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The Latino Middle Class

Jody Agius Vallejo[1,*] and Jessica Vasquez-Tokos[2,*]

[1]Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, USA; email: vallejoj@usc.edu

[2]Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, USA

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*These authors contributed equally to this article

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Abstract

Latino educational gains over time and income mobility portend a burgeoning Latino middle class. In this article, we critically review scholarship on the Latino middle class, from theoretical perspectives aiming to explain Latino experiences to empirical research investigating mechanisms that promote, and barriers that thwart, upward mobility. Studies suggest that the Latino middle class is distinctive for many reasons—from structural barriers to asset accumulation, legal status precarity for self or family, financial responsibility for class-disadvantaged kin, and negative controlling images that bog down class ascension. Scholars' recent efforts to decouple middle-class status from Whiteness is an important contribution that undercuts the notion that melding into Whiteness is the desired outcome of middle-class integration. In addition to the utility of education to upward mobility, we contend that studies of middle-class pathways should expand to recognize that Latinos are engaging in workarounds—career paths not requiring a bachelor's degree, such as business ownership or credentialed professions. Workarounds are an intervention that accounts for routes to mobility that are eclipsed by conventional conceptions of mobility. Ultimately, we argue that Latinos are attaining middle-class status even as they are racialized, thereby expanding the minoritized middle class.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1970, when Latinos[1] made up 5% of the US population, the Latino population has grown more than sixfold (Funk & Lopez 2022). Between 2010 and 2020, the Latino population grew by 23%, outpacing all other racial/ethnic categories and contributing to slightly more than half (51.1%) of the total US population growth during that period (Jones et al. 2021). Contrary to the belief that current Latino population growth is driven by high levels of migration, nearly two-thirds of Latinos in the United States today are native born (67.3% in 2019) (Krogstad & Lopez 2014, Krogstad et al. 2022). Because Latinos are the nation's largest minoritized group, the question of their social and economic inclusion is a pressing one. In this article, we critically review scholarship on the Latino middle class, from theoretical perspectives leveraged to explain Latino experiences to empirical research investigating mechanisms that promote, and barriers that thwart, upward mobility.

Latinos are often mischaracterized as exclusively an immigrant group that poses a threat to the United States, a categorization that elides Latinos' long history in what is now the United States and the fact that most US Latinos are native born. Many Mexican-origin people, as the largest national-origin group comprising the Latino category (61.5% in 2019) (Funk & Lopez 2022), lay claim to presence on land that predated the formation of the United States. Latinos are diverse in national origin, race, generation, and ethnocultural characteristics. The size and heterogeneity of the Latino population have been shaped by declining fertility rates and changing patterns of migration from Latin America; a slight decline in migration from Mexico since the late 2000s; and a recent increase in migration from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean (Budiman 2020). Puerto Ricans are US citizens by birthright, even as the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico stratifies the US citizenship structure (Valle 2019). We caution that overusing an immigration lens when discussing Latinos does a disservice to the integration and permanence that have already occurred.

The fate of Latinos in the United States has long been debated, including the extent to which Latinos will enter the middle class or be mired in poverty across generations. Latinos' economic mobility can be hindered for numerous reasons, including legal status precarity (Abrego 2018, Gonzales 2015, Massey et al. 2016, Menjívar & Abrego 2012), which has intergenerational effects on mobility (Bean et al. 2015; Vallejo 2012a,b); a racialized deportation regime (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013, Menjívar 2021, Waters & Kasinitz 2015); racialization and symbolic vilification (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, Chavez 2008, Vasquez 2011); segregation in schools and neighborhoods (Ochoa 2013); policing (Prieto 2018, Rios 2011); and discrimination in education, the labor market, and financial markets (Rugh 2015, 2020; Telles & Ortiz 2008; Vallejo 2012a; Vasquez 2011).

Despite these challenges, and despite concerns about growing inequality and the shrinking of the broader American middle class (Kochhar & Sechopoulos 2022a), Latino middle and upper classes are growing (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, Flores 2017, Jiménez 2010, Valdez 2020, Vallejo 2012a, Vasquez 2011). Class is a stratifying structure that relates to power, opportunities, and the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage (Grusky 1994, Lareau 2003). As Pattillo (2008, p. 265) notes: "[Class] is entwined with and inflects race to erect complex systems of hierarchy, domination, and disadvantage." Scholars do not agree on a clear definition of middle-class status: Researchers have used various indicators of socioeconomic attainment independently or in

[1]We use the term Latino (or Latina when referring to a group of women) rather than Latinx because while the popularity of the latter term is increasing, it is used less frequently than Latino/a and research suggests it is generationally specific (most embraced by Generation Z) (Mora et al. 2022, Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020).

combination to define the term, including earning an income over the national median or being in the middle-income tier,[2] employment in a white-collar occupation, college degree attainment, homeownership, and wealth/net worth.

One measure of the size of today's Latino middle class is that 49% of Latino adults earn middle-class incomes, compared with 47% of Black and Asian adults and 52% of White adults[3] (Kochhar & Sechopoulos 2022a). Latinos have high rates of income mobility across generations (Chetty et al. 2020), and educational gains over time portend a burgeoning Latino middle class. Earning a bachelor's degree is a classic indicator of middle-class status because education level is generally correlated with income and occupation. In 1980, when Latinos made up 6.4% of the US population, Latino enrollment in higher education accounted for 4% of all students; in 2020, Latinos constituted 18.7% of the US population and made up 20% of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions (Mora 2022). Coupled with the relative youth of Latinos [the median age for Latinos is 30 years, ~9 years younger than the median age of the entire US population (38.9 years; Peña et al. 2023)], there is room for continuing educational and income-earning gains for the Latino population.

The Latino middle class, and the Latino category, is not monolithic: There is heterogeneity in mobility trajectories, experiences confronting and circumnavigating racist barriers, and racial identification and cultural ties. After surveying the existing literature, we argue that the Latino middle class is distinctive from other middle-class formations as a result of racialization, heterogeneity in class origin, class-heterogeneous kin ties, and legal status vulnerabilities, all of which interact to shape pathways and experiences. While some Latinos travel traditional socioeconomic pathways to the middle class, we contend that conceptions of middle-class pathways should expand to recognize that Latinos also engage in workarounds, traveling routes that are unaccounted for in conventional conceptions of mobility as a response to racially restrictive blocked access. Ultimately, we argue that Latinos are attaining middle-class status even as they are racialized, thereby expanding the minoritized middle class.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LATINO MIDDLE-CLASS INTEGRATION

The White Supremacist Implications of Assimilation

Assimilation can be defined as immigrants and their descendants acquiring the cultural trappings of the host society while their racial/ethnic origins, including socioeconomic attainment and mobility experiences, become inconsequential for their life chances (Alba & Nee 2003, Gordon 1964, Zhou & Gonzales 2019). Assimilation can be analyzed as an endpoint (reached when groups achieve parity with native-born Whites) as well as a process (occurring when successive US-born generations improve on the prior generation's status) (Jiménez 2010, Waters & Jiménez 2005). With respect to endpoints, because Whites are the most advantaged group in US society, they become the high-water mark for scholars trying to ascertain immigrants' outcomes. Early assimilation theorists assumed that immigrants start at the bottom of the US social structure,

[2]We use the Pew Research Center's definition of middle income here, which, in 2021, referred to those with an annual household income two-thirds to double the national median income in 2020 (after adjusting for household size), or approximately $52,000 to $156,000 annually (in 2020 dollars) for a household of three (Kochhar & Sechopoulos 2022b).

[3]These statistics gloss over the racial heterogeneity of the Latino category (currently measured as an ethnic group in the US Census), eclipsing variation among Latinos who also identify as White, Black/African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.

shed their cultural baggage, and eventually attain structural integration; acceptance by the White middle class would follow, as evidenced by the expansion of the White racial boundary (Gordon 1964). Yet by using Whites' standing as a benchmark and presuming the eventual integration of immigrants into the White middle class, early assimilation theorists problematically reinforced the White middle class as the middle-class ideal and intertwined assimilation with Anglo conformity (Park et al. 1925, Warner & Srole 1945).

European immigrants of the early twentieth century were seen by laypersons and politicians as a success story of assimilation and "becoming White": They attained structural integration, shed ethnic identities (or ethnicity became symbolic), and were incorporated into the White middle class (Ignatiev 1995, Jacobson 1998, Roediger 2005, Waters 1990). These groups could also assimilate into the White middle class by understanding the power imbued in the White racial category: European newcomers distanced themselves from racialized groups (Ignatiev 1995, Roediger 2005), and anti-Black legislation concurrently expanded the boundary around a broadened White populace (Jacobson 1998). The White assimilation pathway individualizes achievement, elides structural barriers, and then opens groups who do not achieve middle-class status to allegations of being culturally deficient or uninterested in incorporation. Generalizing from these groups also overlooks historical and economic factors bearing on economic futures (Steinberg 2001).

A focus on non-White groups "catching up" to a structurally privileged White category reinforces the notion of Whites as (racially or culturally) superior. Thus, assimilation as a social science theory intended to measure standing and progress can meld into assimilation as a normative concept (i.e., groups of color should move toward Whiteness to be assimilated) that reproduces White supremacy (Treitler 2015). Restricting citizenship to people viewed as White for more than a century (FitzGerald & Cook-Martín 2014, Haney López 2006, Jacobson 1998), followed by nationalizing projects on assimilating Mexican-origin people (Sanchez 1993) and awarding the privilege of family unity and privacy based on race (Vasquez-Tokos & Yamin 2021), shows the nation's investment in a racial order (Ngai 1999). Despite early conceptions of various endpoints of assimilation (Gordon 1964) and the "interpenetration" of people and culture over time that suggests multidirectional change (Alba & Nee 2003, Park & Burgess 1921), assimilation theory flattened to mean incorporation into a White middle-class mainstream.

Historically, the Latino middle class has been erased from theories of class mobility. Portrayals of Mexican-origin families from the 1960s proffer a "culture of poverty" thesis (Lewis 1961), pathologizing poverty and suggesting that people are poor due to genetic and moral shortcomings and bad choices. However, Latino communities in the US have always had small middle-class segments (Garcia 1996, Grebler et al. 1970, Molina 2022, Sanchez 1993). In the early twentieth century, along with Mexican laborers fleeing economic instability and the Mexican Revolution, members of the petite bourgeoisie, including teachers, doctors, lawyers, and shopkeepers, also migrated to the United States (Monroy 1999, Sanchez 1993). These new arrivals' middle-class status did not shield them from social and economic exclusion because "middle-class Mexicans were still Mexicans, and thus associated with poor Mexicans in the eyes of the Anglo majority" (Monroy 1999, p. 32). A small but socially mobile middle-class Mexican American population also grew out of the post–World War II era, and many worked with grassroots organizations to mitigate inequality and attain greater political representation (Garcia Bedolla 2005, Monroy 1999, Romo 1983, Sanchez 1993), efforts that continued with the Chicano Movement. Successful Cuban entrepreneurs and professionals in Miami are also part of the Latino middle class (Portes & Bach 1985). But Cubans, specifically the pre-1980 cohorts, are arguably an exceptional case due to the confluence of premigration characteristics such as high human capital, welcoming US immigration policies, and a resource-rich ethnic enclave (Eckstein 2022). Labor unions have also helped

build the middle class by safeguarding Latino employment (Galdámez & Gonzalez 2021, Glass et al. 2023).

Static and often cross-sectional measures of assimilation that use the White middle class as the benchmark can underestimate incorporation and do not provide a detailed understanding of how immigrants and their children integrate into society. Scholars have thus used alternative benchmarks, including the parental generation (Jiménez & Fitzgerald 2007, Zhou et al. 2008), regional integration contexts (Park et al. 2014, Telles & Ortiz 2008), parental premigration characteristics and home-country contexts (Feliciano & Lanuza 2017, Lee & Zhou 2015), and tools of analyses such as subject-centered perceptions of immigrants' relational social positions and integration strategies (Lee & Zhou 2015, Yazdiha 2021).

Going Beyond Assimilation

As immigration to the United States increased after 1965, scholars began to question whether the new immigrants and their descendants—who were mostly non-White and navigating a restructured economy—were attaining structural integration in ways that mirrored their White ethnic predecessors (Gans 1992, Portes & Zhou 1993). Segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou 1993) pushed theorists to account for race and racialization by proposing three assimilation paths—linear assimilation, downward assimilation, and selective acculturation—shaped by race and racialization, reception contexts (e.g., legal status and neighborhood context), ethnic community, and opportunity structures (e.g., labor markets). Latinos were often portrayed as a monolithic group in terms of class and were expected to follow the downward mobility pathway (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Portes et al. 2005). Missing in both the classical and segmented assimilation frames is the idea of a minoritized middle-class integration path. Neckerman et al. (1999) account for this lacuna via their concept of the "minority culture of mobility." They argue that some upwardly mobile minoritized groups integrate as middle-class minoritized groups; here, ethnic identification remains salient, groups continue to experience discrimination despite their class status, and people retain coethnic ties despite attaining structural integration.

Empirical research on the Latino middle class, drawn primarily from studies on Mexican Americans, tests these theories. Middle-class Latinos generally approximate the White middle-class mean on various status indicators and therefore appear similar to middle-class Whites in cross-sectional survey data. However, for some Latinos, the White assimilation pathway is unavailable because of structural barriers and interpersonal boundaries. Building on the minority culture of mobility literature, Vallejo's (2012a,b) scholarship on middle-class Mexican Americans demonstrates how some structurally integrated Latinos do not view themselves as White, nor do others view them as members of the White middle class. Those who grew up poor traveled a race- and class-based minority identity pathway into the middle class; their Mexican American identity was strengthened, not loosened, through coethnic and community ties and discriminatory experiences in White middle-class milieus.

Classical assimilation theory emerged through investigations of White ethnics whose entry paths were terminated by the Immigration Act of 1924, meaning that their descendants came of age in an era when their ethnic groups were not being replenished. Latino immigration, however, has been continuous, with immigration from Mexico steady and ongoing since at least 1900 (Fitzgerald 2009, Massey 2009). Anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, and the racialization of Latinos as a threat to US society and an out-group, render Latinos exploitable and excludable (Canizales & Vallejo 2021, Chavez 2008, Massey 2009, Molina 2014). Latino racialization has significant effects on the Latino middle class in terms of identification and opportunity. Jiménez's (2010) research on working- and middle-class Mexican Americans documents that "immigrant

replenishment," or continued immigration flows from Mexico, supports Mexican American ethnic identity among the middle class in both positive (celebratory) and negative (racializing) ways. With respect to achievement of middle-class status, continuing Mexican immigration affects the inclusion prospects of Mexican-origin people due to stigma, racial ideologies, and cultural representations. Controlling images construct Latino men as illegal, criminal, and culturally and intellectually deficient (Chavez 2008, Deckard et al. 2020, Vasquez 2010) and women and children as drains on public resources and, ultimately, a threat to White hegemony (Fox 2012, Hondagneu-Sotelo 1997).

More recent research has shaken the Anglo-conformity underpinnings of assimilation theory from its pedestal and demonstrated that Whiteness is not always the pertinent reference group and desired outcome for integration. In rethinking classical assimilation theory, Alba & Nee (2003, p. 11) posit that ethnic change takes place "in groups on both sides of the boundary," with the "mainstream" (both constituents and meanings) being actively "remade" by contemporary immigration. Jiménez (2017) argues for "relational assimilation," whereby not only immigrants but also people in the "established" population (US born to two US-born parents) adjust to social, cultural, and racial changes that occur as a result of immigration and demographic change (see also Jiménez & Horowitz 2013). Telles & Sue (2019, p. 20) position the concept of an "ethnic core" ("structures and institutions that promote ethnicity. . .[and] create and enhance an ethnic community") as a counterpoint to the (White) mainstream as a presumptive endpoint. Identifying and naming an ethnic core that exerts its own "gravitational pull" (p. 108) that is distinct from, but not oppositional to, the mainstream (coded as White) represent a theoretical advancement that elevates "unsung reference groups" (ethnic institutions and communities) to a stature commensurate with their importance in the lives of Mexican Americans (Vasquez-Tokos 2020b).

Scholars are also exploring integration and inclusion in contexts of multiracial diversity in Europe and the United States. This body of research considers intragroup diversity in terms of race/ethnicity and class and attends to how intragroup heterogeneity could redefine identities, social and economic structures, and institutions as well as foster new integration paths (Crul 2016, Foner et al. 2019, Jiménez 2017). These considerations are particularly important in superdiverse cities and regions (e.g., Los Angeles) where Latinos are the numerical majority and are diverse across socioeconomic statuses, and where the White middle class might not be the reference group for integration (Crul 2016, p. 57; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Pastor 2021; Jiménez 2017; Vallejo & Ramirez 2024). Vallejo & Canizales (2023) find that superdiverse contexts provide ample opportunities for Latino mobility and the expansion of the Latino middle class via ethnoracial capitalism, which occurs when racialized groups leverage ethnicity to target coethnics for profit via businesses, services, and products. Drawing on geography, "regional racial formation" emphasizes that "place-specific processes" are important elements of the study of racialization, integration, challenges, and opportunities (Cheng 2013, p. 10; Huante 2021; Omi & Winant 1994; Vasquez-Tokos 2020a).

LATINO SOCIOECONOMIC ATTAINMENT AND MIDDLE-CLASS MOBILITY MECHANISMS: TRADITIONAL PATHWAYS AND WORKAROUNDS

In this section, we review the empirical research on upward mobility trajectories, socioeconomic outcomes, and Latino middle-class experiences. Research on middle-class Latinos who identify as Black or Asian American is lacking, and future work should investigate these groups, as there is not one singular Latino middle-class experience. Backed by evidence, we suggest the Latino

middle class is poised to expand. We also advocate for a new way to understand Latino agency and maneuvering as Latinos actively work around mobility barriers to attain middle-class lives.

To understand socioeconomic outcomes, scholars explore processes of integration, such as racial/ethnic identity formation, mobility mechanisms, and familial and community contexts that foster Latinos' ascension into the middle class (Flores 2017, Jiménez 2010, Vallejo 2012a, Vasquez 2011). Researchers also investigate socioeconomic attainment outcomes related to the pace of integration within and across generations—the empirical benchmark for progress being either earlier generations of Latinos (i.e., intergenerational analysis, or how far one moves beyond each prior generation) or non-Hispanic Whites (i.e., intercategorical analysis) (Jiménez & Fitzgerald 2007, Park et al. 2014, Perlmann 2005, Zhou & Gonzales 2019, Zhou et al. 2008).

Broadly, Latinos as a group have not attained economic parity with Whites. According to our own analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data, 44% of Latino households are in the middle-income category, compared with 43.5% of Black households, 47% of Asian American households, and 52% of White households (Ruggles et al. 2024).[4] Our methodology roughly followed the method used by the Pew Research Center (Kochhar & Sechopoulos 2022a) to define middle-class households, which incorporated adjustments for household size. However, we augmented the method to adjust for geographic differences in the cost of living as well. We also restricted our analysis to the primary family and examined family income (rather than considering the entire household) because secondary families or individuals unrelated to the householder are not likely to be part of the same economic unit as the householder.

For the data set, we used 2021 5-year ACS microdata from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series USA (IPUMS) (Ruggles et al. 2024). Once the adjusted middle-class family income limits were identified for each geography, all families falling between them were tagged as middle class. Using this approach, we found that the unadjusted weighted average family income limits range from $47,022 to $141,066 for all middle-class families in the nation (in 2021 dollars). Kochhar & Sechopoulos (2022a) reported unadjusted income for three-person middle-class households as ranging from $52,000 to $156,000 (in 2020 dollars). While this range is slightly higher than what we found, it is expected to be, given that the average family size in our sample is below three (2.48). In this analysis, Latinos included people of Hispanic origin of any race. To estimate the undocumented population, we applied the methodology of Pastor et al. (2021), who used the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Among those in the middle-income tier, 54% are US born, 23% are naturalized citizens, 13% are documented noncitizens, and 11% are undocumented (Ruggles et al. 2024). Research demonstrates that authorized and citizen Latinos' incomes "are on an upward trajectory across generations" (Chetty et al. 2020, p. 736). However, there are differences by national origin, gender, and generation, underscoring heterogeneity and how variations in premigration characteristics, policy and immigrant-entry statuses, and US context shape outcomes. For example, Cubans and South Americans exhibit parity with native Whites on socioeconomic measures, which may nod to their more advantaged starting points—the first two waves of Cuban immigrants were disproportionately refugees who received access to citizenship and resettlement support (Garcia 1996, Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Rumbaut & Portes 2001), and South Americans arrive with higher levels of educational attainment (Feliciano 2012). In contrast, Mexican and Central American migrants are more likely to be undocumented, have lower levels of education upon arrival, and experience criminalization, all of which affect second-generation mobility (Bean et al. 2015, Feliciano 2005).

[4]Our analysis of the 2021 ACS 5-year estimates is a close approximation of the Pew Research Center's calculation that half of Latinos (49%) are in the middle-income tier (Kochhar & Sechopoulos 2022a).

Traditional Middle-Class Indicators and Mobility Mechanisms

Educational attainment is a traditional measure of middle-class status because it correlates with income, occupation, and wealth attainment (Reeves et al. 2018). Scholars and the public fret about Latino educational disparities, as Latinos have the lowest levels of bachelor's degree attainment at 21%, compared with Black Americans at 28%, White Americans at 42%, and Asian Americans at 61% (Mora 2022). However, Latino educational attainment is increasing. From 1996 to 2021, the percentage of Latinos with high school diplomas (for ages 25 to 29) rose from 58.2% to 88.5% (Hernandez & McElrath 2023). College attendance jumped accordingly, doubling from 1.2 million in 2005 to 2.4 million (40.9% of Latinos aged 18 to 24) in 2021 (Hernandez & McElrath 2023). Between 2000 and 2020, the number of Latinos enrolled at 4-year institutions jumped from 620,000 to 2.4 million (a 287% increase); by comparison, overall student enrollment at 4-year institutions in the United States grew by 50% (Mora 2022). In 2021, among Latinos aged 25 to 29, 23% had earned a college degree, up from 14% in 2010 (Mora 2022). Degree attainment also differs by generation. For example, among Latinos, those born in the United States are more likely than the foreign born to have a bachelor's degree or higher (24% versus 15%) (Moslimani & Noe-Bustamante 2023).

Rates of college enrollment and degree attainment increased among all Latino national-origin groups, but there are educational differences by national origin, which speak to variations in sending-country contexts, immigration policy, and continued challenges in US national and local contexts of reception (Fussell 2014). Among the US population aged 18 to 24 in 2021, almost half of people identifying as South American or Cuban were enrolled in college, compared with 33% of Mexican Americans and 29.2% of Central Americans (Hernandez & McElrath 2023). Regardless of these national-origin differences, overall significant increases in postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment will further increase the growth of the Latino middle class.

Mechanisms that facilitate educational attainment, but are not evenly instituted, include mentors and ethnoracial community resources—such as Latino scholarship funds and Latino university alumni associations—that connect Latino youth to institutional and economic resources and programs (Portes & Fernández-Kelly 2008; Schmalzbauer & Andrés 2019; Smith 2008; Vallejo 2012b, 2015b; Vallejo & Ramirez 2024). Affirmative action is one structural mechanism that widened educational pathways for historically underrepresented groups in higher education. State-level bans on affirmative action, like those in California during the anti-immigrant policy wave of the 1990s, affected college enrollment and ultimately led to a loss of talent and income (Chapa 2005, Gandara 2012, Lutz et al. 2020). The 2023 Supreme Court decision to end race-conscious college admissions imperils a traditional route of mobility for Latinos. Ultimately, increasing Latino college graduation rates portend transformative effects for individuals, such as greater earnings potential and opportunities to accumulate wealth and assets.

Wealth and asset accumulation is another important indicator of class, because wealth is a cumulative process and a measure of economic well-being and long-term class stability across generations (Keister & Moller 2000, Nembhard & Chiteji 2006, Oliver & Shapiro 1995, Vallejo & Keister 2020). Wealth not only shapes individuals' starting points but also is a tangible resource that can be deployed during economic crises or used to invest in a business, buy a home, or support the next generation's educational attainment (Keister 2005, Keister et al. 2016, Vallejo & Keister 2020). However, Latinos experience a significant and persistent wealth gap. The median household net worth of Latinos in 2020 was $52,190, compared with $195,600 for non-Latinos (Scherer & Mayol-García 2022). Akin to educational attainment, Colombians and Cubans have the highest net worth, at $141,200 and $92,700, respectively. Mexican Americans fall in the middle, with $52,440, and Dominicans have the lowest net worth, at $9,430 (Scherer & Mayol-García

2022). Even a small amount of savings can create a buffer against economic precarity experienced by the Latino middle class (Vallejo 2012a). Salgado & Ortiz (2020) find that wealth accumulation among middle-class Mexican Americans is a result of their own achievements, rather than intergenerational asset transfers from parents—making our intervention of workarounds, defined and elaborated below, especially salient because it highlights agentic efforts within situations of constraint.

Institutions also shape possibilities for asset accumulation across the life course and across generations (Keister et al. 2016, Vallejo & Keister 2020). Racism within the banking system diminishes asset accumulation prospects. Using Whites as an empirical benchmark, people of color have higher loan rejection rates and receive less favorable terms for mortgage loans, including being disproportionately steered into high-risk subprime loans and saddled with a race tax in the form of higher interest rates (Massey & Denton 1993, Rugh et al. 2015, Turner & Skidmore 1999, Williams et al. 2014). A reliance on standardized financial modeling (e.g., credit scores and collateral assets, such as homeownership) can also prevent Latino community banks from providing access to capital to middle-class Latino entrepreneurs (Vallejo & Canizales 2023). Exclusionary mechanisms that institutionalize racial segregation and maintain inequality, including colonization that relegated Latinos to the worst housing (Rendón et al. 2023), have prevented minoritized groups from accumulating wealth through homeownership (Conley 1999, Massey & Denton 1993, Oliver & Shapiro 1995, Pager & Shepherd 2008, Taylor 2019). In addition to being one of the primary vehicles of wealth and asset accumulation for the middle class, homeownership is a symbol of attaining the American middle-class dream (Keister 2005). Latinos' homeownership rate is increasing, rising to 49% in 2022 (NAHREP & Hisp. Wealth Proj. 2023). This growth is driven by young, educated, and higher-earning Latinos (Zinn & Choi 2023).

Entrepreneurship is an understudied mechanism that facilitates mobility into the Latino middle class. Some middle-class Latinos with college degrees leave well-paying white-collar occupations to start businesses that rely on ethnicity to target coethnics in response to perceived opportunities stemming from the growing Latino population (Santellano 2023; Vallejo & Canizales 2016, 2023). Latino professionals might also channel the skills and connections accumulated in white-collar occupations into entrepreneurial endeavors to circumvent blocked mobility and the Brown glass ceiling (Smith & Mannon 2020, Valdez 2011, Zarrugh 2007). Yet, Latino middle-class entrepreneurs who lack wealth to sustain their businesses during recessions face precarity (Valdez 2020).

A growing Latino middle class also has transformative effects for society, as traditionally White middle-class institutions (e.g., colleges and white-collar workplaces) diversify (Alba 2020). Racial/ethnic demographic shifts and settlement patterns have opened occupational niches and business opportunities, creating new opportunities for Latinos to amalgamate class and ethnoracial resources that can lead to, or secure, middle-class status. For example, Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo (2014) demonstrate how race/ethnicity, gendered networks, and class background funnel Latinas with college degrees into the teaching profession. Opportunities for mobility are also present in new destinations where the Latino population is growing (Marrow 2011). Upwardly mobile Mexican Americans can leverage family resources, networks outside of nuclear families, and bilingualism to attain occupational mobility in new immigrant destination labor markets that reward Spanish-language brokering (Hernández-León & Lakhani 2013, Morando 2013). Superdiverse regional contexts (e.g., Los Angeles, Chicago, Texas, and Florida) provide opportunities for the Latino middle class to draw on ethnoracial networks to engage in ethnoracial capitalism and capitalize on Latino purchasing power (Santellano 2023, Santellano & Vallejo 2023, Vallejo & Canizales 2023).

The top tiers of the workforce are also becoming more diverse as minoritized groups occupy positions of greater prestige, remuneration, and authority (Alba 2020). In 2021, 25% of employed Latinos worked in management and professional occupations (the highest-paying major occupational category), compared with 58% of Asian Americans, 43% of Whites, and 34% of Black Americans (US Bur. Labor Stat. 2023).

Middle-Class Mobility Workarounds

In addition to the traditional mobility pathway of higher education (and its correlation to income and occupation that signal middle-class status), we argue that today's minoritized groups, like Latinos, use workarounds to enter the middle class. Workarounds are career paths such as business ownership or credentialed professions (e.g., realtors, sales and advertising professionals, financial advisors, health care professionals, accounting professionals) that may or may not require an associate degree or "some college," but not a bachelor's degree, and result in upward mobility, middle-class incomes, and the corresponding trappings and habitus of middle-class life. Higher education is perpetually hailed as the great equalizer and primary route to middle-class mobility and stability,[5] making a bachelor's degree *the* indicator of social class. Access to higher education, and attainment of a college degree, is a primary route to upward mobility, but we contend that it is not the only route.

The term workaround is a double entendre meant to signify (*a*) how emerging middle-class Latinos are entering the middle class via nontraditional routes outside the historically narrowly defined middle-class pathways and (*b*) how middle-class Latinos are effortfully "working" to creatively maneuver "around" multiple barriers—historical legacies of structural inequalities and racialization—to achieve socioeconomic advancement. The term underscores and remedies a shortfall of conventional conceptions of middle-class attainment that obscure the flexibility, ingenuity, and calculations of racially dominated groups who strategically move around racially exclusionary structural barriers to reach, enter, and exist in the middle class.

Overemphasizing a college degree as a precondition of middle-class attainment both obscures institutional racism and inequities that prevent people from attaining higher education and discounts Latino agency. Many Latinos do enter the middle class via college degree attainment, as the traditional pathway is not equally available to all. Among Latinos without a bachelor's degree, 70% said that needing to work to support their family prevented them from applying to college or finishing college, and 69% said that they could not afford a 4-year degree (Mora 2022). A 4-year college might not be viewed as a safe route to mobility, as it can be accompanied by high levels of student loan debt (currently, the median student loan balance of Latino borrowers is more than $17,000) (Rivera 2023).[6] Workarounds are a notable trend that successfully transition people into middle-class status. Underscoring our argument is the finding that, among the 44% of Latinos in the middle-income range, 51% have a high school education or less (28% and 23%, respectively) and 28% have attained some college or an associate's degree. According to our calculations, this means that 79% of Latinos in the middle-income category have less than a bachelor's degree (**Figure 1**). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 19% of Latinos

[5] Education as a great equalizer disrupting the association between parents' and children's socioeconomic status does not apply at the graduate level, where a strong intergenerational link emerges (Oh & Kim 2020).

[6] These data do not reflect what percentage of loans were borrowed for degree-granting colleges and universities in comparison to for-profit colleges that give credentials. McMillan Cottom (2017, p. 12) argues that for-profit programs "leverage our faith in education without challenging its market imperatives and. . .preserves the status quo of race, class, and gender inequalities."

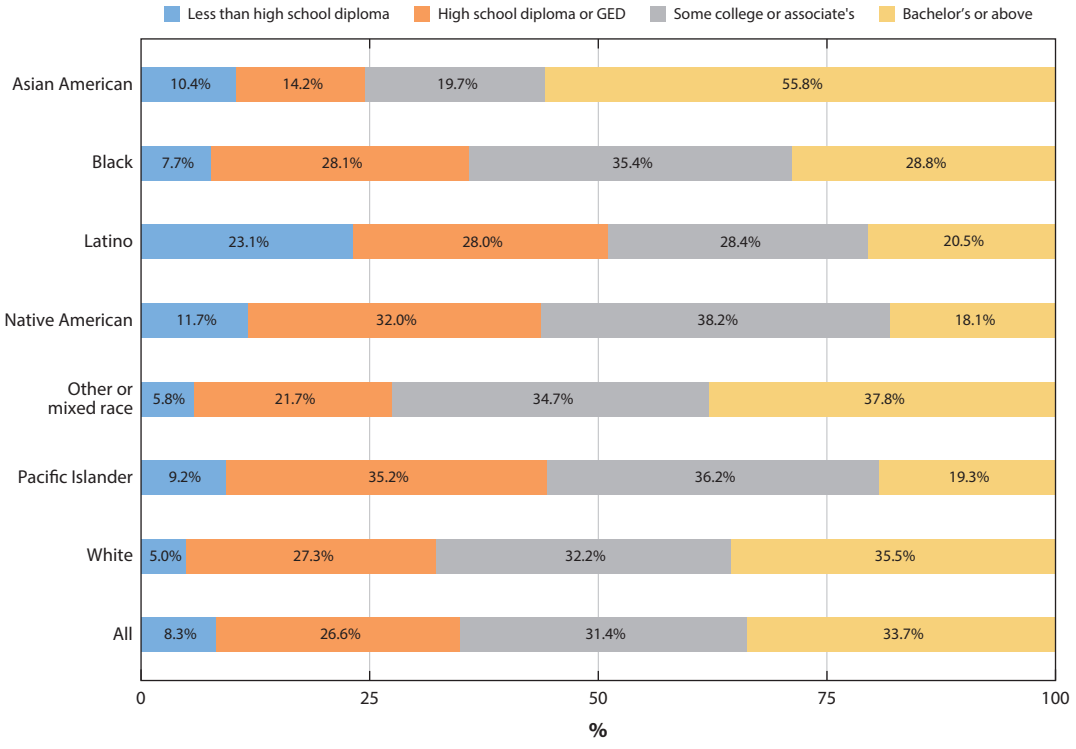

Figure 1

Educational attainment of the middle class by race/ethnicity. The universe contains all adults aged 25 and older in a family classified as middle class. Data are from 2021 5-year American Community Survey microdata from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series USA (Ruggles et al. 2024). Not all rows sum to 100% due to rounding.

are employed in sales or office positions, a category including jobs that require some college but not necessarily a bachelor's degree (US Bur. Labor Stat. 2023).

Understanding where Latinos fall relative to middle-class Whites is empirically important because of the social, economic, and political power that Whites continue to hold, but this lens obscures workarounds people take to deal with barriers to mobility. Some middle-class Latinos who are blocked from attaining a college degree—often because they must work at early ages to help support lower-income or undocumented family members—enter entrepreneurship as a mobility strategy (Vallejo 2012a, Vallejo & Canizales 2016). Entrepreneurship is utilized not only as a workaround to launch into the middle class but also to advance and entrench middle-class status and autonomy (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013, Valdez 2011). Latino self-employment—often in lucrative credentialed professions that may not require a college degree (e.g., real estate or financial services)—is a middle-class workaround to low-wage labor markets and blocked access to higher education (Vallejo 2012a, Vallejo & Canizales 2016). Among middle-income Latinos, those with less than a high school degree (11.4%) or a high school degree or GED (8.6%) are more likely to be self-employed than those with some college (7.5%) or a bachelor's degree (7.3%), signaling that entrepreneurship can function as a workaround (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Again using IPUMS data, we find that income tier has a stronger association with homeownership than does educational attainment. Among Latinos in the middle-income category, 59.1% own a home. There are no large differences in homeownership by education level, showing that

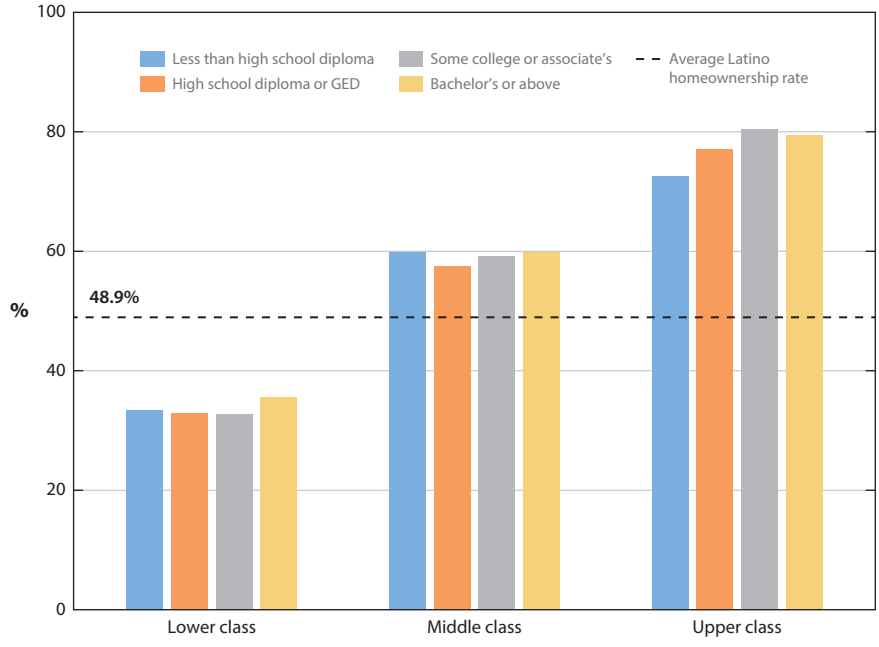

Figure 2

Latino homeownership by income class and educational attainment. The universe contains all Latino households. Data are from 2021 5-year American Community Survey microdata from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series USA (Ruggles et al. 2024).

access to finances is the key to homeownership (Ruggles et al. 2024; authors' calculations). Among middle-income Latinos, 60% of those with less than a high school degree own a home, in comparison to 57.4% of those with a high school degree or GED, 59.2% of those with some college, and 59.9% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher (**Figure 2**).

In support of workarounds, what is notable is the proportion of people in the middle- and upper-class tiers who do not have higher education but do own a home. This disruption of education as the singular pathway to earning a middle-class income and thus the possibility of owning a home reveals that one can either travel through education or work around higher education to gain financial stability and attain a home, a hallmark of middle-class achievement.

Latinos striving for socioeconomic improvement need not have tried and failed to achieve middle-class status via traditional routes to decide to use workarounds instead. Witnessing family members or friends encountering difficulties accessing conventional opportunities like education or seeing other Latinos encounter a "Brown tax" on the job (e.g., lower pay, racial discrimination) may be enough to sway people toward workarounds. Seeing others successfully travel trajectories into occupations that provide a middle-class income and lifestyle provides a roadmap. For example, in Smith's (2024) study of Mexican Americans in New York, many upwardly mobile respondents enter occupations that do not require a college degree, such as police officers, paralegals, executive assistants, and travel agents (all with benefits and career steps for advancement), because they know other middle-class individuals who hold these careers. These people selected labor market niches with expected trajectories—niches that they understand will boost their prospects based on the experience of others. In this way, learning through observation and knowledge sharing can direct Latinos endeavoring to improve their economic fortunes toward pathways—aside from achieving

a college degree—that can also lead to middle-income occupations. Thus, Latinos can choose workarounds as a reasonable, calculated means of improving their financial foothold.

The blurriness around definitions of middle class offers opportunities to discern movement along and among dimensions of middle-class status. Middle-class status is often viewed as comprising "cash" (economic resources such as income and wealth), "credentials" (educational achievements and occupation), and "culture" (attitudes, mindset, behavior, self-definition) (Reeves et al. 2018). Parsing out middle-class status into its component parts allows for finer-grained examinations of how any one piece is sufficient for middle-class status even if other aspects are lacking. Furthermore, accomplishment of one of these dimensions may facilitate acquisition of the other aspects. As we advocate for the utility of workarounds, we see opportunity in being attentive to how reaching up into the middle class from lower rungs on the class ladder may first manifest in accruing a single aspect of middle-class status, with others coming later (or not at all). The range of experiences captured by this multipronged definition is a stepping-stone to a better understanding of various entry points into the middle class.

We want to clarify that access to college degree attainment, and equity within educational systems, is critical because of the links between education and status, power, social networks, and economic rewards. We are not claiming that a college degree is no longer important to obtain middle-class status or access to power and privilege. Instead, our goal is to acknowledge people's agency in working around barriers to mobility and to urge scholars to rethink what "middle class" means for groups, like Latinos, who continue to experience systematic structural mobility barriers.

We argue that understandings of middle-class status and upward mobility must expand to include workarounds to education and labor markets engaged by middle-class Latinos, and potentially other minoritized groups. Examining workarounds in tandem with education provides a more holistic picture of who constitutes the middle class and the various routes traveled to occupy middle-class status. Scholastic focus on White middle-class entry points and routes occludes non-White groups' blockages and workaround routes, thus contributing to the epistemic exclusion of these groups' lived realities.

RACIALIZED ASSIMILATION: THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE LATINO MIDDLE CLASS

The Latino middle class is an important example of how assimilation and racism interact. As we have demonstrated, the literature attending to Latinos in the United States is bifurcated: The primary lenses for exploring Latinos' mobility pathways and experiences are assimilation, which uses an ethnicity paradigm, and race, which focuses on exclusionary mechanisms and emphasizes racialization. These two perspectives are sometimes viewed as disparate and difficult to bridge (Valdez & Golash-Boza 2017). Our objective is to call attention to empirical realities, draw from pertinent aspects of both theoretical perspectives, and ultimately let empirics drive our growing understanding of the Latino middle class.

We perceive an imbricated and interstitial relationship between the assimilation and race literatures (Telles & Ortiz 2008): They both push to attend to shortcomings, ultimately advancing our understanding of heterogeneous groups in the United States. Within a population, a subgroup might attain middle-class status despite being subjected to societal, institutional, and political racialization (Lee & Kye 2016). We see value in a both/and approach that is attentive to integration and racialization; we hold that teasing out the sources and ramifications of these countervailing forces remains key to scholarship on Latinos. The term "racialization despite assimilation" (Vasquez 2011) highlights how assimilation and race literatures that are often thought to be in tension with one another can operate simultaneously. Race, as a master status that marks lines of

inclusion, exclusion, and belonging (Flores-Gonzalez 2017), can shape Latinos' achievement of middle-class status and influence their experience of it.

Racialized assimilation is a racist process that co-occurs with integration and reinscribes race based on phenotypical and other social cues, marking the lived experience of Latinos and entrenching the Latino middle class as distinctive. Racialized assimilation is evidenced by racialization that does not halt with socioeconomic advancement: Class status is not a foolproof protectant against anti-Latino racism. When Latinos gain a foothold in or navigate middle-class environments—especially predominantly White middle-class spaces—their exposure to anti-immigrant and anti-Latino racism is heightened (Chávez 2011, Delgado 2016, Feagin & Cobas 2014, Jiménez 2010, Vallejo 2012b, Vasquez 2011, Vasquez-Tokos & Norton-Smith 2017). Mexican American women in female-dominated white-collar professions, for example, find that their work contexts reinforce gender and ethnoracial hierarchies (Segura 1992). Middle-class Latinos also experience discrimination when they speak Spanish in White-dominated workplaces (Delgado 2016, Feagin & Cobas 2014, Vallejo 2015a) or must deal with anti-Latino attitudes concerning unauthorized migration (Flores 2011). In White-dominated institutional and professional spaces, people of color face the "impossible burdens" of tokenization (Pan & Reyes 2021), negotiating racial narratives, and shouldering emotional labor resulting from microaggressions while also aiming for success (Evans & Moore 2015). These microlevel inequalities are linked to larger social structures that reflect and reinforce racialized intergroup power inequalities. As a result, some Latino professionals, especially those from low-income backgrounds or who lack middle-class cultural cues, are not viewed as, and often do not view themselves as, akin to the White middle class (Vallejo 2012a,b).

Racialized assimilation intersects with class status, including class background, and shapes identities, financial and social obligations to family and community, and group relations. New members of the Latino middle class often retain strong ties to low-income family members—especially because their parents often remain low income and may be undocumented—and hold an immigrant narrative of sacrifice that prompts them to give back to family and community via financial support, volunteering, and mentoring (Vallejo & Lee 2009; Jiménez 2010; Vallejo 2012a, 2015b). Middle-class Latinos also use their professional expertise to support Latino youth and young adults striving to gain a foothold in white-collar, middle-class occupations (Vallejo 2015b, Vasquez-Tokos & Norton-Smith 2017). Similarly, upwardly mobile Latina teachers use their ethnicity, class background, and cultural resources to connect with students and families to facilitate educational mobility (Flores 2017).

Other middle-class Latinos engage in social distancing practices, a tactic (conscious or not) that is likely a response to viewing the middle class as synonymous with Whiteness. Social distancing can involve erasing racial heritage by rejecting it outright or "easing" connections to racial ancestry, with the aim of facilitating socioeconomic mobility by shielding oneself from class- and race-based stereotypes (Vasquez-Tokos 2017). Middle-class Mexican and Dominican Americans engage in so-called identity work to neutralize stigmatized race and class identities by asserting their middle-class status or their non-Mexican national origin, responses that reaffirm the low status of the overall Latino category (Browne et al. 2021). When the middle class is coded as White and the lower classes as non-White, loosening one's ties to a racial identity and community is viewed as a tactic that may unlock the door to a higher socioeconomic echelon.

Economic precarity, especially low assets (McConnell 2015, Salgado & Ortiz 2020), is often part of the middle-class experience for Latinos and underscores how racialized inequality ripples within and across generations. A limited conception of class that focuses primarily on income mobility obscures unequal wealth holdings—reserves that can be passed on intergenerationally. A 2019 Federal Reserve survey found that White families have the highest levels of median and mean family wealth ($188,200 and $983,400, respectively) and that Latino families trail far

behind ($36,100 median wealth and $165,500 mean wealth) (Bhutta et al. 2020). Owing to policy decisions such as the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers (many of whom were African American and Latino) from New Deal social welfare programs in the 1930s, wealth-generating possibilities were truncated (Fox 2012). Such policy maneuvers result in "undeserved impoverishment" of non-White groups like Latinos (Feagin 2014, p. 14). Economic prospects vary by wealth standing. For instance, Mexican-origin middle-class entrepreneurs were affected by the Great Recession more than other middle-class groups because they lacked wealth relative to others (Valdez 2020). Due to a lack of substantial wealth holdings, Mexican-origin business owners experienced "economic vulnerability. . .that was seemingly inconsistent with their social class" (Valdez 2020, p. 3887). Newly minted members of the Latino middle class are also often called on to give back financially to lower-income family members, limiting their ability to accumulate assets and wealth (Vallejo 2012a, Vallejo & Lee 2009).

Gender also shapes mobility (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). An example is the so-called female second-generation advantage, where Latinas have higher levels of educational and occupational attainment compared with men (Anthony et al. 2021, Valdez & Tran 2020). Research suggests that the path to a college degree—and the resulting middle-class status—can vary according to gendered familial expectations (Ovink 2014, Parra & Garcia 2023) and externally imposed racialized and gendered stereotypes that lead to gendered educational tracking (Vallejo 2012a).

Colorism, or skin-color stratification, is a global phenomenon that privileges lightness/Whiteness by provisioning advantages to light-skinned people over dark-skinned people in income, education, housing, and the marriage market (Dixon & Telles 2017, Hunter 2007). Even when controlling for other variables, light-skinned Latinos (like light-skinned African Americans and Asian Americans) are advantaged in multiple material domains, including education, wealth, and the labor market (Abascal & Garcia 2022, Espino & Franz 2002, Hunter 2002, Murguia & Telles 1996, Painter et al. 2016, Ryabov 2016, Shiao 2023). Life chances, trajectories, and outcomes from health to wealth to subjection to the carceral system are affected by colorism (Monk 2021). Darker skin tone is significantly associated with higher reports of racial discrimination (specifically from US-born Whites) (Marrow et al. 2022, Ortiz & Telles 2012, Vasquez 2010), which can depress the acquisition of higher-paying positions in a stratified labor market. With respect to women, light skin may be interpreted as beauty within a White supremacist system and convertible into other forms of capital (Hunter 2002). Such exchanges occur in the marriage market, with fair-skinned people of color more likely to marry Whites than their darker-skinned counterparts (Qian 2002). Class status climbing can be a calculation of lighter-skinned Latinos, with "marrying up" a way to consolidate race, color, or class privilege (Vasquez-Tokos 2017).[7]

Another factor that makes the Latino middle class distinctive, and that may necessitate workarounds, is the precarity of family members' legal status (Vallejo 2012a), which can amplify the economic insecurity of the Latino middle class and, on the macro level, the racialization of illegality (Menjívar 2021). Latinos comprise three-quarters of undocumented Americans (66% are born in Mexico and Central America and 8% in South America) (Batalova 2023), and undocumented status pushes people into easily exploitable, sub–living wage positions. This "legal violence," or "legally sanctioned social suffering" due to a legal system that enacts violence on undocumented migrants, blocks mobility pathways (Menjívar & Abrego 2012, p. 1413). A growing literature on legal status shows numerous nefarious consequences of undocumented status,

[7]Among racially intermarried heterosexual couples, the most common pairing is one Hispanic and one White spouse (42%) (Livingston & Brown 2017).

including how "membership exclusion" (Bean et al. 2015) stymies job acquisition and improvement. The undocumented status of parents or other family members has consequences for the socioeconomic attainment of the next generation. "Multigenerational punishment" (Enriquez 2020) and "social illegality" (Flores & Schachter 2018) create spillover effects of undocumented status across generations that rope US citizen family members into a system of inequality targeting undocumented Americans. The power of parental legal status cannot be overestimated—Latinos with parents who enter the country with legal status or who naturalize early in a child's life course have higher levels of educational attainment (Bean et al. 2015). Parental legal status early in both the child's and the parents' life course can lead to cumulative advantages for parents—higher wages, job stability and mobility, and greater asset accumulation—that stream down to children, hasten entry into the middle class, and make middle-class status for the second generation less precarious, in part because financial obligations to parents and other family members are less salient (Vallejo 2012a).

Temporary, renewable legal status in the form of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a vehicle for upward mobility (Gonzales et al. 2019). DACA recipients are disproportionately Latino in origin: 94% were born in Mexico, Central America, or South America (López & Krogstad 2017). However, DACA's impermanence as a policy solution for undocumented Americans creates barriers to educational investments (Hsin & Ortega 2018). Opportunities for legal status that remove fear of deportation and allow for stable and higher-paying employment can improve outcomes and pave a pathway to mobility.

Despite the importance of legal protections, nativity-status inequality remains. An audit study focusing on Latino men with college degrees found that employers were twice as likely to call back native-born as foreign-born Latinos; employers also called back documented, work-authorized Latinos at the same low rate as undocumented Latinos without authorization to work, revealing a foreign-born penalty that extends beyond the undocumented (Kreisberg 2023). Perceived nativity or generational status on the basis of names (ethnic or anglicized) also cues discrimination, funneling access to roommates and rental housing (Gaddis & Ghoshal 2020).

Finally, even as Latino middle-class distinctiveness, precarity, and racialization derive from a racist (and sexist, classist, and color-stratified) system of domination, middle-class Latinos engage in several coping and navigational strategies. Deploying a rhetoric of "racial authenticity," middle-class Mexican Americans establish their social worth by leveraging symbolic boundaries to challenge racial domination (Vasquez & Wetzel 2009). Another strategy to rebut racism is social distancing from lower-class coethnics to create distinction by virtue of class standing (Vasquez-Tokos 2017), a tactic that can backfire: Middle-class Latinos calling themselves "atypical" magnify racist discourse even as they try to escape it (Delgado 2016). Modes of resistance can change over the life course, transitioning from emotional strategies in youth to mentorship and professionalization strategies in adulthood (Vasquez-Tokos & Norton-Smith 2017). Members of the Latino middle class also cultivate professional associations or institutions to provide resources to the community and "change negative narratives" about Latinos (Vallejo 2009, 2015b). Finally, middle-class Latino parents choose names for their children that are ethnically flexible and signal middle-class status to maximize their children's opportunities vis-à-vis ethnoracial integration and class distinction (Sue 2023).

These various experiences structured by race, class background, gender, skin tone, legal status, and nativity are evidence of racialized class mobility. Middle-class achievement does not determine cultural orientation in lockstep (Jiménez 2010, Vallejo 2012a, Vasquez 2011). With varying cultural orientations coexisting with middle-class achievement, the Anglo-conformity element of assimilation is falling away. Yet, while Latinos need not blend into Whiteness to be middle class, racism continues to affect middle-class Latinos.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Latinos experience significant barriers to mobility; nevertheless, some enter the middle class by forging traditional routes or via workarounds. Research on the Latino middle class upends normative conceptions of assimilation by demonstrating that Whiteness is not a precondition of attaining middle-class status. Yet, the ripple effects of White supremacy shape Latino mobility, identity, and experiences in the middle class. Latinos navigate pressures to conform to practices associated with Whiteness to advance socioeconomically (Delgado 2016, Evans & Moore 2015, Gómez 2007). Expectations of conformity to White-dominated occupations and social circles expose middle-class (and aspiring) Latinos to allegations of being "White-washed" (Jiménez 2004; Vallejo 2012a, 2015a). Accusations that the upwardly mobile are betraying their culture by virtue of socioeconomic ascension (Roman 2013) traffic in essentialist views, conflating working-class and poor with Latino and middle-class status and wealthy with White. A tension exists between condemnations of cultural betrayal and a diversifying middle class wherein Latinos are accruing resources that can circulate within a coethnic community through ethnic institutions, relationships, and purchasing power.

The Latino middle class is poised to grow, and it is distinctive for several reasons. It is heterogeneous in class-origin starting points, race/racialization, gender, phenotype, migration histories, legal status, nativity, and integration milieus, all of which affect everyday experiences. To grow the Latino middle class and secure the class status and economic well-being of those who newly enter it, it is imperative to secure the economic status of parents, especially the immigrant generation. Legalization for undocumented people, the majority of whom have lived in the United States for a decade or longer, could reduce societal stigma and would abate the economic precarity of new Latino middle-class members who remain in mixed-status families.

We caution that middle-class pathways and categories are not bounded. Pathways and experiences are dynamic, and scholars must understand the multiple facets of movement into the middle class. Investigating and enumerating typologies of workarounds to the middle class for historically marginalized groups—Latinos and beyond—grant agency to people working to better their lives; call out blockading structures; and may be a way to identify cross-racial, class-based commonalities with other groups. The concept of workarounds should be examined to assess its utility for non-Latino groups endeavoring to improve their economic fortunes. While distinguishing group characteristics exist, Latinos share attributes and class locations with other groups, and the extent to which workarounds are a useful way of understanding the mobility of other communities of color is an important empirical question that can reshape classic understandings of movement across class strata. Future research should also embrace the internal diversity of the Latino middle class and should investigate varying experiences by national origin and race (e.g., the Black Latinx middle class). Regional context warrants further investigation regarding how population demographics relate to racialized assimilation (Pulido & Pastor 2013). Recent economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, also deserve exploration, as economic disruptions that ripple across families and communities have significant effects for the socially mobile (Pirtle & Wright 2021, Santellano 2021). Upward-mobility pathways that hew to White supremacy are also ripe for exploration. For example, some Latinos integrate into racial state bureaucracies such as the US Border Patrol, which, in policing Latin American immigrants, gives rise to accusations that Latino enforcement agents are "traitors" and makes visible how White supremacy underpins opportunities for financial security (Prieto 2015).

In addition to investigating how Latinos move into and navigate the middle class, scholars must pay attention to movement into and out of the Latino identity category (Emeka & Vallejo 2011, Irizarry et al. 2023, Vargas 2015) and its implications for how the Latino middle class is

measured, conceived, and experienced. Due to racial intermarriage, multiraciality, and the blurring or crossing of racial boundary lines, who "counts" as Latino varies over time (Alba 2020). With ramifications for the study of race/ethnicity and mobility, "ethnic attrition" results in "unmeasured progress" (Duncan & Trejo 2011), advancement that is not captured after (mixed) Latino people disaffiliate from the group.

The role of interclass relations and racial/ethnic solidarity and organizations in facilitating social movements related to mobility, political representation and civil rights, categorization, and belonging is also an area ripe for study (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Pastor 2021, Mora 2014, Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021). With the striking down of affirmative action and the decline of labor unions, there is a pressing need to study upward mobility routes charted in an era outside these institutional supports. Finally, as the US population continues to diversify, we expect debates will continue to proliferate about Latino mobility, racial futures and power hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva 2004, Haney López 2006, Lee & Bean 2010, Mora et al. 2021), identities and ideologies (Dowling 2014, Roth 2012), racial status and intergroup relations (Jones 2022), and racial/ethnic relations (Jiménez 2017, Jones 2021, Marrow 2011).

Rather than continuing to hitch studies of Latinos to immigration/assimilation or racialization literatures, what might it look like to study the Latino middle class on its own terms to understand mobility, inclusion, and racialization? By centering a group marked by race/ethnicity and class status, and then reverse-engineering projects to determine from the bottom up where members of the group came from, their experiences, and where they hope to go, a subject-centered approach (Lee & Zhou 2015) may offer empirical insights into how to more fully understand the Latino middle class and bridge the gap between the assimilation and race literatures.

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