SEARCHING FOR THE FAMILY LEGAL STATUS OF MEXICAN-ORIGIN CHILDREN:

A PRIMER ON DIFFERENT MEASUREMENT STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Interest in the consequences of family legal status for children has grown in response to immigration-related changes in the ethnic composition of American society. However, only a few population-based empirical studies devote attention to family legal status due to data limitations. Using restricted data from the California Health Interview Survey (2009), this study identifies and evaluates strategies for measuring this important determinant of life chances. The latter is accomplished with an analysis that demonstrates the sensitivity of estimates of the size of status-specific segments of the Mexican-origin child population and their risks of living in poverty to measurement decisions. The results demonstrate that estimates are sensitive to how family legal status is measured. Various "combinatorial" strategies are shown to be unnecessarily reductionist and to rely on untenable assumptions that can be avoided with more parsimonious approaches.

The past several decades witnessed striking changes in the ethnic composition of the child population in the United States. According to the Census and the American Community Survey, the non-Hispanic white share of children less than 12 years of age declined from 69% to 55% between 1990 and 2011. This was largely due to the ascendance of the Mexican-origin population from 8% to 17% of the total over this period. These trends are especially evident in traditional migration-receiving states such as California. California includes one-third of all Mexican-origin children in the nation who, in turn, account for almost half of those in the state. In contrast, 28% of the state's children are non-Hispanic white and 6% are African American.

The growth of the Mexican child population stems from trends in immigration, the fertility of immigrants, and the fertility of the second generation (Landale and Oropesa 2007). These sources of growth suggest that the importance of parental nativity as a fundamental source of inequality in children's life chances may be increasing. Indeed, children of Mexico-born parents are more likely than their co-ethnic counterparts with U.S.-born parents to experience poverty. At the same time, various strands of research reveal paradoxical findings that suggest the consequences of parental nativity are not necessarily straightforward. The coupling of a relatively high risk of poverty among children of Mexico-born parents with a low risk of living in a single-parent family is a case in point (Reimers, 2006).

The role of nativity in the family circumstances of children cannot be understood apart from legal status, an additional fundamental cause of differences in life chances. Legal status refers to the hierarchy of positions that is established by institutions through the creation and enforcement of laws. Immigration law regulates the terms of admission and exit while alienage law specifies the rights of non-citizens (Romero, 2009). At the apex of the hierarchy are naturalized citizens; that is, those who obtain the full rights of citizenship by successfully applying for naturalization after a

three to five-year period of permanent residency. Because naturalization renders this group nearly indistinguishable from native-born citizens, the term immigrant is used narrowly in legislation to refer to non-citizens who have been granted the right to permanently live and to engage in economic activities in the United States. This is marked by the issuance of "green cards" that confer lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. Non-immigrants are defined as those who are authorized to be temporarily present and those whose presence is unauthorized, regardless of their duration of residence. Needless to say, the latter category is a large segment of the population. About 6.8 million of 11.5 million Mexico-born persons in the United States are unauthorized residents (Hoefer, Rytina, & Baker, 2011).

Legal status is increasingly acknowledged as a determinant of vulnerability that is hidden from view (Glick, 2012). This stems, in part, from the fact that most widely-used data sources only permit distinctions between the native born, naturalized citizens among the foreign born and non-citizens among the foreign born. The inability to partition non-citizens into those who are not authorized and those who are authorized to live in the United States as permanent residents or as temporary residents (e.g., visas) is a formidable data limitation. As a result, family legal status is a source of unmeasured heterogeneity in most empirical studies of the Mexican-origin population produced by family and immigration scholars.[1] Moreover, this potential problem is compounded by the fact that families are complex entities that are marked by asymmetry in dependencies between members, especially parents and children. The status of parents is crucial in determining the family circumstances of their dependent

[1] To illustrate, no population-based study on the implications of family legal status for Mexican-origin children has ever appeared in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* or the *Journal of Family Issues*. Just one empirical study that examines the implications of family legal status for the population in general has appeared in *Child Development*. Shortages are evident in the immigration literature as well, as revealed in various reports by the National Research Council (1999, 2006, 2013) and the pages of *Demography*, *International Migration Review* and *Population Research and Policy Review.*

children, but this has largely been ignored because of data limitations. Still, there are a few ground-breaking exceptions that have relied on indirect methods to identify "mixed-status" families based on distinctions between foreign-born parents and native-born children in citizenship (Fix and Zimmermann 2001) or documentation status (Passel 2005, 2006; Passel and Clark 1998). These studies used side information from special-purpose surveys to generate a probability-based algorithm for assigning immigrants their most likely status in various government surveys that lack direct questions.[2] This innovative procedure culminates in the identification of families according to the relative positions of parents and children. A mixed status family, for example, might involve the coupling of a non-citizen parent with a native-born child if this distinction is emphasized. Needless to say, information is lost in the process of dichotomization and by not taking differences in statuses between parents into account. The question of whether this loss of information matters remains open.

Although direct questions on legal status are rarely available in population-based surveys that are used by social scientists, several exceptions have allowed researchers to partially overcome the data limitations that inspired the development of imputation-based methods. Ziol-Guest and Kalil (2012), for example, used the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to examine the health-related consequences of family immigration status for all children. Unfortunately, the universe for the migration module of the SIPP is those who are eligible to enter the labor force and who co-reside in the same household. No information is provided on the status of children under the age of 15 or non-resident parents of those who live in single-parent families. As a result, the study's measure of family legal status was based on two parents for some children and one parent for others

[2] This involves two primary stages. The first stage is to predict the likelihood of having a given status (e.g., undocumented vs. documented) from a set of predictors such as country-of-origin, sex and occupation in the special-purpose survey that includes direct questions. The second stage is to use this model to classify individuals according to their likely status in the survey that lacks direct questions based on their values for the predictors that are common to both surveys.

(described below). In summary, most data sources used by social scientists lack information on the legal status of both parents and their children, but even when direct questions are asked they are often limited to co-residential parents or to the parent who answers the survey on behalf of a child.[3]

Some studies in allied fields that are strongly grounded in the social sciences have been able to construct more informative measures of family legal status from information on both parents (e.g., Guendelman et al., 2005; Ortega et al., 2009). At the same time, the measurement strategies used in this nascent literature demonstrate little agreement about appropriate procedures. There is disagreement about *which* legal status distinctions should be maintained and *how* to aggregate legal status distinctions across those who comprise families. This is characteristic of an underdeveloped area of inquiry with insufficient attention to measurement assumptions. Such issues are potentially crucial for all research that aspires to shed light on the children of immigrants, ranging from studies that focus narrowly on estimating the size of different segments of the population to those that seek to demonstrate how family-based differences in risk factors are structured by nativity and legal status.

Using restricted data from the 2009 California Health Interview Survey, we evaluate measurement strategies for characterizing the legal status of children's families. The first objective is to identify strategies that are based on direct questions about the statuses of parents and children. The second objective is to demonstrate the implications of each strategy for estimating the size of status-specific segments of the Mexican-origin child population. This is an important descriptive objective that serves both the research and policy-relevant interests of those in numerous fields because the magnitude of

[3] In an additional study, Bean et al. (2011) alluded to "mixed" families based on the relative status and the timing of changes in status among parents in a population-based survey of Los Angeles residents. This study is not directly relevant to the present investigation because it examined the *adult* children of immigrants, emphasized parents' changes in status between time of entry and interview without synchronization to the childhoods of the respondents, and did not show how parents' statuses intersect (apart from a latent class analysis).

any social problem reflects the size of the population that experiences it. The prominence of immigration on the public agenda, in particular, reflects the number of undocumented adults and children coupled with concerns about the long-term prospects of native-born offspring. In this vein, the third objective is to illustrate how inferences about the vulnerabilities of children may be sensitive to strategies for classifying parents' legal status. This is demonstrated with an analysis of the likelihood of living in poverty, another fundamental determinant of the life chances of children. The expectation is that economic deprivation is most likely when parents have marginal legal statuses, but this is not an investigation of poverty per se. Rather, the analysis of poverty is used to illustrate potentially problematic procedures for understanding the implications of legal status for children's likelihood of experiencing deleterious circumstances.[4]

The organization of this article departs from what might be expected from the standard outline (i.e. theory→data→ findings) that most investigations follow. Specifically, we start with the specific survey questions that are potential building blocks for constructing family legal status to understand the choices that are involved in measurement decisions. After describing the source of data and presenting descriptive statistics for the specific survey questions, the analysis turns to how information on members is combined in practice to characterize families as collective entities. The analysis then reveals how measurement strategies matter for estimating the sizes of different segments of the child population and their risks of poverty. In so doing, various untenable assumptions of "combinatorial" strategies are exposed and a more parsimonious analytic approach is proposed.

DATA & METHODS

We use restricted data on the Mexican-origin child population from the 2009 California Health

[4] In other words, no effort is made to identify the mechanisms for associations between family legal status and poverty given the objectives of this research. To do so would require more information on experiences in the labor force than is available the dataset used here.

Interview Survey (CHIS). Conducted by Westat for the Center for Health Policy Research at UCLA, the California Department of Public Health and the California Department of Health Care Services, the CHIS is the most comprehensive state health survey in the United States. This telephone survey targets children, adolescents and adults using a complex multi-stage sampling design with 44 counties and county groups serving as geographic strata for the random-digit dialing of households connected to landlines and those with cell phones. Within each household, one adult was randomly selected to participate in an interview about his/her own circumstances and those of co-resident dependents. As for the latter, one child age 0-11 was randomly selected along with one child age 12-17 as focal observations among those present. The youngest age group comprises the "child sample" that is examined here.

The analysis is based on Mexican-origin children identified from responses to questions on the specific origin(s) of focal children identified as Hispanic or Latino. Mexican-origin children are those with single or multiple origins that include Mexican, Mexican American, and Chicano. The unweighted sample of Mexican-origin children includes 2,961 cases that are representative of the state's non-institutionalized population when weighted. All analyses are based on weighted data with standard errors adjusted for the complex sample design. Incomplete data were handled in the CHIS through hot-deck imputation.

Dependent Variable

Poverty reflects the income-to-needs ratio. This is the ratio of income to the federal poverty thresholds for households. The ratio is dichotomized to contrast children living below the poverty line (coded as 1) and those living at or above it (0).

Immigration Status

Identical sequences of questions permit four statuses to be determined for the focal child, the

child's mother and the child's father: (1) native-born citizen, (2) foreign-born naturalized citizen, (3) foreign-born permanent resident (green card), and (4) foreign-born non-permanent resident (no green card). Although the latter category encompasses the undocumented along with others such as current visa holders, almost all Mexico-born persons who are neither naturalized nor permanent residents are not authorized immigrants (Passel, 2007).[5] It should be noted as well that it is hard to overemphasize the potential value of these survey items given that other data sources either only permit a distinction between naturalized citizens and non-citizens among the foreign born or do not provide detailed information on the legal status of children, coresidential parents and non-coresidential parents.

Family Structure

Most family legal status measures are gender-blind in their treatment of parents and do not take family structure into account. Because these intertwined operational decisions should be subject to scrutiny, we identify two-parent and single-parent families. Single-parent families are partitioned for some analyses into those headed by women and those headed by men. Two-parent families cannot be satisfactorily partitioned into those formed by married or cohabiting couples due to data limitations.

Caveats

The extended-interview completion rate for children is approximately 75% with an overall child-sample response rate of 14% (California Health Interview Survey 2011). This rate is low by historical standards. Still, the case for using these data is strong. Response rates for telephone surveys have declined precipitously in recent years to the point where the response rate of the CHIS

[5] The share is difficult to determine with certainty because the stock of permanent residents is unknown. The size of the undocumented Mexican-origin population was estimated with residual methods to be around 6.8 million in 2011. This is *more* than the number of Mexico-born non-citizens minus the likely number of Mexico-born permanent residents based on various surveys (see Gonzalez-Barrera, Lopez, Passel, and Taylor 2013).

is now typical (Pew Research Center, 2012). [6] Moreover, non-response bias cannot be assumed from the magnitude of the response rate given that the association between the two is weak (Groves 2006; Groves and Peytcheva 2008; Pew Research Center, 2012; Massey & Tourangeau, 2013). The case is strengthened further by the fact that replication is a goal of research and this survey has been used extensively in the health literature and to inform state policy. In short, there is no better alternative for studying the children of hard-to-reach undocumented migrants.

These results are generalizable to Mexican-origin children age 0-11 in California. We acknowledge that children in other ethno-racial and age groups are of potential interest. Mexican-origin children are of special interest as the new majority whose lives are especially likely to be touched in some way by the nativity and immigration status of their parents. Also, young children are of interest because their well-being is particularly dependent on the status of their parents. An analysis of 12-17 year olds is precluded by restricted access to these data.

The measurement procedures described below are based on direct questions rather than indirect attempts to infer status using other characteristics. Although a comparison between these two approaches might be of value, it is beyond the purview of our objectives given that an indirect approach would never be preferred over the alternative. Recent studies show that direct questions are both valid and reliable (Bachmeier, Van Hook and Bean 2014).

Another concern is omitted variable bias in the association between legal status and poverty. It is important to keep in mind that we focus on poverty to demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of operational strategies for dealing with legal status. A comprehensive investigation

[6] The CHIS response rate reflects a denominator that is inflated by the majority of the sample that did not complete the screener. Although there is no equivalent survey of children in California for comparison, the telephone survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control as part of the California Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is informative. The response rate for adults in the 2009 CHIS is the same as that for the 2007 BRFSS and slightly lower than that for the 2009 BRFSS (California Health Interview Survey, 2011).

into the mechanisms for observed associations is beyond the purview of this research and the capabilities of any survey that lacks comprehensive information on labor market activities. Similarly, the absence of data on the parents' ethnicities should be noted. The impact of this shortcoming is probably minimal because the Mexican-origin population exhibits a high level of endogamy in parenthood. About 86% of births to Mexican-origin mothers are with Mexican-origin fathers. This figure is 93% for immigrant mothers and 74% for native-born mothers (Landale, Oropesa and Bradatan 2006).

RESULTS

The Immigration Status of Children and Parents

Table 1 provides the frequency distributions for the immigration statuses of Mexican-origin children and their parents. Here we see that the Mexican-origin child population of California is extremely large. The three million (2.8) children below the age of 12 is greater than the total populations of 14 states. Approximately 96% of all children are native-born. Just 1.5% are either naturalized citizens or permanent residents and 2% are without a green card. Thus, there is considerable homogeneity in the immigration status of children.

----------TABLE 1----------

In contrast, heterogeneity is evident in the statuses of parents with 39% of mothers and 34% of fathers born in the United States. This implies that, at minimum, two-thirds of all children have at least one parent who was born in Mexico. Although non-trivial shares are naturalized (12-18%) or permanent residents (20%), the undocumented constitute the largest single category of Mexico-born mothers and fathers at nearly 30% for both. The undocumented shares increase to 48% when the base is restricted to Mexico-born mothers and 43% when it is restricted to Mexico-born fathers.

Table 2 expands the portrait by showing the joint distribution of the mother's and the father's

legal status for *all* Mexican children. The top panel shows how the statuses of both parents intersect regardless of family structure. Summing the values on the main diagonal indicates that a strong majority has same-status parents (63%) with those having two native-born parents (28%) and two undocumented parents (21%) leading the way. An additional 18% of children have "mixed nativity" families with one U.S.-born and one foreign-born parent. This brings the total for those with at least one native-born parent to 46% (46=18+28). Conversely, the boxed figures in the last column and row indicate that 36% of Mexican children have at least one parent who does not have a green card. In numeric terms, the number of Mexican-origin children in California whose lives are touched by unauthorized immigration stands at one million.

----------TABLE 2----------

As noted, the CHIS provides a unique opportunity to describe the family status of children based on the characteristics of both parents. Family structure complicates the analysis of parents' legal status because some children live with two parents while others live with a single parent. Because the legal status of absent parents may affect children's access to resources, the bottom panel identifies single-parent families. This panel shows that single-parent mothers predominate and this disproportionately affects the children of native-born mothers. The boxed cells reveal that 22% live with a single mother and 3% live with a single father overall. Also, the 12% of children who live with a single U.S.-born mother account for nearly one-third of all children with U.S.-born mothers. The 6% who have an undocumented mother and an absent father account for one-fifth of children with undocumented mothers. The shares with absent fathers among those whose mothers are naturalized (14%) and permanent residents (14%) are even lower.

Different Classification Approaches and Estimates

Strategies to summarize family circumstances could potentially utilize all of this information on

children and parents.[7] In principle, a 64 category variable would be required to retain the maximum amount of information from a four-category indicator of the immigration status of each of three focal family members ($64 = 4^3$). In practice, this is unnecessary because almost all Mexican-origin children age 0-11 are born in the United States and almost all children who are not native born have the same legal status as at least one of their parents. An additional reason is that the legal status of young children is unlikely to affect family poverty.

These considerations reduce the operational problem to describing the status of parents with a single measure. One approach is to construct a variable that reflects the 16 unique combinations of a 4 x 4 cross-tabulation of mother's status by father's status. Because this is unwieldy, studies of various populations in allied fields combine categories to reduce complexity (Guendelman et al., 2005; Zhihuan, Yu & Ledsky, 2006; Kinchloe, Frates, & Brown, 2007; Ortega et al., 2009; Perez et al., 2009; Stevens, West-Wright & Tsai, 2010; Ziol-Guest & Kalil, 2012). However, strategies for combining categories differ across studies. A subset of the more transparent strategies and alternatives that might be considered "stylized" representations is presented below to accomplish the first research objective.[8]

Table 3 describes five different measurement strategies. Each panel corresponds to a particular strategy with numbered cells and boxed areas that identify how the cells are combined for each. Bolded percentages indicate the share of the sample in each area. Ziol-Guest and Kalil (2012)

[7] Mixed statuses among siblings, step-families and extended families in the same household typically are not addressed and cannot be addressed here.

[8] Transparency is sometimes impeded by imprecise language and the failure to specify the grounds for collapsing categories. Some procedures are inconsistent in only using information on a subset of child's statuses in conjunction with a subset of parent statuses. Some procedures are not exhaustive; that is, coding does not account for all possible combinations of two or more variables and arbitrarily excludes some children. Lack of exclusivity is evident in verbal descriptions which suggest that a child could be placed simultaneously in two categories. Lastly, some procedures fail to use full information relying solely on data for one parent to determine family legal status.

epitomize transparency in their strategy of anchoring classifications in the parent with the lowest status (Panel A). In this *low status anchor* strategy, for example, a child of one undocumented parent and one permanent resident parent, one naturalized parent or one native-born parent is classified with a child of two undocumented parents. This contrasts with a *high status anchor* strategy where the child of one undocumented parent and one permanent resident parent is classified with a child of two permanent resident parents (Panel B). A child with an undocumented parent and a native-born parent would be classified with the child of two native-born parents. Thus, these strategies diverge in how those with mixed status parents are treated.

----------Table 3----------

Three hybrid strategies are guided by different principles for different statuses. Guendelman at al. (2005) preserve the low status anchor for children with at least one parent who is not a citizen, but *conflate citizenship* categories by not distinguishing naturalized citizens from native-born citizens (Panel C). In this scheme, a child with two naturalized parents is treated the same as a child with two native-born parents or one native-born parent and one naturalized parent. Another hybrid strategy *conflates naturalization and permanent residence* (Panel D; similar to Ortega et al., 2009). A child with two naturalized parents would be treated the same as a child with two permanent resident parents or one of each.[9] Public-use files require *conflation of permanent residence and lack of documentation* since immigration status is reduced to three categories: (1) native born, (2) naturalized citizen, and (3) non-citizen. To illustrate, Panel E shows a low status anchor approach even though a variant of other strategies could also be used (see Perez et al., 2009).

In keeping with the second research objective, these panels reveal that estimates of the shares of

[9] There is uncertainty here due to imprecise language in the original source which might be interpreted to either preclude or require naturalized citizens and native-born citizens to be combined. The latter is indicated by the shaded area. Also, their verbal description does not indicate how two cells would be classified (cells 4 and 13).

children in different family circumstances are sensitive to the procedure used. The *low status anchor* identifies 28% of children with two native-born parents and an additional 13% with one or two parents who are naturalized. This is followed by 24% whose lowest status parent is a permanent resident and 36% with an undocumented parent. In contrast, the *high status anchor* places 45% in the highest category of those with at least one native-born parent, followed by 18% whose highest status parent is naturalized and 16% whose highest status parent has a green card. One-fifth of children are in the bottom category of two undocumented parents, leaving the vast majority of children with at least one citizen or permanent resident parent (80%).

As for the hybrid strategies, conflating U.S. birth with naturalization and emphasizing the lowest status for the other categories in Panel C places 40% of children in the top category with shares in the other categories identical to those in the top panel. Panel D demonstrates the consequences of conflating naturalization and permanent residence. The share in cell 1 is the same as for the low status anchor (Panel A) and the share in cell 16 is the same as in the high status anchor (Panel B). This hybrid approach classifies 46% between these extremes.

The "public-use" approach in Panel E shows that identification of categories in which naturalization serves as a low status anchor is not affected by the collapsed categories for legal status (Panel A vs. Panel E). The inability to identify the separate statuses of non-citizens places 60% into the lowest category (vs. 36% in Panel A). If the high status anchor strategy were used, 37% of children would be in the lowest status group of two parents who are non-citizens (cells 11, 12, 15, 16; see Panel B). In short, the inability to distinguish permanent residents from unauthorized residents with the creation of a "non-citizen" category in the public-use file is inadequate for studying the Mexican-origin population. The appropriateness of combining various categories is general issue to which we now turn.

Table 4 facilitates a preliminary assessment of the implications of these strategies for estimating differences in poverty across statuses. The top part of the table shows estimates separately for mother and father's legal status, followed by estimates for the various strategies based on their joint occurrence. The first column identifies the cell numbers and the second column reproduces the percentage of the observations in each category that were shown in the previous table. The remaining column indicates the percent below poverty. Statistical tests are omitted from the table because the associations between variables are all significant at $p < .001$. The significance of differences between categories is discussed below.

---------TABLE 4--------

Although the results reveal the same underlying pattern of substantial variation in poverty by legal status, strategies differ in the extent to which they conceal heterogeneity in the circumstances of children. When the status of each parent is considered separately, the distinction between native-born and naturalized citizens is less substantial than others. Compared to a poverty rate of 22% for all children age 0-11 in the state of California (2009 American Community Survey), 25% of the children of native-born mothers and 18% of those with naturalized mothers live below the poverty threshold. Comparable figures for fathers are 20% and 27%, respectively. Still, risks increase substantially for children whose parents are further removed from the threshold of citizenship. The poverty rate increases from 42% for children of permanent residents to 71% for children with undocumented parents. Such figures provide a stark reminder of how potential vulnerabilities associated with financial hardship change with legal status.

The remaining panels also show a negative association between legal status and poverty. The "highest" status groups have poverty rates that range from 20% (Panel C) to 25% (Panel B) and the "lowest" status groups have poverty rates that range from 67% to 75%, except for the public use

figure of 55% (Panel E). At the same time, differences in poverty across the intermediate groups are obscured by strategies that conflate naturalization with the adjacent categories (Panels C and D). These different risks are illustrated by the low status and high status anchoring strategies. The former suggests that 36% of children whose lowest status parent is a permanent resident are impoverished, compared to 58% of children whose highest status parent is a permanent resident. In summary, some strategies have a limited ability to shed light on substantial differences in the risks of poverty for intermediate categories. The inability of the public use file to illuminate the extreme risks of poverty for the undocumented seriously diminishes its value for investigations of the Mexican-origin population.

Examining Assumptions: An Alternative Approach

All studies that employ these strategies assume that the statuses of both parents must be considered jointly irrespective of gender and that some categories can be combined without sacrificing insights into a given dependent variable. The last two tables provide a basis for formally evaluating these assumptions for poverty. Table 5 presents odds ratios from a series of bivariate and multivariate logistic regressions. Bivariate parameter estimates are referred to as Model 1, with multivariate estimates from a regression that includes the statuses of both parents referred to as Model 2. Model 3 includes the statuses of both parents and family structure.

----------Table 5----------

Columns 1-3 show odds ratios for contrasts with the native born. In Model 1, children whose mothers are naturalized citizens are significantly less likely than those with native-born mothers to be impoverished (odds ratio = .64, p=.055). This is inconsistent with the non-significant odds ratio for fathers (1.41, p=.13), but those with permanent resident parents and undocumented parents have a substantially higher likelihood of being impoverished. The odds of poverty among children with

undocumented mothers are seven times the odds generated by those with native-born mothers. The odds ratio for those with undocumented fathers is even higher at 8.8 ($p<.001$).

Model 2 reveals that entering the statuses of both parents simultaneously does not substantially change the pattern of results, despite the non-significance of the estimate for permanent resident mothers (1.33) and the lower parameter estimates for undocumented parents. The odds ratio for undocumented mothers declines from 7.1 to 2.8 ($p<.001$) and that for undocumented fathers declines from 8.8 ($p<.001$) to 4.5 ($p<.001$). Lastly, Model 3 indicates that controlling for family structure has little effect on the estimates except to restore the significance of the parameter estimate for children of permanent resident mothers compared to children with native-born mothers. Thus, the multivariate model is consistent with the bivariate model.

Columns 4-6 highlight differences among the foreign born by treating the undocumented as the reference category. Here we see that all contrasts between the undocumented and their permanent resident and naturalized citizen counterparts are significant and substantial. The likelihood of poverty is progressively greater as one descends the status hierarchy for foreign-born mothers and fathers. Model 3 shows that the odds ratio for poverty among those with naturalized mothers is less than one-fifth (.16, $p<.001$) and the odds ratio for poverty among those with permanent resident mothers is about half that for the undocumented (.48, $p <.001$). Estimates for father's status have a similar pattern, with an odds ratio for permanent residents that is borderline significant (.65, $p<.06$).

These results also demonstrate the higher risk of poverty among children of single parents. Their odds of living below the poverty line are 2-3 times greater for children in single-parent families than the odds for those in two-parent families.

Table 6 takes this line of inquiry one step further to demonstrate the effect of legal status for children living with single mothers, despite the diminished power of statistical tests for the fewer

than 400 children who live in this type of family and the 40-50 whose mothers are naturalized or permanent residents. The results for single mothers are similar to those for the pooled sample. Living below poverty appears to be inversely associated with the legal status of both mothers and fathers at the bivariate level in Model 1, despite the failure of some coefficients to achieve significance. Children who live with single mothers who are undocumented are much more likely than those who live with native born or naturalized mothers to live below poverty.

---------Table 6----------

Other results suggest that poverty among children of single mothers is associated with the documentation status of absent fathers. Compared to those with native-born fathers, the children of undocumented fathers are especially likely to live in poverty even after the documentation status of mothers is taken into account. At the same time, the results are somewhat equivocal for two reasons. First, the addition of father's legal status as a variable to a model limited to mother's legal status fails to achieve significance despite the significant coefficient for the undocumented (Wald $\chi2 = 4.34$, $p = .23$). Second, it is difficult to speculate about the mechanism for such an association in the absence of additional controls. The coefficient for undocumented fathers could simply reflect numerous other unmeasured characteristics of the mother that might affect the likelihood of falling below the poverty line.[10]

Such findings offer important insights that can be used as the foundation for measures of family legal status. The key findings from the pooled analysis in Table 5 are that collapsing categories obscures meaningful differences and that the statuses of both parents have independent effects on

[10] A similar table is available on request for those living with two parent families. This table is omitted here due to its redundancy given that a large majority live with two parents. The overall pattern of results for these children largely mirrors that for the pooled sample in the previous table. Both the mother's (Wald $\chi2 = 38.61$, $p < .001$) and father's legal status (Wald $\chi2 = 28.49$, $p < .001$) significantly improve the fit of the model for children living with two parents.

the risks of poverty. The question of whether these variables should be considered jointly requires additional analysis that is guided by the intuition that the decision to combine categories should hinge, in part, on whether doing so provides more information than considering each of the variables separately. In this vein, Table 7 presents results of multiplicative models that test for the interaction between the legal statuses of the mother and the father. The first test consisted of a model limited to each status and the nine interaction terms that represent their intersection, followed by an additional test that included family structure in the model (Panel A). These tests are impervious to grouping error because they utilize the full array of categorical status distinctions.

----------TABLE 7----------

The results indicate that there is no empirical justification for combining the individual items into a single measure. For the total sample in Panel A, mother's status*father's status is not significant with a Wald $\chi 2$ of 11.06 for the first test (p=.27) and 9.33 for the second test that included family structure (p=.41). Tests for interaction between mother's and father's legal status were also not significant for two-parent (Panel B) and single-mother families (Panel C). Last, a series of tests was conducted to determine whether the effect of legal status is conditioned by family structure (Panel D). Because most children in single-parent families are with their mother and there were too few children of single-parent fathers for separate analysis, the sample for this test was restricted to children in families headed by two parents or by a single mother. These tests were non-significant. Lastly, the interaction between the legal status of mothers and fathers is also not significant for the sample restricted to single parents. In sum, the legal statuses of mothers and fathers are significant independent causes of poverty that do not condition the effects of each other.

CONCLUSION

Immigration has emerged as a leading issue on the public agenda, partly in response to the

sizable number of undocumented adults and children who are present in the United States. The sheer magnitude of the undocumented population has contributed to a growing recognition of legal status as a key source of inequality in life chances. Although providing a pathway to legalization is a contentious issue, the "immigration problem" is not necessarily reducible to the undocumented per se given that boundaries may be hardening across all categories that define the status distribution (Coutin, 2011). This suggests that the lives of Mexican-origin children cannot be fully illuminated without information on the full range of statuses that potentially affect their family circumstances.

Using restricted data on a representative sample of young children in California, this research pursued several objectives to provide guidance for moving legal status to center stage in studies of Mexican-origin children. This effort was grounded in key social facts about this population. The number of Mexican-origin children in the state stands at three million, but they are nearly all native-born citizens. This stands in sharp contrast to their mothers and fathers who are a heterogeneous mix of citizens, permanent residents and undocumented residents. Still, over one million children comprising one-third of the total have at least one parent who is an unauthorized immigrant. Such estimates are essential for evidence-based evaluations of the impact of immigration policies on various populations.

These estimates are also relevant to the research objective of identifying direct strategies for describing the family legal status of children from questions about different family members. The problem of describing family legal status is reduced to the development of strategies for combining the statuses of parents because almost all young Mexican-origin children are native born. However, the fact that five strategies for doing so can be identified in prior studies suggests that decisions about how to combine categories are less than straightforward. Leverage for determining the optimal approach for a given research situation requires a clear understanding of the assumptions upon which various

strategies are based. All of the prevailing approaches that have been identified in this paper with information on two parents assume: (1) Family legal status is gender neutral in treating a "parent as a parent" without regard to the particular statuses of mothers and fathers; (2) Family legal status reflects the statuses of both parents, regardless of whether they co-reside with the child in the same household; (3) Family legal status can be described without information on the statuses of siblings and information on other co-residential family members does not matter. As will be shown below, these assumptions should be empirically evaluated despite the inability to scrutinize some because of data limitations (e.g. #3).

The five strategies are also grounded in operational decisions in the process of anchoring and conflating categories that involve different assumptions about vulnerabilities and the structure of opportunities. Low status anchoring is predicated on the idea that factors that inhibit access to opportunities deserve emphasis in understanding the circumstances of children and a high status anchoring emphasizes factors that facilitate access to opportunities. Similarly, the conflation of categories reveals assumptions about their equivalence. To conflate the native born with naturalized citizens, naturalized citizens with permanent residents, or permanent residents with the undocumented is to make a statement about non-essential distinctions in access to opportunities. These assumptions are potentially problematic.

In keeping with the second objective, the results indicate that decisions about where to anchor and conflate categories matter. Estimates of the shares of children in specific segments of the population and estimates of the risk of poverty within each segment depend on the strategy that is used. Undoubtedly, an overriding consideration in decisions about anchoring and collapsing categories is the desire to achieve parsimony in the characterization of the legal status of families from the joint characteristics of parents. However, there is no empirical basis for these decisions in analyses of

poverty. Non-significant tests for interaction suggest that there is no advantage to considering the status of parents jointly in a single measure. The treatment of each parent's legal status separately achieves parsimony without sacrificing information about the role of parents' legal status in child poverty. This effect is evident across most categories, with the most pronounced risk evident for children of the undocumented.

The magnitude of differences in poverty by the legal status of each parent and the tests for interactions are also relevant to our evaluation of the assumption of gender neutrality. A gender neutral approach would be contraindicated by different levels of poverty according to each parent's status, different patterns of poverty across categories for each parent, or a significant interaction between the legal statuses of the two parents. There is no evidence of any of these situations. The percentages of children in poverty are basically the same whether the mother's legal status or the father's legal status is considered. Approximately 70% of children with an undocumented mother and 69% with an undocumented father are below poverty. Similarly, the poverty rates for those with permanent resident mothers and fathers are 42% and 38% respectively. The absence of significant interactions further suggests that the gender-neutral data analytic approach that characterizes this literature is warranted. Of course, this conclusion is not a statement about theoretical priorities and it remains to be seen whether it is generalizable to other outcomes of interest. This conclusion may be untenable for investigations where the gendered division of labor and the organization of responsibilities within households are keys to outcomes, such as those that pertain to the utilization of medical services or interaction with other institutions such as schools. The point is that assumptions must be evaluated and tailored to the particular research problem.

A final point pertains to who should be considered "family" in the determination of family legal status. Most approaches assume that the legal statuses of parents are the most relevant for children's

circumstances.[11] Although Mexican families are complex entities that often include extended family members, the instability of such arrangements suggests that this assumption is appropriate (Landale, Oropesa and Noah 2014). A greater concern is how to treat absent parents. Determining family legal status from both parents when one parent is not co-resident may or may not mischaracterize the circumstances of children who do not have contact with the absent parent. Some children have contact with the absent parent and access to his/her resources. Nonetheless, our results suggest that the effect of the legal status of parents is not conditioned by single parenthood.

In closing, the connection between legal status and poverty was emphasized here for illustrative purposes in the hope of providing a foundation for future research. Additional research is needed to demonstrate how these intersect with a host of other factors that may exacerbate or mitigate the vulnerabilities of children. Such inquiries are necessary for a comprehensive portrait of how inequality in family legal status is reproduced as inequality in the life chances of children.

[11] A related issue is whether the legal status of the child should be considered simultaneously. This was shown to not be a salient issue given that almost all children age 0-11 are born in the United States. In turn, almost all children who are not native born share the same legal status as at least one parent.

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Table 1. Legal Status: Mexican-Origin Children Age 0-11 in California (2009)

	Percent	Weighted N	Unweighted N
Child			
Native Born (U.S.)	96.1	2,718,088	2,806
Naturalized	.7	20,242	28
Permanent Resident	.8	22,300	32
Undocumented	2.4	67,824	95
Total	100.0	2,828,454	2961
Mother			
Native Born (U.S.)	39.2	1,107,251	1,045
Naturalized Citizen	12.2	344,294	401
Permanent Resident	19.7	557,511	647
Undocumented	29.0	819,398	868
Total	100.0	2,828,454	2,961
Father			
Native Born (U.S.)	33.8	955,454	939
Naturalized Citizen	18.0	509,544	579
Permanent Resident	19.6	554,359	603
Undocumented	28.6	809,097	840
Total	100.0	2,828,454	2,961

Table 2. Mexican-Origin Children by Parents' Legal Status and Family Structure

	Mother			
	Native Born (U.S.)	Naturalized	Permanent Resident	Undocumented
Panel A. Total				
Father				
Native Born (U.S.)				
Percent of Total	27.6	2.5	2.5	1.2
Unweighted N	(747)	(100)	(72)	(20)
Weighted N	[779,547]	[71,842]	[71,387]	[32,678]
Naturalized				
Percent of Total	5.2	5.0	5.5	2.4
Unweighted N	(147)	(173)	(195)	(64)
Weighted N	[146,094]	[140,486]	[156,013]	[66,951]
Permanent Resident				
Percent of Total	2.8	3.2	9.4	4.2
Unweighted N	(88)	(95)	(293)	(127)
Weighted N	[77,768]	[91,382]	[266,703]	[118,506]
Undocumented				
Percent of Total	3.7	1.4	2.2	21.3
Unweighted N	(63)	(33)	(87)	(657)
Weighted N	[103,842]	[40,584]	[63,408]	[601,263]

	Mother				
Father	US-Born	Naturalized	Permanent Resident	Undocumented	No Mother Present
Panel B. Identify Single Parents					
Native Born (U.S.)					
Percent of Total	19.0	2.1	2.2	.7	1.6
Unweighted N	(607)	(88)	(65)	(14)	(26)
Weighted N	[536,215]	[60,022]	[61,374]	[18,508]	[46,487]
Naturalized					
Percent of Total	3.8	4.6	5.2	2.2	.4
Unweighted N	(117)	(161)	(187)	(60)	(9)
Weighted N	[106,813]	[130,994]	[147,914]	[60,714]	[10,116]
Permanent Resident					
Percent of Total	1.6	2.5	7.8	2.7	.6
Unweighted N	(69)	(86)	(270)	(105)	(10)
Weighted N	[45,000]	[71,460]	[220,143]	[75,139]	[17,566]
Undocumented					
Percent of Total	1.4	1.1	1.4	16.7	.7
Unweighted N	(31)	(21)	(65)	(569)	(17)
Weighted N	[40,595]	[29,927]	[40,157]	[472,138]	[18,618]
No Father Present					
Percent of Total	11.7	1.7	2.7	5.8	
Unweighted N	(192)	(40)	(52)	(100)	
Weighted N	[329,788]	[47,125]	[76,894]	[164,747]	

Note: The top figure in each cell is the percentage, the middle figure is the unweighted number of cases, and the bottom figure is the weighted number of observations.

Table 3. Distribution of Mexican Children in California by Legal Status of the Mother and Father – 2009 (Weighted)

	Mother			
	Native Born (U.S.)	Naturalized	Legal Permanent Resident	Undocumented
Panel A. Lowest Status Anchor				
Father				
Native Born (U.S.)	1 **27.6%**	5	9	13
Naturalized	2	6 **12.7%**	10	14
Permanent Resident	3	7	11 **23.5%**	15
Undocumented	4	8	12	16 **36.3%**
Panel B. Highest Status Anchor				
Father				
Native Born (U.S.)	1 **45.4%**	5	9	13
Naturalized	2	6 **17.5%**	10	14
Permanent Resident	3	7	11 **15.9%**	15
Undocumented	4	8	12	16 **21.3%**
Panel C. Hybrid – Conflate Naturalization & Nativity and Low Status Anchor				
Father				
Native Born (U.S.)	1 **40.2%**	5	9	13
Naturalized	2	6	10	14
Permanent Resident	3	7	11 **23.5%**	15
Undocumented	4	8	12	16 **36.2%**
Panel D. Hybrid - Conflate Naturalization and Permanent Residence				
Father				
Native Born (U.S.)	1 **27.6%**	5	9	13 **1.2%**
Naturalized	2	6 **46.4%**	10	14
Permanent Resident	3	7	11	15
Undocumented	4 **3.7%**	8	12	16 **21.3%**
Panel E. Public Use Conflation of Legal Permanent Residence and Not LPR				
Father				
US-Born (U.S.)	1 **27.6%**	5	9	13
Naturalized	2	6 **12.7%**	10	14
Permanent Resident	3	7	11	15
Undocumented	4	8	12	16 **59.8%**

Table 4. Poverty Rates by Legal Status Strategies

	Cell Number In Table 3	Percent	Poverty Percent
Mother's Immigration Status			
U.S. Born	1-4	39.2	25.3
Naturalized	5-8	12.2	18.0
Permanent Resident	9-12	19.7	42.0
Undocumented	13-16	29.0	70.7
Father's Immigration Status			
U.S. Born	1,5,9,13	33.8	20.4
Naturalized	2,6,10,14	18.0	26.6
Permanent Resident	3,7,11,15	19.6	37.6
Undocumented	4,8,12,16	28.6	69.4
Panel A. Lowest Status Anchor			
Both parents U.S. Born	1	27.6	20.6
Lowest parent naturalized	2,5,6	12.7	17.8
Lowest parent permanent resident	3,7,9-11	23.5	36.1
Lowest parent undocumented	4,8,12-16	36.3	67.4
Panel B. Highest Status Anchor			
Highest parent U.S. Born	1-5,9,13	45.4	24.6
Highest parent naturalized	6-8,10,14	17.5	26.9
Highest parent has permanent resident	11,12,15	15.9	57.7
Both parents undocumented	16	21.3	74.7
Panel C. Hybrid Conflate Naturalization & Nativity			
Both parents naturalized or U.S. Born	1,2,5,6	40.2	19.7
Lowest parent Permanent resident	3,7,9,10,11	23.5	36.1
Lowest parent undocumented	4,8,12-16	36.2	67.4
Panel D. Hybrid Conflate Naturalization & Permanent			
Both parents U.S. Born	1	27.6	20.6
1+ parent naturalized or permanent resident	2,3,5-8,9-12,14,15	46.4	35.7
Both parents undocumented	16	21.3	74.7
Panel E. Public Use Conflate Permanent & Undocumented			
Both Parents U.S. Born	1	27.6	20.6
At least one parent naturalized	2,5,6	12.7	17.8
Both parents non-citizen	3,4,7,8,9-12,13-16	59.8	55.1

Note: All associations with both poverty and health are significant at $p<.001$. Also, two cells for Panel D (4,13) are omitted (in keeping with Table 3).

Table 5. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions: Poverty

				Switch Reference		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Mother's Status						
U.S. Born	-----	-----	-----	.14***	.36***	.28***
Naturalized	.64+	.45**	.56*	.09***	.16***	.16***
Permanent	2.13**	1.33	1.73*	.30***	.48***	.48***
Undocumented	7.14***	2.79***	3.59***	-----	-----	-----
Father's Status						
U.S. Born	-----	-----	-----	.11***	.23***	.24***
Naturalized	1.41	1.33	1.45	.16***	.30***	.35***
Permanent	3.54***	2.85***	2.68***	.40***	.64+	.65+
Undocumented	8.84***	4.45***	4.15***	-----	-----	-----
Family Structure						
Single Parent	2.14***		2.74***	2.14***		2.74***
Two Parent	-----		----	-----		-----

Table 6. Logistic Regressions: Poverty by Immigration Status among Children with Single Mothers

	Single Mother Parents			
			Switch Reference	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Mothers Status				
Native Born (US)	-----	-----	.17***	.26**
Naturalized	.56	.47	.09***	.12***
Permanent	3.31	2.68	.55	.71
Undocumented	6.00***	3.80**	----	-----
Father's Status				
Native Born (US)	-----	-----	.23***	.41*
Naturalized	1.27	1.17	.29**	.48
Permanent	2.44	1.51	.55	.62
Undocumented	4.42***	2.42*	-----	-----

Note: All statistics are based on weighted data with adjustments for complex sample design.
+ p < .10; * p < .05; ** p< .01; *** p< .001.

Table 7. Tests for Interaction

Interaction Terms	Dependent Variable	Wald Chi-Square	df	p
Panel A. Total Sample				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	11.06	9	.27
Control for Single vs. Married				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	9.33	9	.41
Panel B. Two Parent				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	9.90	9	.36
Panel C. Single Mother				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	11.91	9	.22
Panel D. Two Parent and Single Mother				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	12.19	9	.20
With Covariates				
Mother's Status * Father's Status	Poverty	9.77	9	.37
Father's Status * Single Parent	Poverty	4.16	3	.24
Mother's Status * Single Parent	Poverty	2.81	3	.42