



Transcript for “The prospects for second-generation Latino young men in the inner city”

Featuring Maria Rendon

Hosted by David Chancellor

In this podcast, Maria Rendon of UC-Irvine discusses findings from her qualitative study of second-generation Latino young men in urban neighborhoods and their attitudes about getting ahead in the United States.

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[Chancellor] You’re listening to a July 2014 podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I’m Dave Chancellor.

For this podcast, we’re going to be talking with Maria Rendon, of UC Irvine’s School of Social Ecology. Rendon visited IRP this May and gave a seminar on second-generation young men in the inner city—mostly Mexican-Americans—and their attitudes about making it in America. For this study, Rendon did several interviews in two different time periods with a group of young men from a neighborhood in Los Angeles who were born in the U.S., but have immigrant parents.

For one thing, this is a group that’s growing in size. And, there’s a lot we don’t know about their attitudes, especially given the setbacks that many in this group faced during the Great Recession. So, let’s turn to Professor Rendon to talk about what she learned from the men that she talked to as part of her study.

[Rendon] There’s a lot of concern about what’s happening with males in particular in the urban context and immigration scholars have proposed a number of theories about what might be happening. One of those very popular theories is this concept of downward assimilation. Whereas in the past we saw immigrants do better over time and across generations, what we’re seeing here with the post-1965 immigrant population is a diversification, people are taking different paths. Some people, some immigrant groups are doing really well, some of them are struggling. The Mexican-origin group is one of these groups that raises a lot of concern because within the second generation you see things like high dropout rates, higher incarceration rates, teenage parenthood is still an issue. And so

this has raised concerns about where they're heading, the extent to which they will successfully move up relative to their parents and integrate into the larger society.

[Chancellor] Although Mexican-American immigrant families and their second-generation children have settled across the United States, there's a big group that lives in America's largest cities. And so, scholars have become interested in how this urban context affects the acculturation process for the Latino population.

[Rendon] **What my research does is to try to have a conversation—trying to encourage a conversation between immigration scholars who have been asking these questions about how groups adapt and urban poverty scholars who have spent a lot of time thinking about how neighborhoods matter, urban contexts matter. That body of literature focuses primarily on African-Americans, and for very obvious reasons. But now we have changing cities with the rise of immigration and increasingly the Latino population being very second generation and so my research is asking this question of how young men are adapting in the inner city.**

And there's been some literature on the second generation and how they're an optimistic population in part because they're children of immigrants and immigrants are a select group of individuals who migrate to this country thinking about advancing and doing well and so they're a very motivated group of people. And so the idea is that the second generation picks up on that motivation and the question is 'does that hold for the second generation in urban contexts that are very challenged?'

[Chancellor] The young men that Rendon talked to come from a neighborhood in LA where there are high rates of poverty and where violence is a frequent threat. For the study, Rendon initially interviewed a broad range of these men, with a mix of educational backgrounds, over the course of a year and got to know them and their parents.

[Rendon] **A third of these guys from these neighborhoods were high school dropouts, high school non-completers is what I call them. A third of these guys were college kids from these neighborhoods, kids who went on to four year universities from these same neighborhoods. And another third were mostly high school graduates, sort of in between. And I purposefully sampled that way because oftentimes when we do look at inner city young men, we tend to think about a subgroup in the inner cities, we tend to think about the young men who are engaging in crime and violence, we tend to think about maybe only about the high school dropouts, but in these communities, we see a diversity of young men and some of them are very much attached to the labor market, some of them are trying to go to college and oftentimes when we have a conversation about urban youth, we miss that.**

[Chancellor] Rendon had the opportunity to interview these men twice—before and after the recent recession. One of things Rendon was interested in finding out was how they had fared during the recession and whether it had an effect on the optimism she had previously observed.

[Rendon] What I find is—I studied these guys in 2007 trying to really understand how the neighborhood mattered, I followed up with them five years later, just trying to figure out how they weathered the recession and finding jobs, these sorts of things. And I what I find is that they are still very optimistic—for the most part. And I think this goes back to this immigrant background, immigrant narrative that a lot of them embrace. And for a lot of them they look toward their parents, and for a lot of the guys they look in particular towards their fathers or father figures and they look at where they started, their parents started and how far they’ve gotten. And even for immigrant families—and even for their parents, most of them talked about very challenging times here in the United States obviously, but there’s also a sense of mobility, there’s this narrative, that if you work hard in the United States, you can get ahead even if it’s a little bit. So the young men hold on to that, this idea that, my father was coming from dire poverty and here at least, maybe he purchased a home, maybe in the roughest part of town but that’s an accomplishment.

[Chancellor] Rendon says that a lot of the men she talked to felt this sense of responsibility—that if their parents were able to purchase a home and raise children, for example, that they should be able to do more because of their comparative advantage of having been born in the United States. But, Rendon points out that their parents mostly came to the US in the late 70s and 80s and the economy was different then. It’s not yet clear how this second generation group will fare over the long term, particularly since they’re entering the labor force at a time when a lot of young people are having difficulty finding good jobs.

[Rendon] When I did go back to see how these guys were, the majority were still living in their neighborhoods and they were living with their parents and what I saw—a lot of them were having a hard time during the recession, finding jobs, or they lost a job, and so they were having a hard time getting by.

[Chancellor] One of the interesting things she found was the difficulty that some of the men had in translating a college degree into a good job.

[Rendon] Figuring out where they land, what kind of jobs are there for them proves to be very difficult for that population, a lot of them end up going back to their neighborhood ties, to their kin ties for a job during these difficult times. For example, I have these two guys who are both working for Bank of America as bank tellers. One was a college educated guy from the neighborhood, one was a high school dropout from the neighborhood. And so, this raises the question about, not necessarily the value of education—because all of these men would say ‘yes, it’s worth going to college’—but how do you then translate that to a job, when you don’t have the social networks, going to college as a first generation young man, from a poor background and a racial minority. You have all these things that make you different from the typical college student. And these young men they go, they get their degrees, they struggle—most of them struggle to get their degrees, but in most cases, they’re not socially integrated with the larger college

population, which means that they forego opportunities of getting to know people who could perhaps link them with a job. They end up going back to the ties that they know.

[Chancellor] Rendon says that, as a country, we have a lot riding on how well these second generation young Latino men are able integrate into the mainstream labor market and find decent jobs. And while immigrants and the undocumented group have gotten a lot of press in the last few years, this U.S.-born group is both larger and faster growing and there's an ongoing story of assimilation here. Rendon says that thinking about how these young men can bridge out of neighborhood situations in which poverty and violence hold sway and into middle class lives will be an important policy question looking forward.

Thanks to Maria Rendon for taking the time to talk about this work with us. For more information, check out her recent paper on urban violence and peer ties in the February 2014 issue of Social Problems. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.