the majority in as little as five years.

OPS has the lowest ACT (college entrance exam) scores of all Omaha-area districts, and the highest percentage of children in poverty and in English language-learner (ELL) classes. Also, OPS includes neighborhoods with the poorest tax base, a major factor in the school-aid funding formula.

OPS found its fierce "one city, one school district" campaign, which it believed would correct such imbalances, turned on its head by LB1024. Passed on April 13, 2006, this law splits OPS into three districts along existing racial and ethnic neighborhood boundaries. Some argue this will amount to legalized segregation, and a lawsuit challenging it has been filed with the support of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

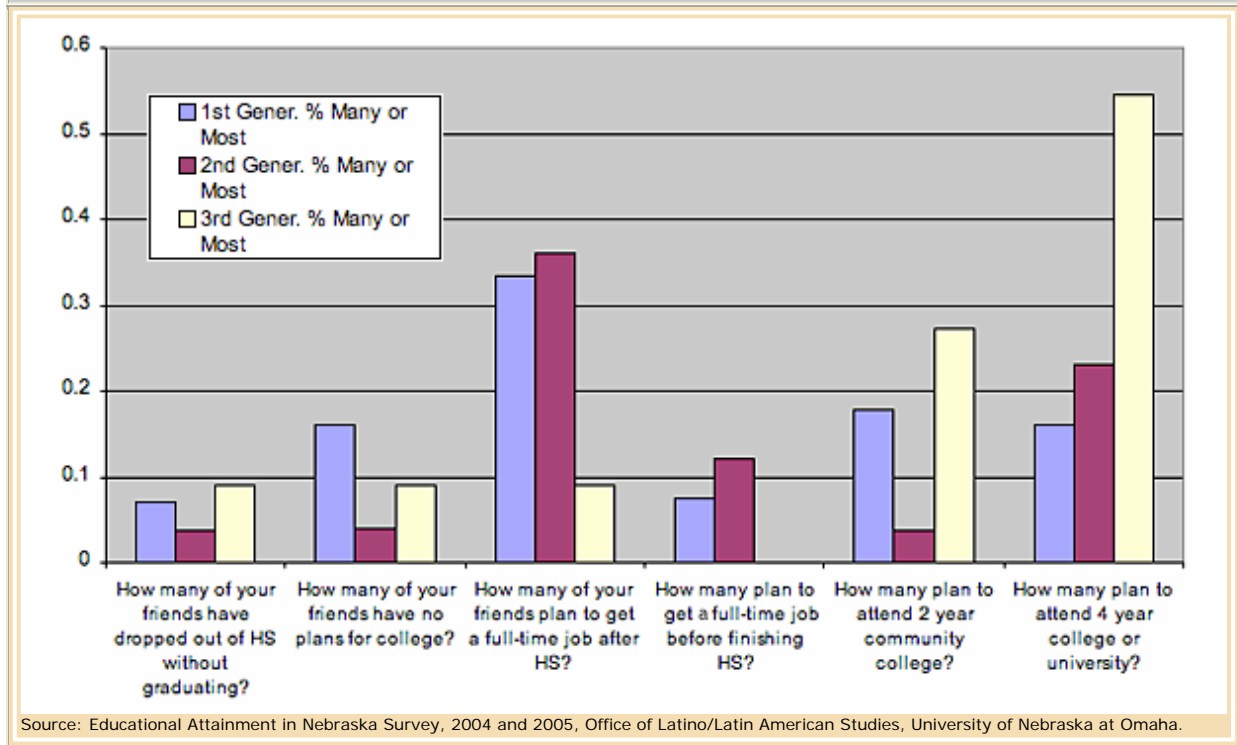
The EAN survey included a series of questions about school context. As a rule, students of all generations rated their schools fairly high on characteristics such as school spirit and treatment by teachers. The overwhelming majority of second-generation Latino students (92 percent) also said they believe it is fairly easy to make friends with students from other racial/ethnic groups.

On the other hand, third-generation students tended to experience fewer problems in these Omaha schools than did first- and second-generation students. For example, fewer third-generation students felt unsafe at school, or felt that fights among students of diverse racial and ethnic origins or gangs were much of a problem, than did either first- or second-generation students.

Over 60 percent of students in each generation group did agree that disruptions by other students get in the way of their education. A similar percentage said they had experienced discrimination, with second-generation students slightly more likely to report discrimination (65.4 percent) than the third generation (59.3 percent). It is unclear how this complex school environment will ultimately affect the fortunes of the second generation.

The picture seems equally ambiguous when it came to peers' influence. Few students had large numbers of friends who dropped out of high school without graduating (see Figure 1). However, there are clear generational differences regarding friends' plans to attend a four-year college. Over half of third-generation students reported that many or most of their friends had such plans. Yet only 23 percent of second-generation and 16 percent of first-generation students felt the same.

Figure 1. Friends' Educational Plans by Generation (2004 and 2005)

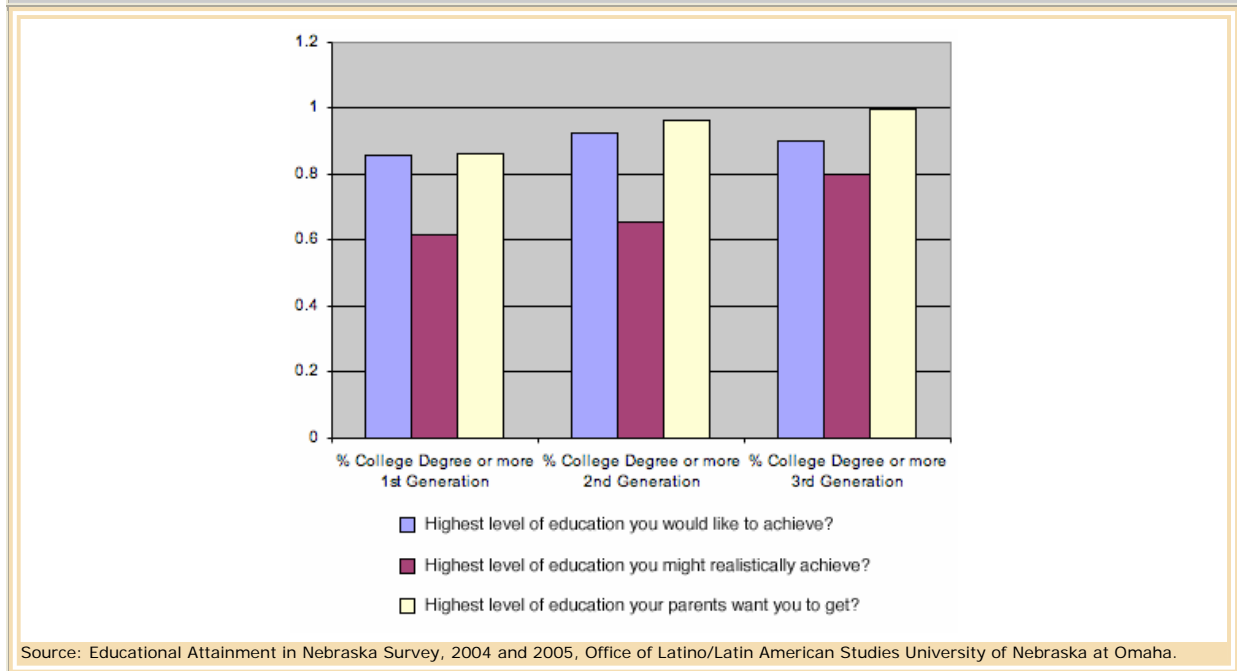


The need to work or the desire to quickly overcome their parents' economic limitations also comes through in Figure 1. Over 30 percent of both first- and second-generation students reported that many or most of their friends plan to work full time after high school, compared to only 9 percent of third-generation students. The tendency of a large number of students to drop out even before graduating in order to get one of the many unskilled jobs available to them in Omaha was a common concern expressed in various interviews with OPS principals, community liaisons, and English as a second language (ESL) administrators.

On the positive side, the majority of the students surveyed appear to be building their incorporation strategy by anchoring it to, rather than divorcing it from, their parents' support system. Most students reported having a good relationship with their parents; the overwhelming majority (85.3 percent) are bilingual, and a minority (41.3 percent), prefer to speak English.

Finally, Figure 2 reveals differences in educational aspirations and expectations across generations of Latino students. All three generations have high aspirations, with over 85 percent of each group wanting at least a bachelor's degree.

Figure 2. Student Educational Goals, Realistic Expectations, and Parents' Goals by Generation (2004 and 2005)



However, while each group expects to accomplish less than they desire, 24 percent of first-generation and 27 percent of second-generation students believed they will not attain their educational goals. Just 10 percent of third-generation students felt this way. Students also perceived that their parents' aspirations for them are similar to their own aspirations, but that their parents expect them to achieve more than they themselves believe is realistic.

Conclusions

The picture of the second generation in new destination states such as Nebraska is still emerging and remains highly uncertain.

The majority of these second-generation children live in urban neighborhoods where poverty is at least twice as high as the city's overall poverty rate. Their parents are concentrated in the bottom rungs of a highly segmented local labor market.

While students in the EAN survey felt that gangs or other types of counterproductive youth activities were not major problems within their schools, some community and law enforcement agency employees believe these are serious and growing problems in the larger community. They fear a large number of children are becoming despondent over the growing climate of rejection toward Hispanics and real or perceived barriers to a college education. These and similar issues remain to be thoroughly investigated.

In the past, Nebraska escaped some of the most virulent anti-immigrant sentiments of older immigrant destinations. However, the inflammatory anti-immigrant climate and the shrill voices of groups such as the Minutemen have a more visible presence in the state today. Several political candidates running in the November 2006 elections succumbed to the intimidating tactics of such groups, as well as to pressure from their growing and confused constituencies, and turned "illegal immigration" into the most important issue for Nebraska voters.

A large number of Nebraskans who never knew or thought the state had an immigration problem believe so now. Survey responses showed that children are soaking up this negative reception, and its impact will only be known in years to come.

The state government has done relatively little to take a proactive role in immigrant integration, leaving that task to communities or schools with relatively few resources. Nebraska experts and heads of various agencies interviewed for a recently released report overwhelmingly agreed that, while state policies toward immigrants have not been overtly exclusionary, the state has neglected its role in facilitating immigrant integration.

The evidence suggests that states such as Nebraska possess a number of positive features not present in older destinations, which could serve as partial remedies for downward assimilation for large numbers of immigrant children. However, this is not enough, and more focused efforts will be required to identify concrete barriers to successful incorporation and the best policies to overcome them.

This is particularly critical considering that Mexicans are, by far, the largest immigrant group in the state. It is no exaggeration to say that the state's future depends on the US-born children of Mexican immigrants.

While research, including this report, shows that second-generation Mexicans have made impressive progress when compared to their parents, they also face the steepest climb given the historical depth of their experiences with discrimination and exploitation, and the high levels of unauthorized migrants in the community.

In the absence of serious government efforts, the low levels of parental human capital may cancel out, or at least significantly delay, the educational aspirations of Mexican parents and their children. Another factor in the equation: the Mexican community itself, which possesses a myriad of cultural and ethnic solidarity antidotes to downward assimilation, such as a high level of community involvement in social issues, ethnically cohesive neighborhoods (in the case of Omaha), and high levels of bilingualism.

The outcome in this configuration of forces is unclear and also arguably contingent on successful intervention. LB1024, the law that breaks up OPS into ethnic-bound districts, could ghettoize these children, or ironically, it could buffer new immigrant children from the growing anti-immigrant climate seeping into the state. All of these are open questions, and their answers should not be left to chance or be resolved by governmental and citizen neglect.

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