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Hidden Hispanic Homelessness in Los Angeles: The "Latino Paradox" Revisited

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The authors exploit a unique sample of Mexican-born persons in Los Angeles to investigate whether the apparent dearth of Hispanic homeless (the "Latino paradox") can be explained as a methodological bias. They test two hypotheses: (Hypothesis 1) there will be no significant difference between the homeless rate (HR) for this sample compared to Los Angeles County and (Hypothesis 2) Mexican-born homeless persons are as likely as others to sleep in nontraditional settings. Rejecting both hypotheses, we find that the HR for this sample is nearly 7 times greater than for the entire county and that Mexican-born homeless are more likely to sleep in nontraditional settings. The authors conclude that Mexican-born homeless may be systematically undercounted in homeless samples because they are more likely to exist outside traditional homeless spaces.

Keywords: *Hispanic homeless; homeless rate; Latino paradox; Mexican immigration; homelessness; Los Angeles*

During the past two decades, researchers have consistently found an overrepresentation of African Americans in homeless samples (Hopper & Milburn, 1996). For example, Rossi (1989) noted that in 31 studies, African Americans accounted for an average of 45.8% of homeless sample populations, whereas Hispanics represented 11.8% (out of 19 studies). At the same

time, census data from 1980 (Gibson & Jung, 2002) indicated that African Americans accounted for only 11.7% of the total U.S. population and Hispanics 6.5%. As such, African Americans were overrepresented by a factor of four, while Hispanics less than two. Furthermore, Hispanics' share of the total U.S. population was rising dramatically from 1980 to 2000, nearly doubling by the year 2000 to 12.5% (Grieco & Cassidy, 2001) whereas African Americans' share increased only slightly to 12.3%. Thus, the slight overrepresentation effect among Hispanics would have been diluted over this time period. This is borne out by more recent analysis by Baker (1996) who, in an examination of 24 studies of homeless persons in 18 cities, found that African Americans exceeded their representation in the metropolitan populations by an average of 25.5%, whereas Hispanics were actually underrepresented by 3.5%. Recent work by Tan and Ryan (2001) also suggested that Hispanic and non-Hispanic homeless persons may differ on a variety of important demographic dimensions.

At the same time, researchers have noted that Hispanics and African Americans share similar risk factors for homelessness, including higher poverty rates (Shea, 1995) and lower income and educational attainment (Carnoy, 1996). So, why this apparent contradiction—coined by Baker (1996) as the "Latino paradox"—that Hispanics are underrepresented in homeless samples? One theory is that a methodological bias exists, namely that Hispanics are systematically undersampled in surveys of homeless persons. According to Baker, "Certain regions of the United States like the Southwest, include 'hidden' communities of Latino homeless. Incorporating such areas into homelessness research likely would increase the representation of Latinos" (p. 139). However, Baker dismissed this theory as insufficient to account for the apparent disparity. Instead, she suggested the most plausible explanation for the paradox is an interaction of culture and institutions. For example, Baker theorized that Hispanics may use their personal networks to avoid the streets and shelters (e.g., through doubling-up in low-cost housing), whereas African Americans use these same networks to gain access to and navigate through the shelter system. A more recent investigation by Tan and Ryan (2001), however, casts doubt on the notion that Hispanic homeless individuals may be doubling-up at higher rates than non-Hispanics.

In this current endeavor, we exploited a different sampling methodology to test whether the methodological bias theory merits further consideration. Specifically, we used a sample of Mexican-born persons in Los Angeles County surveyed jointly by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Baja California (COLEF), and the University of Southern California (USC) to test whether

the homeless rate (HR) for this sample was different from the HR for the entire Los Angeles County area.

Next, we wished to explore one explanation of this methodological bias, namely that Hispanics may be more likely to exist on the periphery of traditional homeless spaces and hence be less likely to be included in homeless samples that typically emphasize the skid row and central business districts (see Burt, 1992; Koegel, Burnam, & Morton, 1996; Rossi, 1989). In fact, the HUD and Urban Institute surveys (see Burt, 1992) relied exclusively on homeless shelters for data collection. To test this, we used a traditional homeless sample, the Course of Homeless (COH) sample, taken from the same metropolitan area.

Data

We used data from two different samples in Los Angeles. The first is a mobility spaces sample of Mexican-born immigrants in Los Angeles conducted jointly by the COLEF and USC (COLEF-USC) during September and October of 1994 (for a complete description of the data, see Bustamante, Santibanez, Anguiano, Corona, & Heer, 1996). Notably, this was not a survey of (only) homeless persons. The three requirements to participate were that the respondent must have been over 14 years of age, born in Mexico, and resided in Los Angeles for at least 30 days. The 633 participants in the survey were asked a variety of questions regarding their current and past residential status, social and familial characteristics, economic activity including remittances, and migratory experience. Based on a previously established technique (see Bustamante, 1989) for sampling migratory populations, the sampling frame included four mobile spaces within Los Angeles: (a) athletic complexes (soccer fields), (b) Mexican-menu lunch truck locations, (c) street corners at which a large proportion of Mexican-born day-laborers congregate, and (d) commercial centers frequented by a high proportion of Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles.

The second sample is the Course of Homelessness (COH) study, a prospective study of exits from and reentry into homelessness among homeless adults (see Conroy, 2001; Koegel et al., 1996; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998). Samples were drawn from two sites, downtown and the West Side of Los Angeles, with the former containing the highest concentration of homeless persons in Los Angeles County and the latter containing the second highest. The survey was conducted from October 1990 to September 1991, and a total of 1,563 homeless adults were interviewed face to face. We use data from this survey because of its (a) location in Los Angeles County and (b) rigorous

attempt to capture a "representative sample" of homeless persons (see Burnam & Koegel, 1988).

Although the COLEF-USC data are now nearly a decade old, they were employed here because of their unique mobile spaces sampling technique. To our knowledge, no other comparable mobile spaces samples of Mexican-born immigrants are currently available. To make a relevant comparison among the data sources, it was of paramount importance that the data be as synchronous as possible. Thus, we used the 1993 to 1994 estimate of the HR in Los Angeles County because it coincided roughly with the COLEF-USC collection dates (end of 1994). Although not nearly as critical, it was convenient for us that the COH collection period (1990-1991) fell within a few years of the COLEF-USC sample. It should also be noted that we are not aware of any unique circumstances occurring during this period that would have made these results time sensitive. If anything, we expect the results to become more robust as Mexican immigration to Los Angeles increases over time.[1]

Method

A priori, we expected the HR among the COLEF-USC sample of Mexican-born immigrants to reflect the rates found elsewhere in the United States. Taking a conservative approach, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: The HR among the Mexican-born sample is not different from the HR for the metropolitan area as a whole (including all races and ethnicities).

To test this hypothesis, we used survey data from the COLEF-USC sample in which participants were asked about their current housing arrangements and inferred from this whether they fit a standard definition of homelessness (i.e., having no fixed address in Los Angeles County). Respondents were then asked a follow-up question about what type of housing arrangement they used (e.g., living on the streets, below a bridge, etc.). Based on this number, we calculated an HR among the current Mexican-born population in the sample and compared it to a countywide estimate including all races and ethnicities, conducted in 1993 to 1994 by the Los Angeles Shelter Partnership (Guth, 1995).

Next, we tested one explanation of the methodological bias theory, namely that Hispanic homeless may be more likely to be missed in homeless samples because they are "hidden" (Baker, 1996) from the general homeless population. Research by Chavez (1992) was also suggestive that Hispanic immigrants may employ a number of informal housing arrangements—even amid the opulent suburbs of Southern California—that are removed from the

Table 1.   Frequency Distribution of Mexican Immigrants by Location of Sample Population and Housing Status, Using Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Baja California, and the University of Southern California Sample

Sample Population	Total Observations	Total Housed	Total Homeless	% Homeless
Soccer fields	140	137	3	2.1
Day labor	175	157	18	10.30
Lunch trucks	151	143	8	5.30
Commercial centers	167	156	11	6.60
Total	633	593	40	6.30

more traditional homeless (e.g., skid row) spaces. Thus, our second (null) hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Mexican-born homeless persons are as likely as others to sleep in nontraditional settings.

To test Hypothesis 2, we used the COH sample of homeless persons in Los Angeles and, using a standard *t* test, compared mean sleeping arrangements among Mexican-born and all others in the sample. We would be able to reject Hypothesis 2 if we found that Mexican-born homeless persons were significantly more likely to sleep in informal arrangements, which would lend support to the "hidden Hispanic homeless" explanation for the methodological bias.

Results

Among the 633 respondents in the COLEF-USC sample of Mexican-born immigrants in Los Angeles, 40 indicated that they had no fixed address (see Table 1). Of these, 21 were living in some informal housing arrangement such as on the streets (4), below a bridge (3), near a freeway (2), in an abandoned house/apartment (9), and in a parking lot (3). The other 19 respondents reported some other location. The HR for the sample (40/633) translates to 632 per 10,000, which is nearly 7 times greater than 93 per 10,000 for Los Angeles County as a whole (based on Guth's 1995 estimate for 1993-1994). Thus, we reject our hypothesis, Hypothesis 1, that the HR for the Mexican-born sample will not be significantly different from the HR for Los Angeles County as a whole. Furthermore, we reject Hypothesis 1 in the opposite direction from what prior research would have suggested.

Next, we compared the Mexican-born to all others in the COH homeless sample to see whether sleeping arrangements differed. Results presented in

Table 2.   Mean Number of Nights Spent in Each Housing Arrangement:
_t_ Test Comparison of Homeless Born in Mexico and Not Born
in Mexico, Using Course of Homelessness Data

Number of Nights in Each Housing Arrangement, Past 30 Nights	Born in Mexico	All Others	Probability > |T|
Mission	6.26	8.01	.236
Church	1.27	1.43	.999
Theater	1.01**	0.94	.050
Abandoned building	2.48**	0.61	.000
Car	1.69*	1.49	.078
Streets	11.40	9.64	.106
Other arrangement	1.23*	0.61	.098

*significant at .1. **significant at .05.

Table 3.   Respondent's Usual Place to Stay: _t_ Test Comparison of Home-
less Born in Mexico and Not Born in Mexico, Using Course of
Homelessness Data

Respondent's Usual Place to Stay, Past 30 Nights	Born in Mexico	All Others	Probability > |T|
Apartment, home, hotel paid by respondent	.04	.08	.1346
Boarding house, voucher hotel, mission, church	.29**	.41	.0216
Friend's or relative's place	.03	.03	.8421
Theater, abandoned building, car, other	.19**	.11	.0163
Street or other outdoor place	.43	.36	.1485

*significant at .1. **significant at .05.

Table 2 indicate that Mexican-born homeless respondents spent significantly more nights (out of the past 30) in theaters, abandoned buildings, sleeping in cars, and in other arrangements. Although they spent fewer nights on average in missions and churches, and more nights on the streets, the mean differences were not significantly different at the 10% level.

Next, we estimated the means for the respondents' usual place to stay. We found that a lower proportion of Mexican-born respondents (.29 vs. .41) reported sleeping in a traditional homeless shelter such as a boarding house, voucher hotel, mission, or church (see Table 3). Similarly, a higher proportion of Mexican-born respondents (.19 vs. .11) reported sleeping in a more informal setting such as a theater, abandoned building, car, or other arrange-

ment. In sum, combining results from Tables 2 and 3, we rejected our Hypothesis 2, that Mexican-born homeless persons are as likely as others to sleep in nontraditional settings. Instead, we found that Mexican-born persons were much more likely to sleep in nontraditional homeless settings. The implication of this result is that Mexican-born homeless may be systematically undersampled because they are less likely to be found in the traditional homeless shelters and similar sampling spaces.

Discussion

In this study, we wished to investigate the methodological bias explanation for the apparent and well-publicized dearth of Hispanic homeless persons. Exploiting a unique sample of Mexican-born individuals in Los Angeles, we tested Hypothesis 1, that the HR among the Mexican-born sample will not differ from the overall HR for the county as a whole—including all races and ethnicities. Based on previous research, we did not expect to reject Hypothesis 1—and certainly not in the direction that we ultimately did. We found that the HR for the COLEF-USC sample was not lower than, but nearly 7 times greater than, the rate for Los Angeles County as a whole. These findings lend support for the methodological bias theory.

Next, we investigated one explanation for the methodological bias theory, namely that Hispanic homeless persons may be underrepresented in homeless samples because they are less likely to participate in standard homeless sleeping arrangements such as missions, shelters, and churches. We formalized this research question as Hypothesis 2, that Mexican-born homeless persons are as likely as others to sleep in nontraditional settings. Using the COH sample of homeless persons in Los Angeles, we found that Mexican-born homeless persons were more likely to sleep in nontraditional arrangements such as in abandoned buildings and less likely to have indicated boarding houses, voucher hotels, missions, and churches as their "usual place" to stay. Rejecting Hypothesis 2, we concluded that Hispanics may be systematically underrepresented in homeless samples because they are more likely to exist on the periphery of traditional homeless spaces and hence be hidden from traditional homeless samples.

There are three important implications of these findings. First, researchers should increase their efforts to sample homeless persons who may exist outside of the traditional skid row areas to capture the invisible, or "hidden Hispanic homeless" on the periphery. Second, policy makers should not become complacent about the apparent dearth of Hispanic homeless because findings presented here for Los Angeles County—which, at more than 4 million, contains the largest number of Hispanics in the United States—cast serious

doubts on the assumption of underrepresentation of Hispanics among the homeless. To the extent that the proportion of Hispanics in Los Angeles County has continued to grow (*supra*) since the early 1990s, findings presented here may actually understate the current magnitude of the problem. Policies designed to assist the homeless must attempt to address this potentially significant group of "hidden Hispanic homeless" who exist on the fringes of homeless society. Research is warranted to identify important means by which this population can be served. Future research endeavors should also attempt to identify the reasons why Mexican-born homeless exist on the periphery of traditional homeless spaces. We believe factors such as language, legal status, culture, migratory and labor market patterns, and discrimination are all potential causes.

Although this investigation has cast serious doubt on alternative explanations for the apparent dearth of Hispanic homeless persons, we emphasize that these results should be considered preliminary, rather than conclusive. For example, the mobility spaces sampling technique used in the COLEF-USC sample has been designed to capture a large number of Mexican-born persons, not necessarily homeless Mexican-born persons. Future research should consider different sampling designs to test the robustness of these results. In addition, larger samples would improve their overall reliability. There are also concerns about the generalizability of these results to sample spaces outside of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. For example, it may be that Hispanics in other metropolitan areas (e.g., because of climatic differences, etc.) participate more fully in mainstream homeless sleeping arrangements. Nevertheless, we believe that these findings should open the door to a reconsideration of the methodological sampling bias against Hispanic homeless persons.

Note

1. Indeed, according to the Census Bureau, the percentage of Hispanics in Los Angeles County increased from 37.3% in 1990 to 44.6% in 2000 and the percentage of foreign-born persons rose from 32.7 to 36.2%.

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