

The case of the disappearing Mexican Americans:
An ethnic-identity mystery

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ABSTRACT

We examine the issue of identification stability for U.S.-born Mexican Americans, by far the largest of the ethnic groups growing as a result of contemporary immigration. We demonstrate a significant exodus from the Mexican-American group as identified by the census. The major part of this loss, revealed by comparisons of birth cohorts across the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Censuses, occurs because individuals who identified themselves as Mexican American at an earlier point in time do not do so at a later point. In addition, there are exits that occur between generations because of past intermarriage, visible in the number of non-Hispanics who claim Mexican ancestry. The losses in the Mexican-American group appear to be accounted for by two kinds of identity shifts: toward identities that have a mainstream character and thus appear reflect conventional assimilation; and toward identities that have a pan-ethnic character, i.e., with Hispanics or Latinos. These exits are selective, but in complex and partially off-setting ways. Nevertheless, the comparison of the characteristics of U.S.-born members over time is likely to be affected by changing patterns of identification with the group.

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The analysis of ethnic populations with census data generally presumes substantial stability in the identification of members over time. At the limit, this assumption is tantamount to the demographic change equation. Without such an assumption, it is very difficult to make sense of trends in such important indicators as residential segregation and educational attainment. That is, if membership is unstable, so that many former members no longer indicate membership or previous non-members now elect to belong, then what appears at first blush to be a change in the objective situation of the group, such as a decline in residential segregation, can be the product of shifts in the ways its membership is identifiable.

Although a long-standing sociological tradition views racial and ethnic memberships as ascriptive, and therefore stable, life-long, traits, we know that the reports of membership in some ethnic populations have shifted over time, in some cases according to a consistent trend, in others according to idiosyncratic fluctuations. Thus, the numbers of Americans claiming to be American Indian on the census race question rose sharply after 1960, as individuals who had once described their race in some other way changed their self-designation (Eschbach et al. 1998; Nagel 1995). It is plausible to hypothesize that this rise has occurred because of the growing acceptability of indigenous origins, which has encouraged many Americans with part Indian ancestry to claim this identity. By contrast, the numbers of claimants of various European origins on the census ancestry question have exhibited considerable flux, prompted partly by the examples listed just below the write-in question (see Farley 1991; Lieberman and Waters 1993).

In this paper, we examine the issue of stability for U.S.-born Mexican Americans, by far the largest of the ethnic groups growing as a result of contemporary immigration. In the 2000 Census, the identification of Mexicans and other Hispanic groups was made problematic by a wording shift in the Hispanic-origin question. However, we show that an exit of some members from the Mexican group was apparent even in the 1990 Census and was accentuated in 2000. We show also that this exit is selective, so that a comparison of the characteristics of U.S.-born members over time presumably is affected by changing patterns of identification with the group. However, because the exit takes place into two distinct kinds of identity categories, one of which is pan-ethnic Hispanic while the other reflects a more mainstream assimilation, the impact of exit on the characteristics of the identifiable Mexican-American group is complex.

Identity shift

One force that can lead to identity shifts for large numbers of individuals is assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964). It has long been posited that, in its more developed phases, assimilation brings a weakening of the secure anchoring of ethnic identification in ancestral origins (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Substantial evidence shows that, for the descendants of European ethnics, identities have been affected by assimilation and especially by the mixed ancestry that results from intermarriage. Thus, the ethnic identities of whites evidence considerable lability, so that their specific manifestations shift over time and from one context to another. One signal of this weakening may be flux over time in the way individuals respond to questions about ethnicity or in their responses to different versions of an ancestry question (Lieberson and Waters 1993).

In principle, assimilation can lead to various outcomes in terms of identity and group membership. As Portes and Zhou (1993) point out in their exposition of the concept of “segmented assimilation,” it matters what societal sectors individuals and groups are assimilating to. One possibility is entry into the mainstream society, which is dominated by white Americans with European ancestries. In the case of Mexicans, who come from a country that prides itself upon *mestizaje* and who have both in the past and present displayed a relatively high rate of marriage with Anglos (Bean and Stevens 2003; Spickard 1989), there exists a large population of individuals who can see themselves as having mixed ethnic and racial origins. In this connection, it is important to recognize also that Mexicans are a racially diverse population, which ranges from those who have an indigenous appearance in North American eyes to others with a European appearance (Murgia and Forman 2003). Racial appearance may well be linked to the treatment Mexican Americans receive in American society (Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001; Murguia and Telles 1996). The research of Alba and Logan (e.g., Alba, Logan, and Stults 2000; see also Massey and Denton 1994) on locational attainment shows that Mexican Americans who declare themselves to be “white” on the census reside in somewhat better neighborhoods (as indexed, say, by the average income of their residents) than otherwise comparable Mexican Americans who classify themselves racially as “other.” The combination of a European appearance and a family background of intermarriage to Anglo Americans could encourage some individuals to identify with their more prestigious European ancestral origins than with their Mexican ones (Duncan and Trejo 2005).

This tendency could be strengthened by the economic impacts of immigration from Mexico. Economists have noted that the deepest impacts of newly arrived immigrants are on the earnings of longer resident members of the same groups (Borjas 1999). This suggests that, in areas of high immigration, Mexican Americans, even those who are U.S. born, could have reasons to distinguish themselves from recently immigrated Mexicans. Speculating a bit, one could infer that this incentive could spur those of partly non-Mexican ancestry to identify with it rather than with their Mexican heritage (Jasso 2001).

Another possible outcome of assimilatory processes is a pan-ethnic identity as Hispanic or Latino (Espiritu 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2001: ch. 7). Pan-ethnic identities have long been a feature of U.S. society, as exemplified by the acquisition of a white racial identity by the members of racially “in-between” groups such as eastern European Jews and southern Italians (Barrett and Roediger 1997; Ignatiev 1995). Some sociologists assert that they are likely outcomes for contemporary groups from Asia and Latin America because the U.S. classification system tends to slight nationality distinctions, as between Mexicans and Salvadorans, in favor of more global categories, like Hispanic. In the U.S., so the argument goes, the connection of such categories to opportunities for advancement that have been generated by affirmative action and diversity policies more generally will encourage individuals to identify themselves in pan-ethnic terms (Nagel 1994; Skrentny 2004). The nature of the political system, which favors larger groups over smaller ones, points in the same direction.

But there are arguments that would lead one to hypothesize the resilience of a Mexican-American identity. Immigration itself might strengthen that identity. That is,

there are incentives for later-generation individuals to identify with a demographically and culturally powerful group, especially in areas with a salient Mexican presence. Indeed, insofar the Mexican population is constituted by immigrants without U.S. citizenship and the undocumented, there is a niche for members of the U.S.-born generations to serve as the interface between the group and the institutions of the surrounding society, in such occupations as teachers and lawyers. This reasoning suggests that the attractiveness of a Mexican identity should be stronger in areas of immigrant concentration and weaker where the Mexican population is small (Jiménez 2004).

Analytic strategy

Our analysis involves tracing Mexican-American birth cohorts across the 1980-2000 censuses. We define Mexican Americans in narrow and broad ways, but always include only U.S.-born individuals in the group. In that way, we virtually eliminate the possibility that international migration, specifically to and from Mexico, can account for the changes in size that we will document. (The Mexican Census of 2000 shows only a small resident population—about 500 thousand--of individuals born in the United States. Since there is a sizable group of Anglo retirees living in Mexico, it is implausible that one can account for much of the size changes in the Mexican-American population by migration to Mexico. U.S.-born children living in immigrant families are something of an exception, as noted subsequently.)

The diversification of Mexican-American identities is evident in the different ways that members of the group can be identified in census data. They are shown in Table 1. The obvious identity is that indicated through the Mexican category in the

census Hispanic-origin question, which has been asked since 1980 (where our data series thus begins). When we use the term “Mexican American” without further qualification, we are referring to the incumbents of this category.

One complication for this data series lies in the changes in the wording of the Hispanic-origin question across the census years (shown in Table 2). Nevertheless, in all three years, the labels “Mexican,” “Mexican Amer.” and “Chicano” appear together on the census form. In 1980, it appears in connection with a question that neutrally inquires, “is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent?” In 1990, the question was the same, except for the elimination of the phrase “or descent.” In 2000, however, the question shifted to: “In this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?” It appears that the new question was understood by some respondents to ask whether they labeled themselves in these ways (del Pinal 2004)

Partly because of the change, a growing number of individuals with Mexican ancestry can be found by other means. Some of them place themselves in the “other” Hispanic category, possibly because they do not generally label themselves as “Mexican” or “Chicano.” This category grew in size especially between 1990 and 2000, in part because of a change in wording of the 2000 Hispanic-origin question. Some of its incumbents can be identified as having Mexican ancestry because of their responses to the ancestry question. Such individuals are subsequently described as “other Hispanic” Mexicans, and their percentages of the total U.S.-born Mexican-origin population are shown by census year in Table 1.

A final category is the most perplexing: the non-Hispanic Mexicans. These are persons who refuse to describe themselves as Hispanic or Latino on the Hispanic-origin

question, but then indicate some Mexican ancestry on the ancestry question. They are a relatively stable component of the U.S.-born Mexican-origin population, accounting in each census year for about 3 percent of the total.

The magnitude of Mexican-American loss over time

Table 3 traces the changing size of a single birth cohort from 1980 to 2000: Mexican-ancestry individuals who were in the ages 25-29 in 1980 (and thus were born in the U.S. in the period 1951-1955). We have chosen to begin with a group that was in adult ages at the start of the period we can observe, so that the individuals involved, rather than their parents, have been able to specify their census classifications at every time point. We show the evolution of two different definitions of this birth cohort: the first, in the top panel, includes only Mexican Americans, as defined above; the second adds in the other-Hispanic Mexicans in order to account for the possibility that the change in wording in 2000 may have contributed to the apparent loss of Mexican-ancestry individuals. The cohorts are shown separately for men and women. In order to take into account losses due to mortality, a “relative” loss figure is shown; this is the loss beyond that experienced by the same birth cohort of all U.S.-born persons (regardless of ethnic origin) during the same period. This is a reasonable approach to accounting for mortality in light of the recent analysis by Palloni and Arias (2004), which shows that Hispanic mortality advantage is essentially confined to the foreign born.

If we restrict our attention only to individuals who declared themselves to be Mexican on the Hispanic-origin question, then the attrition over a two-decade period is very substantial. Net of the losses due to mortality, the fall-off in membership is 3-5 percent by 1990 and nearly 20 percent by 2000. Obviously, the bigger decline occurred

during the 1990s, and this fact raises the suspicion that the shift in question wording is somehow implicated in it. However, the picture is not changed very much by adding in the other Hispanics who can be identified as Mexican through the ancestry question. With them included in all years, the attrition in the group during the 1980s is now somewhat larger than before, while the total loss between 1980 and 2000 is somewhat ameliorated. But at 13-15 percent, it is certainly not small.

How extensive are these losses for other birth cohorts? Table 4 summarizes the declines over time for five-year birth cohorts, up through the 60-64 year-olds of 1980. To simplify the presentation, we drop the separate panels for men and women, and we present only the evolution of the combined population of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics of Mexican ancestry.

Aside from the age extremes, the average decline for Mexican Americans in the 1980-1990 period seems to have been modest, on the order of 4-5 percentage points more than one would have expected from the size changes exhibited by all the U.S. born. An exception is the 0-4 age cohort of 1980 (0-4): it does not decrease in size. Plausibly, this occurs because of the circularity of Mexican migration in the pre-IRCA period (Massey et al. 2002). Thus, some families with U.S.-born children would have been in Mexico at the time of the 1980 Census and returned to the U.S. before 1990, possibly in order to allow their children to attend school. This addition would have offset the loss the cohort might have experienced

In general, there are large declines when the 2000 counts are compared to the 1980 base figures. Aside from the youthful cohorts of 1980, the declines are at least 10 percent, and usually they are more, averaging around 12 percent compared to the

expected values. The youthful cohorts, extending this time through the 10-14 year-olds of 1980, do not decline as much. Though we do not show separate figures for men and women, it turns out that for males who were under 10 in 1980 and are thus 30-39 years old at the time of the 2000 Census, there is even an increase over time. Quite possibly, some of the U.S.-born children who were in Mexico at the time of the 1980 Census have returned to the U.S., where they can reside and work because of their U.S. citizenship.

Nevertheless, for the cohorts that were past childhood in 1980, there is a consistent pattern of substantial decline in size by 2000. The losses evident in the Mexican-ancestry population reflect changes in identities that are specific to Mexican Americans: they are not universal among Latin American-origin groups. To demonstrate this point, we have produced Table 5, which is the equivalent to Table 4 but for U.S.-born Cuban-ancestry individuals. (We have chosen Cubans over Puerto Ricans for this exercise because of the complications introduced by back-and-forth migration between U.S. states and Puerto Rico.) In Table 5, there is no consistent pattern of change in the sizes of birth cohorts over time. The Cuban group as counted by the census is not losing members in the way that the Mexican group is.

Characteristics of different Mexican-ancestry categories

This brief overview of the declines in the numbers of U.S.-born persons who report themselves as Mexican on the Hispanic question suggests the complexity of the phenomenon. The declines cannot be simply explained as a result of the change in question wording in 2000, although that probably contributed to their magnitude. It cannot be explained either as a consequence of the shift for young people from parental reporting of race/ethnicity to self reporting. The magnitude of the decline suggests the

possibility of very substantial effects on the apparent characteristics of the Mexican-American group. For instance, educational data can be affected by these losses among adult Mexican Americans. Thus, it behooves us to try to examine the characteristics of the individuals who appear to be “disappearing” from the Mexican-American group. However, an immediate stumbling block becomes evident: how can we identify them?

One way of approaching the possible selectivity of exit from the Mexican-American group is to examine the characteristics of the different categories of Mexican-ancestry individuals that we can identify in census data: Mexican Americans, other Hispanics of Mexican ancestry, non-Hispanic Mexicans. Table 6 therefore presents the racial self-classification, language, and educational characteristics of the incumbents of these three categories.

The table demonstrates that the non-Hispanic Mexicans stand apart from the other two categories. In fact, they resemble what one would predict from conventional assimilation theory: that is, their characteristics suggest that their exit from the group is linked to entry into the mainstream. They are far more likely than the incumbents of the other two categories to describe themselves in racial terms as “white” only, and the great majority of them do so. They are very likely to speak only English at home. And their educational attainment is, on average, superior to that of other Mexican-ancestry individuals. In addition, we have confirmed something that the table does not show: many of these individuals report some European ancestry in addition to Mexican. It is logical to infer that many incumbents of this category are the descendants of intermarriages (see Duncan and Trejo 2005).

The differences between Mexican Americans and the other Hispanic Mexicans are less clear-cut. But the small differences that one finds suggest that the other Hispanic Mexicans are more distant from the Anglo mainstream than the Mexican Americans are. Perhaps this is the case because the category contains some individuals who misunderstood the nature of the Hispanic-origin question posed in the 2000 census. Such individuals are likely to have low levels of education. In any event, the other Hispanic Mexicans have slightly lower education than Mexican Americans and are less likely to speak only English at home and to classify themselves as racially white.

Finding missing Mexican-origin individuals: The case of Texas

The comparison in the last section is unsatisfying: it cannot address the characteristics of those individuals who have exited from the Mexican group and are not to be found in one of the three Mexican-origin categories. Do they resemble the non-Hispanic Mexicans or the other Hispanic Mexicans? The ramifications of the sizable exit from the group depend on an answer to this question.

Since we cannot identify all the individuals who have exited, we cannot entirely resolve the issue. The best we can do is to examine shifts among Hispanic-origin categories in a state or region where Hispanics are overwhelmingly of Mexican descent. After examining the states of the southwest, the traditional region of concentration of Mexicans, we have chosen Texas for this purpose because the shifts there in the 1980-2000 period have an unusually clear-cut character: that is, the percentage of Hispanics in Texas who reported themselves as Mexican was 92.0% in the base year (and no doubt many of the “other” Hispanics were also of Mexican background); thus, the subsequent growth of other categories of reporting among Hispanic residents of that state comes

mainly at the expense of the Mexican category.¹ Since the categories of ethnic reporting are shaped by identities and these are to some extent local, it must be underscored that the analysis that follows might not apply everywhere.

Table 7 shows these shifts among major categories within the Hispanic population of Texas. To eliminate the possibility of reporting shifts arising from the in-migration of non-Mexican Hispanics, we restrict the table to Hispanics and individuals with Mexican ancestry who were born in Texas in 1980 or before. However, in order to track a consistently defined population across censuses, we continue to include Texas-born individuals in all census years even if they no longer reside in the state. For the same reason, while the 1980 data includes individuals of all ages, the 1990 data includes only those 10 and older in that year and the 2000 data those who were 20 and older.

There is one difference from national patterns that stands out: among the Texas born, there is not much of a drop off in the number of Mexican Hispanics between 1980 and 1990; the big decline comes during the 1990s. However, this decline seems to be captured by the other categories enumerated in the table: that is, the total number of Hispanics and non-Hispanics with Mexican ancestry exhibits small declines from year to year consistent with losses to mortality.

One obvious identification change in the table has already been identified: a shift, especially noticeable in the 2000 census, from the Mexican category on the Hispanic-origin question to the “other Hispanic” one, with Mexican indicated as ancestry.

¹ Of the southwestern states whose Hispanic populations are heavily Mexican by origin, Texas has the highest percentage of Hispanics who reported themselves as “Mexican” in the base year. This is in part due to the earlier use of non-Mexican categories by the Mexican-origin population of the other southwestern states—for example, the high frequency of claiming “Spanish” origin by Hispanic New Mexicans in 1980.

However, one other shift seems to parallel this one: a large increase in the number of individuals who place themselves in the “other Hispanic” category and indicate their ancestry as “Hispanic.” This, it appears, is a pan-ethnic response, to which the change in question wording may have contributed. In any event, the number of individuals giving it soars from 8 thousand in 1980 to 121 thousand in 2000, a 15-fold increase.

The other noteworthy pattern in the table concerns the non-Hispanic Mexican identity and a newly observed analogue. Contrary to the national pattern, the non-Hispanic Mexican category grows over time among the Texas born, doubling in size between 1980 and 2000. An inspection of the table decomposed between Texas residents and those who have left the state reveals that all of this growth takes place among the out-migrants. In addition, an identification with a strong European component now appears among those who describe themselves as Hispanic: it consists of individuals who place themselves in the “other Hispanic” category and specify their group and/or ancestry as “Spanish” or “Spanish American.” While the number who claim to be Spanish is stable and, at roughly 50 thousand, not large, it and the non-Hispanics of Mexican ancestry account for 5 percent of the Texas-born Mexican-origin population in 2000. This is approximately the same as the percentage attributable to the pan-ethnic response.

The characteristics of the major categories of identification among Mexican-origin Texans, reported in Table 8, bear close resemblance to those observed at the national level, in Table 6. If we take the Mexican-American category as our reference point, then we see that the comparison between its incumbents and other Hispanics who report Mexican ancestry is rather similar to that in Table 6. However, among the Texas born, members of both categories are more likely to place themselves in the “white”

racial category, are less likely to speak only English, and have weaker educational attainment on average than is the case in the nation as a whole. As of 2000, members of both categories are very likely to remain residents of Texas, though this is somewhat more likely for the other Hispanics with Mexican ancestry. With similar qualifications with respect to the national data, the non-Hispanic Mexicans in Table 8 exhibit similar differences in comparison to Mexican American and other Hispanics of Mexican ancestry to those visible in Table 6. In comparison with these other two categories, the non-Hispanic Mexicans, in addition, are much less likely to reside in Texas, suggesting that spatial mobility away from one's origin community is frequently implicated in this identity.

Moreover, the two categories that are new in Table 8 exhibit some resemblance to categories already discussed. That is, the other Hispanics who identify themselves as Spanish or Spanish American in response to the ancestry question are somewhat analogous to the non-Hispanic Mexicans. And the other Hispanics who state "Hispanic" in response to the ancestry question resemble in some respects the other Hispanic Mexicans. But the analogies are not exact.

Thus, the tendency of the Spanish to classify themselves in racial terms as only white is no higher than that of Mexican Americans in Texas. In this respect, the other Hispanics who report their ancestry as Hispanic stand apart from all the other categories: they are less likely to describe themselves as white and more likely to place themselves in the "other" race category. Somewhat more similarity to the previously discussed categories occurs for language: the Spanish Americans are more likely to speak only English (ironically) than everyone else but the non-Hispanic Mexicans, while the other

Hispanics who claim only Hispanic ancestry are about as unlikely to speak only English as Mexican Americans and other Hispanics of Mexican ancestry. There are also analogies to the already discussed categories for educational attainment: the attainment of the Spanish category is superior to that of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics with Mexican ancestry, though it does not equal that of non-Hispanics with Mexican ancestry; the attainment of the other Hispanic Hispanics is clearly below that of the other categories, which lends support to the suspicion that the Hispanic-origin question in 2000 was misread by some individuals.

The determinants of Hispanic ethnic identification in Texas are examined in greater depth in the multinomial logistic regression results for 1990 and 2000 that are reported in Table 9. The odds in each case compare the identity category listed first at the heads of the columns to the Mexican-American one. The independent variables are constituted mainly by the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the individual: age, gender, education, household income, the type of marriage², and the language he or she speaks at home.³ Also included are selected characteristics of the PUMA of residence, which allow us to examine—admittedly in a rather rough way—how identification may depend on the social contexts in which the individual is located.

These variables are the percentages of the PUMA that is Mexican on the Hispanic origin

² The marriage variable is set up as a contrast between individuals married to non-Hispanics (coded 1) and those married to Hispanics (coded 0). Individuals who are single or whose marriage type cannot be identified in the PUMS because they are neither householder nor spouse of the householder are accounted for by other dummy variables in the equation; since these variables are present only as controls, their coefficients are not shown.

³ Race is omitted here on the grounds that it is part of the identity that is under analysis and thus not a determinant of it.

question, that is foreign born (regardless of country of origin), and that speaks a language other than English at home.

Given the possible impact of changes in question wording between 1990 and 2000, our emphasis is on the effects that are consistent across the two censuses. The micro-level determinants of a Spanish identity rather than a Mexican-American one are, generally speaking, consistent and closely related to the mainstream-assimilation profile we have already inferred for this identity. Preference for a Spanish identity is greater among the more highly educated, those who are married to a non-Hispanic, and those who speak only English at home. In addition, this identity is preferred by older Hispanics.

Oddly, the determinants of identifying as a non-Hispanic with Mexican ancestry are not entirely consistent with this profile, in particular in the negative effect of education. However, this identity is very strongly determined by two variables: being married to a non-Hispanic and speaking only English. Intermarriage not only has an effect that dwarfs that of education (effect of 4 years of education=-.11; effect of intermarriage=2.64), but is itself determined by education (Qian 1997). The total effect, including indirect pathways, of education on identifying as a non-Hispanic with Mexican ancestry is surely positive.

The two “other Hispanic” identities exhibit less consistent profiles between the two census years, but they are broadly consistent with each other. The effects that are consistent between 1990 and 2000 indicate that those who prefer either of these two identities are less assimilated than those who report themselves as Mexican American. This is especially apparent for the other Hispanics who report Mexican ancestry, who are

more likely to be endogamously married and more likely to speak Spanish at home. In addition, both of these “other Hispanic” identities are chosen more frequently by young people than is the Mexican-American one; and they are preferred by individuals with lower socioeconomic status, as indicated by education (other Hispanics with Mexican ancestry) or household income (other Hispanics with Hispanic ancestry).

Further, the contextual effects are fairly consistent for the two “other Hispanic” identities, indicating that, in terms of location, both differ in the same way from the Mexican-American one. According to the signs of the coefficients in both the 1990 and 2000 equations, the Mexican-American identity is more common where the percentage of Mexicans in the total population is high and where there are many immigrants. However, where the percentage speaking a language other than English at home is high, the alternatives to a Mexican-American identity are favored. One inconsistency concerns residence in Texas, which is significant only in 2000. In this year, however, the other Hispanic identities are preferred by Texas residents.

There is less consistency in the contextual effects for the two identities that appear to represent greater assimilation, indicating perhaps that each represents an expression of greater assimilation in a particular context. The non-Hispanic Mexican identity is preferred by the residents of Texas (a reversal of the bivariate relationship) and by those who live in PUMAs with greater percentages of non-English speakers. The Spanish identity is offered by those who live in areas with relatively small Mexican-American populations and few immigrants.

In sum, given that the Hispanic population that was born in Texas by 1980 is overwhelmingly of Mexican descent, the major categories of identification we have just

analyzed appear to reflect variations in the way Mexican-origin individuals identify themselves. This analysis thus sheds further light on the identity categories in which Mexican Americans may appear. In addition to the non-Hispanics with Mexican ancestry, we have found a Spanish category, which is stable in size between 1980 and 2000, appears well established as an identity and to contain individuals who are more assimilated in conventional terms than other Texans of Mexican-origin. The other novelty is the category of other Hispanics who label their ancestry as “Hispanic.” They may well represent the emergence of a pan-ethnically identifying group within in the Mexican-origin population, though the picture is clouded by the uncertain impact of the changes in question wording between 1990 and 2000. Nevertheless, this group was already increasing in number by 1990 among Texas-born Hispanics.

Conclusion

Some U.S.-born Mexican Americans are disappearing from the group. At least, that appears to be a fair conclusion from the declines in the sizes of Mexican-American birth cohorts over the period 1980-2000. These declines are well beyond what can be accounted for by mortality, and they are visible in both decades under observation. The change in question wording in the 2000 census may have distorted the magnitude of decline during the 1990s, but it is highly implausible that it can explain it. The inevitable conclusion is that identity shifts are taking place in the Mexican-American population and are moving some Mexican Americans into other racial and ethnic categories.

Both of the identity shifts predicted earlier are evident in the data, though only one of them does much to explain the declining sizes of Mexican-American cohorts across censuses. The outcome conventionally predicted by assimilation theory, a

weakening of ethnic identity in tandem with a closer identification with the mainstream society, is visible in two ways: at the national level, in the category of non-Hispanic individuals with Mexican ancestry, which regularly accounts for 3-4 percent of the Mexican-origin population; and in Texas, in the group identifying itself as Spanish or Spanish American, who account for 2 percent of Texas-born Hispanics. These are not large fractions, to be sure, and these groups mostly have been stable in size over time; thus they do not do much to explain the 1980-2000 declines. (The growth of the non-Hispanic category among the Texas born is an exception.) Presumably, the identity shifts involved in them generally occur across generations and are, in significant part, the outcome of intermarriages in the past.

These groups resemble an assimilation outcome in several respects: they are likely to identify racially as whites; they are more likely than other Mexican Americans to speak only English; and their educational attainment is higher than that of Mexican Americans in general. In the cases of the non-Hispanic Mexicans, many report having some European ancestry, and the Spanish of Texas obviously identify with a European origin.

The other shift involves the emergence of a pan-ethnic identity, i.e., Mexican-origin individuals who apparently identify mainly as Hispanics or Latinos (see also Portes and Rumbaut 2001). We can observe this in Texas, but not in the nation as a whole, because only in a state whose Hispanic population is heavily Mexican by origin can we feel confident about the ethnic origins of people in a pan-ethnic category. Among the Texas born, this category expanded rapidly in the 1980-2000 period, to reach a size roughly comparable to that of the combined assimilation-linked identities; some of this

expansion could have been due to the shift in question wording but not all of it, since it was already apparent in 1990. The pan-ethnic category appears to be selective of individuals who, to judge by educational attainment, are less well positioned than the average Mexican American. They are also more likely to identify with the “other” race category as opposed to the white category.

The trends are of course interesting in themselves, but demographers and sociologists need to be concerned about them for another reason: namely, the selective departures from the Mexican-American group are on a scale that could easily impact on the measurement of group characteristics over time. This worrisome conclusion seems especially valid if we restrict our attention to the conventional census definition of the group: individuals who describe themselves on the Hispanic-origin question as Mexican. Table 2 showed that, for a young adult cohort in 1980, the unexplained loss was on the order of 20 percent during a two-decade period. Granted, the patterns of identity shift we have identified in this paper exhibit different forms of selectivity: those pulled toward a pan-ethnic category are less “assimilated” in conventional terms than the average Mexican American; those identifying with the mainstream society are obviously more so. That these changes are somewhat offsetting does not negate the need for more research on the ramifications of the substantial outflow from the Mexican-American group.

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Table 1. Distribution of the U.S.-born Mexican-origin population across categories of identification in census data

Name	Definition	1980	1990	2000
Mexican Americans	Hispanics who place themselves in Mexican category	94.3%	95.5%	89.4%
Other Hispanic Mexicans	Other Hispanics who answer "Mexican" on ancestry question	2.9%	1.1%	7.2%
Non-Hispanic Mexicans	Non-Hispanics who report some Mexican ancestry	2.7%	3.4%	3.4%
N (in millions)		6.92	9.37	13.65

Table 2
Wording of question on Hispanic origin in 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses

<p>7. Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent?</p> <p><i>Fill one circle.</i></p>	<p><input type="radio"/> No (not Spanish/Hispanic)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Amer., Chicano</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, Puerto Rican</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes, Cuban</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic</p>
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1980

<p>7. Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin?</p> <p>Fill ONE circle for each person.</p> <p>If Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic, print one group: _____</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> No (not Spanish/Hispanic)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Am., Chicano</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, Puerto Rican</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes, Cuban</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic (Print one group, for example: Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.)</p>
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1990

<p>5 Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? Mark (X) the "No" box if not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Puerto Rican</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Cuban</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino — Print group. z</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

2000

Table 3. Disappearing Mexican Americans, 25-29 years old in 1980

Mexican Americans			
	1980	1990	2000
males	262,940	246,710	203,719
abs. chg., 1980 base		-6.2%	-22.5%
rel. chg., 1980 base		-4.9%	-19.9%
females	265,300	253,378	211,862
abs. chg., 1980 base		-4.5%	-20.1%
rel. chg., 1980 base		-3.1%	-18.4%
Mexican Americans + other Hispanics with Mexican ancestry			
males	270,320	249,568	222,775
abs. chg., 1980 base		-7.7%	-17.6%
rel. chg., 1980 base		-6.4%	-14.8%
females	273,220	256,718	232,969
abs. chg., 1980 base		-6.0%	-14.7%
rel. chg., 1980 base		-4.7%	-12.9%

Note: Relative change indicates the decrease beyond that experienced by the same cohort of all U.S.-born persons.

Table 4. Mexican-origin Americans: Proportions of counted to expected, 1980-2000, by birth cohort

1980 age	1980 N	1990 prop. Of expected	2000 prop. of expected
0-4	1095680	1.01	1.00
5-9	937680	0.96	0.97
10-14	829240	0.94	0.91
15-19	785980	0.98	0.90
20-24	661200	0.98	0.89
25-29	543540	0.94	0.86
30-34	430840	0.97	0.87
35-39	296760	0.94	0.85
40-44	241780	0.97	0.86
45-49	226020	0.95	0.87
50-54	218420	0.99	0.90
55-59	170040	0.98	
60-64	108560	0.91	
65+	179380		

Table 5. Cuban-origin Americans: Proportions of counted to expected, 1980-2000, by birth cohort

1980 age	1980 N	1990 prop. Of expected	2000 prop. of expected
0-4	41860	0.98	1.08
5-9	43880	0.93	1.07
10-14	37440	1.13	1.14
15-19	31580	1.10	1.10
20-24	15400	1.06	1.04
25-29	9820	1.01	0.98
30-34	7240	1.04	1.00
35-39	4800	0.97	1.04
40-44	3180	1.06	1.06
45-49	3460	0.94	1.03
50-54	3080	1.09	1.21
55-59	2720	1.12	
60-64	2400	0.98	
65+	5780		

Table 6. Characteristics of U.S.-born Mexican-origin population in 2000

	% white race (aged 20+)	% "other" race (aged 20+)	% speak only English (aged 20+)	% some post- secondary education (aged 25+)	% no hs diploma (aged 25+)
Mexican Americans	54.1	38.2	35.0	40.7	31.2
Other Hispanic Mexicans	48.2	43.1	27.2	37.8	31.4
Non- Hispanic Mexicans	85.2	0.7	77.5	52.6	18.5

Table 7. Reporting in Hispanic- and Mexican-origin categories by the Texas born, 1980-2000

	1980	1990 (aged 10+)	2000 (aged 20+)
Mexican Americans	2541860	2407510	1876557
Puerto Ricans	7980	9448	12963
Cubans	3140	4056	5171
Other Hispanics	166760	146465	572164
Mexicans	49860	20691	253244
Spanish	56500	43761	53082
Hispanic	7900	34570	120848
Other categories	36560	30831	53955
Not reported	15940	16612	91035
Non-Hispanic Mexicans	36780	52689	77173
Total N	2756520	2620168	2544028

Note: The table is restricted to Hispanics and persons with Mexican ancestry who were born in Texas no later than 1980.

Table 8. Characteristics of Hispanic- and Mexican-origin categories among the Texas born, 2000

	% Texas resident (aged 20+)	% white race (aged 20+)	% other race (aged 20+)	% speak only English (aged 20+)	% some post-secondary education (aged 25+)	% no hs diploma (aged 25+)
Mexican Americans	78.1	63.0	32.6	19.0	36.0	36.8
Other Hispanic Mexicans	86.9	53.9	39.1	15.7	33.8	35.2
Other Hispanic Hispanics	86.4	40.9	54.1	19.8	26.1	39.5
Spanish	68.6	60.3	30.6	33.5	42.4	32.0
Non-Hispanic Mexicans	34.6	87.6	1.1	54.4	48.5	25.7

Note: Table is restricted to Hispanics born in Texas no later than 1980.

Table 9. Multinomial logistic regression analysis of identities of Texas-born Hispanics and non-Hispanics with Mexican ancestry, 1990 and 2000

	Non-Hispanic Mexicans vs. Mexican American		Spanish vs. Mexican American		Other Hisp/Hispanic anc vs. Mexican American		Other Hisp/Mexican anc vs. Mexican American	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
age	0.013***	0.0075**	0.025***	0.017***	-0.0099**	-0.019***	-0.0082*	-0.012***
sex	0.075	-0.034	0.13	0.096*	0.014	0.14***	0.023	0.031
income	-0.0050**	0.00012	-0.0023*	-0.00061	-0.0038*	-0.0017**	-0.0054*	-0.00023
yrs educ	-0.044***	-0.0265*	0.060***	0.042***	-0.016	-0.038***	-0.032*	-0.017***
Texas res.	0.46***	0.27**	-0.31***	-0.0047	-0.10	0.26***	0.30	0.33***
intermarr.	3.75***	2.64***	0.82***	0.57***	-0.46**	-0.16***	-1.93***	-0.42***
English only	0.49***	0.79***	0.85***	0.47***	-0.098	0.013	-0.72**	-0.25***
		-						
% mex	-0.020**	0.0142**	-0.043***	-0.036***	-0.038***	-0.026***	-0.022*	-0.014***
% foreign	-0.0147	-0.015*	-0.04***	-0.030***	-0.067***	-0.074***	-0.052***	-0.048***
% lang	0.034***	0.0195**	-0.046***	0.028***	0.062***	0.046***	0.035*	0.031***

Note: The analysis is restricted to individuals born in Texas who are 25 years or older; the percentage variables refer to PUMA characteristics (see text).