

# OCCUPATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF LATINO IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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**ABSTRACT.** Acquiring good jobs is vital for the economic success of immigrants, yet occupational attainment is understudied in the immigration literature. One particularly neglected aspect is the role of ethnicity in occupations beyond the ethnic niche. This study examines the occupational attainment of long-term Latin American immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, Ecuador, and Colombia in four metropolitan areas with large Latino populations. The findings show that occupational attainment varies considerably by country of origin across these areas, although important human and social capital factors also are significant variables. These findings lend support to the proposition that, for immigrants, place of origin and destination play an important role in job-queue position. *Keywords:* immigrants, Latinos, occupational attainment, panethnicity, queuing theory, U.S. metropolitan areas.

The role of occupations in the incorporation of immigrants is understudied compared with other economic outcomes. With the exception of research on ethnic niches (Logan and others 2000; Wright and Ellis 2000; Wilson 2003), scholars have focused most of their attention on immigrant income and self-employment, while paying scant attention to the jobs that lend themselves to these outcomes (for example, Portes and Jensen 1987; Bailey and Waldinger 1991; Light and others 1993). Yet, as labor markets in the United States make the last transition from manufacturing to service economies, occupations cannot be overlooked, for they are vital to the economic well-being of immigrants (Bohon 2001; Ellis 2001). This study analyzes occupational attainment among Latin American immigrants in four metropolitan areas in the United States.

## IMMIGRATION AND JOB QUEUES

Queuing is a theoretical framework commonly used to explain racial and gender discrimination in hiring and promotion (Roos and Reskin 1992; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993; Reid 1998; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999). Queuing theory is based on the idea that workers stand in an imaginary line for good jobs. Place in line is determined by some standard of desirability: The most desired workers are at the front of the line; and the least desired, at the end. When workers with similar job skills compete for the same jobs, those belonging to the more desirable group gain preferential access to those jobs (Reskin and Roos 1990; Model and Ladipo 1996).

Among immigrants, queue placement usually also depends on country of origin. Roger Waldinger (2001) demonstrates that unemployment rates are significantly predicted by country of origin for Mexican-, Caribbean-, Dominican-, and Cuban-origin immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Miami. Mark Ellis (2001) presents similar findings with regard to the income gap between

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