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A Portrait of U.S. Children of Central American Origins and their Educational Opportunity

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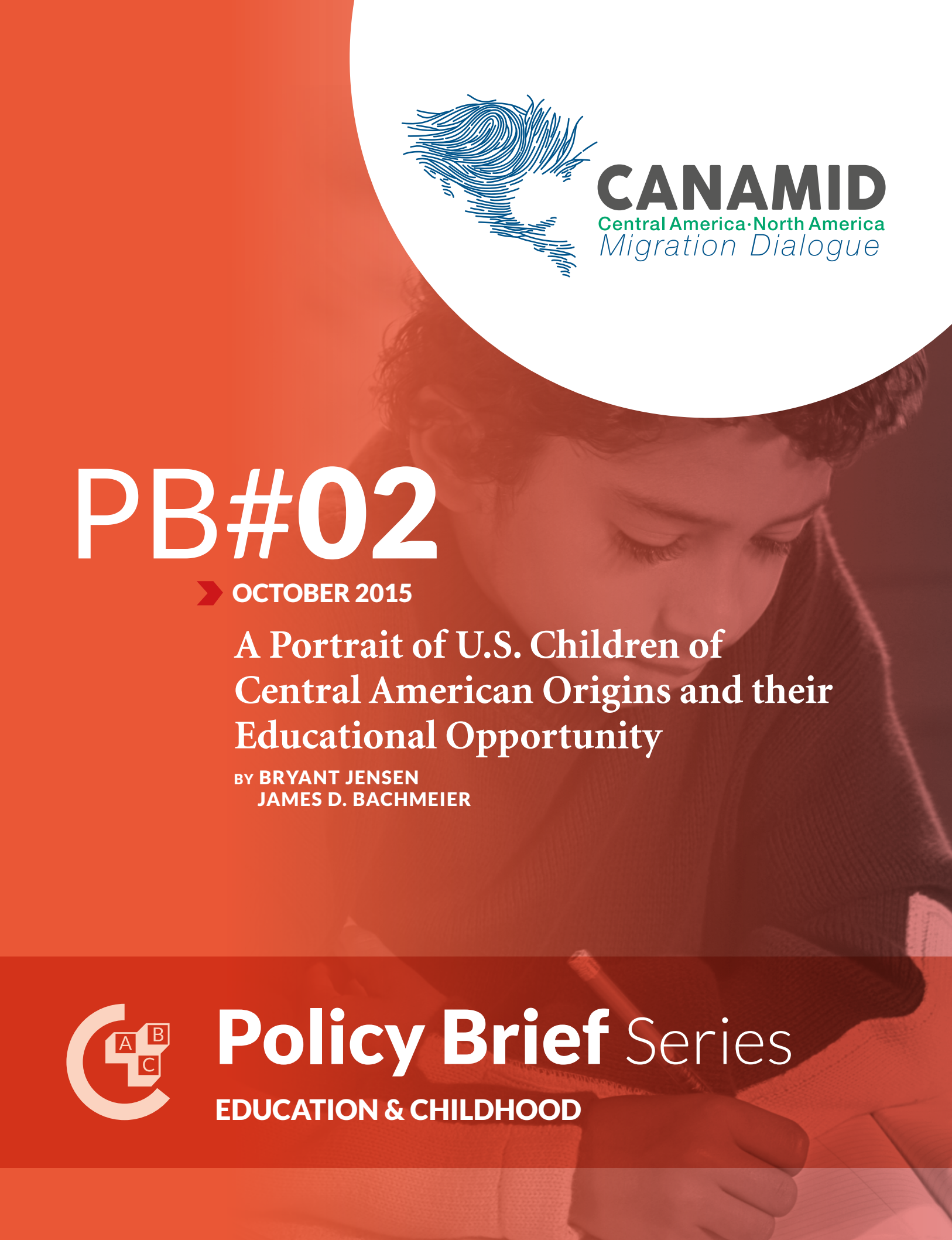

Policy Brief Series

EDUCATION & CHILDHOOD

A portrait of U.S. children of Central American origins and their educational opportunity

BRYANT JENSEN,[a] JAMES D. BACHMEIER[b]

SUMMARY

Educational opportunity—access to high quality schooling—is a critical aspect of social mobility and integration in the United States. This policy brief provides a demographic portrait of children with Central American heritage, with a focus on educational opportunity. We describe educational outcomes as well as some institutional conditions and family circumstances associated with opportunity.

Nearly 1.7 million children (ages 0 - 17) of Central American origin lived in the U.S. in 2011. Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran origins are the most prevalent. Central American families settle throughout the U.S., though California, Texas, and Florida are the most common destination states. Most children of Central American origins (86%) were born in the United States, and most (82%) live in immigrant households (those with one or more foreign-born parents).

Among their Latino peers, children of Central American origins (40%) are the most likely to have an undocumented parent. Having an undocumented parent is associated with weaker educational opportunity—e.g., lower parent education, higher poverty, and lower rates of health insurance coverage.

Overall, children of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran origin have weaker educational opportunity than their peers from the rest of Central America. These differences are associated with pre-existing social inequalities within migrant-sending communities, the selectivity of migrants versus non-migrants in their countries of origin, and structural inequalities in the U.S. school system.

The integration of Central American-origin children into the U.S. mainstream, as with other Latinos, is an intergenerational process. By the third generation, however, it appears that many children with Central American heritage are not integrated. Poverty, overcrowded housing, and health coverage rates between those with documented immigrant and U.S.-born parents are comparable. We conclude with four recommendations to improve educational opportunity of Central-American-origin children.

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Central American families have a long history of migrating to the U.S. in search of social, economic, and civic opportunities (for a detailed political and historical account, see Policy Brief PB01, this series). The first spike in immigration from Central American countries occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to civil wars, political violence, and economic hardships in the region. Migration flows decreased in the early 1990s with the end of political conflicts, but rose again in the late 1990s.

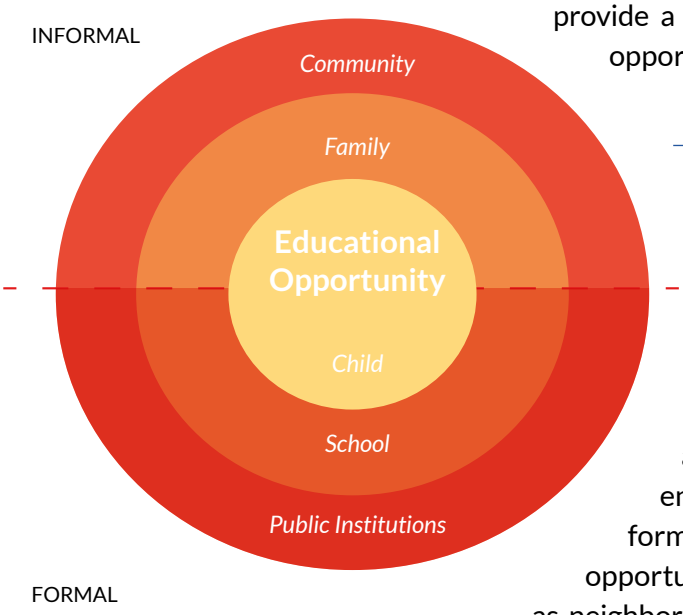
The news media frenzy in 2014 [1] about unaccompanied minors from Central America refocused our attention on immigrant children of Central American origins, and their integration into the American mainstream. It also led to some misconceptions about the size, dispersal, and incorporation of populations from Central American countries.

In this policy brief we draw primarily on Census Bureau data[2] to describe the distribution of children of Central American origins in the United States, as well as some of the institutional and family conditions associated with their educational opportunity. The institutional conditions associated with educational opportunity that we address include poverty rates, health insurance coverage, and crowded housing. The associated family circumstances include parent educational levels and their children's English proficiency. We describe the educational attainment of young adults from Central American origins, as well as the academic achievement of children with Central American heritage.[3]

We describe the ways in which indicators of educational opportunity vary by national origins, immigrant and documented status of their parents, and U.S. regions, thus identifying the most vulnerable groups of children from Central American origins.

We begin with a brief discussion of how processes within children's school and non-school environments shape their educational opportunities. Understanding these relationships are key to appreciating how conditions of Central American immigration are associated with U.S. integration, specifically educational opportunity. We then present a sociodemographic profile of children from Central American origin, including their national origins and family immigrant status. We explore family circumstances and institutional conditions associated with educational opportunity, and provide a set of recommendations to begin to improve opportunities for these children.

Figure 1. Multiple ecologies of educational opportunity



Multiple ecologies of educational opportunity

Multiple aspects of children's environments influence their social, emotional, and academic development.[4] When evaluating educational opportunity we must take into account both institutional and familial influences. Figure 1 illustrates how informal and formal environments interact to shape children's opportunities. At the community level, variables such as neighborhood ethnic and socioeconomic segregation,[5] availability of health services,[6] and neighborhood safety[7] have shown to be associated with student outcomes. At the family level,[8] years of parental schooling, household income, English proficiency, and parent educational involvement[9] are among the variables[10] that demonstrate significant effects on child outcomes. Among the educational variables teacher quality is of greatest impact, but unequal access to resources[11] across school districts and individual schools also affects student opportunities.

Indices of children's educational opportunity include the quality *and* quantity of their schooling experiences. Student achievement on tests of academic knowledge and skills are often used as "quality" measures, whereas school enrollment and attainment (i.e., highest level of school completion) constitute "quantity" measures.

We also describe how children with Central American origins fare in terms of ecological conditions that are relevant to educational opportunity in the U.S. These conditions are particularly relevant to the immigrant experience. Given limited information currently available on children of Central American origins, we crosstabulate these conditions with national origins and immigrant/documentation status.

Children from Central American origins

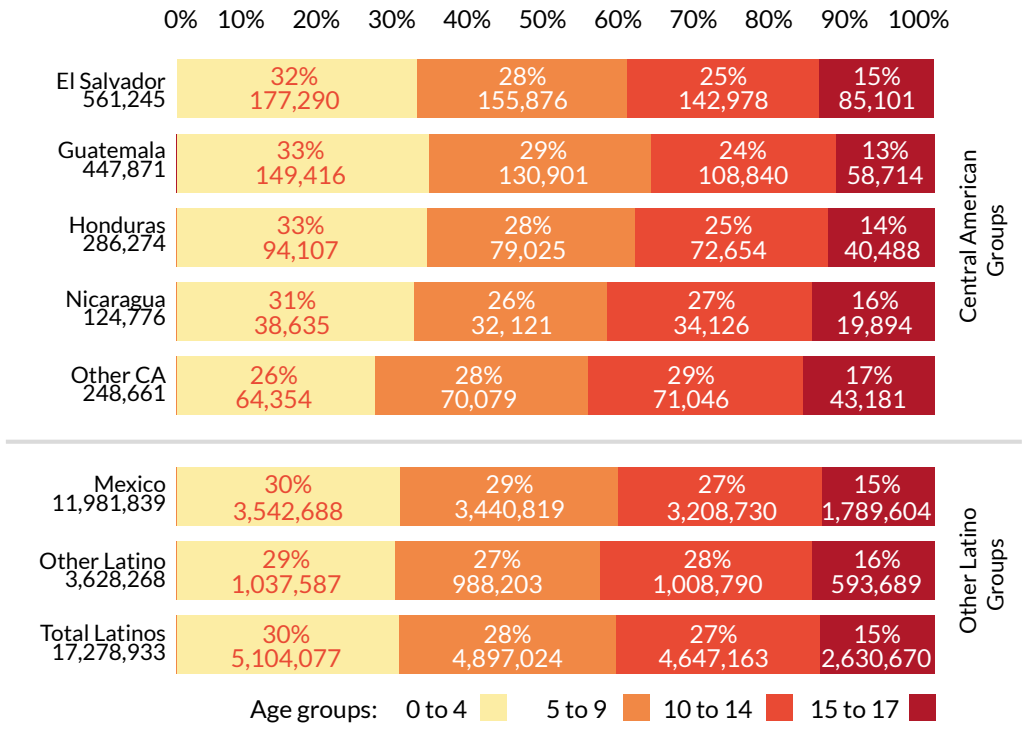
Nearly a quarter of all children in the U.S. come from families that identify as Latino or Hispanic. Among them, 1 in 10 have Central American origins, totaling 1.7 million (ages 0 to 17 years)

National Origins

Nearly a quarter of all children in the U.S. come from families that identify as Latino or Hispanic.[12] Among them, 1 in 10 have Central American origins, totaling 1.7 million (ages 0 to 17 years). Figure 2 includes national population estimates of children from Central American heritage by age groups and national origin. For comparative purposes, we include children from Mexican origins as well as those from other Latin American origins. The "other Central American" group is comprised of children from Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama origins, and the "other Latino" groups includes those whose families identify as Latino or Hispanic from Caribbean and South American origins.

The largest groups of Central-American-origin children are from El Salvador and Guatemala. Children with Honduran origins comprise the third largest group, followed by those of Nicaraguan origins. Nearly one in five Salvadoran nationals,[13] and about one in 15 Guatemalans and Hondurans, currently reside in the United States. Large numbers of migrants from Central America have been migrating since the 1970's.[14] Migration from Honduras is the most recent wave: more than half of the Honduran immigrants currently in the U.S. arrived in 2000 or later.[15] One reason for this increase is the escalating violence in Honduras, which currently has the highest homicide rate in the world.

Figure 2. Number of U.S. children (0-17 years) of Central American origin—by age and nationality



Source: American Community Survey (ACS) data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples. Ruggles, S., Genadek, K., Goeken, R., Grover, J., & Sobek, M. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0 [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015

Figure 3.
Regional distribution of U.S. children of Central American heritage by national origin

Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

U.S. children of Central American origins are slightly younger than their Latino counterparts, due largely to higher fertility rates among Central American immigrant women.[16] Twenty-seven percent of all U.S. children were under five years old in 2014, compared to 32% of children from Salvadoran-, 33% of Guatemalan-, 33% of Honduran, and 31% of Nicaraguan-origin households. Children from other Central American origins, on the other hand, are on average slightly older.

Children of Central American origins are geographically dispersed across the United States. California, Texas, and Florida are the most common destination states

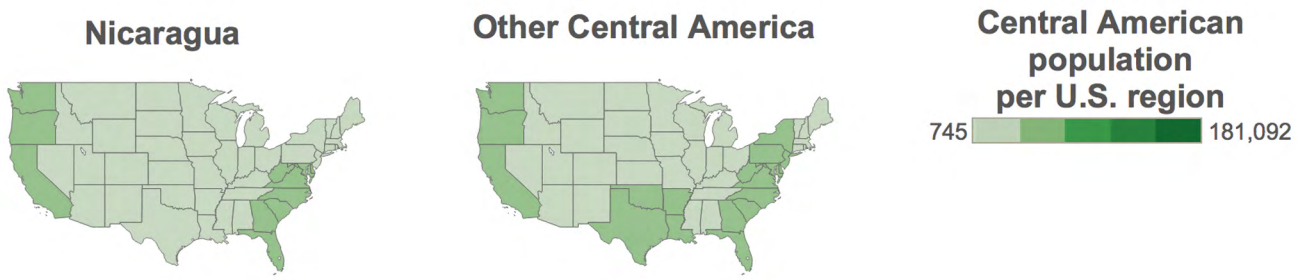
Children of Central American origins are geographically dispersed across the United States. California, Texas, and Florida are the most common destination states.[17] Figure 3 shows regional[18] distributions of Central American origin families by national heritage. It shows that 45% of children of Nicaraguan origin live in the South Atlantic region, compared to 21% of children from Guatemalan origins. The two regions with the largest share of children with Central American heritage overall are the South Atlantic and Pacific. Nearly a third of a million Salvadoran and Guatemalan origin children live in the Pacific region, the most popular destination for these two groups. Many families of have also settled in the West South Central region, which is the third most popular destination.

Immigrant and documentation status[19]

Most children of Central American origins in the U.S. (86%) are native-born citizens. Yet, they are more likely than their Latino peers overall to be foreign-born and undocumented

Most children of Central American origins in the U.S. (86%) are native-born citizens. Yet, they are more likely than their Latino peers overall to be foreign-born and undocumented. Nearly 14% of Central American origin children are foreign-born, and over 7% undocumented, compared to 8% and 5%, respectively, of all Latino children. These figures vary by national origin (see Figure 2).

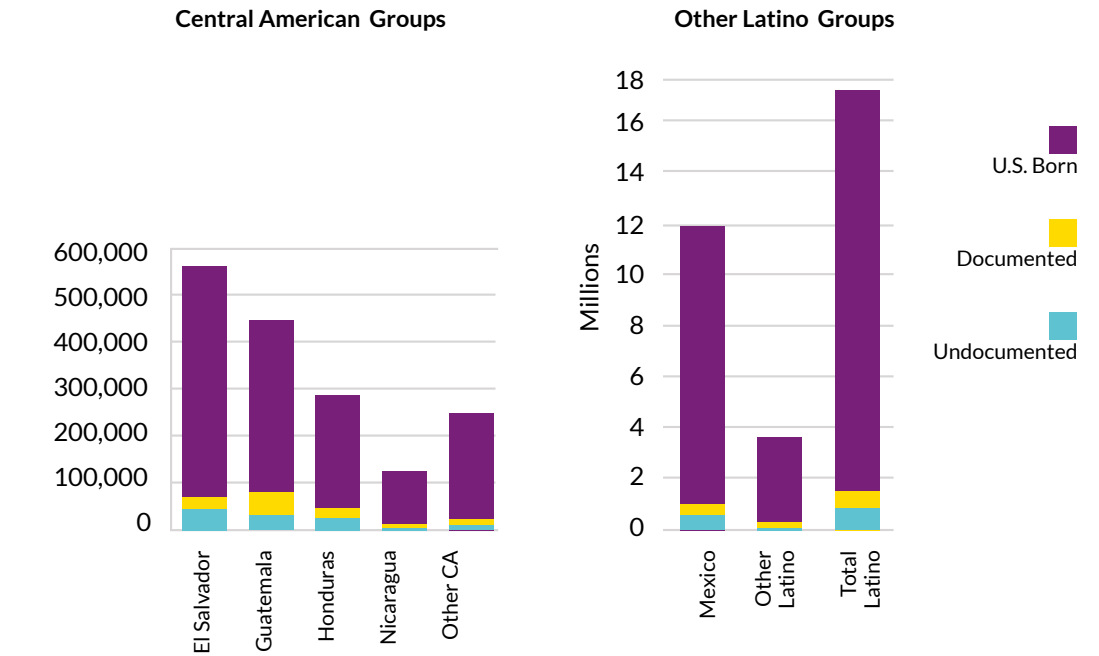
Children from Guatemalan origins are the most likely group to be foreign-born (18%), and children from Honduras (10%) are the most likely to be undocumented. Honduran-origin children are twice as likely as Latino children overall to be undocumented—nearly seven times more likely than Latinos with Caribbean or South American heritage. Children of Central American heritage are also more likely



than other Latinos to live in immigrant households, and with undocumented parents (see Figure 5).

Forty-one percent of Mexican-origin children have a US-born parent, compared to 18% of Central American origin children overall, and 64% of Latino children from Caribbean and South American origins. A whopping 40% of all Central American origin children have an undocumented parent, a total of more than 650,000 children. In other words, half of the children living in Central American immigrant homes have an undocumented parent; this is the highest percentage among all Latino groups. Among Central American immigrants, Hondurans are the most likely and Nicaraguans are the least likely to be undocumented.

Figure 4.
Estimates of children of Central American heritage by immigrant status and nationality

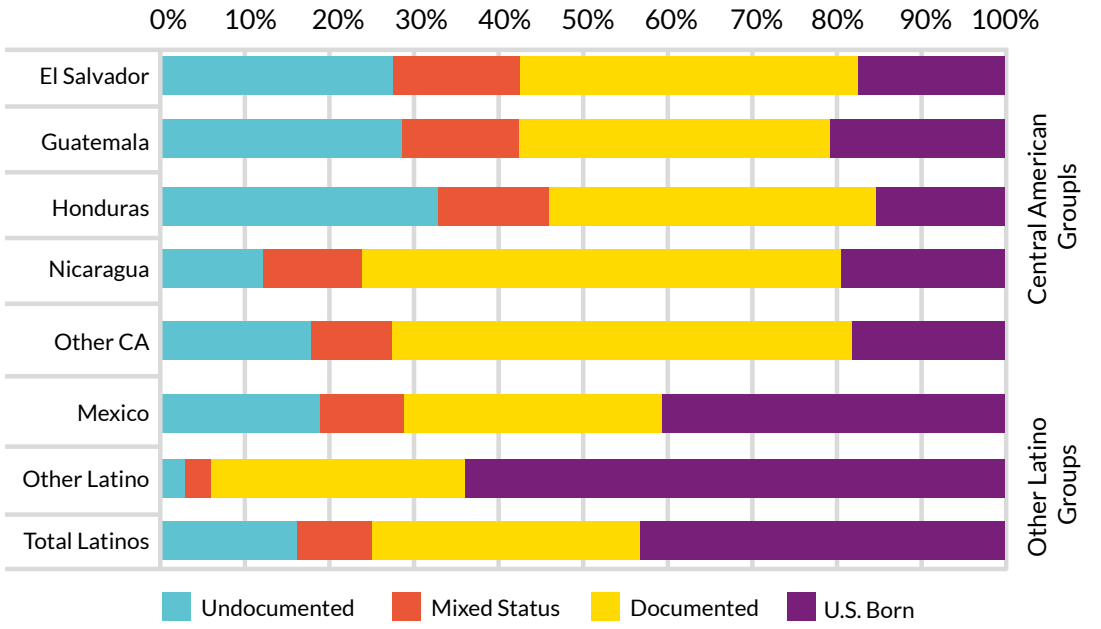


Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

Research increasingly demonstrates connections between the documented status of immigrant families—including the effects of children's own status,[20] that of their parents,[21] and even their grandparents—[22] and children's educational opportunities. Undocumented

families face more precarious circumstances than documented immigrant families. Undocumented parents have less predictable employment and lower wages, are less likely to take advantage of social programs like state-funded preschool, and experience higher levels of stress due to their uncertain futures.[23] Studies find that the documented status of parents and grandparents affects children's high school[24] completion and college enrollment.[25] Financial hardship, family separation, emotional turmoil, and associated uncertainty are some of the operative mechanisms that explain these effects.[26]

Figure 5
Immigrant status of parents of children of Central American heritage, by nationality



Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

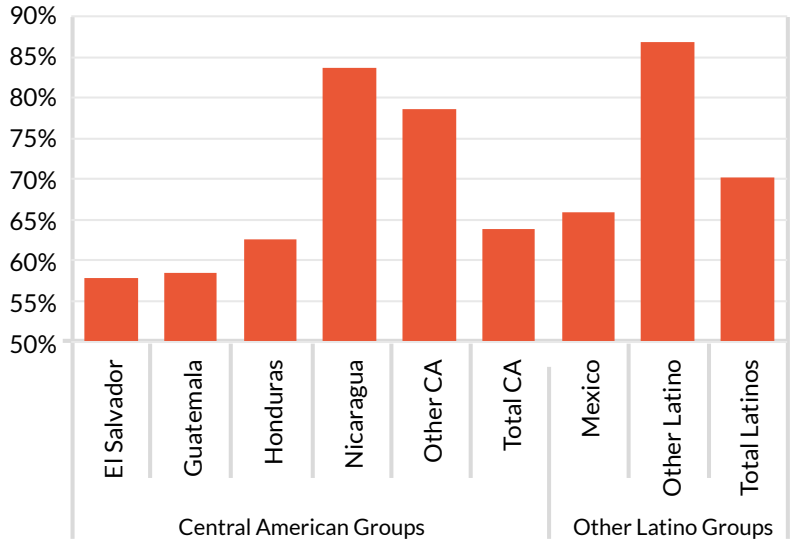
Educational outcomes

To characterize educational opportunities of children with Central American heritage, we report mathematics achievement from a national longitudinal study, as well as the attainment levels of young adults from Census Bureau data. We describe ethnic differences to provide a sense of how those from Central American origins fare in comparison with other groups of U.S. peers. Low academic achievement in childhood is a risk factor for high school dropout (or low school attainment in young adulthood).[27] The following figures address these realities.

Figure 6 provides the percentages of adults ages 18 to 24 years old of Central American heritage with a high school education or more, by national origin. Young adults from Central American and Mexican origins are somewhat less likely, 64% and 65% respectively, than Latino adults overall (70%) to complete high school. Within

the overall Latino group, young adults with Nicaraguan origins are the most likely (83%) among Central American groups to graduate from high school, followed by those from other Central American (79%) countries. Those with Honduran (63%), Guatemalan (59%), and Salvadoran (58%) origins demonstrate significantly lower attainment levels.

Figure 6
Central American origin persons (18-24 years old) with high school diploma by national origin



Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

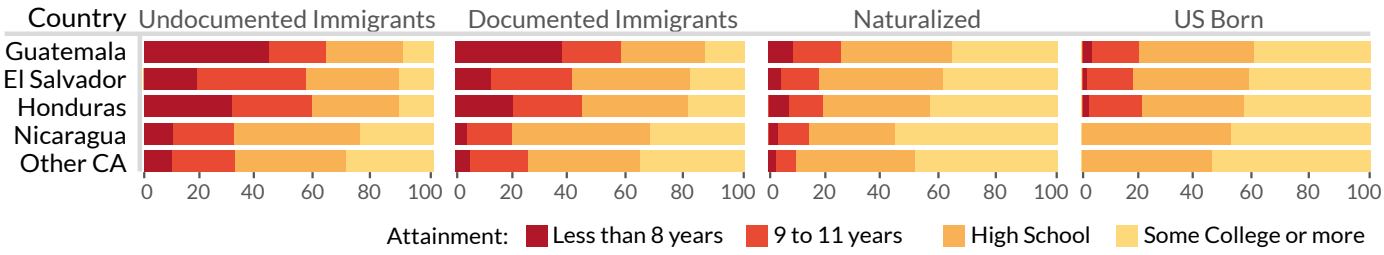


Figure 7
Attainment of persons of Central American origins (18-24) by nationality and immigrant status

Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

Figure 7 shows the distribution of Central-American-heritage adults across four levels of educational attainment, by national origin and immigrant status. Undocumented immigrants demonstrate the lowest levels of attainment, followed by documented immigrants. Again we see differences among national origins. For example, 64 percent of undocumented immigrants from Guatemala had not completed high school, compared to undocumented immigrants from Honduras (59%), El Salvador (57%), Nicaragua (32%), and other Central American countries (32%). Attainment levels of naturalized and US-born citizens of Central American origins are fairly comparable, suggesting the segmentation of immigrant integration following the second generation.

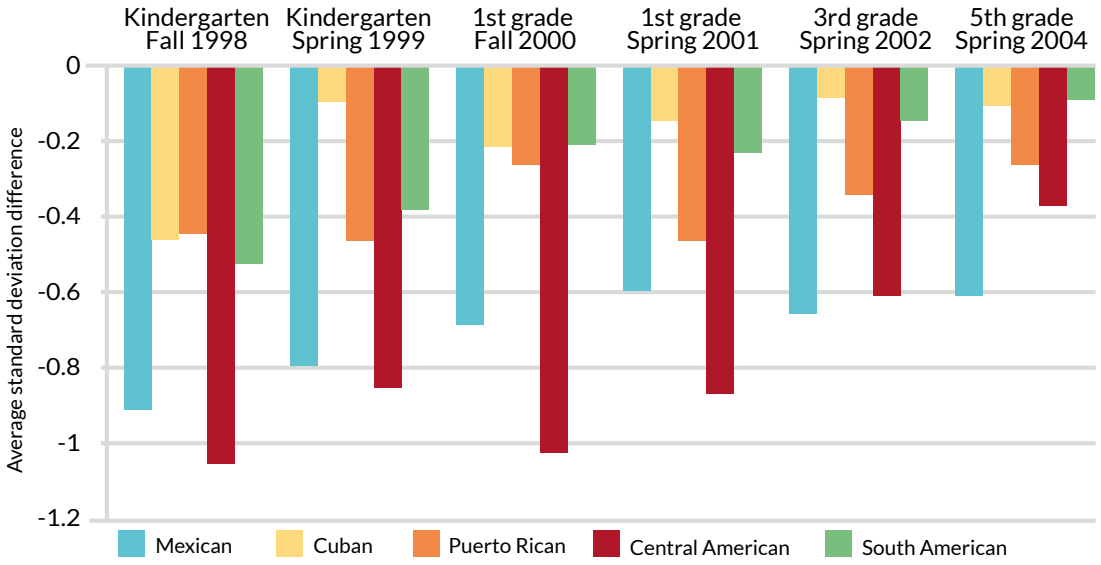
All Latino groups perform lower than white, non-Latino children, on average. These differences tend to shrink over time, suggesting that school has a net positive effect on Latino-White performance gaps

Figure 8 provides mathematics achievement means of Latino children from kindergarten through fifth grade.[29] The bars show average achievement differences (measured in standard deviations) between Latino subgroups and their White, non-Latino peers. Longer bars are associated with larger achievement differences. These differences do not control for the effects of socioeconomic status, immigrant generation, or other family background variables on children's performance in school.

All Latino groups perform lower than white, non-Latino children, on average. These differences tend to shrink over time, suggesting that school has a net positive effect on Latino-White performance gaps. Among Latinos, children of Cuban, South American, and Puerto Rican origins perform substantially higher than those from Central American or Mexican origins. Though children of Central American heritage perform more than a full standard deviations lower than their White, non-Latino peers at the start of kindergarten, the gap decreases to .37 of a standard deviation by the spring of 5th grade. By mid-elementary

school Central American origin children perform better than their Mexican-origin peers, suggesting stronger integration. A critical, unanswered question is how parent immigrant status affects their children's achievement in school.

Figure 8
K-5 Mathematics achievement of latino children relative to the non-latino white mean



Note: x-axis = Non Latino white mean, y-axis = average standard deviation difference between groups. Unit of analysis= child. Education level= highest of the parents. All parental ages considered.
Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K).[28]

Family circumstances

Parent education

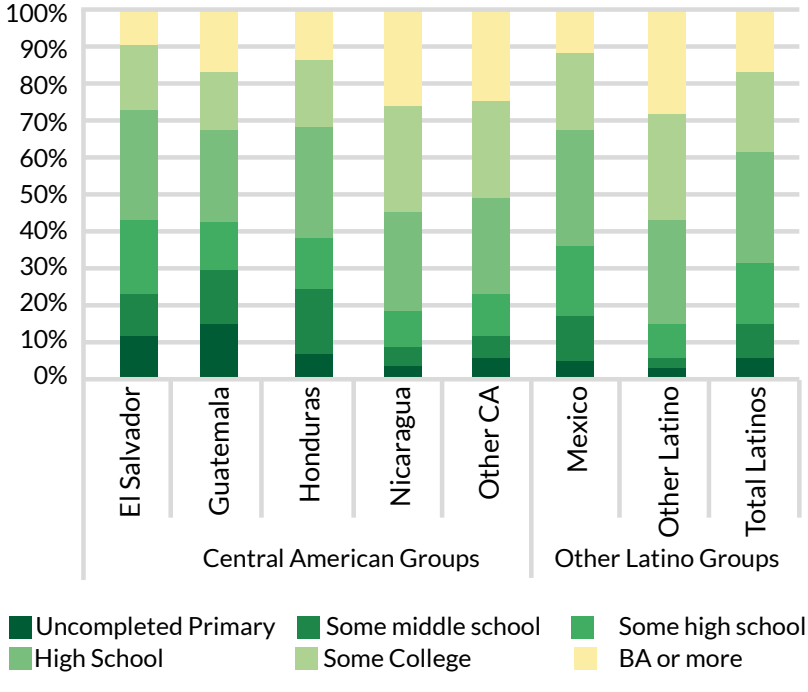
Among the most significant family predictors of school success in the U.S. is the number of years of formal schooling completed by children's parents.[30] Material and human resources in and outside of the school explain this effect. Figure 9 presents parent education estimates[31] for children of Central American origins, by nationality.

Nearly one-third of all Latino children have parents who did not complete high school. Parents with Central American origins demonstrate slightly lower levels of educational attainment than Latinos overall, yet vary by national origin. Children of Salvadoran and Guatemalan heritage have the lowest parent education levels: 42% of them have parents without a high school diploma, compared to 37% of Honduran-, 16% of Nicaraguan-, and 22% of other Central American-origin children. Those of Guatemalan origins demonstrate the lowest parent education levels: 29% have parents who completed eight years or less of formal schooling.

These differences are associated with educational opportunity in the countries of origin, as well as immigrant selectivity. One example of se-

lectivity is the Nicaraguan case in which immigrants tend to demonstrate higher socioeconomic levels than both their non-migrant co-nationals and those from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.[32] More than one in four Nicaraguan-origin children has a parent with a college degree, compared to 16% of all children with Central American heritage.

Figure 9
Population estimates of parental education of Central-American-origin children, by nationality



Note: Uncompleted primary stands for 0 to 5 years of schooling, some middle school 6 to 8 and some high school 9 to 11.
Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

English proficiency

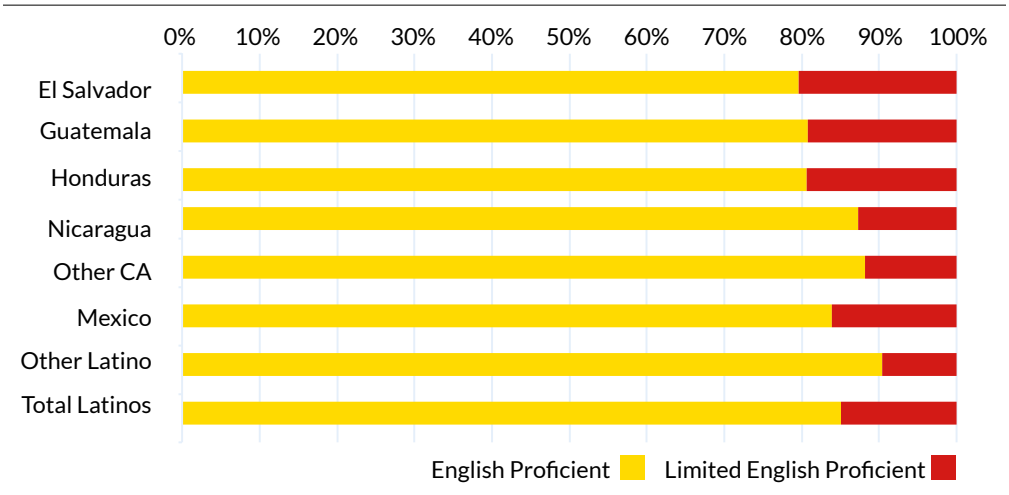
The oral English proficiency of children 5 to 17 years old is another factor associated with their educational opportunity in the U.S.[33] Higher levels of proficiency tend to be associated with stronger student outcomes. Proficiency in English is obviously associated with family immigrant status: Latino children in families with more time in the U.S. tend to demonstrate stronger levels of proficiency than those with less time. Older children learning English as a second language who have spent more time in school tend to demonstrate higher levels of proficiency than younger children.

Across national origins, children of Central American heritage with two undocumented parents are more likely than their peers to be Limited English Proficient

Consistent with the definition used by the U.S. Census Bureau, we define Limited English Proficient (LEP) children as those whose proficiency is reported as less than "very well." Thus, 15% of all school-aged Latino children are LEP, compared to 18% of those with Central American heritage (Figure 10).

Children with Salvadoran (20%), Guatemalan (20%), and Honduran (19%) origins are more likely to be LEP than those from Nicaraguan (13%) or other Central American origins (12%). Across national origins, children of Central American heritage with two undocumented parents are more likely than their peers to be LEP, followed by those from mixed status households, and those with two documented immigrant parents. As expected, those with U.S-born parents are the least likely to be LEP.

Figure 10
Estimates of Central-American-origin Children's english proficiency, by nationality



Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

Institutional conditions

Poverty rates

Household income is a clear marker of socioeconomic status associated with children's educational opportunities. Recent analyses of national data show that opportunity gaps (i.e., academic achievement, college enrollments) by household income continue to widen.[34] Institutional (e.g., growing income inequality, neighborhood/school segregation) and family processes (e.g., family structure, money spent on concerted child development) explain this trend. One study[35] recently found that high-income families spend nearly seven times as much on their children's development as low-income families, up from a four-to-one ratio in 1972. Moreover, in many U.S. cities, schools are increasingly segregated by family income as well as by race/ethnicity.[36] Children in low-income neighborhoods generally attend schools with fewer resources, and have lower quality teachers with fewer credentials.[37]

Children of Honduran and Guatemalan origins with two undocumented parents are more likely to live in poverty than other Central American groups with undocumented parents

Poverty rates, according to federal definitions, among all Latino families vary by immigrant status (see Figure 11). Latino children in families with two undocumented immigrant parents are the most likely to live in poverty (72%), followed by those in mixed status households (54%). Interestingly, poverty rates do not differ much between Latino children with U.S.-born parents (41%) and those with two documented immigrant parents (42%). Some of these trends vary by country of origin.

Children of Central American origins (45%) are slightly less likely than Latino children overall (47%) to live in poverty. Among this group of children of Central American origins, children of Honduran (53%) and Guatemalan (50%) origins are more likely than those from other Central American origins to live in poverty. The relationship between poverty and immigrant status interacts with national origin. Children of Honduran and Guatemalan origins with two undocumented parents are more likely to live in poverty than other Central American groups with undocumented parents. For some Central American groups (namely, Guatemalan Americans), like with Mexican Americans, having U.S.-born parents slightly reduces the likelihood of living in poverty. For children of Salvadoran, Honduran, and Nicaraguan heritage, however, poverty rates are lower for those with documented immigrant than U.S.-born parents.

This generally supports the notion that integration of immigrants into the U.S. mainstream is more challenging from the second to third (and beyond) generations after migration than from

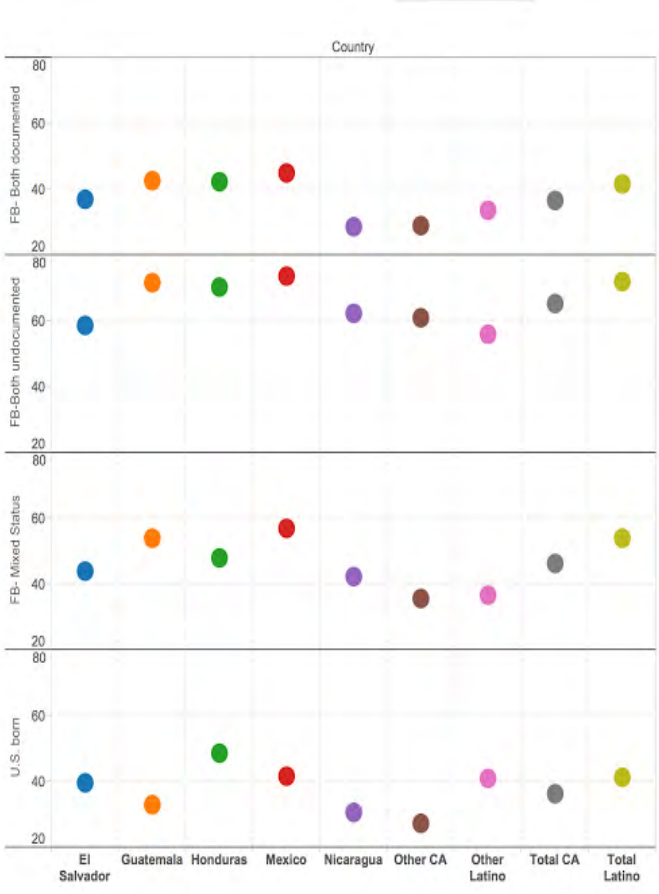


Figure 11
Poverty rates for children of Central American origins by parent immigrant status and nationality
Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

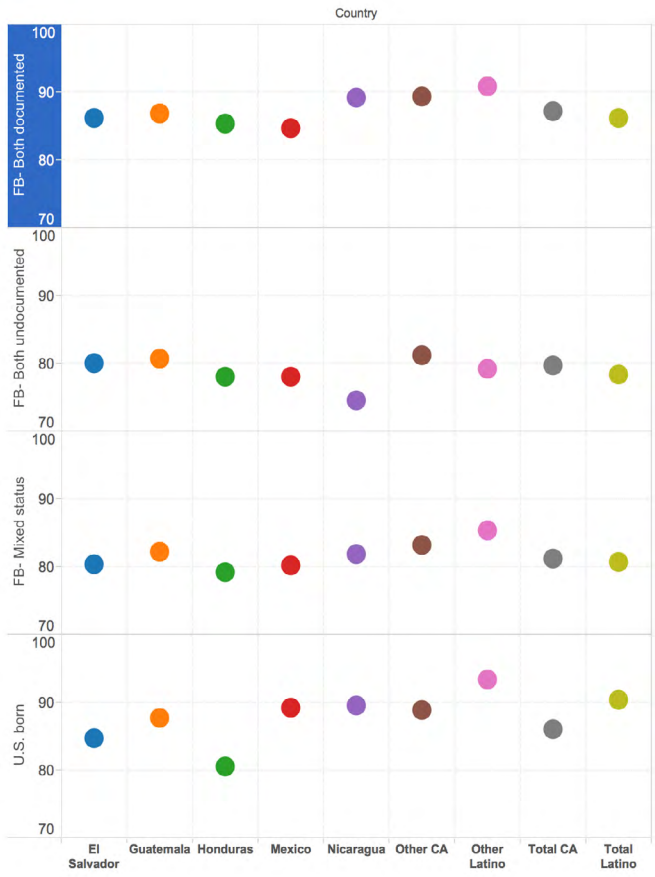


Figure 12
Health coverage for Central American Origin Children by parent imigrant status and nationality
Source: ACS data, pooled 2009-2013 single-year samples (Ruggles et al. 2015)

the first to second (i.e., segmented assimilation[38]). Whereas documented immigrant status across the board is associated with lower poverty rates (compared to having undocumented immigrant parents), birthright citizenship is not. The case of Honduran-origin children in poverty is particularly interesting: children of mixed-status parents (48%) are as likely as those with U.S.-born parents (48%) to live in poverty.

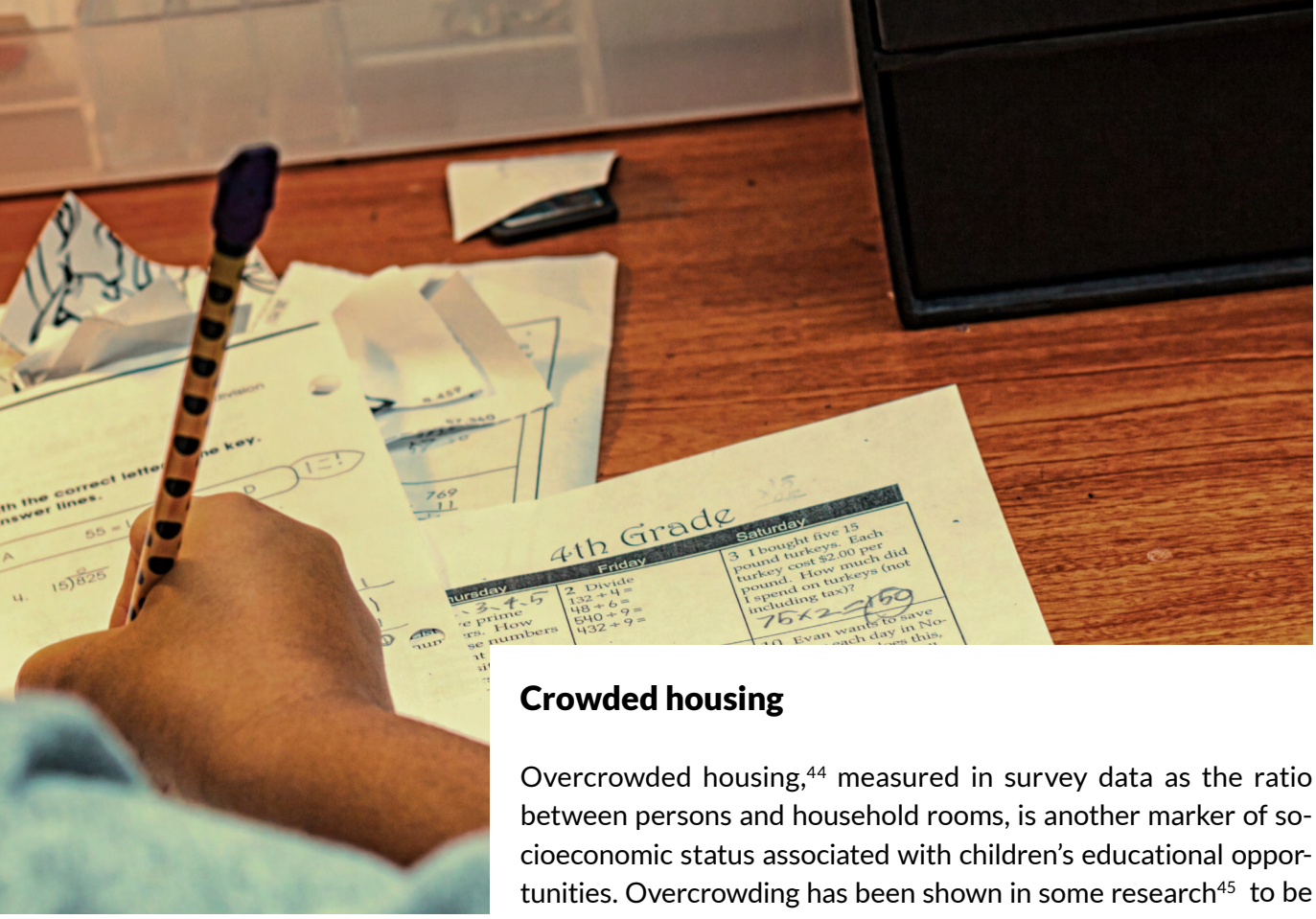
Health coverage

Significant relationships exist between educational opportunity and children's physical and mental health. These relationships go in both directions. Years of schooling (i.e., educational attainment) are associated with better health status and healthy behaviors, above and beyond the effects of race, ethnicity, gender, income, and occupation.[39] And dispar-

ities in children's health contribute to gaps in their performance of academic knowledge and skills taught at school.[40] Children in families with health insurance coverage tend to receive more care[41] and demonstrate stronger health outcomes.[42]

Most children of Central American origins (84%) have health insurance coverage through their parents' employers or through government programs,[43] though there are differences across parent immigrant status and national origin (see Figure 12). Honduran-origin children (81%) are the least likely to have insurance, while Latinos from Caribbean and South American (92%) origins are the most likely. Children of undocumented immigrant parents are the least likely to be insured, even though most are still insured: 80% of all Central American origin children of undocumented parents are insured.

Again we see differences by nationality: more than a quarter of Nicaraguan-origin children of undocumented parents are uninsured, compared to 19% of other Central American origin children with undocumented parents. And once again we see evidence of "segmented assimilation": Central American origin children with documented immigrant parents are slightly more likely to have health coverage than their co-ethnic peers with a U.S.-born parent. This is particularly the case for children of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran origin.



Crowded housing

Overcrowded housing,[44] measured in survey data as the ratio between persons and household rooms, is another marker of socioeconomic status associated with children's educational opportunities. Overcrowding has been shown in some research[45] to be associated with lower academic achievement, cognitive delays, social withdrawal, lower self-efficacy, and less student persistence in school, even after controlling for other household SES markers. These effects tend to be mediated by the quality of family relationships and interactions (e.g., affection, communication, etc.).[46]

Central American origin children with documented immigrant parents are slightly more likely to have health coverage than their co-ethnic peers with a U.S.-born parent

One-third of children of Central American origins live in crowded housing (one or more persons per room), compared to 15% of Latinos from Caribbean or South American origins. Children from Guatemalan origins (38%) are the most likely among nationality groups to live in crowded housing, followed by Salvadoran- (36%), Honduran- (34%), Nicaraguan- (26%), and other Central American-origin (24%) children. Among immigrant groups, Central American origin children from undocumented families (45%) are the most likely to live in crowded housing, compared to Central American origin children from mixed immigrant status (41%), documented immigrant (27%), and U.S.-born parents (25%). For Salvadoran- and Honduran-origin children, those with U.S.-born parents are more likely than those with two documented-immigrant parents to live in crowded housing.

Conclusion

- Nearly 1.7 million children of Central American origins live in the U.S. Most of them are U.S.-born and live in immigrant families. Educational opportunity for children from Central American origins tends to be comparable to that for children from Mexican origins, though weaker than for Latinos from Caribbean or South American origins. The largest groups of Central American origin children—from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—have weaker opportunities than those from other Central American countries. These differences are associated with varied immigrant selectivity across these countries (e.g., Nicaraguan immigration is the most selective), as well as the quality of educational opportunities within countries and communities of origin.

- Children from Central American origins are more likely (40%) than any other group of Latino children to have an undocumented parent. Across several tables and figures we find that undocumented status of Central-American-origin children's parents is associated with weaker educational opportunity. Having two undocumented parents is associated with weaker opportunity than having mixed-status parents, and children from mixed-status households tend to have weaker opportunities than those whose parents documented immigrants or U.S.-born.

- We also find that Central-American-origin children with a U.S.-born parent do not demonstrate educational advances over their co-ethnic peers from documented immigrant households. This suggests that improving immigrant integration vis-à-vis educational opportunity is an intergenerational ordeal that requires commitment and coordination across multiple sectors.

Policy recommendations

In order to enhance opportunities for these students, we recommend the following:

1) Collaborate with authorities and education ministries in Central American nations (especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) in order to understand and improve educational opportunities in migrant-sending communities. Activities include:

- **a)** Sharing relevant education initiatives and communicating statistical reports to better understand and improve educational opportunities.
- **b)** Designing and testing bi-national initiatives (transfer documents, online programs, teacher exchanges) to enhance educational opportunities in both countries.

2) Use federal research funds to better understand educational opportunity for Central American-origin (and other Latino) children, and to design and test improvements. Sponsored projects should:

- **a)** Identify the mechanisms that explain the effects of family documented status of children's educational opportunities and outcomes, as well as the school, community, and family reasons for educational stagnation between the second and third generation following migration.
- **b)** Develop and test a variety of interventions to reverse these ominous effects.

3) Incorporate the needs of children from Central American origins (and other Latinos) into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (i.e., No Child Left Behind). More specifically, we recommend:

- **a)** Including national origin and self and parent birth information of students on state and federal student assessments, in order to track performance by immigrant generation;

- **b)** Requiring states to establish common and rigorous English Language Learner (ELL) membership criteria (and high-quality assessments) for accountability purposes;
- **c)** Making explicit the amount of time ELL students need to acquire English language proficiency, requiring that states honor these timelines through English and content instruction;
- **d)** Improving teacher quality in schools with large populations of Central American-origin (and other Latino) children, by providing incentives to hire and retain high-quality teachers, and requiring teacher credentialing programs in states receiving Title II and Title III funds to address the language, academic, and cultural needs of Central-American-origin (and other Latino) students.

4) Provide undocumented parents of children with Central American origins with a pathway to legal permanent resident status. This pathway should:

- **a)** Consider conditions of migrant entry and the amount of time in the U.S.,
- **b)** Charge reasonable but not onerous fees, and
- **c)** Privilege the union of families with mixed legal status, particularly those with U.S.-born children.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See, for example, Park, H. (2014) "Children at the Border," New York Times, 21 October.
2. We use data from the American Community Survey (ACS), a monthly survey representative of the total U.S. population conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Each annually released ACS micro-data sample includes roughly one percent of the U.S. population, and is this the ideal data source for analyses of sub-populations and geographies as each sample includes more than three million observations. For this report, we use ACS data released through the IPUMS project at the University of Minnesota Population Center. Our sample was constructed by pooling the 2009-2013 single year ACS samples in order to maximize the number of observations on which our estimates are base.
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19. The legal status of children and parents in the 2009-2013 American Community Survey (ACS) was imputed using a method known as combined-sample multiple imputation (CSMI). This method was developed by Jennifer Van Hook and James D. Bachmeier at the Population Research Institute at the Pennsylvania State University, and also serves as the basis for statistics on the unauthorized foreign-born population released through Migration Policy Institute's (MPI) Data Hub (http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/us-immigration-policy-program-data-hub/unauthorized-immigrant-population-profiles). The imputed data used to produce the profiles of unauthorized migrants at MPI's web site are the same as the imputed data used for this report. For more on the method, see the methodological appendix in: Randy Capps, James D. Bachmeier, Michael Fix, and Jennifer Van Hook, A Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Health Coverage Profile of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute (2013).
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SUMMARY

Educational opportunity—access to high quality schooling—is a critical aspect of social mobility and integration in the United States. This policy brief provides a demographic portrait of children with Central American heritage, with a focus on educational opportunity. We describe educational outcomes as well as some institutional conditions and family circumstances associated with opportunity.

Nearly 1.7 million children (ages 0 to 17 years) of Central American origin lived in the United States in 2011. Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran origins are the most prevalent. Central American families settle throughout the U.S., though California, Texas, and Florida are the most common destination states. Most children of Central American origins (86%) were born in the United States, and most (82%) live in immigrant households (those with one or more foreign-born parents).

Among their Latino peers, children of Central American origins (40%) are the most likely to have an undocumented parent. Having an undocumented parent is associated with weaker educational opportunity—e.g., lower parent education, higher poverty, and lower rates of health insurance coverage.

Overall, children of Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran origin have weaker educational opportunity than their peers from the rest of Central America. These differences are associated with pre-existing social inequalities within migrant-sending communities, the selectivity of migrants versus non-migrants in their countries of origin, and structural inequalities in the U.S. school system.

The integration of Central American-origin children into the U.S. mainstream, as with other Latinos, is an intergenerational process. By the third generation, however, it appears that many children with Central American heritage are not integrated. Poverty, overcrowded housing, and health coverage rates between those with documented immigrant and U.S.-born parents are comparable. We conclude with four recommendations to improve educational opportunity of Central-American-origin children.

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