

Starting From the Bottom: Why Mexicans are the Most Successful Immigrants in America

A new study from UC Irvine and UCLA challenges our definition of success

By [Mitch Moxley](#)

Who's more successful: The child of Chinese immigrants who is now a prominent attorney, or a second-generation Mexican who completed high school and now holds a stable, blue collar job?

The answer depends on how you define success.

In fact, according to a study by University of California, Irvine, Sociology Professor Jennifer Lee and UCLA Sociology Professor Min Zhou, contrary to stereotypes, Mexican-Americans are the most successful second-generation group in the country. The reason is simple: The study considered not just where people finished, but from where they started.

The report serves as counter-point to arguments raised by Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor better known as the Tiger Mom. In a new book, *The Triple Package*, Chua and her husband, Jed Rubenfeld, argue that some groups—namely Chinese, Jews, Cubans, and Nigerians—are more successful than others because they possess certain cultural traits that enable them to be.

In a nutshell, Chua's "Triple Package" includes: a cultural superiority complex, impulse control, and insecurity. Combined, the authors assert, these traits drive the groups to succeed within a broader American culture that is comparatively lackadaisical. They base their argument on an analysis of test scores, educational achievement, median household income, and other factors.

The UC study, however, argues that it's not any specific cultural trait that makes groups like Chinese-Americans more successful than others. Lee and Zhou say both Chinese-American and Mexican-American parents highly value education. Most parents do. But the reason Chinese-Americans get ahead is because they start ahead. Way ahead, in many cases.

The study, called "The Success Frame and Achievement Paradox: The Cost and Consequences for Asian-Americans," looked at Chinese-, Vietnamese-, and Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles whose parents immigrated to the U.S. At first

glance, the study's findings seem to reinforce claims made by Chua and her supporters: Children of Chinese immigrants far exceeded other groups when it came to educational outcomes. Sixty-four percent of Chinese immigrants' children graduated from college, compared to 46 percent of native-born whites in L.A. Of the Chinese-American college graduates, 22 percent went on to attain graduate degrees.

Asian-American kids, the study found, have good role models and extra help from family and community when it comes to schooling. They also benefit from well-educated parents who put them in good schools and push them into high-income, high-status professions, including medicine, pharmacy, engineering, and law.

Mexican-Americans had the lowest level of educational attainment in the study. Eighty-six percent had graduated from high school, compared to 100 percent of the Chinese-Americans, and just 17 percent had graduated from college.

Fundamental to Chinese-Americans' overall level of success is that their parents are already highly educated. Chinese immigrant parents were by far the most highly educated in the study—in L.A., 60 percent of Chinese immigrant fathers and 40 percent of Chinese immigrant mothers had a bachelor's degree or higher. According to a separate study by Pew Research Center, 61 percent of recent Asian immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 had a bachelor's degree, which is more than double the U.S. average.

Meanwhile, Mexican-Americans' high school graduation rate was more than double that of their parents, and their college graduation rate more than doubled that of their fathers and tripled that of their mothers. According to Lee, the results are clear: When success is measured as progress from generation to generation, Mexican-Americans come out on top.

The study found that Mexican parents strongly value education, but that their frame of academic achievement is less exacting than Chinese-American parents. They emphasize finishing high school, possibly going to college—though not necessarily an elite one—and having some kind of career. Mexicans aspiring to higher education, the study found, look toward good colleges in the L.A. area, and often settle on community colleges in their neighborhoods. Because many Mexican parents have a relatively low level of education, they were not as well-equipped to help their children succeed as Chinese-American parents.

“My mom never said to me to, ‘Get an A.’ She said, ‘Do your best,’” Nadia, a 28-year-old second-generation Mexican-American who is working toward her master's in education, told the researchers. Nadia was the first in her family to go to college and pursued a graduate degree even though her parents didn't understand the point of staying in school beyond a bachelor's degree.

Lee found that second-generation Mexican-Americans who attained the highest education outcomes had access to public resources at their schools such as zero

periods, College Bound programs, and AP classes, in which students learned how to apply for colleges. Many also had a teacher, guidance counselor, or coach who encouraged them along the way and guided them through the college application process.

Consider Camille, one of the study's subjects. A 27-year-old second-generation Mexican woman who earned a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Southern California, Camille's parents arrived in the U.S. as unauthorized immigrants and worked in garment factories. Her parents wanted her and her twin sister to attend college but had no way to help them.

After high school, the twins attended a local community college, where Camille met a guidance counselor who guided her through the admissions process to a four-year college. After Camille was accepted by USC, the counselor visited her parents to persuade them of the merits of allowing their daughter to leave home for school. "She really went above and beyond," Camille said.

The point of the study, Lee says, was to reframe the debate about what success means.

"We wanted to understand how parents' position and parents' immigration status, how their level of education, how all of these factors then shape how the second generation frames success," she says. "We really wanted to reframe the debate about success."

Lee says that in the U.S., Asian-Americans benefit from a broad cultural belief in "Asian-American exceptionalism"—that Asians are inherently brighter and more hard-working than others—while other groups, such as Mexican-Americans and African-Americans, are subjected to negative stereotypes.

In elite U.S. universities, Asian-Americans make up a disproportionate percentage of the student population. Although they comprise just 5.5 percent of the American population, Asian-Americans account for just under one-fifth of the entering class at schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. At University of California, Berkeley, they make up 43 percent of the student body, but they are just 13 percent of the state's population. Chinese parents also define success narrowly and invest their resources in their sons and daughters achieving it. (This is also, Lee says, why you don't see many Chinese-Americans in careers such as writing, acting, fashion, and art.)

Lee argues that Asian-American students gain from this "stereotype promise"—the idea that being viewed through the lens of positive stereotypes can serve as a performance booster. In her research, she has found that positive stereotypes about Asian-Americans are reinforced in schools by teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. In some cases, Asian students with mediocre grades in junior high were placed in advanced classes in high school regardless. (Stereotype promise can have a negative effect as well; Asian-Americans who are not high achieving reported feeling like outliers.)

Comparing different ethnic groups and their places in society, Lee often uses a baseball analogy. Asian-Americans, she says, tend to end up on the third base of life. But “their parents are so highly-educated, they almost start the race to get ahead on third base,” Lee says. “But all we see is that they’ve made it to third base. That’s not to say they don’t work hard to get there. They do. But they have certain advantages that other groups don’t have.”

Mexican-Americans, Lee says, are starting from behind home plate. “In the sense that they come [to the U.S.] much more poorly educated than the average American, they have a lot more catching up to do just to get to where the average American is. For Mexican-Americans, the fact that their children make it to first or second base is enormous progress.”