POVERTY IN THE SOUTHWEST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN, NONWHITE AND ANGLO FAMILIES*

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Much of the recent research on poverty in the United States focuses on the differentials between whites and nonwhites in our population. For many purposes this distinction will suffice, since it highlights the association between deprivation and skin-color. But, in the five southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas, the white-nonwhite dichotomy may hide as much as it reveals. Within this vast area, comprising 21 percent of the land area of the United States and 16 percent of its population, is concentrated the overwhelming bulk of the people of Mexican descent in this country.

"Mexican-Americans," a generic term that we shall use to include people of Mexican, Spanish, or mixed Indian descent, are classified as white. Members of this minority group are usually physically or otherwise identifiable, however, and their experiences with the rest of American society partially parallel those of other immigrant groups of relatively recent vintage, on the one hand, and those of nonwhites, and particularly Negroes, on the other. By every yardstick available, poverty among Mexican-Americans is a serious problem both from the standpoint of the ethnic community and for society at large.

The Position of Mexican-Americans in the United States

Mexican-Americans comprise the second-largest disadvantaged minority group in the United States, the largest, of course, being Negroes. Of an estimated 3.8 million Mexican-Americans in the United States in 1960, approximately 87 percent resided in the Southwest. Only 45 percent of the total were of foreign stock, (that is, either born in Mexico or of Mexican parentage); the remainder were the descendants of still earlier immigrants. The social and economic conditions of Mexican-Americans are reflected in the tabulations of the U.S. Bureau of the Census relating to white persons of Spanish surname.

Contrary to widespread impression, Mexican-Americans are highly urbanized. In the Southwest, 79 percent of the Spanish-surname persons lived in urban areas in 1960, compared to 80 percent of nonwhites and 81 percent of the Anglos (white minus white persons of Spanish surname). Clearly, the image of Mexican-Americans as being primarily a rural population is out of date. They vary little in this characteristic from the population at large.[1] Most Mexican-Americans are engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and reside in other than rural areas.

Within the cities, Mexican-Americans are highly segregated residentially. As Moore and Mittelbach have shown, this residential segregation is widespread but varies greatly in degree from city to city.[2] Moreover, residential segregation of Mexican-Americans from the dominant population does not assume the dimensions of that between Negroes and Anglos. The pervasive geographical distance of Mexican-Americans from Anglos, (and parenthetically also from Negroes) is merely one indication of general social distance.

Other indicators show a similar picture. For example, one presumably important distinction is that between first, second, and third-or-more generation immigrants. It might seem reasonable to assume that socio-economic position tends to improve the further people are removed from immigrant status. No long series are available to subject this proposition to careful scrutiny. Median income data for Spanish-surname persons by nativity and parentage, however, indicate that there is no such straightforward relationship. While natives of native parentage fare better than do the foreign born, natives of foreign or mixed parentage enjoy still higher incomes than do either of the others. This holds for males in all five southwestern states, and** for the rural as well as the urban population. (Table 1)

In another study, Fogel highlights the above income differentials more sharply by holding age, as well as sex and area, constant.[3] In 1959 the income of Spanish-surname urban males was higher for the children of immigrants than for those who were themselves foreign born; however, income of third-or-more generation Mexican-American males was lower than that of the second-generation immigrant, although it exceeded that of the foreign born. These differences were not attributable to lower educational attainment among natives of native parentage than for the children of immigrants. In fact, the opposite was found to be true.

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*This paper is derived largely from our monograph, The Burden of Poverty, (Mexican-American Study Project, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966), which is part of a comprehensive study of the Mexican-American population in the United States. We gratefully acknowledge the comments and assistance of Leo Grebler, Joan Moore and Ralph Guzman. The authors, however, take full responsibility for all data and findings.

** The same conclusion appears to apply to the income of females as well; however, so many of the female incomes were in the undifferentiated class of less than $1,000 that exact comparisons are impossible.

Table 1

Median Income by Nativity and Parentage for White Males of Spanish Surname in Five Southwest States, 1960 Urban and Rural

Nativity Class	Total	Urban	Rural Nonfarm	Rural Farm
All Classes	$2,804	$3,197	$1,871	$1,531
Native of Native Parentage	2,689	3,071	1,890	1,495
Native of Foreign or Mixed Parentage	3,345	3,650	2,152	1,892
Native of Mexican or Mixed Parentage	3,114	3,426	1,971	1,648
Foreign Born (Total)	2,307	2,742	1,610	1,423
Foreign Born (in Mexico)	2,158	2,602	1,564	1,374

Source: 1960 U.S. Census of Population, PC(2) 1B, Table 6.

Table 2

Number and Percent of Poor Families in Various Population Groups in the Southwest, 1960

Population Group	All Families	Poor Families[a]	Percent of Poor in Each Group	Poor in Each Group as Percent Of All Poor
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Total	7,356,866	1,451,655	19.7%	100.0%
White	6,766,367	1,205,729	17.8	83.1
Anglo	6,068,340	962,826	15.9	66.4
Spanish Surname	698,027	242,903	34.8	16.7
Nonwhite	590,299	245,926	41.7	17.0

[a]Families with annual income under $3,000 in 1959.

Source: 1960 U.S. Census of Population, PC(2) 1B Table 5; Vol. I, State Volumes, Table 65.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to describe or analyze comprehensively the socio-economic status of the population of Mexican descent in the United States. A great many factors should enter into such a discussion and we can only sketch some of the outlines. Unquestionably, more recent immigrants, as well as the descendants of earlier settlers in areas of the Southwest which at one time were part of Mexico, frequently have found themselves in a hostile social, economic and political environment. A great deal of discrimination was experienced in the labor market and elsewhere, although this may have diminished somewhat in recent years. The relative recency of large-scale immigration from Mexico into the United States, which reached its peak in the 1920's after immigration from other parts of the world had begun to decline, also may partially explain present conditions of this population.[4] The proximity to Mexico, the continued stream of immigration from that country, the uncertainty of the intentions of immigrants from Mexico to remain here, plus other factors have contributed to the maintenance of cultural boundaries. In turn, these boundaries were further strengthened by the attitudes of the host society. The chain of causality is, indeed, complex.

With this brief introduction to the subpopulations with which we shall be concerned, we turn to our examination of poverty. Using data from the 1960 Censuses of Population and Housing, we shall analyze poverty among Mexican-Americans and present comparisons with other major population groups.

The Incidence of Poverty Among Families

For present purposes, we have adopted the widely-used statistical "poverty line" of $3,000 family income per year. The concept and definitions of poverty are the subject of many recent writings. Our choice of definition was largely determined by availability of data. An alternative measure of poverty was tried but it failed to produce any major changes in the number and percent of poor families in the Southwest.[5]

The highly-condensed data in Table 2 tell a great deal. Nearly 243,000 Spanish-surname families in the Southwest, or about 35 percent of all such families, were in the poverty group in 1960. The number of poor nonwhite families was slightly larger (almost 246,000); however, fewer nonwhite families than Spanish-surname families resided in the Southwest. Consequently, the incidence of poverty among nonwhites was still greater than among families of Spanish surname (almost 42 percent for nonwhites.) The incidence was far smaller for "Anglos," the group representing the dominant society. The relative frequency of poverty among Spanish-surname families was more than twice the Anglo rate. In the case of nonwhites the frequency of poverty was two and one-half times that of the Anglos.

Numerically, poor Anglo families by far exceeded the poor of both minority groups combined. As the last column of Table 2 shows, two thirds of all poor families in the Southwest were Anglo, 16.7 percent were in the Spanish-surname group, and 17.0 percent were nonwhite. In other words, for every poor family in both minorities combined there were nearly two Anglo families, a reminder that below-minimum income affects many people not in ethnic or racial minorities.

The initial data show also the distortion that results from the frequent failure to distinguish between Anglo and Spanish-surname families within the "white" class. Although the Spanish-surname families represent only 10.3 percent of all white families in the Southwest, irrespective of income, they account for 20.1 percent of the poor white families. Consequently, analyses of poverty in the Southwest that do not consider Spanish-surname persons separately from Anglos hide the existence of a minority which, by the income criterion used here, is almost as disadvantaged as the nonwhite minority. In terms of social action, this failure to differentiate is bound to ignore problems that are more specific to the Spanish-surname population and less prevalent among Anglos. Further, this failure to separate the Spanish-surname group from the rest of the white population in effect reduces the income gap between Anglos and nonwhites in the Southwest.

Selected Characteristics of the Poor

This section analyzes some of the special characteristics of the poor in the subpopulations. National studies have shown that it is the aged, broken families, farmers and farm workers, the minorities, and the unemployed or underemployed who are most likely to be poor.[6] These are frequently overlapping categories, and the risk of being poor rises if a family falls within more than one of these groups. When the higher incidence of poverty among the minorities is recognized and minority status held constant, the question remains, "Who are the poor in the Spanish-surname population?" It will be shown that selected types of Spanish-surname families are particularly afflicted by low incomes, as is true also for Anglos and the nonwhites. Here again, the answers are derived from the 1960 Census, and particularly the One-In-One-Thousand sample.[7] The situation may differ in small detail at the present time; however, the structural relationships with which we are concerned here do not change significantly over a number of years.

Table 3 (last column) shows that the incidence of poverty among Spanish-surname, nonwhite and, in fact, all families is especially high when the head of the family is employed in farming, is 65 years old and over, or is a female, this last item being an indication of a broken family. About one-third of the Spanish-surname families generally are poor, but when one considers the subgroupings it becomes evident that a Mexican-American family is more than twice as likely to be poor if the head is in farming or is a female (69 and 68 percent are poor, respectively), and almost as unfortunate if the head is

Table 3

Selected Characteristics of Poor and All Families for Three Populations in the Southwest, 1960
(Families may be counted more than once)

Characteristics	Total	Percent of Total	Poor	Percent of Poor	Percent Poor of Total
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Spanish-Surname Families					
Number of Families	702,000	100.0	241,000	100.0	34.3
Characteristics of Head					
Occupation Farmer or Farm Worker	81,000	11.5	56,000	23.2	69.1
65 Years old & over	63,000	9.0	38,000	15.8	60.3
Female Head	90,000	12.8	61,000	25.3	67.8
Head 0-4 Years of Education Completed	223,000	31.8	127,000	52.7	57.0
All Families					
Number of Families	7,356,885	100.0	1,451,655	100.0	19.7
Characteristics of Head					
Employed Farmers and Farm Workers	383,023	5.2	167,364	11.5	43.7
65 Years old & over	865,651	11.7	415,431	28.6	48.2
Female Head	660,013	9.0	327,724	22.6	49.7
Nonwhite Families					
Number of Families	590,514	100.0	245,926	100.0	41.7
Characteristics of Head					
Employed Farmers and Farm Workers	37,676	6.4	22,245	9.0	59.0
65 Years old & over	58,717	9.9	41,287	16.8	70.3
Female Head	106,871	18.1	77,864	31.7	72.9

Source: 1960 U.S. Census of Population, Vol. I, State Volumes, Tables 65, 110, 139 and 145; Spanish Surname, which is estimated, is from the One-in-One-Thousand Sample (See Reference 7).

over 65 (60 percent). Similar patterns are found for nonwhites. Over-all, 42 percent of the nonwhite families are poor, but over 70 percent are poor if the family head is a female or is elderly. The disadvantage of employment in farming is not quite so high for nonwhites (59 percent poor) as for Mexican-Americans. Generally, then, among Spanish-surname and nonwhite families with the three characteristics examined, poverty is so common that it is the rule, not the exception.

Farm employment, old age, and broken families account also for a large proportion of poverty among all families, irrespective of ethnicity. Nearly one-fifth of all families in the Southwest are poor, but, among families whose head is a farmer or farm worker, 44 percent are in this category. For families headed by an aged person, the incidence of poverty is 48 percent, and for those with a female head, 50 percent. The relatively high proportions of poverty-stricken families of these types in the general population reflect the statistical weight of minority families, among whom the three characteristics are unusually numerous.

A note of caution is called for at this point. The immediate causes of poverty among farm, elderly and broken families are unquestionably related to these circumstances. But, further reflection suggests a more complex chain of causality. For example, the fact that families with elderly persons as heads are prone to be poor results from the low earning capacity of the breadwinner. Many factors may be associated with this inability to earn sufficient income, including physical impairments, discrimination against older persons in the labor market, and technological obsolescence of skills. Moreover, in many such families the head is over 65 and is a woman whose responsibilities in the home, or lack of marketable skills, prevent her from earning a sufficient amount to take the family out of the poverty group. On a longer perspective, it will often be found that the present poverty status in families with an elderly head results from experiences or personal difficulties in the past. Lack of opportunity or ability to prepare for voluntary or involuntary retirement or, for that matter, the breadwinner's death, will have contributed to the present plight of the family. Among minority families, the breadwinners' experiences in the labor market during their younger days will have prevented the accumulation of savings for the day when they are no longer able to work or compete with younger job applicants. Moreover, industries and firms employing large numbers of minority persons often have no retirement and pension programs. Consequently, at old age they are heavily dependent upon social security and welfare programs to meet their needs, and even these funds may be lacking or given sparingly. In any case, social security and welfare support cannot (and are not designed to) provide enough income to take a family out of the poverty group.

Another illustration is the prevalence of poverty among broken families. Divorce, desertion, or early death of the male head will in many cases place the remaining family in the poverty group even if the original unit was better off. In the instance of divorce, two households will be formed. As a unit, the family may not have been poor, but the separate parts of the unit may both be classified as poor. This is not merely a matter of definition. Certain expenses, such as rent, will now be duplicated. In this case it may not seem unreasonable to attribute poverty status to the breaking up of the family. However, the breaking up of the family may be as much a result of poverty as the cause. The stresses within the family in the face of low income often lead to divorce or desertion. If so, the causality runs in the other direction -- from poverty to the breaking up of the family.

The incidence of broken families among some minority groups is unusually high. To the extent that female family headship is an indication of this phenomenon, it will be noted in Table 3 that 13 percent of the Spanish-surname families in the Southwest are of this type irrespective of income size. The comparable figures are 18 percent for nonwhites and 9 percent for all families (including the two minority groups). The problem is less severe in the Spanish-surname population than among nonwhites, and especially Negroes; but it can be inferred that the incidence of broken families among Mexican-Americans is far greater than among Anglos. It is also far greater than the commonly-accepted notion of the traditional strength of the family in this segment of the population would suggest. This subject will be pursued in other parts of the Mexican-American Study Project. In the present context, the relatively high incidence of broken families in the Spanish-surname group warrants emphasis because of its bearing on the incidence of poverty.

It would be erroneous, however, to conclude that the relatively large number of broken families in selected minority groups results from inherent instabilities. Considerable evidence supports the thesis that the experience of disadvantaged minority groups in American society tends to undermine the self-confidence, and indeed the identity, of minority-group men. In turn, the stability of the family is threatened. Though this generalization has been derived primarily from studies of American Negroes, it is quite likely that it also applies to Mexican-Americans. A history of discrimination, comparatively high unemployment, low income, and alienation from both the dominant community (and sometimes their own group) has characterized the Mexican-American minority as well as the Negro, and all of these and other disabilities are likely to weaken the fibers which hold families together. This is a problem, then, of both the larger society and the minority.[8]

Similar caveats on causality apply to other family or personal characteristics associated with a high incidence of poverty. For example, poverty is often correlated with low educational attainment, but the long-range factors which have contributed to this condition are often deeply

imbedded in history and the whole structure of our society.

The data on the Spanish-surname population in Table 3 make it quite apparent that many of the families who are poverty-stricken have more than one of the characteristics discussed so far, and others as well. The percentages in the Spanish-surname portion of the table add to more than 100. This reflects the substantive fact that poor farmers also often have a low level of educational attainment, etc.

An attempt has been made to pin down these multiple characteristics of the poor more closely. Special tabulations were prepared for the Spanish-surname poor, in which each of the families was counted only once. The data are presented in Table 4. The procedures for preparing the estimates were as follows: First, the record was searched to determine if the head of the family had the occupation of farmer or farm worker. If so, the family was recorded in this group no matter what the other characteristics were. If not a farmer or farm worker, the records were searched further to establish if the head was 65 years old or over. Again, if the answer was positive the family was classified under "head 65 years and over" and nowhere else. The search continued in this manner until all families had been classified under one of the six specified categories in the order indicated in Table 4. If they did not fit any of these classifications, the families were placed in the "other" group. This procedure was applied to both poor and non-poor families as well as to persons not in families. While the ordering is subjective, it is not without rationale.[9]

In the aggregate, the overwhelming majority of the Spanish-surname poor families, a little under 83 percent, had a head with one or more of the six specified characteristics which have been identified as strongly associated with poverty status. In comparison, only 39 percent of the non-poor families fell under one or more of these six headings.

Moreover, the new data make it doubly clear that poverty among Spanish-surname families is associated with several characteristics rather than any one. Perhaps the best illustration is the low education of the heads of poor families. As shown in Table 3, 127,000 families who are poor have a head whose educational attainment is four years of schooling or less, more than those in any other category. Generally, persons with such a low level of education are considered to be functionally illiterate, a term applied by the United States Army in World War II to "persons incapable of understanding the kinds of written instructions needed to carry out basic military tasks." One would expect and, in fact, does find a relatively high incidence of poverty among families of this type. They represent about 53 percent of all Spanish-surname families who are poor, and 57 percent of the families headed by persons with such low educational preparation are in the poverty group. Table 4 provides a new perspective. After classifying poor families first by reference to the other characteristics, only 14 percent of the poor have heads who are functionally illiterate. In other words, low education among the poor is associated with farm occupation, family headship of 65 years and over, female family headship, and so on.

The foregoing analysis has served to demonstrate more specifically the multiple characteristics of minority families and individuals that are related to their poverty, in addition to minority status. In this fashion, it has extended the search for the causes of economic deprivation. But it stops short of establishing the order of links in the chain of events and circumstances that produce poverty. Where does it all begin, and what are the processes through which an initial shortcoming becomes transformed into more or less permanently inadequate income?

To take the case of poverty associated with low educational attainment, what are the reasons for poor schooling -- inability of schools to adapt their system (and their teachers) to the needs of Mexican-American children, or a low value placed on schooling at home, or the pressing need to get a job at an early age because of the parents' poverty, or the youngsters' expectations of a low payoff from education as they observe discrimination in labor markets? And are the formal schooling requirements of employers really necessary for the performance of certain jobs which, if Mexican-Americans could obtain them, would be sufficient to take members of this minority group out of the poverty class? Or, have these requirements sometimes been imposed as a convenient device to screen out applicants of certain ethnic minorities?

Similar questions could be raised about the other characteristics. Explanations will vary from group to group and even from person to person within each group, and this is not the point of the questions. The real point is rather whether major institutions in our society operate in such fashion that they produce, aggravate, and perpetuate poverty among minorities.

In conclusion, better understanding of the multiple determinants of poverty is important mainly because it will help suggest approaches to effective public action. One of these is to alleviate the problem through traditional welfare and some of the more recently-developed anti-poverty programs -- essentially a redistribution of income. Another is illustrated by public aids for better schooling and manpower training - or retraining - programs to help persons and deprived groups overcome specific handicaps and thus increase their earning capacity and their productive contribution to the economy.

Also, there remains the challenge of general economic growth sufficiently rapid and sustained to move a maximum number of poor families out of the poverty class. It seems that the period of high-level economic activity during World War II, and the associated large demand for labor, came closer to reaching this objective for Mexican-Americans as well as others than did any period

Table 4

Estimate of Characteristics of
Poor and Non-Poor Spanish-Surname Families and Individuals: 1960
(Families and Individuals Counted Only Once)[a]

THE POOR

	Number of families[b]	Members of families	Head's Children under 18	Persons[c] not in families
Total Number	241,000	1,092,000	527,000	105,000
Total Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Head farmer or farm laborer	23.2	28.7	29.6	31.4
Head 65 years and over	14.1	9.1	2.3	16.2
Female family head	20.3	17.8	18.6	22.9
Head employed less than 13 weeks[d]	4.6	5.1	6.5	3.8
Head under 25 years	6.6	4.8	3.6	15.2
Head 0-4 years education	13.7	15.0	17.3	3.8
Other	17.4	19.6	22.2	6.7

THE NON-POOR

	Number of families	Members of families	Head's Children under 18	Persons not in families
Total Number	461,000	2,233,000	1,007,000	75,000
Total Percent	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Head farmer or farm laborer	5.4	6.6	6.9	12.0
Head 65 years and over	5.2	4.1	0.6	9.3
Female family head	4.6	4.1	3.7	18.7
Head employed less than 13 weeks[d]	4.3	4.9	5.4	8.0
Head under 25 years	6.9	5.2	4.8	10.7
Head 0-4 years education	12.6	14.7	14.9	12.0
Other	61.0	60.4	63.9	29.3

[a]See text for further explanation.

[b]Poor families are defined as having income of less than $3,000 in 1959. Number of families equals number of family heads.

[c]Individuals were classified as poor if their income in 1959 was under $1,500. Inmates were excluded.

[d]Includes unemployed.

Source: From the One-in-One-Thousand Sample, 1960 Censuses of Population and Housing (See Reference 7).

thereafter, no matter how prosperous. It would be a stupendous failure of our economic system if the same goal could not be accomplished without war. The long-run solution calls for larger and more widely-shared wealth -- shared by people in different income classes and regardless of minority status.

References

1. This generalization is valid for the Southwest as a whole; but, there are interesting variations between the five states. See Joan W. Moore and Frank G. Mittelbach, Residential Segregation in the Urban Southwest, (Los Angeles: Mexican-American Study Project, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of California, 1966) Advance Report 4, pp. 5-10.

2. Ibid., pp. 15-22.

3. Walter Fogel, Education and Income of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, (Los Angeles: Mexican-American Study Project, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of California, 1965) Advance Report 1, pp. 5-7.

4. Leo Grebler, Mexican Immigration to the United States: The Record and Its Implications, (Los Angeles: Mexican-American Study Project, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of California, 1966) Advance Report 2, Chap. II.

5. When families were classified as poor if their incomes were less than half the Southwest median income, the incidence of poverty in each of the five states was the same as when the $3,000 line was used, because half the 1959 median family income was $2,996, rather precisely at the line already adopted. This methodology was adapted from Victor R. Fuchs, "Toward a Theory of Poverty," in The Concept of Poverty, published by the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, Washington, D. C., 1965.

6. See, for example, Herman P. Miller, Rich Man, Poor Man, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1964) pp. 58-80.

7. For a detailed discussion see: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, U.S. Censuses of Population and Housing, 1/1,000, 1/10,000, Two National Samples of the Population of the United States, Description and Technical Documentation (Washington, 1963) and supplements thereto. Users of these data are obliged to include the following notation: "Certain data used in this publication were derived by the authors from a computer tape file furnished under a joint project sponsored by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the Population Council and containing selected 1960 Census information for a 0.1 percent sample of the population of the United States. Neither the Census Bureau nor the Population Council assumes any responsibility for the validity of any of the figures or interpretations of the figures published herein based on this material." (From Supplement 1, p. 10.)

   The estimates shown for the Spanish Surname population in Tables 3 and 4 were drawn from this source. All categories in Table 3 are strictly comparable for the Spanish surname and other groups with the exception of the farm category. For Spanish surname families with heads whose occupation is farmer or farm worker we included employed, unemployed and those not currently in the labor force. For total and nonwhite families with heads who are farmers or farm workers, only those in the experienced labor force with income are included, because data are available only in this form.

   Family heads who have completed four or fewer years of education are included only for the Spanish-surname group in Table 3, since cross tabulations of education and income are published only for family heads with less than eight years of education for the total and nonwhite population.

8. The intricate strands of the web relating family structure and poverty have been analyzed for Negroes in several works. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, Office of Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1955, is one. Another is Thomas Pettigrew, A Profile of the Negro American, (Princeton, New Jersey; D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1964).

9. Herman P. Miller, op. cit., pp. 64-70.