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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the trend in the educational attainments of U.S.-born and immigrant Hispanics from 1960 to 1980, using data from the decennial censuses, in an effort to pinpoint sources of convergence and divergence in schooling outcomes. A major question addressed is whether and to what extent persisting educational differentials between Hispanics and other minority groups are sustained by the influx of educationally disadvantaged immigrants. Additional questions explored are (1) how education gaps between native- and foreign-born children are maintained through enrollment differentials; and (2) how age-grade delay leads to failure to complete high school and low rates of college attendance. The data presented, although tentative, do not support claims that immigration from Mexico and South America is a major factor in explaining why Hispanics--Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in particular--are the most educationally disadvantaged minority groups in the United States. (Contains 12 references and 5 figures.) (Author)

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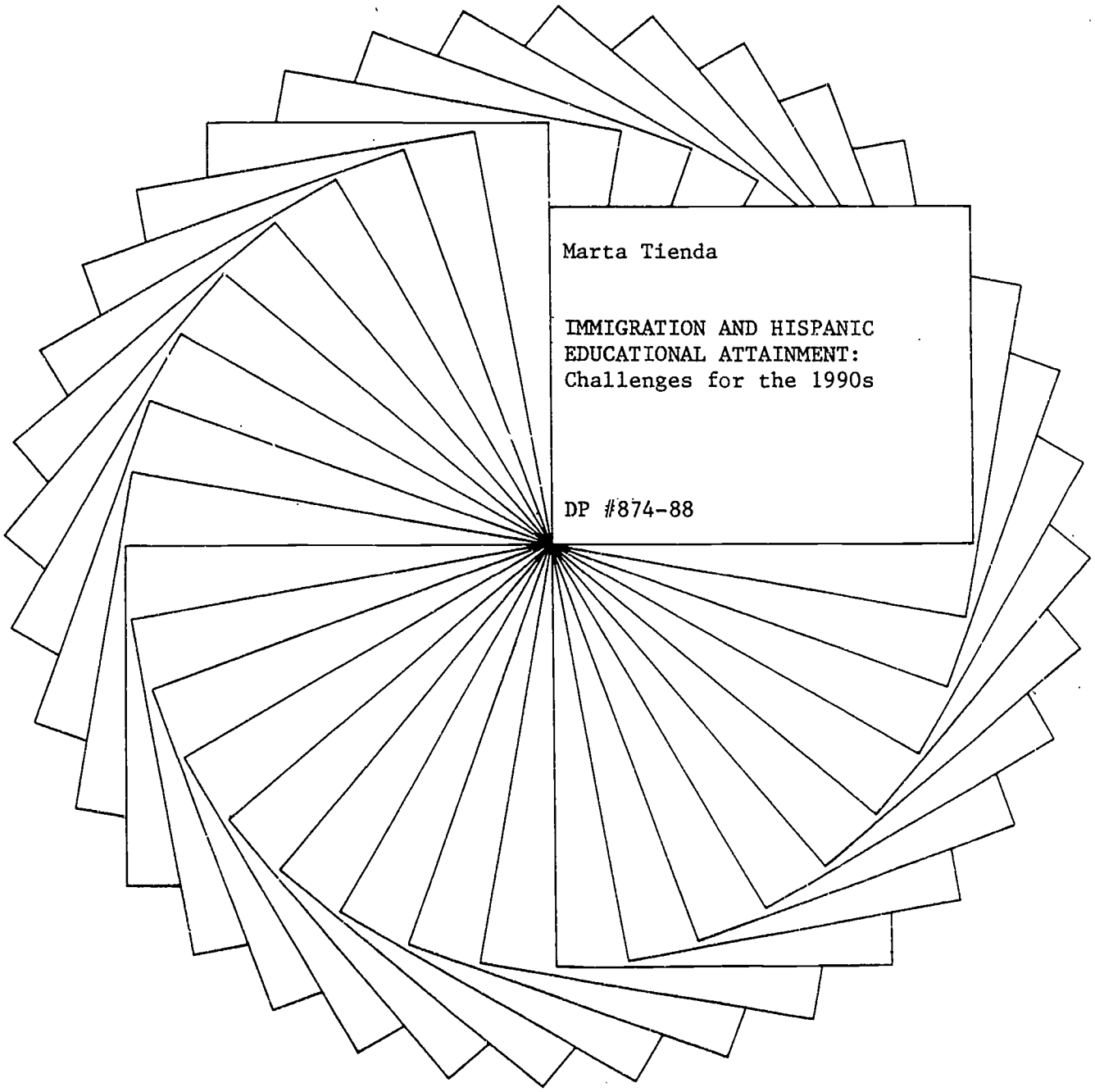

Marta Tienda

IMMIGRATION AND HISPANIC EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: Challenges for the 1990s

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Immigration and Hispanic Educational Attainment: Challenges for the 1990s

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Abstract

This paper documents the trend in the educational attainments of U.S.-born and immigrant Hispanics from 1960 to 1980, using data from the decennial censuses, in an effort to pinpoint sources of convergence and divergence in schooling outcomes. A major question addressed is whether and to what extent persisting educational differentials between Hispanics and other minority groups are sustained by the influx of educationally disadvantaged immigrants. Additional questions explored are (1) how education gaps between native- and foreign-born children are maintained through enrollment differentials; and (2) how age-grade delay leads to failure to complete high school and low rates of college attendance. The data presented, although tentative, do not support claims that immigration from Mexico and South America is a major factor in explaining why Hispanics--Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in particular--are the most educationally disadvantaged minority groups in the United States.

Immigration and Hispanic Educational Attainment: Challenges for the 1990s

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically the U.S. public school system has, implicitly or explicitly, assumed the challenge of equitably integrating foreign-language-speaking students, minorities, and recent immigrants into American society. To varying extents, this broad mission has included the difficult goal of protecting cultural differences while ensuring that educational achievements are not sacrificed. However, amid fluctuating political climates the changing racial and ethnic composition of the school-aged population may quickly render innovative programs obsolete and distort the progress in the development of culturally sensitive programs.

The mission of the schools is more complex in regard to the Hispanic population of the United States. Hispanics are one of the fastest-growing minority populations and are also one of the most heterogeneous in terms of demographic and economic characteristics, immigration histories, and educational experiences. That Hispanic ethnicity and immigration status pose special challenges to the American educational system is reinforced by achievement statistics showing poor performance, high dropout rates, and low rates of participation in postsecondary education. Moreover, attainment indicators showing that the foreign-born fare worse than the native-born indicate some connection between immigration and persisting educational underachievement. Yet, partly because of inadequate data and partly because educational underachievement of immigrant populations has been attributed simply to

language difficulties, the relationship between immigration and educational underachievement of Hispanics is poorly understood.

Because Hispanics exhibit the lowest levels of educational achievement of all racial and ethnic groups, their condition in the educational system has been characterized as amounting to a national crisis (ASPIRA, 1983; Kyle, 1984), since a large share of the Hispanic population will be ill-equipped to participate fully in the civic and political institutions of society, and especially in the labor market. The generalized requirement of a high school diploma for job entry severely constrains the employment prospects of Hispanic-origin groups, as is already evident in high rates of labor market withdrawal and unprecedented unemployment levels among adult Puerto Ricans (see Hirschman, 1988; Tienda, 1989). Rising dropout rates combined with the young age structure of the Hispanic population and the continued influx of immigrants with very low levels of formal schooling increase their chances of becoming an underclass in American society--marginalized from mainstream institutions, from the labor market, and from political participation.

Hispanic educational underachievement is not simply a problem of the 1980s or of a given cohort of students. Its prominence has, however, increased in recent years as national attention has turned on the rising numbers of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries whose integration into the social and economic fabric is presumed to be more difficult. Moreover, evidence of a narrowing education gap between blacks and whites has raised questions about the role of immigration in maintaining large educational disparities among Hispanic-origin groups. In some quarters, the poorly defined association between Hispanic

educational underachievement and immigration has posed taxing questions about how the educational system can respond to the plural requirements of a young immigrant population.

To provide a basis for examining these questions, I have prepared tabulations that address the issues of whether persisting educational differentials between Hispanics and other minority groups are sustained by an influx of educationally disadvantaged immigrants; how education gaps between native- and foreign-born children are maintained through enrollment differentials; and how age-grade delay leads to failure to complete high school and, ultimately, low rates of college attendance. The relatively large segment of the Hispanic population with limited educational credentials poses special challenges for the design of continuing education programs, not only because of the pervasiveness of educational disadvantages among both the adult and youth segments of the population, but also because educators interested in tailoring programs for immigrant populations must be sensitive to culturally grounded differences and special needs that remain poorly understood.

To anchor my discussion of nativity differences in schooling outcomes in a social and historical context, I briefly review recent changes in the ethnic-origin composition of immigrants that have direct implications for the development of continuing education programs at all levels of the educational system. Subsequently, I chart the educational attainment of U.S.-born and immigrant Hispanics from 1960 to 1980 and pinpoint sources of convergence and divergence in educational outcomes. A summary of the age composition of recent immigrant cohorts combined with data on age-specific differentials in enrollment rates helps trace the origins of educational underachievement of Hispanics.

II. IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY

Perhaps the most striking changes in the composition of immigrant cohorts since 1960 are the shifts in the region of origin and in the socioeconomic characteristics of recent flows. Whereas immigrants from Europe composed over half of all persons admitted during the 1950s, they represented less than 20 percent of the total admitted during the 1970s. In their place, immigrants from Third World countries, especially Asian and Latin American nations, dominated the pool of entrants, and between 1976 and 1980 three-fourths of all legal immigrants originated from these regions.

The 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act officially abolished national origin as a basis for admission into the United States, but the emphasis on family reunification provisions in that legislation actually increased the salience of national origin as a basis for admission. This is because the present immigration guidelines facilitate the admission of groups whose ancestors were admitted during earlier periods. Moreover, the deemphasis of labor market skills as a basis for admission by default has strengthened the association between the social background and national origin of recent immigrants. This occurred because Asian and African immigrants have been admitted under the two labor certification categories of the 1965 legislation, while Hispanic immigrants have been admitted under the family reunification categories (Tienda, 1983; Massey, 1981).

In terms of absolute and relative volume, the contemporary imprint of immigration is greatest among Asians and Hispanics, but for several reasons I focus my discussion on Hispanics. First, they are the most

educationally disadvantaged population; second, the social and economic motivation of the Latin American flow, as well as its social consequences, are frequently misunderstood; and third, the existence of large native-born Hispanic minorities permits me to entertain the hypothesis that immigration is not the most important source of Hispanics' low educational achievement, even though it may well serve to keep aggregate levels low. I do not dwell on nativity comparisons for blacks and non-Hispanic whites, because in 1980 less than 2 percent of the black and non-Hispanic white population was foreign-born, compared to 25 percent of Mexicans, 77 percent of Cubans, and 80 percent of Central and South Americans. Also, more than half of Puerto Ricans were born on the island and have carried with them the educational challenges of bicultural and bilingual life experiences. Although Puerto Ricans technically are not immigrants, for them the distinction between island and mainland birth bears striking parallels with the native-foreign birthplace distinction used for other groups.

The educational selection effect of the 1965 amendments on the adult immigrant population is illustrated in Table 1. Hispanics, and Mexicans in particular, have the lowest levels of formal schooling, especially when compared to Asian, African, and European immigrants, who have relatively high levels of education. With the exception of Cubans, the average schooling levels of Hispanics have remained relatively stable among successive arrival cohorts, whereas Asians and others exhibit somewhat more diversity.

Additional information on the educational demands posed by immigration emerges from an inspection of the age structure of new arrivals. Table 2 provides some perspective on the educational

TABLE 1

Mean Years of Education of the Adult Immigrant Population, by National Origin and Year of Arrival Cohort

	1970-1980	1960-1969	1959 or Prior
Hispanic			
Mexican	6.9	7.6	6.9
Puerto Rican[a]	9.6	9.0	8.9
Cuban	9.7	11.4	11.0
Other Hispanic	10.4	10.9	10.4
Asian			
Japanese	13.9	12.5	11.0
Chinese	12.2	12.7	10.6
Filipino	13.3	13.9	9.6
Korean	12.6	13.9	14.3
Indian	14.9	16.7	13.4
Vietnamese	11.0	13.8	14.3
Other Asian	11.0	13.4	12.0
European	11.3	11.2	10.1
African	14.3	14.2	11.6
Other	12.3	12.4	10.8

Source: Based on analyses of decennial census data by Bach and Tienda (1984).

[a]Puerto Ricans born on the island are technically not immigrants; the characteristics reported refer only to those born in foreign countries.

TABLE 2

Age Structure of the Hispanic, Black, and White Populations, by Nativity, 1980

Age	MEXICAN			PUERTO RICAN[a]			CUBAN			CENTRAL/SOUTH AMERICAN			BLACK			WHITE		
	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Total	Native-Born	Foreign-Born
0-4	12.7	16.3	2.9	11.6	20.7	2.5	4.6	19.1	0.3	7.8	31.7	2.1	9.1	9.4	2.5	6.7	7	1.1
5-19	33.4	37.6	22.4	34.1	51	17.5	22.3	52.8	13.2	24.5	50.3	18.3	30.8	31.1	20.5	23.6	24.4	9.7
20-24	10.7	9.8	13.4	10.3	11.5	9.1	8.4	7.2	8.8	11.1	6	12.3	10.2	10.2	11.9	9.2	9.3	6.8
25-64	38.7	33.4	52.7	40.7	15.6	65.4	53.1	17.9	63.6	53.4	11.6	63.3	42	41.5	58	48.3	48	53.7
65+	4.5	2.9	9.7	3.3	1.2	5.4	11.5	3	14.2	3.2	0.5	3.9	7.8	7.8	7.2	12.1	11.3	28.7
Total[b]	100.0	100.0	101.1	100.0	100.0	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.1	99.9	99.9	100.0	100.1	99.9	100.0	100.0

Source: 1980 PUMS A File and 1980 U.S. Census, Table 253 of Report PC80-1-D1-A.

[a] Mainland and Island born, respectively.

[b] May not sum to 100.0 because of rounding error.

implications of immigration insofar as age structure can be used as a gauge for the demand for schooling. In terms of sheer size, youth cohorts of immigrants are considerably smaller than those of young adults, many of whom either have completed their schooling or whose educational aspirations are dwarfed by the economic imperatives that motivated departures from their homelands. However, their educational requirements may be greater because, depending on their age at arrival and whether they complete their schooling careers in the United States, children are likely to remain in the system for a greater number of years. Also, because youth are at earlier stages of their educational careers, the formal school system becomes a stronger force in shaping their socialization experiences.

These data show that in 1980 roughly one-quarter of the foreign-born Mexican-origin population was of school age, and this share rises to approximately one-third if we include college-age persons among those potentially requiring educational services. For Puerto Ricans, the most educationally disadvantaged Hispanic group, approximately 17 percent of the island-born population was between 5 and 19 years of age, and an additional 9 percent was in the modal range for college attendance. Of course, the accuracy of age structure as a gauge for educational demands assumes a limited amount of age-grade retention and high rates of completion. Below, I demonstrate that this assumption is highly questionable in the case of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Although Cubans and Central and South Americans have the largest proportions of immigrants (77 and 80 percent, respectively--see Bean and Tienda, 1987), their age structures are substantially different and have distinct implications for educational requirements. Over three-fourths

of Cuban immigrants are over 25 years of age, compared to two-thirds of Central and South American immigrants. Put differently, among Cubans aged 5-19 as of 1980, 45 percent were foreign-born, of which 23 percent immigrated prior to 1970 and 22 percent after 1970 (Bean and Tienda, 1987). Among Central and South Americans aged 5-19 in 1980, 11 percent arrived prior to 1970, whereas 48 percent arrived between 1970 and 1980. Not only are recent immigrants from Central and South America younger, on average, than recent Cuban immigrants, but they also are more educationally disadvantaged (Bean and Tienda, 1987).

These data focus on the direct effect of immigration on the demand for educational services, and indirect effects must also be considered. With the exception of Cubans, Hispanic immigrants are relatively young. This means that their fertility will affect future demands on the educational system.

That children from socially and economically disadvantaged households often reproduce the disadvantages of their parents broadens the mission of expanding educational opportunities for the foreign-born population of all ages. This challenge is all the more urgent in light of recent research showing rising social and economic inequality along racial and ethnic lines (Tienda and Jensen, 1988). As the following section illustrates, immigration has widened educational differentials for some Hispanic-origin groups, although not for others. This suggests that programs targeted toward the most disadvantaged will go furthest toward reducing the troubling trends in socioeconomic inequality among minority groups.

III. NATIVITY DIFFERENTIALS IN SCHOOLING

How immigration has placed demands on the educational system can be appreciated, first, by examining the nativity differentials in median schooling among adults, and subsequently, by evaluating enrollment statistics among both youth and adults. For the 1960 to 1980 period, this section documents nativity differentials in adult median educational attainment and in enrollment patterns for persons aged 5 through 34. Evidence of nativity differences in enrollment patterns is used to introduce the significance of birthplace in the observed rates of age-grade delay and high school noncompletion which have been emphasized in policy discussions of the educationally disadvantaged.

Adult Median Education

Table 3 and the three panels of Figure 1 portray adult nativity differentials in median years of schooling for the four major Hispanic-origin groups over the decades 1960-80. Median educational attainment of blacks and whites is presented for comparative purposes. The experience of blacks is particularly instructive because it illustrates both rising median attainment over time, as well as the virtual elimination of nativity differentials. As suggested in the previous discussion, the rising educational attainment of foreign-born blacks can be attributed partly to the selection effects of the 1965 legislation, but the rising attainment of the black native-born population was achieved through domestic initiatives. Presumably, similar goals are feasible for immigrant minorities.

TABLE 3

MEDIAN EDUCATION OF THE ADULT POPULATION AGED 25 YEARS AND OVER BY RACE, HISPANIC ORIGIN AND NATIVITY: 1960-1980

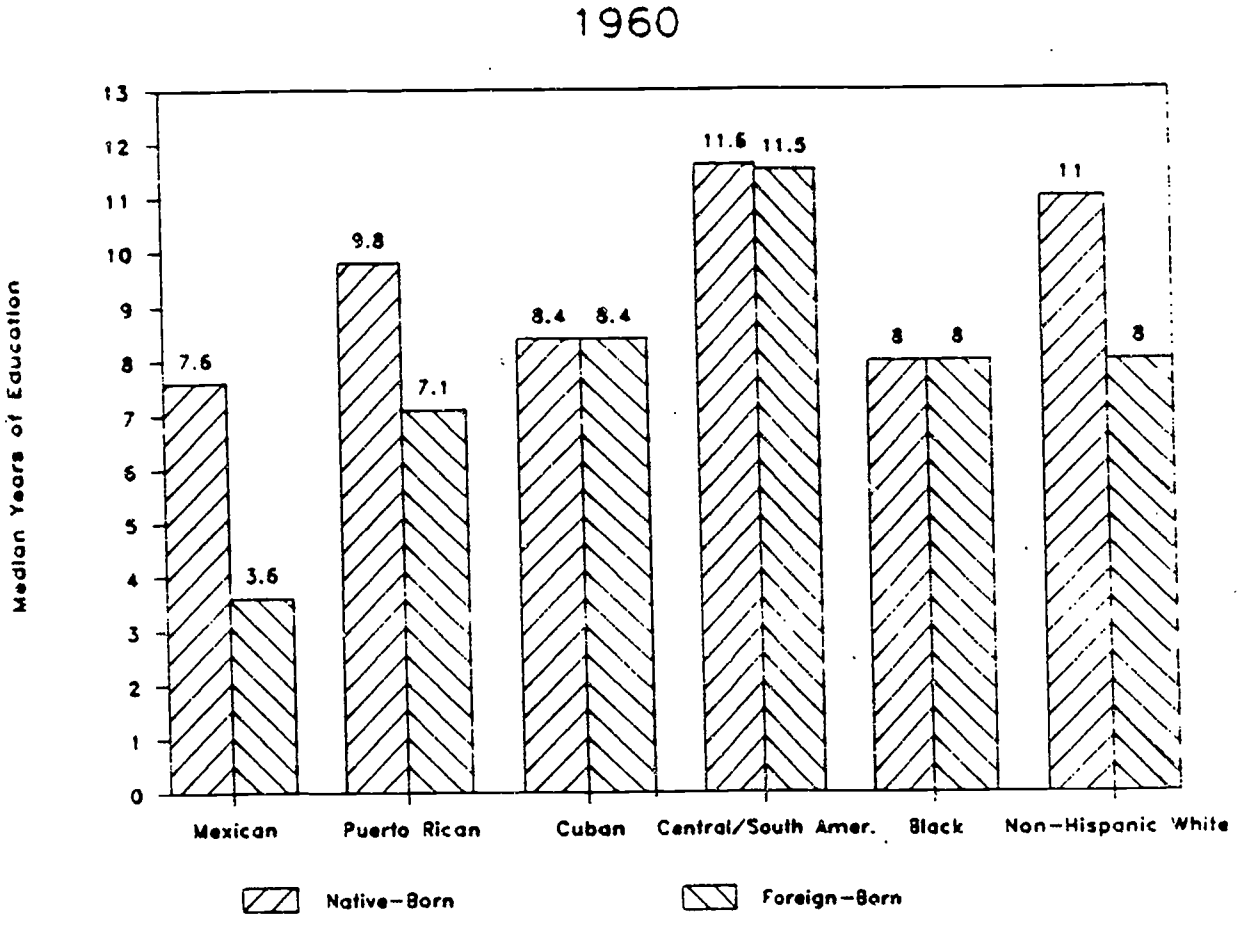
	1960			1970			1980		
	Native	Foreign	Total	Native	Foreign	Total	Native	Foreign	Total
Mexican	7.6	3.6	6.4	9.2	5.6	8.2	11.1	6.1	9.1
Puerto Rican	9.8	7.1[a]	7.5	11.5	7.9[a]	8.2	12.0	9.2[a]	10.0
Cuban	8.4	8.4	8.4	11.8	10.0	10.0	12.1	11.7	11.7
Central/South American	11.6	11.5	11.6	12.0	11.6	11.7	12.4	11.7	11.7
Black	8.0	8.0	8.0	10.0	12.0	10.0	12.0	12.0	12.0
Non-Hispanic White	11.0	8.0	11.0	12.0	9.0	12.0	12.0	12.0	12.0

Source: 1960, 1970 and 1980 PUMS

[a] Foreign refers to island born.

FIGURE 1-A

DIFFERENTIALS IN MEDIAN YEARS OF SCHOOLING ATTAINED BY HISPANIC, BLACK, AND WHITE ADULTS, BY NATIVITY, 1960-1980

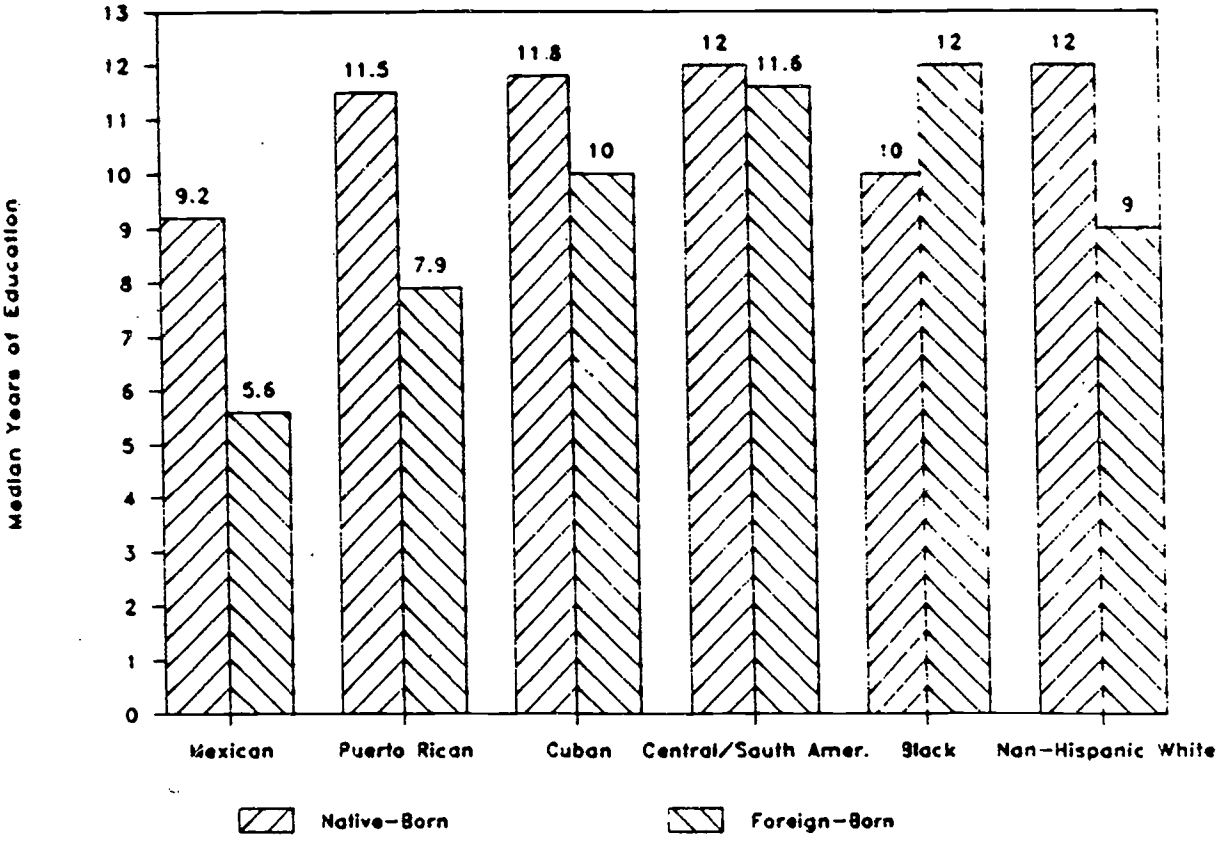


Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Table 8.1.

FIGURE 1-B

DIFFERENTIALS IN MEDIAN YEARS OF SCHOOLING ATTAINED BY HISPANIC, BLACK, AND WHITE ADULTS, BY NATIVITY, 1960-1980

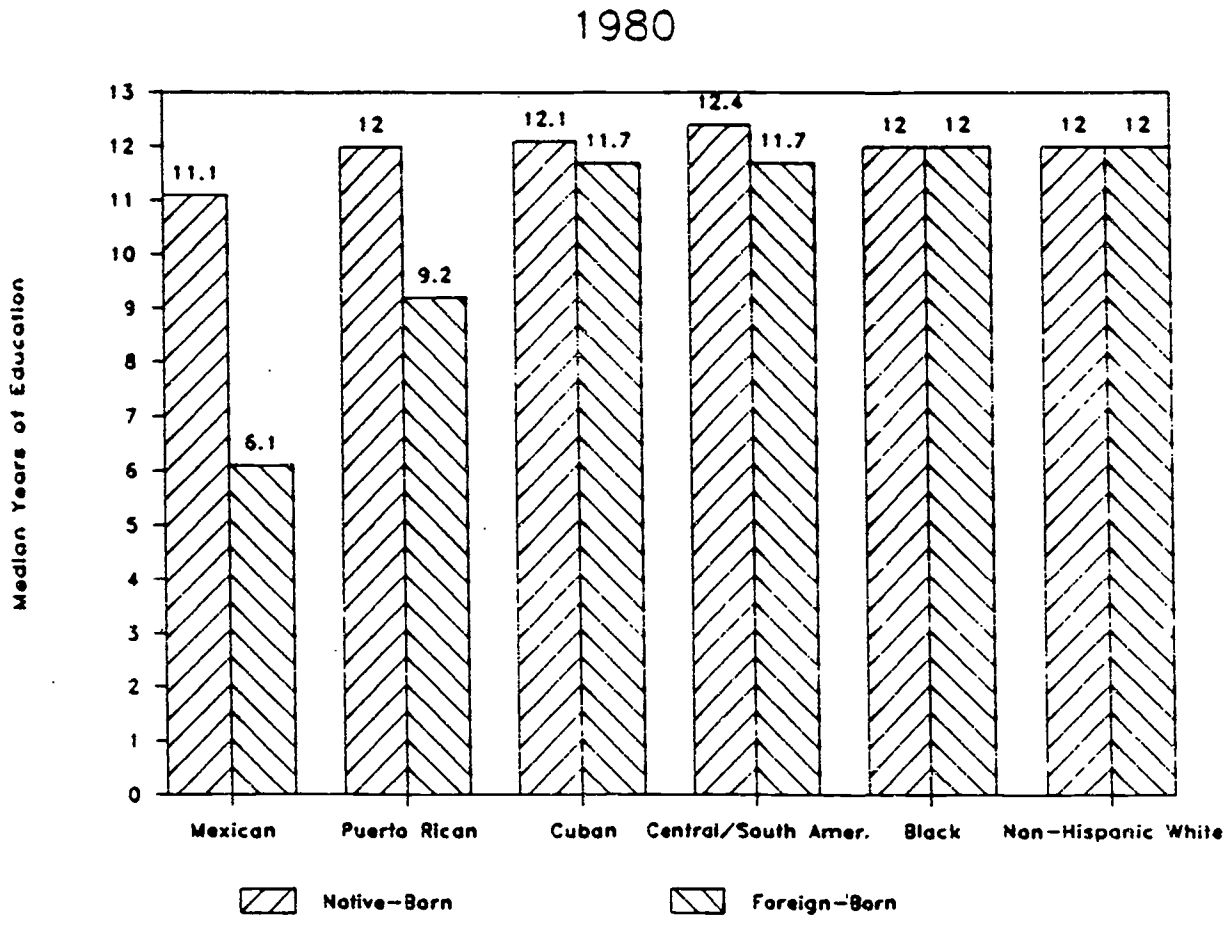
1970



Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Table 8.1.

FIGURE 1-C

DIFFERENTIALS IN MEDIAN YEARS OF SCHOOLING ATTAINED BY HISPANIC, BLACK, AND WHITE ADULTS, BY NATIVITY, 1960-1980



Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Table 8.1.

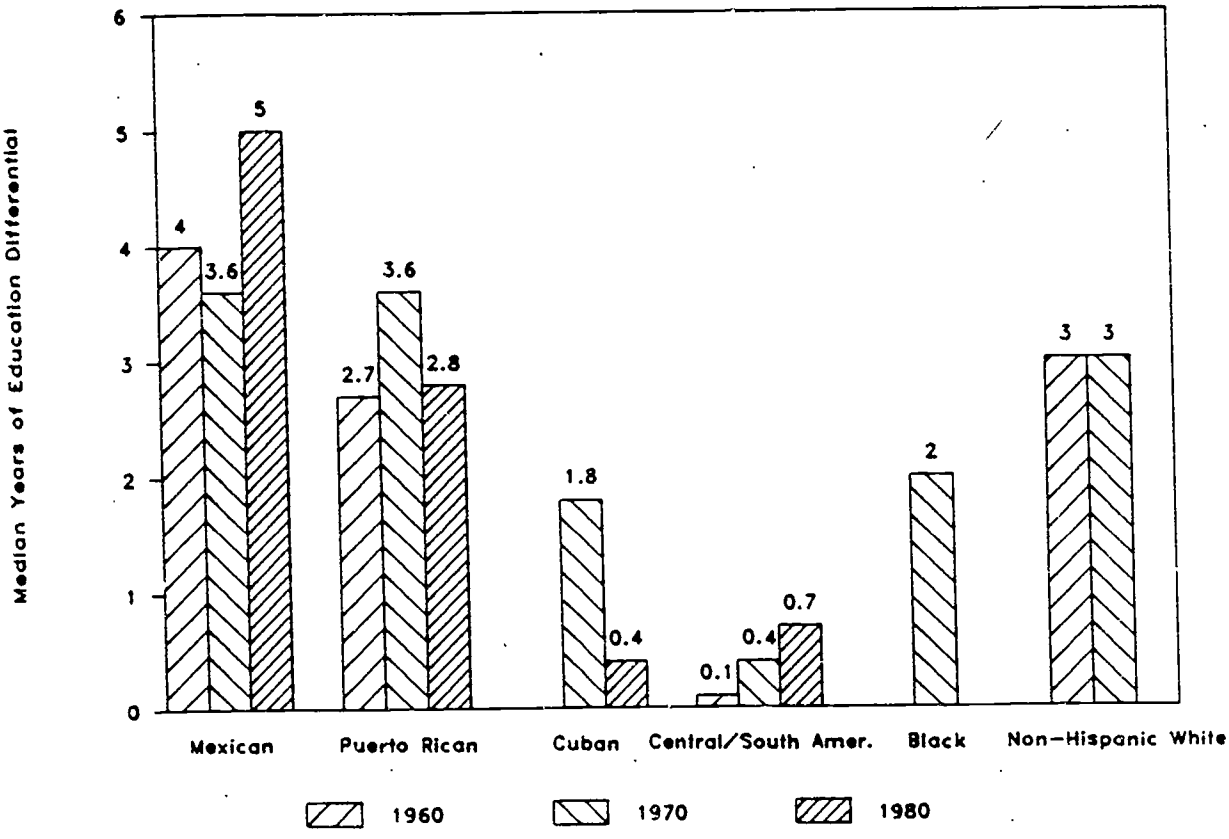
Like those of blacks, white nativity differentials in adult attainment also were virtually nonexistent by 1980, but this resulted largely from the selection effects of immigration after 1970. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a three-year median educational differential between the native- and foreign-born, even though median levels of education rose by one year over the period. Because median education rose uniformly for both the native- and foreign-born, nativity differentials remained essentially unaltered (see Figure 2). In contrast to blacks, the white birthplace differential in median education favored the native- rather than the foreign-born prior to 1970.

Nativity differentials in adult median education of Hispanics have differed from those of blacks or whites. The good news is that all groups experienced rising median levels from 1960 to 1980. The impressive educational improvement observed for Cubans largely reflects the selective character of Cuban immigration during the 1960s, and the transmission of these advantages to its native-born offspring.

More disturbing news is the evidence of widening education gaps according to birthplace among Mexicans and Central/South Americans, as well as the persistence of a large schooling gap between island- and mainland-born Puerto Ricans. For Mexicans, the nativity gap in education reached an all-time high of five years by 1980. By any account, this indicates a major need for continuing adult educational programs. The median educational deficit of island-born Puerto Ricans is smaller, roughly three years, but is substantial nonetheless in view of the fact that all Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens. Hence, for Puerto Rican adults, continuing education programs also face a major challenge in reducing the educational disadvantages of island-born with respect to

FIGURE 2

NATIVITY GAP IN MEDIAN EDUCATION, 1960-1980



Source: Same as Figure 1.

Note: "Nativity gap" is defined as median years of education of the native-born minus median years of education of the foreign-born. The absence of a bar for a particular year indicates no difference.

mainland-born adults, and of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans with respect to blacks and whites.

Although less striking in absolute terms than either of the educational differentials observed among Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, the rising nativity gap in adult schooling for Central and South Americans is problematic because it is tightly associated with the changing socioeconomic and national-origin composition of the flow. Whereas immigration from Central and South America was highly selective during the 1960s, and has been characterized as a "brain drain," during the 1970s the large and growing volume of migrants came from the more disadvantaged sectors of the source countries. These migrants, many of them fleeing political persecution, are less well equipped to participate in the social and economic institutions of the host society. Consequently, they and their children also are at risk of becoming part of the American "underclass."

Current Enrollment Rates

That educational disadvantages are not confined to adults and recent arrivals is further evident in the recent enrollment patterns of the Hispanic-origin groups. These data, which are presented in Table 4 and are graphed in the six panels of Figure 3, reveal that nativity differentials in schooling attainments are not confined to adults, whose continuing educational requirements are largely remedial in nature. Instead, nativity differentials originate among the very young--those 5 to 6 years old--and increase as immigrant children work their way through the school system.

TABLE 4

Age-Specific School Enrollment Rates,
1980, by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Nativity

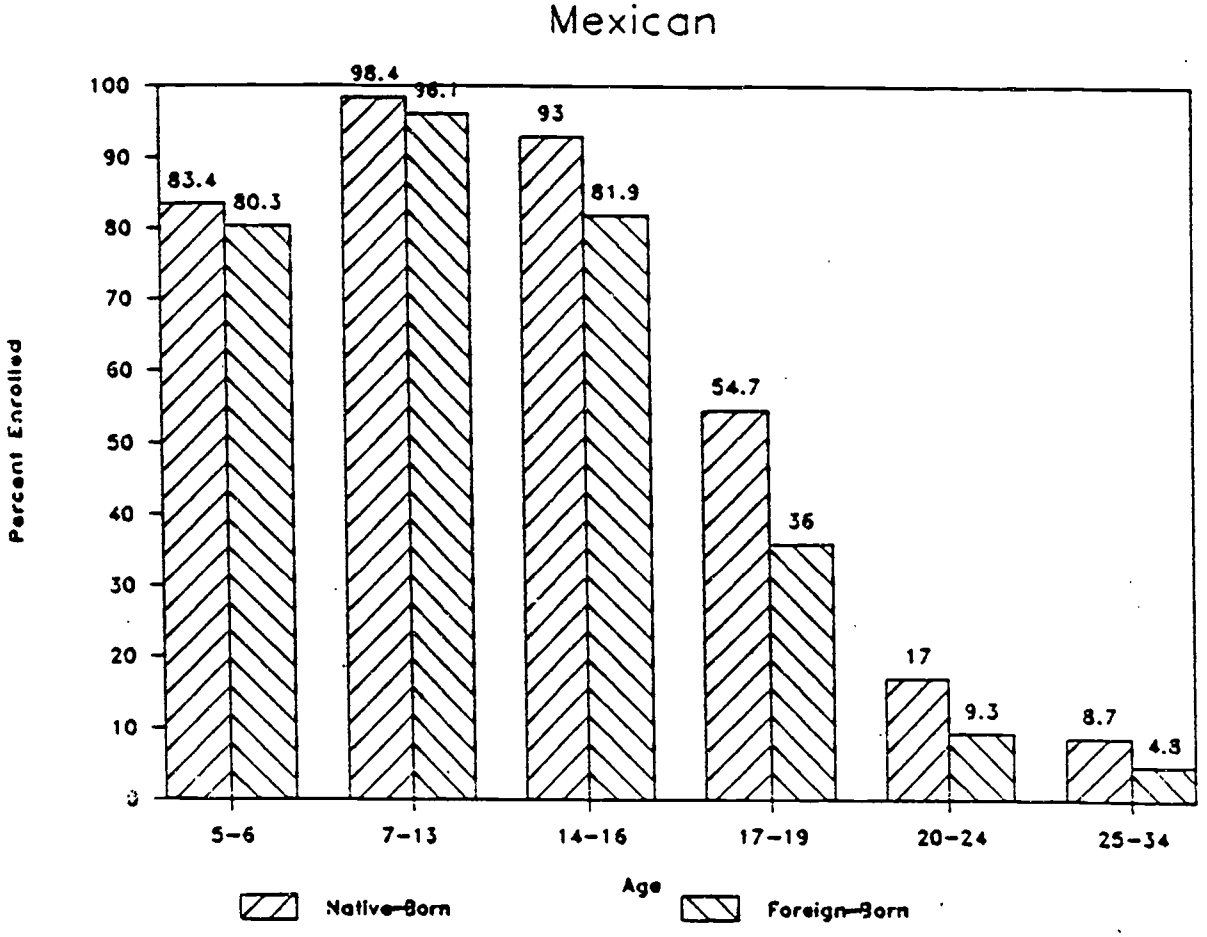
AGE	Mexican		Puerto Rican		Cuban		Central/South American	
	Native	Foreign	Native	Foreign	Native	Foreign	Native	Foreign
5-6	83.4	80.3	86.9	86.2	93.1	81.3	87.5	87.9
7-13	98.4	96.1	98.6	97.6	98.7	95.6	98.5	97.6
14-16	93.0	81.9	93.4	89.9	97.1	96.0	97.6	94.3
17-19	54.7	36.0	56.6	45.0	76.3	69.6	77.3	66.4
20-24	17.0	9.3	19.1	13.9	40.3	34.5	39.8	30.7
25-34	8.7	4.8	11.2	6.8	15.5	12.0	14.6	13.0

	Black	White	All Races
5-6	95.4	95.8	95.7
7-15	99.1	99.0	99.0
16-17	90.6	88.6	89.0
18-19	43.7	46.3	46.4
20-24	18.5	24.2	23.7
25-34	7.8	7.8	7.9

Sources: 1980 Census PUMS A File and Digest of Education Statistics, 1982, Table 4.

FIGURE 3-A

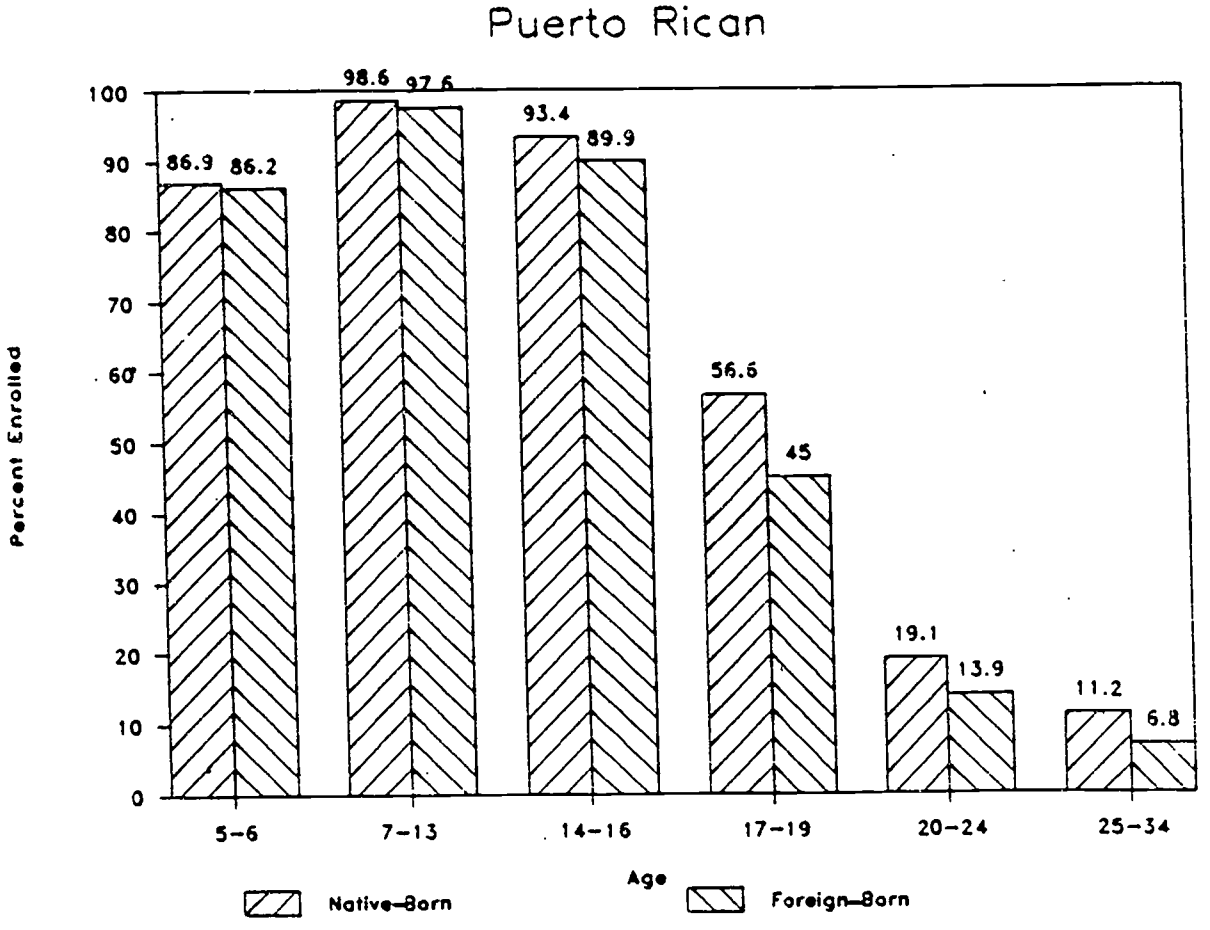
AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980



Source: 1980 Census PUMS

FIGURE 3-B

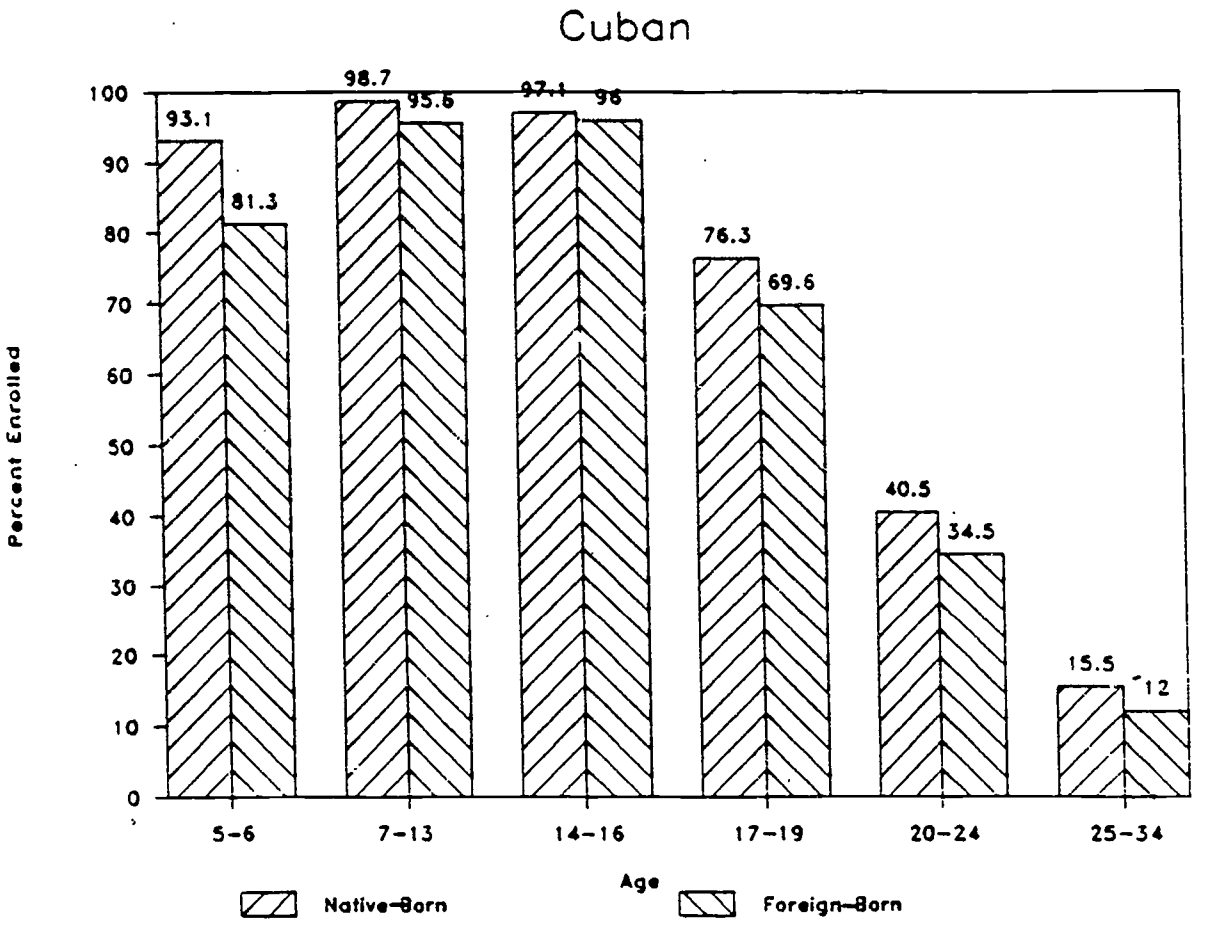
AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980



Source: 1980 Census PUMS

FIGURE 3-C

AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980

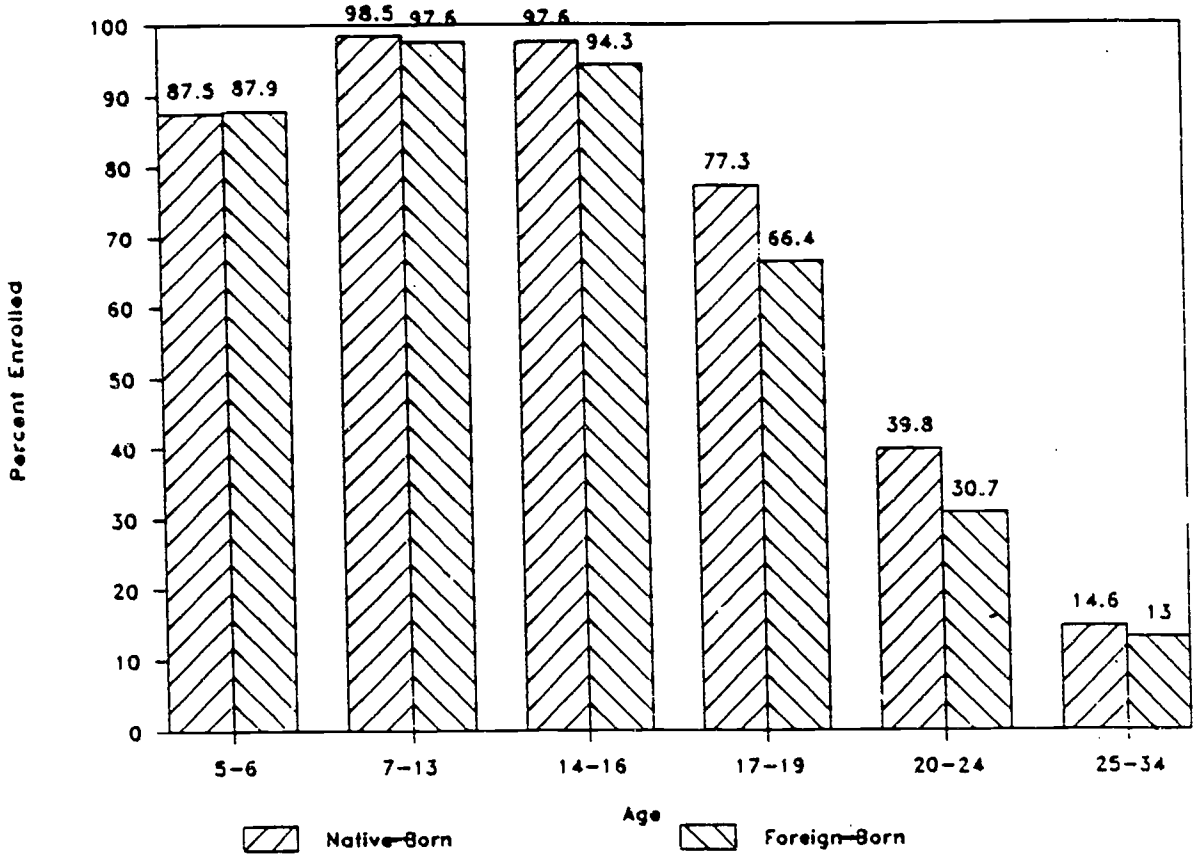


Source: 1980 Census PUMS

FIGURE 3-D

AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980

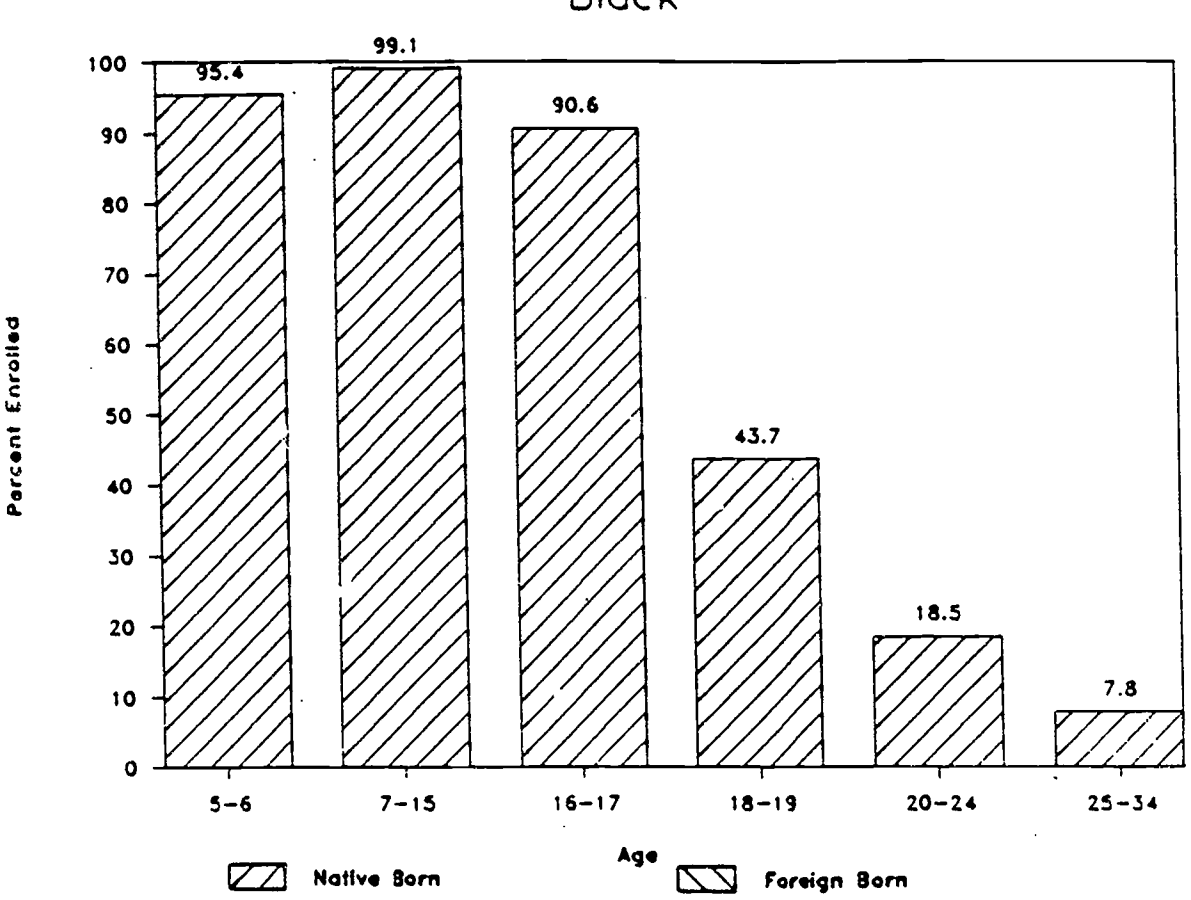
Central/South American



Source: 1980 Census PUMS

FIGURE 3-E

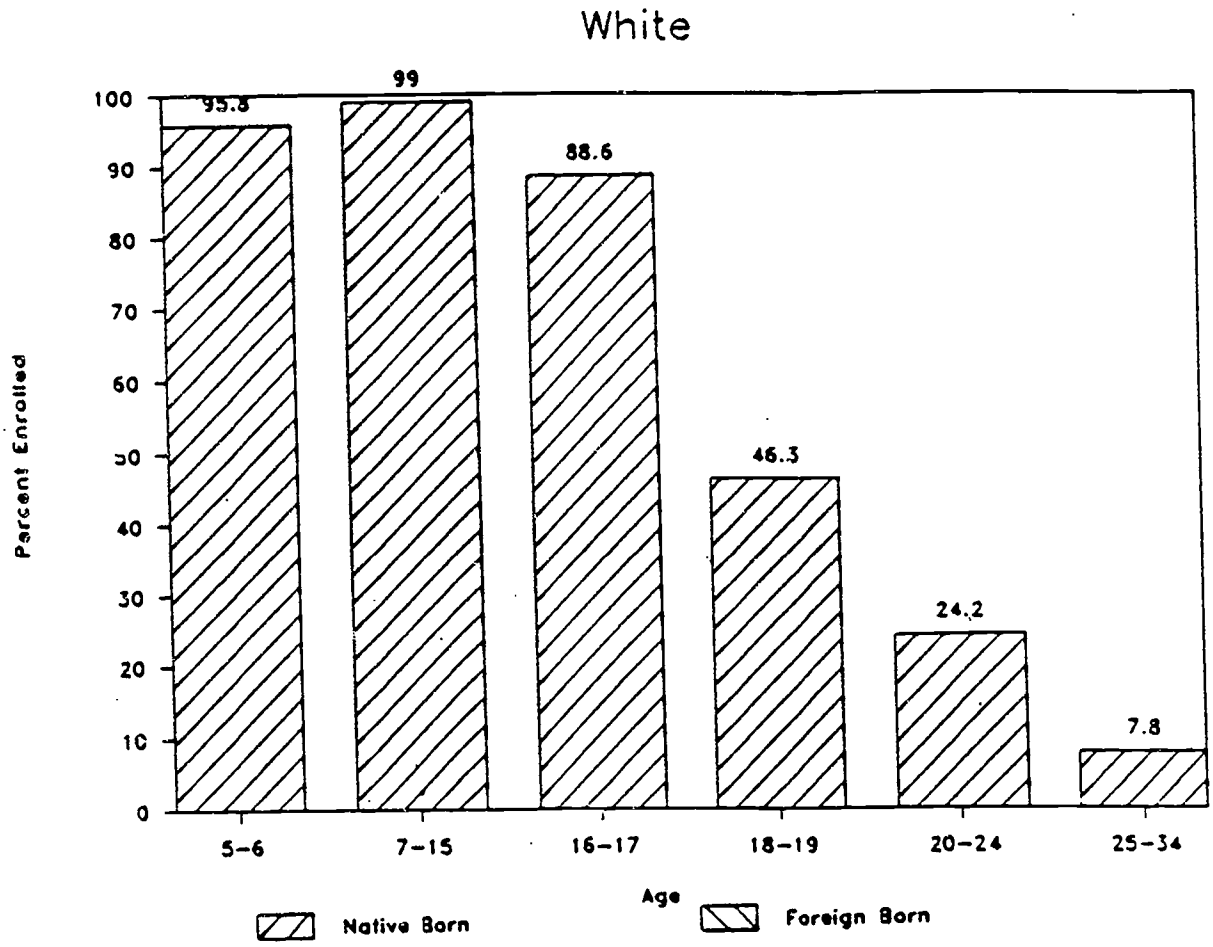
AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980



Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 1982, Table 4.

FIGURE 3-F

AGE-SPECIFIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES,
BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, 1980



Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 1982, Table 4.

It appears, for example, that Hispanic children are delayed in beginning their schooling, a situation which is less pervasive among either blacks or whites. Whereas 95 percent of black and white children aged 5 to 6 were enrolled in school in 1980, approximately 82 percent of Mexican, and 86 to 87 percent, respectively, of comparably aged Puerto Ricans and Central/South Americans were enrolled in 1980. The significance of the timing of entry is that Hispanic children, immigrants in particular, may be overage for their grade throughout their schooling careers. This circumstance may compound the discouragement and frustration they experience as they experience poor achievement. When combined with the limited social supports provided by their relatively disadvantaged social and familial environments, their risks of not completing secondary schooling increase dramatically. Thus, an important mission for continuing education programs is to educate immigrant minority parents about the importance of timely entry into the schools to avoid disadvantage at the beginning.

The birthplace differential in the timing of entry into school is largest for Cuban-origin children, but for them the gap narrows among those 7-13 years old and remains below 2 percent until age 16, the legal age for leaving school. Compared to Cubans, the gap in the timing of entry into school is smaller for Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central/South American children, but their enrollment levels are substantially lower at early ages (5-6). Enrollment rates rise after age 7 and remain high through the period of mandatory enrollment, after which they drop sharply.

Especially noteworthy in terms of immigration and continuing education programs are birthplace differentials in enrollment among

individuals older than the official age for dropping out of school. These produce even larger differences in completion rates according to birthplace. The Mexican case is most extreme. For them the nativity differential in enrollment widens sharply among individuals aged 14-16, probably owing to the greater prevalence of age-grade delay among the foreign-born (Nelson, 1984; Bean and Tienda, 1987). At ages 17 to 19, the foreign-born are less likely to be enrolled in school than their native-born counterparts. Thus, in addition to shortening their educational careers through delayed entry into the schools, Mexicans tend to leave the system earlier than other groups. This propensity to leave before completing high school is greater among those born abroad.

Birthplace differentials in Puerto Rican enrollment levels are smaller than those of Mexicans, but school participation levels among persons aged 17-19 are very low, indicating a strong tendency to leave before completion. Cuban and Central/South American youth are most likely to remain in school beyond age 16, and the nativity gap in enrollment rates ranges between 7 and 11 percent for those aged 17-19, and 6 to 9 percent for college-age students.

In summary, the persistence of nativity differentials in enrollment throughout the schooling careers of Hispanic youth, coupled with their accentuation beyond age 16, reveals that the role of immigration in maintaining educational disparities is not confined to the adult population. These data suggest that schools have not helped prepare immigrant minorities to succeed. The statistics in Table 5 and Figure 4 show alarmingly high rates of high school dropout among Hispanics, and Table 6 and Figure 5 show equally alarming rates of age-grade delay. And these rates understate the prevalence of age-grade delay in the

TABLE 5

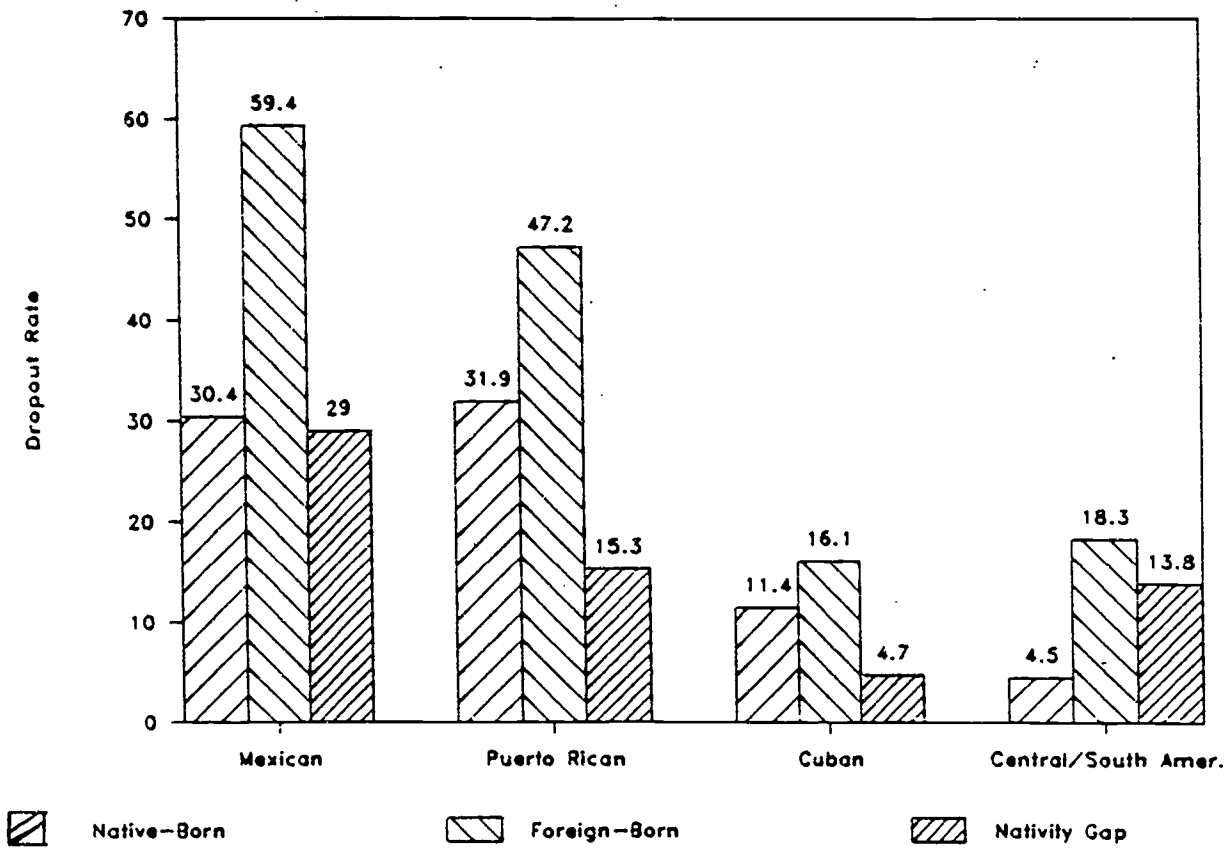
Dropout Rate, 1980,
by Hispanic Origin and Nativity

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Central/South American
Native-Born	30.4	31.9	11.4	4.5
Foreign-Born	59.4	47.2	16.1	18.3
Nativity Gap	29.0	15.3	4.7	13.8

Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Tables 8.7 and 8.9.

FIGURE 4

1980 HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES, BY HISPANIC ORIGIN



Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Tables 8.7 and 8.9.

TABLE 6

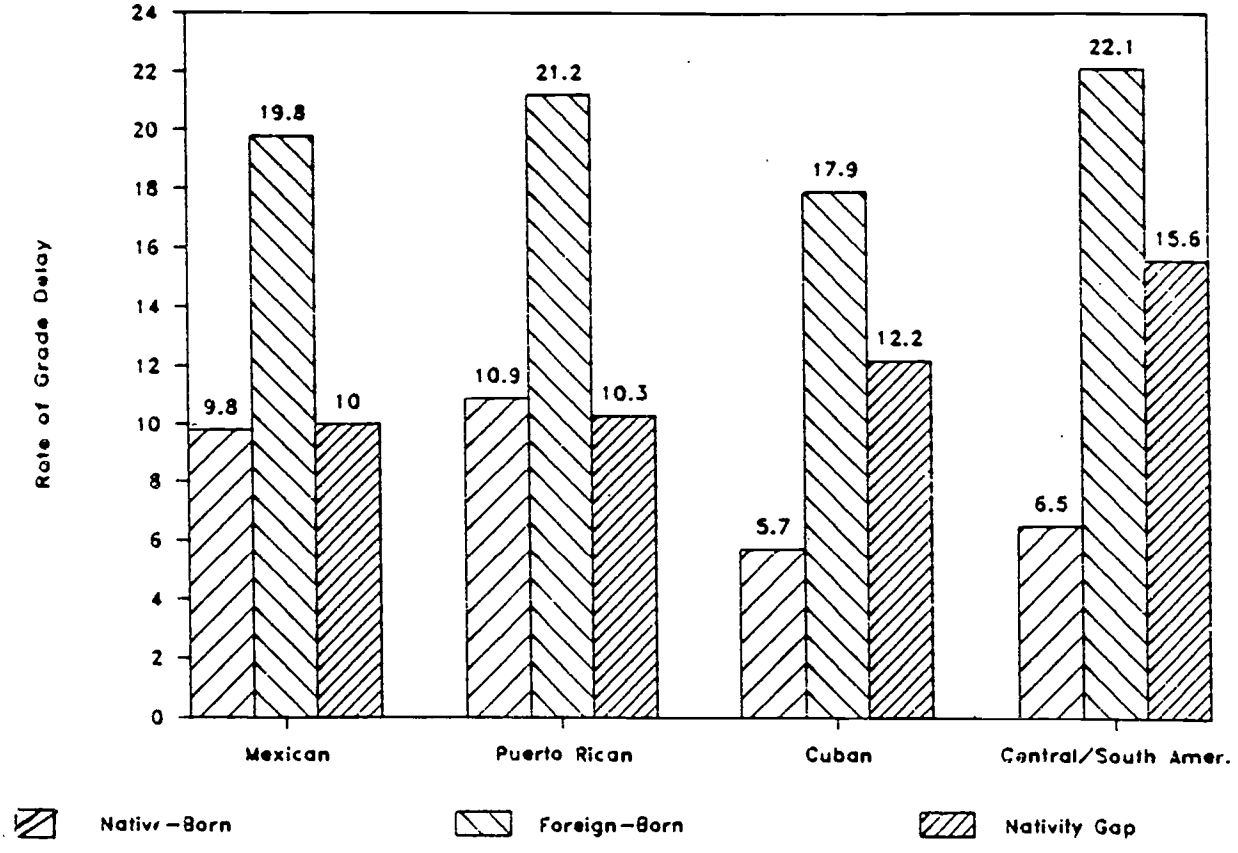
Percentage Experiencing One or More Years of Grade Delay, 1980, by Hispanic Origin and Nativity

	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Central/South American
Native-Born	9.8	10.9	5.7	6.5
Foreign-Born	19.8	21.2	17.9	22.1
Nativity Gap	10.0	10.3	12.2	15.6

Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Tables 8.7 and 8.9.

FIGURE 5

1980 GRADE DELAY, BY HISPANIC ORIGIN



Source: Adapted from Bean and Tienda, 1987, Tables 8.7 and 8.9.

population, because the analysis was necessarily restricted to individuals who were enrolled in school at the time of the census. The share of high school dropouts that were also delayed one or more grades cannot be determined. Age-grade delay is critical in the discussion of Hispanic educational attainment because students who are behind one or more grades have a greater propensity to drop out of school permanently, owing to the difficulties of being an older student among younger classmates, the separation from one's peer group, and the attractions and/or necessity of entering the job market. Because delay rates vary considerably across states and metropolitan areas, several researchers (Carter and Segura, 1979; ASPIRA, 1983) have suggested that the incidence of grade repetition among Hispanics may be the result of discriminatory school system policy rather than a generalized inability of Hispanics to function well in the mainstream owing to language or other socioeconomic handicaps (see also Nielsen and Fernandez, 1981).

Not only is the prevalence of age-grade retention widespread among Hispanics, but birthplace differences in delay are appreciable for all groups. By this measure of educational performance, foreign-born Puerto Rican and Central/South American youth are the most disadvantaged, followed immediately by Mexican and Cuban youth. The greatest nativity differentials in rates of grade delay occur among Central/South American and Cuban youth; these immigrants are over three times more likely to be held back a grade. Foreign-born Mexican and Puerto Rican youth are only twice as likely to be held back a grade as their native-born counterparts.

The key significance of high rates of age-grade delay is that students held back one or more years are more apt to become discouraged

with the educational system, and hence at greatest risk of dropping out altogether. Completing high school is the most important transition in the formal schooling process, as a high school diploma is now a minimum credential for job entry, even at the lowest levels. Since school delay often leads to dropping out, the next logical comparison of educational outcomes concerns school dropouts, reported in Figure 4. Differentials in average dropout rates clearly distinguish the foreign- from the native-born, and Mexicans and Puerto Ricans from the other two origin groups. The highest rates of noncompletion are among foreign-born Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Mexican-origin youth born abroad were twice as likely as their native-born counterparts to drop out of school, 60 versus 30 percent, respectively. Puerto Rican noncompletion rates in 1980 are equally striking, 47 versus 32 percent for those born on the island of Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland, respectively. Cubans experience grade retention in junior high but apparently overcome the forces producing school termination, since their high school dropout rates are close to those of whites and slightly below those of Central/South American immigrant youth. That rates for foreign-born Cubans and Central/South Americans are uniformly and substantially lower than the rates of native-born Mexicans and Puerto Ricans indicates that minority status may transcend their immigrant status in shaping educational outcomes.

The extremely high dropout rates for Mexicans and Puerto Ricans deserve our attention and concern. Sharp differentials between the dropout rates of these two groups and that of Cubans, who approach whites both on indicators of educational attainment and socioeconomic characteristics, raise several questions about the role of ethnicity and

immigrant status in structuring educational outcomes. Explanations involving the increased probability that immigrants will drop out of school are attenuated by the experience of Cubans and Central/South Americans. They have the highest percentages of the foreign-born and the highest levels of Spanish language maintenance in the home (Bean and Tienda, 1987), yet these traits have not deterred them from achieving schooling levels close to those of whites and far above those of Mexican and Puerto Rican youth. Apparently their resources, as manifested by income, parental education, and determination, outweigh the impact of those cultural traits they share with Puerto Ricans and Mexicans.

Is it lack of material resources that accounts for low attainment of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in school? Or is it the absence of social supports that well-educated parents are able to provide? If it is primarily the latter, and not material resources per se, then continuing education programs may need to take over where other adult education programs have failed. Although immigration may contribute to educational disadvantages both through arrival of adults with low levels of schooling and the pervasiveness of grade retention experienced by Spanish-speaking youth into the formal school system, the positive experiences of Central/South American and Cuban youth as compared to those of Mexican and Puerto Rican minorities challenge simplistic interpretations of the role of immigration as the most salient social force producing educational inequality. I elaborate upon these issues in the concluding section.

IV. CONCLUSION

In short, the data presented here do not support the claim that immigration from Mexico and Central and South America has kept Hispanics among the most educationally disadvantaged group. Nonetheless, ethnicity and culture are of special significance to Hispanics as speakers of the second most prevalent language and the second fastest-growing ethnic minority in the nation. In addition to language, cultural differences are manifested in attitudes that shape behavior, perceptions, learning styles, and interpersonal relations.

While the reality of cultural differences cannot be denied, a more perceptive interpretation of their impact would focus on the cultural conflict Hispanics experience as they are forced to become bicultural with respect to learning processes, communication styles, and human relations in general. Schools and adult education programs rarely accommodate this duality. The lack of sufficient role models exhibiting educational achievement and the absence of Spanish-speaking school officials maintain the separation of Hispanics from the schools. This is partly because parents are excluded from the educational decision-making process, and because language and cultural differences, which are most pronounced among the foreign-born, pose formidable barriers to interaction between students, school officials, and parents.

In Chapter 8 of my Hispanic Population of the United States (Bean and Tienda, 1987), I evaluated the relative importance of cultural and socioeconomic variables as determinants of educational outcome for Hispanic youth. These analyses showed that foreign birth apparently did increase students' chances of being delayed in school and/or dropping

out, but the effects of language--in terms both of that spoken in the home and of individual English ability--were consistently overshadowed by those of family background as measured by household income and parents' education. In other words, once an individual's social background was taken into account, the effects of "cultural markers"--Spanish retention, home bilingualism, and immigrant status--disappeared. Also, socioeconomic status is more powerful than family headship, as evidenced by the fact that in few cases did the circumstances of having a single parent, either native- or foreign-born, significantly influence the propensity of students to be delayed in school, or to drop out before completing high school.

That ethnicity is less important than social class is illustrated by the Cuban experience: despite educational obstacles manifested in high rates of age-grade retention, they were able to complete secondary schooling at higher rates than either Mexican or Puerto Rican youth. What is the secret of Cubans' educational successes? Our study shows that despite their higher immigrant composition and the recency of their arrival, as a group they possess two critical ingredients for success that generally are lacking among Mexican and Puerto Rican youth: less extensive material deprivation, and higher education of parents. Both factors are needed to promote educational achievement among offspring.

Since formal schooling is the key to subsequent employment opportunities and long-term life chances, prevailing social norms emphasizing equal access to education are served only when schools distinguish the causes from the symptoms of educational underachievement. But if culture is symptomatic of educational underachievement and social class is determinant, the pressing policy

question is whether educational policy can or should strive to change the class configuration of the Mexican and Puerto Rican populations, and what mechanisms are available to accomplish this task.

In my judgment, a great deal can be accomplished toward that formidable goal by focusing on the educational deficiencies of adults and providing the necessary compensatory skills to enable them to participate in the schools and hence furnish their children the emotional support that their material environment does not provide. Not only will this adult outreach strategy deter the high incidence of high school noncompletion among Mexican and Puerto Rican youth, but it will also provide positive experiences for parents and better equip them to prevent the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

Culturally supportive programs can address these issues not only for ethnic minority students but for white and Asian immigrants as well. They can help immigrant and minority students develop or maintain a sense of pride in themselves that ultimately brings them a wider range of life choices. In addition, only those schools with the personnel capable of communicating effectively in Spanish with parents, particularly recent immigrants, can make progress in integrating the community into the educational process--hence the need for Spanish-speaking officials and adequate role models. This is clearly important for shaping children's motivation and subsequent academic performance.

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