

# Strangers in the Homeland?

## The Academic Performance of Children of Return Migrants in Mexico

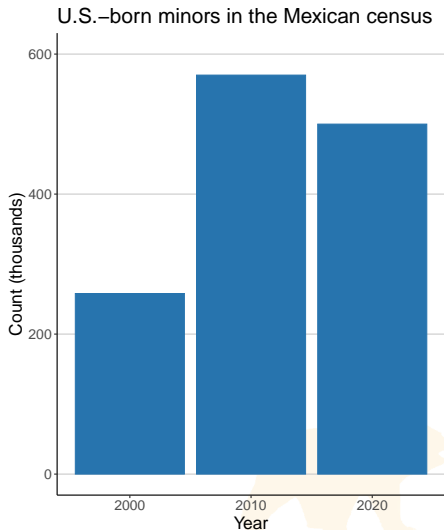
Nathan Hoffmann  
UCLA Sociology

**UCLA** California Center for  
Population Research



# Introduction

- Largest return migration flow in the world is from the U.S. to Mexico (Azose and Raftery 2019)
- Abundance of research on return migrants, but little on the children who accompany them
- About 500,000 American-born minors live in Mexico (~2 percent of school enrollment)
- *0.5 generation*: children of Mexican immigrants who are born in the U.S. and later migrate to Mexico (Zúñiga



# Introduction

- What does it mean to assimilate into a society where ethnic, cultural, and legal barriers are at a minimum?
- Previous, mainly qualitative studies present diverging findings
- Predominant narrative of struggles: difficulty with written language, invisibility to teachers, stigma and exclusion from other youths
- Bybee et al. (2020): teachers characterize them as “star students,” capitalizing on their binational and bicultural assets



# Introduction

## Research questions

- What is migrant success? Importance of comparison group
- ① How do the academic outcomes of U.S.-born children of return migrants compare to other youths in Mexico?
  - Descriptive assessment of Mexican educational context
- ② How do their academic outcomes compare to similar adolescents in the U.S.?
  - Counterfactual: what would have happened to these children had they not migrated to Mexico?
- ③ If disparities exist, are these due to selection on pre-migration characteristics?
- ④ Do post-migration individual characteristics mediate effects?



# Empirical Expectations

## Why might these adolescents be *disadvantaged*?

- Neoclassical economics: Parents return due to negative factors, such as unemployment, deportation
- Transnationalism: Alienation and exclusion in the “home” society
- Institutionalism: lack of infrastructure for investment (Hagan and Wassink 2020, 539).
- Cassarino (2004): deportation means that migrants not “ready and willing” to migrate
- Hernández-León, Zúñiga, and Lakhani (2020) suggest that “U.S. policies [...] effectively externalize downward assimilation to communities of origin.”



# Empirical Expectations

## Why might these adolescents be *advantaged*?

- NELM: return migration implies economic success, with parents accumulating sufficient resources to lead a comfortable life in Mexico
- Ready and willing to migrate (Cassarino 2004)
- Benefit from resources such as dual nationality, bicultural facility, and experience in better resourced schools (Gándara & Jensen 2021)
- Assimilation theory: absence of most social markers of difference  
⇒ smooth integration (Alba & Nee 2003)



# Institutional Explanations

- Recent work shows the importance of institutional features of national systems for immigrant educational outcomes (Thomson and Crul 2007; Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Schneider, Crul, and Pott 2022; Midtbøen and Nadim 2022; Platt, Polavieja, and Radl 2022)
- Supportive or unaccommodating academic environment may be decisive
- Mexican school system under-resourced: low per-student funding, over-extended teachers, short school day, few provisions for Spanish language learners



# Data

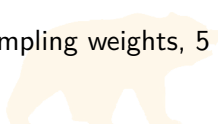
- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for 2012, 2015, and 2018
  - reading, math, and science
- Main sample: 465 children born to two Mexican parents in the U.S., now living in Mexico
- Mexico comparison: 40,710 children of non-immigrants in Mexico
- U.S. comparison: 926 Spanish-speaking children of two immigrants in the U.S.



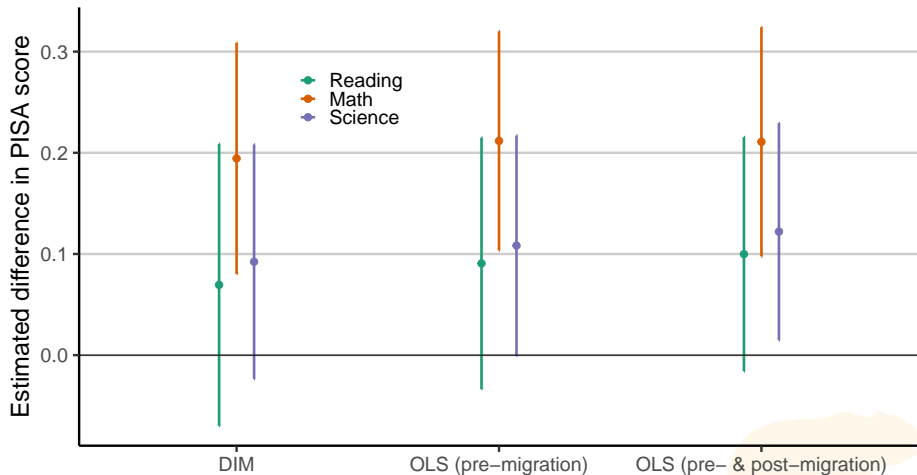


# Methods

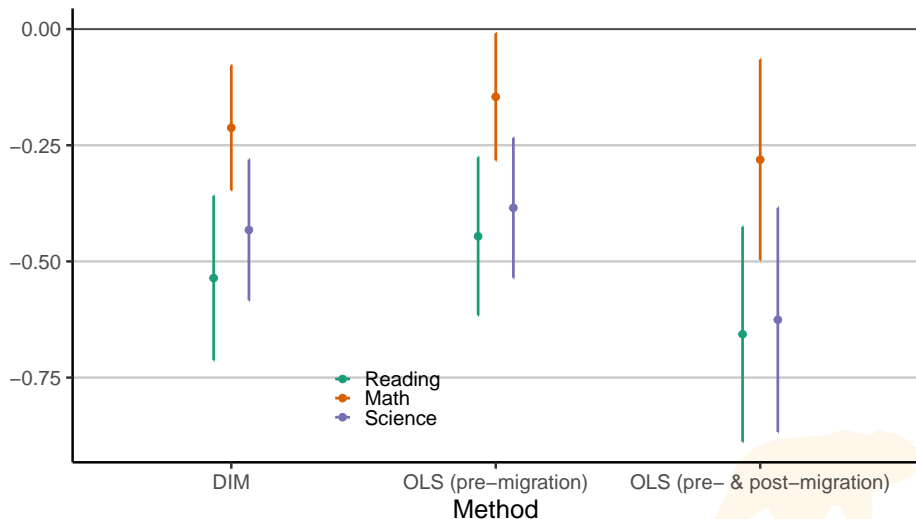
- Difference-in-means and OLS regression estimates
- Adjusting for pre-migration variables: role of selection?
  - Mother's and father's education (6-category ISCED), cultural possessions, home educational resources, age (15 for most respondents), early childhood education and care (ECEC), two-category gender
- Adjusting for post-migration variables: do individual/family characteristics mediate the effect of migration?
  - Household wealth, home possessions, home information and communication technology (ICT) resources, and an index of economic, social and cultural status, highest parental occupational status measured (ISEI), urban locality
- Analysis of moderators
- HC1 clustered standard errors at the school level, sampling weights, 5 plausible values
- Sensitivity analysis with other estimation methods



# Mexico Comparisons



# U.S. Comparisons



# Moderators

- How are results moderated by gender, age at migration, and rural vs. urban locality?
- For within-Mexico comparisons, results do not vary
  - even when excluding 1/3 of the main sample migrated before the age of 1
- For U.S. comparisons, greater disparities for villages (-1 sd)



# Conclusion

- Previous studies have mixed findings, with negative outcomes predominating
- slight advantage compared to Mexican youths
- stark disadvantage compared to similar U.S. adolescents
- Controlling for pre- or post-migration characteristics does not change conclusions
- Little variation by moderators



# Conclusion

- Corrective to narrative on children of Mexican return migrants: advantaged compared to Mexican students
- Importance of comparison group and institutions: focus on only one country fails to capture the importance of institutional context
  - Mexican schools under-resourced
- Smooth assimilation, but to relatively low educational average
- Another way U.S.-citizen children of undocumented immigrants are harmed by punitive immigration policy



# Conclusion

## Thank You

Nathan I. Hoffmann  
[nathanihoff@ucla.edu](mailto:nathanihoff@ucla.edu)



# Variables

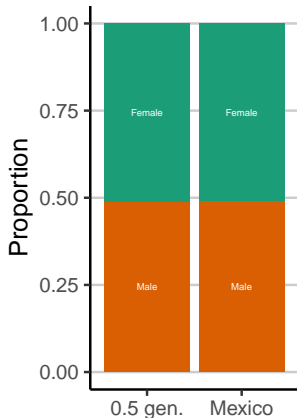
- Pre-migration variables: mother's and father's education (6-category ISCED), cultural possessions, home educational resources, age (15 for most respondents), early childhood education and care (ECEC), two-category gender
- Post-migration variables: composite variables for household wealth, home possessions, home information and communication technology (ICT) resources, and an index of economic, social and cultural status; highest parental occupational status measured (ISEI), urban locality



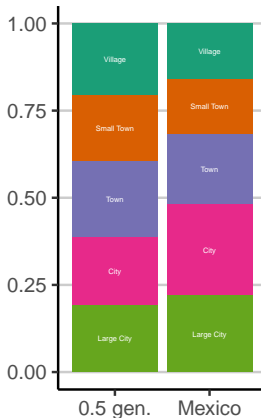


# Mexico Comparisons

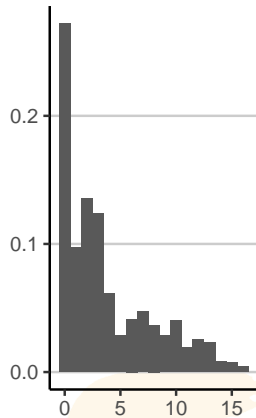
## Gender



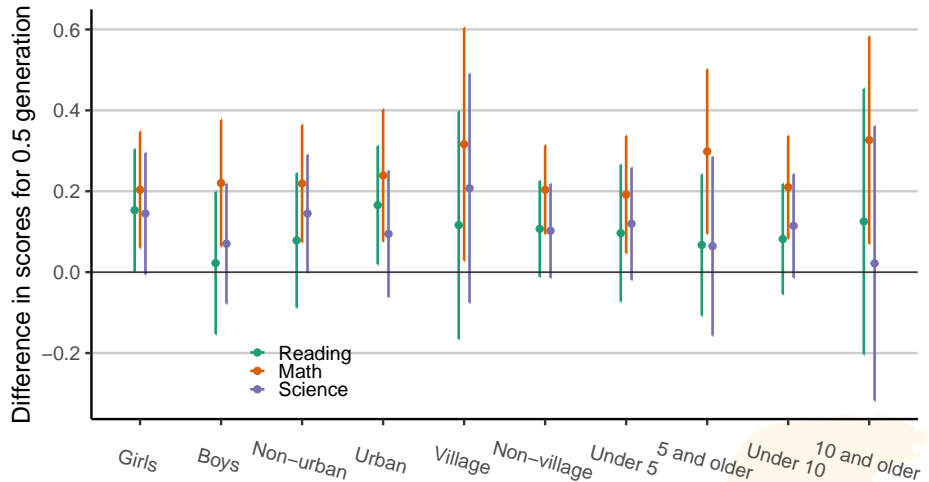
## School Location



## Age at Arrival

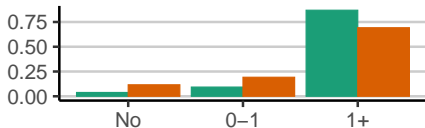


# Mexico Comparisons

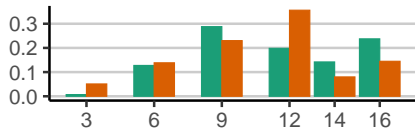


# U.S. Comparisons

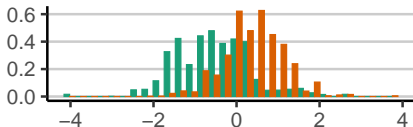
## Early Childhood Education



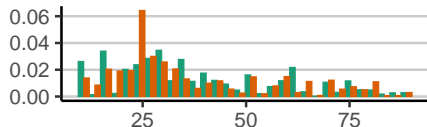
## Parent's Years of Education



## Wealth Composite



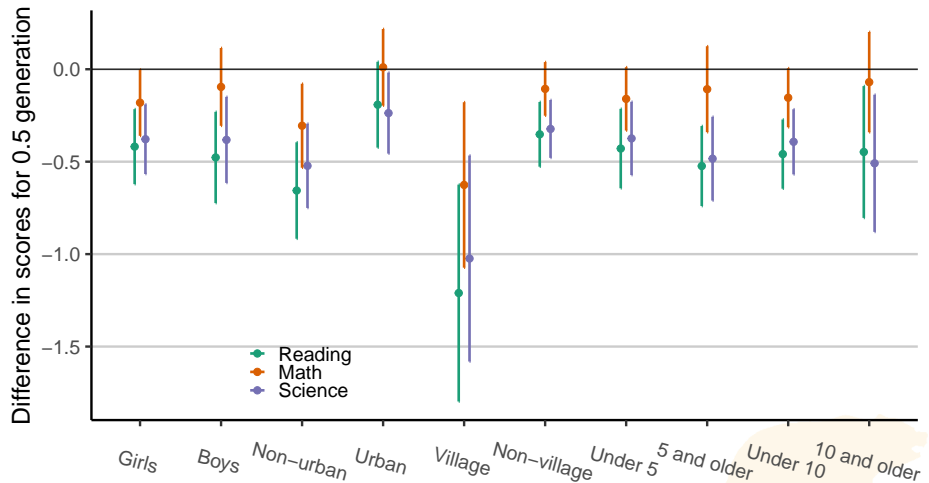
## Parent's Occupation (ISEI)



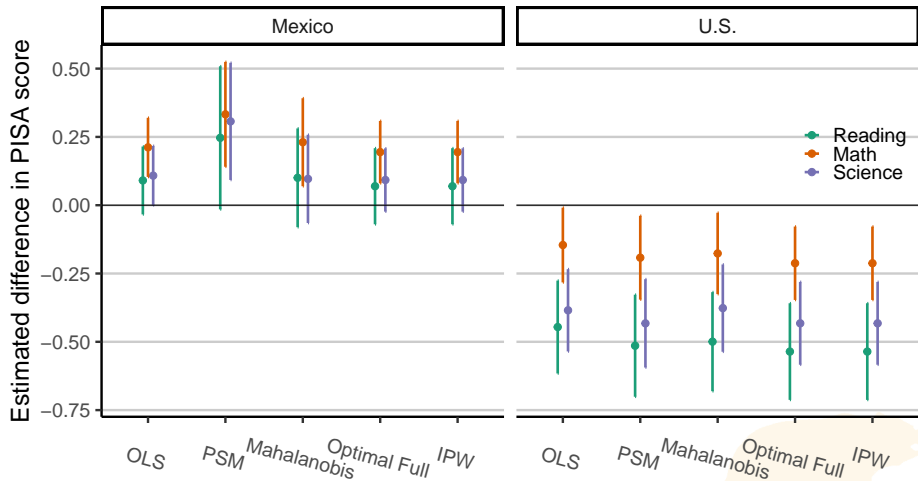
0.5 Generation U.S. Spanish-Speaking



## U.S. Comparisons



# Sensitivity Analysis



# Conclusion

## Why the slight advantage compared to Mexican students?

- Bicultural resources or prestige bestowed by experience in the U.S.
- Facility with standardized tests
- Parental resource advantage: benefits of migration
- Bureaucratic hurdles might prevent the most disadvantaged students from enrolling in school (Mateos 2019) or they have dropped out completely (Zúñiga and Carrillo Cantú 2020)



# Conclusion

## Why the disadvantage compared to U.S. students?

- In 2014, Mexico spent 2,000 USD per pupil, while the U.S. spent 18,000 USD (Santibañez 2021, 25)
- Short school day (4.5 hours in elementary and 7 hours in secondary school)
- Few extracurricular or enrichment programs exist
- Outside of school, social programs may be less well resourced



# References

- Azose, Jonathan J., and Adrian E. Raftery. 2019. "Estimation of Emigration, Return Migration, and Transit Migration Between All Pairs of Countries." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (1): 116–22. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1722334116>.
- Bybee, Eric Ruiz, Erin Feinauer Whiting, Bryant Jensen, Victoria Savage, Alisa Baker, and Emma Holdaway. 2020. "'Estamos Aquí Pero No Soy de Aquí': American Mexican Youth, Belonging and Schooling in Rural, Central Mexico." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 51 (2): 123–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12333>.
- Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. 2004. "Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited." *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 6 (2): 253–79.
- Crul, Maurice, and Hans Vermeulen. 2003. "The Second Generation in Europe." *International Migration Review* 37 (4): 965–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00166.x>.