

Labor Organizing among Mexican-Born Workers in the U.S.:

Summary:

This paper surveys unionization patterns and other workplace-oriented organizing among Mexican-born workers. Drawing on U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) data, I review and analyze the patterns of union membership among Mexican-born workers over the decade from 1994-2004. There is no systematic source of data on the range of organizing efforts that do not involve formal unionization, but the paper includes some discussion of such activity as well.

The *absolute number* of Mexican-born and foreign-born union members grew over the past decade, yet the unionized *proportion* of each group declined. This decline was disproportionately large for the Mexican-born, and especially for non-citizens. That the Mexican-born population includes a large proportion of relative newcomers helps explain the decline in their unionization rate, since recently arrived immigrants are less likely to be union members than their more settled compatriots. Another factor is the increased geographic dispersion of immigration in recent years, especially the declining share of Mexican-born workforce in states like Illinois and California, where union density is high, and the growing share located in those where density is low. Even with this dispersion, California accounted for over half of the nation's Mexican-born union members in 2004 (down from 60% in 1994).

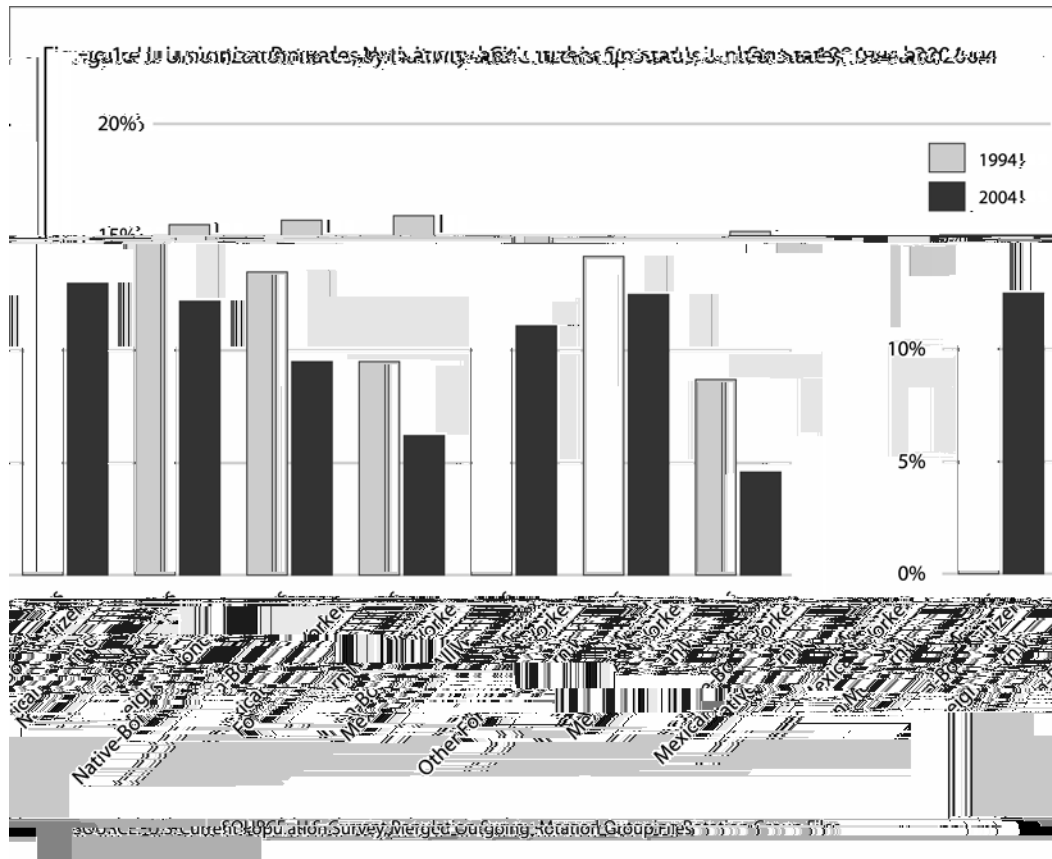
Survey data suggest that immigrants, and Latinos in particular, are more positive in their attitude toward unionism than most native-born workers (with the exception of African-Americans). This is reflected in the wave of high-profile immigrant organizing campaigns that emerged in the U.S. during the 1990s. But these campaigns have yielded relatively small numbers of union members. In the labor market as a whole, pro-union attitudes do not necessarily translate into union membership under the U.S. system of exclusive representation. Instead, the primary determinant of an individual's union (or nonunion) status is the sector or occupation in which she or he is employed. Unionism is extremely unevenly distributed across sectors and occupations, and immigrants tend to be underrepresented in the most unionized sectors (such as government employment).

Alongside union efforts to recruit immigrants, a variety of community-based organizations have emerged during the past fifteen years with a focus on economic justice issues. Some of these organizations have close ties to organized labor, while others are entirely independent. Their advocacy for low-wage workers – a group that

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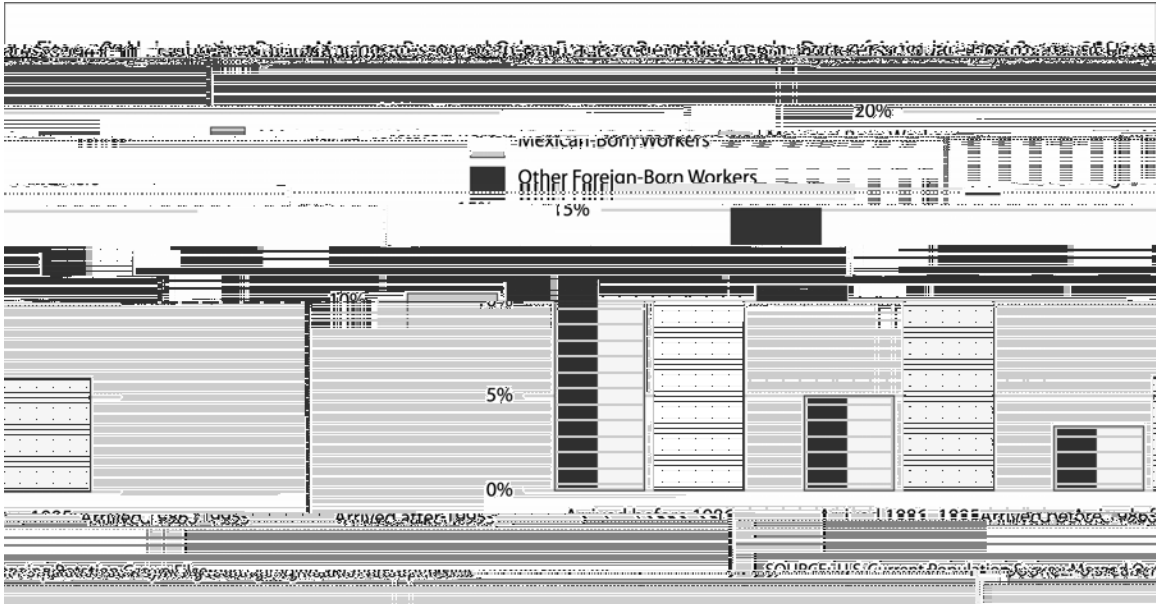
Overall, U.S. union density declined in this period, from 15.5% in 1994 to 12.5% in 2004.² The decline was particularly severe in the private sector, where most foreign-born workers are employed (as detailed below). This is one reason that, even though the *absolute number* of Mexican-born and foreign-born union members grew over



the decade, as noted above, the unionized *proportion* of each group declined. This decline was greater for the foreign-born than for other groups, as Figure 1 shows, and it was disproportionately large for the Mexican-born. Native-born Mexican-American workers' unionization rate also fell slightly more relative to the rate for other native-born workers. Among the Mexican-born, non-citizens experienced the sharpest decline over this period, from what were already unusually low unionization rates.

² Here the term “union density” is used interchangeably with “unionization rate”; both terms denote the proportion of the workforce made up of union members in a given population group or geographical unit.

A second trend affecting unionization rates for both Mexican-born and foreign-born workers was the growth in the proportion of *recent* immigrants (who are less likely to be union members than more settled immigrants) among both groups. As Massey et. al. (2002) argue, although the explicit aim of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was to restrict immigration, it produced the opposite result, especially in the case of Mexicans. Indeed, over the 1994-2004 period, the proportion of the U.S. labor force comprised of Mexican-born workers nearly doubled, from 2.9% to 4.7%. The overall share of foreign-born workers also grew, although somewhat less rapidly: from 9.7% in 1994 to 14.6% in 2004. As Figure 2 shows, unionization rates are much higher among immigrants who have been in the U.S. longer than among those who are relative newcomers. In the case of the Mexican-born, the 2004 unionization rate for those who arrived before 1986 was more than double that for more recent arrivals. A less extreme variant of the same pattern can be seen for other immigrants as well. For those who arrived in the U.S. before 1986, the unionization rate was 10.4% in 2004 for the Mexican-born, only slightly below the overall unionization rate of 12.5%; and for non-Mexican immigrants who arrived in that period the 15.1% for 1986, the unions w



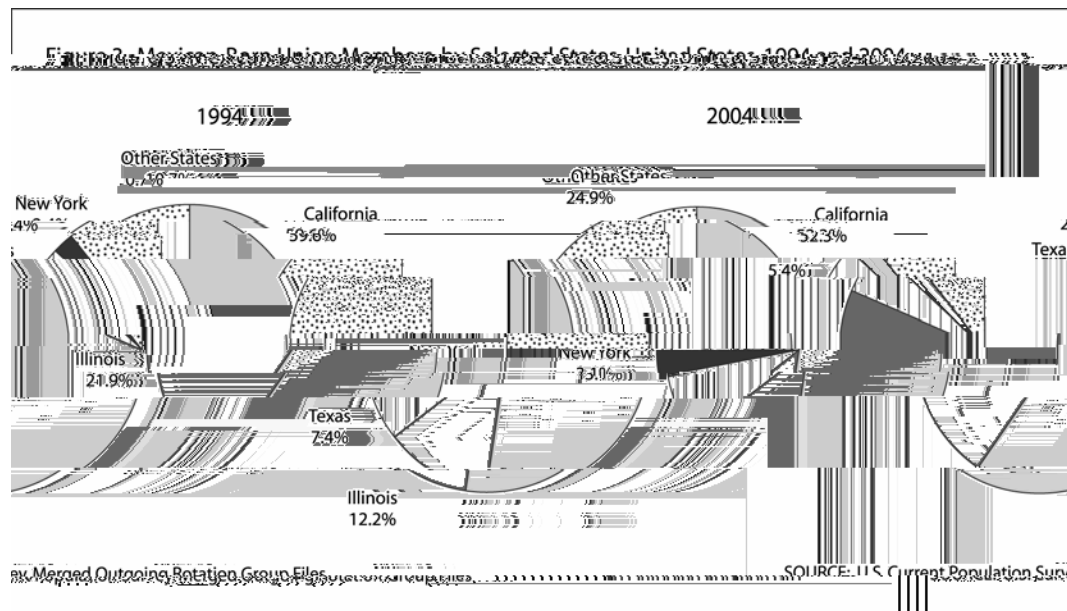
The third key trend affecting Mexican-born workers' unionization rates is closely related to the second, namely, their

State	Share of U.S. Mexican-born Workers		Union Density	
	1994	2004	1994	2004
California	53.8%	35.1%	17.9%	16.5%
Texas	19.8%	19.3%	7.0%	5.0%
Arizona	3.4%	6.5%	7.9%	6.3%
Illinois	8.9%	6.2%	19.9%	16.8%
Georgia	1.8%	3.3%	8.0%	6.4%
North Carolina	0.5%	3.2%	5.2%	2.7%
Colorado	0.5%	2.5%	10.9%	8.4%
New York	1.2%	2.2%	29ns2	16tU4va12

share of the Mexican-born workforce. By contrast, New York, the nation's second most populous state and the one with the highest union density, with a relatively small (but growing) share of the Mexican-born workforce, was home to only 3.1% of all Mexican-born U.S. union members in 2004.

Sectoral and Occupational Patterns of Mexican-born Unionization

In the U.S., with its peculiar (in global terms) industrial relations regime based on a winner-take-all system of exclusive representation, individual workers seldom are able

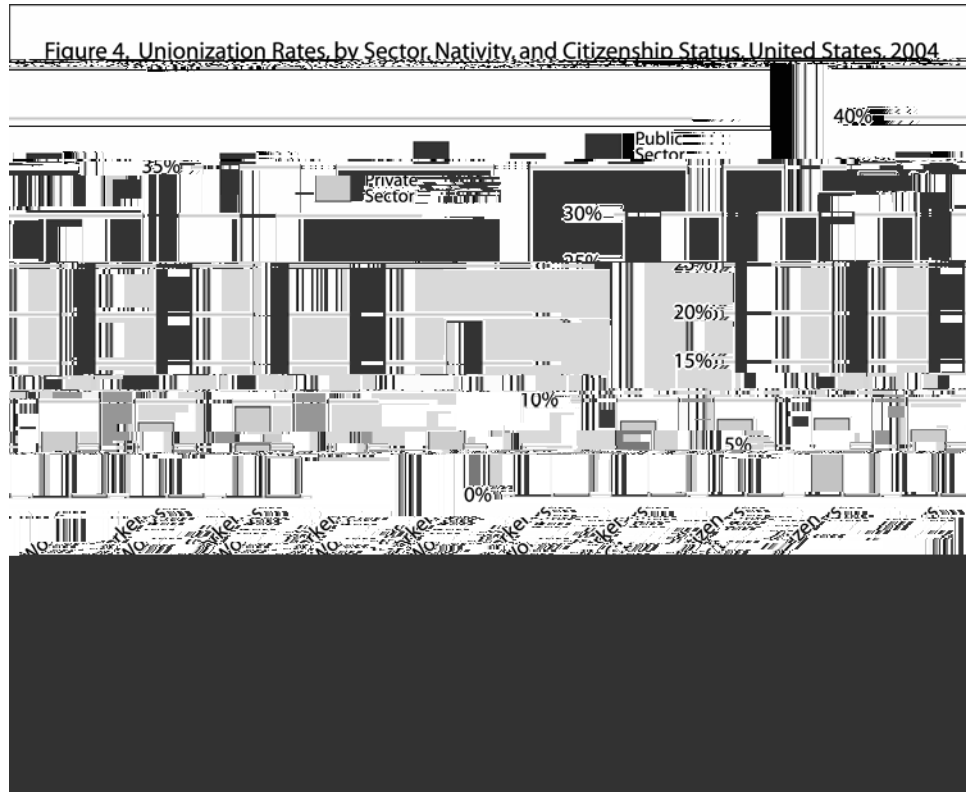


to choose whether or not to become union members. Instead, in most cases, union or non-union status is determined primarily by a worker's specific location in the employment structure. A pro-union worker who is employed in a non-union unit is rarely able to become a union member, unless he or she manages to bring into being a successful campaign to unionize the entire unit. Conversely, if an individual is hired into an employment unit which was unionized at some previous point in time (and has remained

unionized), he or she will probably become a union member, regardless of personal preferences.³

Thus the low unionization rate for immi

Whereas earlier studies did not examine such attitudes by nativity, this one found more pro-union sentiment among immigrants (most of whom were Latino) than among natives, and even more among non-citizens: 66 percent of non-citizen respondents (regardless of ethnicity) expressed a preference for unionization, compared to 54 percent of foreign-born citizens, and 42 percent of native-born respondents.⁵ (Weir 2002: 121) Analysis



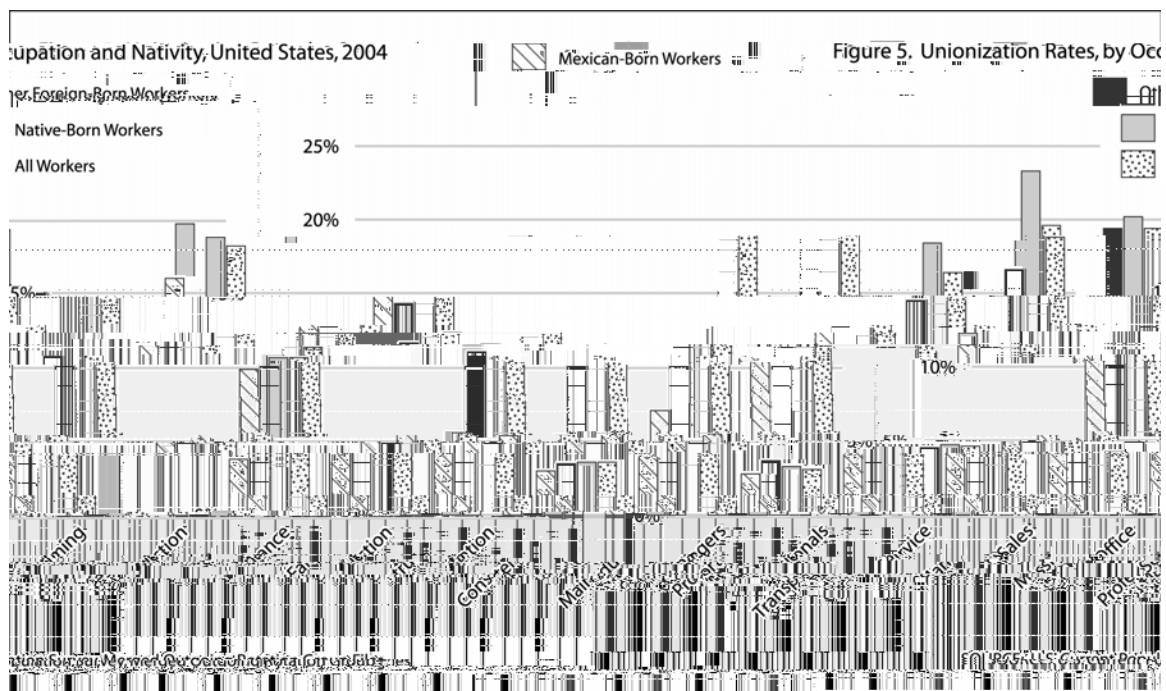
of actual union representation election results, similarly, suggests that union organizing efforts tend to be more successful in workplaces that employ predominantly nonwhite workers (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004: 36-37).

⁵This finding is from the 2001-02 California Workforce Survey (CWS), which asked a question identical to the one in the WRPS. However, the results of the two surveys are not strictly comparable. The WRPS asked the question of almost all workers, except high-level managers, who were not current union members; by contrast, the CWS asked it only of nonsupervisory respondents who were not current union members, excluding a broader group of middle-level managers. The CWS results are statistically significant ($p < .01$ for the race/ethnicity variable and $p < .05$ for the citizen status variable).

Why, then, do immigrants have relatively low unionization rates, as shown in Figure 1? The primary factor shaping unionization patterns among Mexican-born and other foreign-born workers is their disproportionate concentration in sectors of the economy where union density is relatively low. Consider the contrast between the highly unionized public sector and the poorly unionized private sector. As Figure 4 shows, the rate of public sector unionization is much higher than in the private sector *for all population groups*, including immigrants. In 2004, public sector unionization rates for native-born and foreign-born workers were identical (36.4%). Mexican-born workers' public-sector unionization rate was somewhat lower (29.6%), but still far higher than for Mexican-born workers in the private sector. For Mexican-born U.S. citizens, interestingly, the public sector rate was the same as that for natives, although it was much lower for non-citizen Mexican-born workers. (The same disparity between these two groups obtains in the private sector, with Mexican-born noncitizens having by far the lowest unionization rates, as Figure 4 also shows.)

But far more striking than the between-group differentials *within* each of these two sectors is the relatively small proportion of foreign-born workers who are employed in the public sector: only 8.5%, compared to 17.5% of all native-born workers. Among the Mexican-born, the figures are even more stark: only 3.9% of all Mexican-born workers are employed in the public sector, and only 2.0% of Mexican-born non-citizens. The vast disparity in overall public and private-sector unionization rates, combined with the underrepresentation of foreign-born (and especially Mexican-born) workers among public sector employees, greatly depresses the overall immigrant unionization rate.

Unionization rates vary greatly not only by economic sector, but also by industry (not detailed here) and occupation. The fact that immigrant workers are unevenly distributed through the occupational structure, and that they tend, in general, to be underrepresented in many of the occupational categories that are the most highly unionized, further depresses their overall unionization rate. As Figure 5 reveals, the variation within major occupational groups by nativity is much more modest than the variation across occupational groups – paralleling the contrast between the public and private sectors discussed above. Although it is true that, even within these categories, foreign-born workers, and especially Mexican-born workers, have lower unionization



rates than their native-born counterparts, this is because these broad occupational groups are internally segregated by nativity.

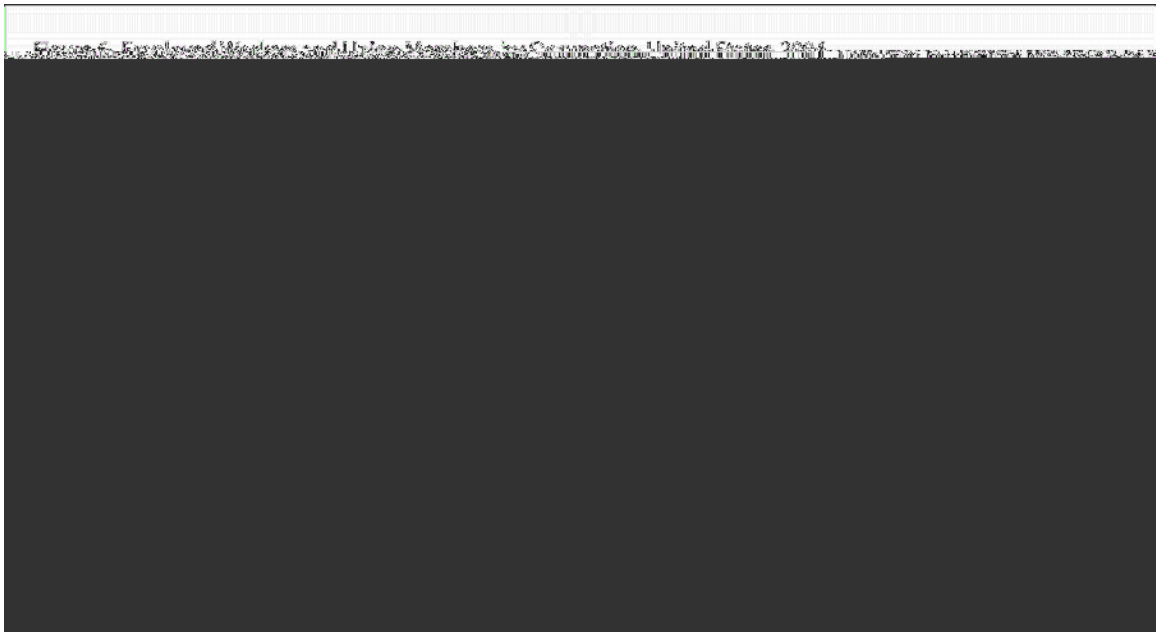
For example, consider the case of construction jobs, where the immigrant-native differential in unionization rates is particularly large, as Figure 5 shows. Latino

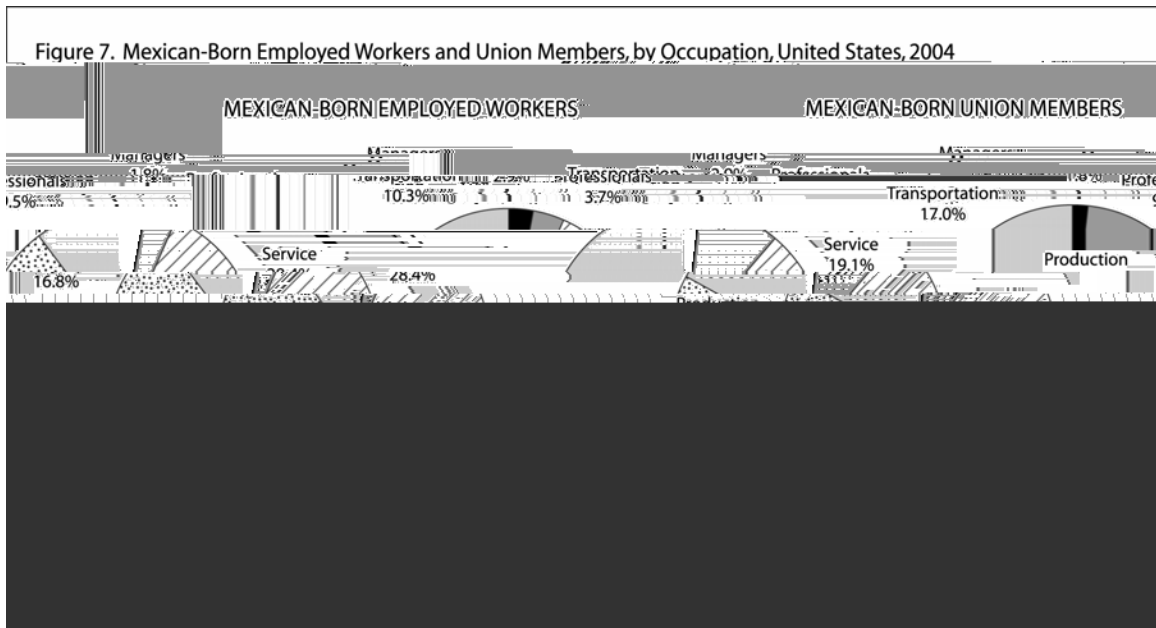
immigrants are concentrated in the largely nonunion residential sector of the construction industry, while native-born workers are much more extensively employed in the more highly unionized commercial sector. In service occupations, similarly, Latino immigrants are disproportionately employed in the most casualized fields, like domestic household service or day labor, where unionization is rare or nonexistent. Undocumented immigrants are particularly concentrated in such unregulated, marginal fields, where employers are seldom concerned with workers' legal status (Marcelli and Heer 1997).

Occupational segregation along lines of nativity is so extensive that Catanzarite (2002, 2004) goes so far as to argue for a category of "brown collar" occupations in which immigrant Latinos, especially the most recent arrivals, are highly overrepresented. (She does not look specifically at Mexican-born workers, but of course they are the predominant Latino immigrant group.) Such occupations are at the bottom of the labor market in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing as well as in the service and hospitality industries.

Figures 6 and 7 expose this dynamic from a different angle, and in somewhat greater detail. As Figure 6 shows, unionization is not distributed evenly through the occupational structure. Professionals, for example, make up a higher proportion of union members than of employed workers (reflecting the extensive unionization of teachers and other professionals in the public sector), and the same is true of production, maintenance and construction occupations. By contrast, managerial, sales, and farming occupations account for a higher proportion of employed workers than of union members. Thus the probability of an individual being unionized varies greatly with his or her occupation.

Figure 7 shows the same kind of comparison for Mexican-born workers. Here the uneven distribution of unionism through the occupational structure, as well as the concentration of Mexican-born workers in particular types of occupations, are both in evidence. Thus, although only 9.5% of Mexican-born workers are in professional or office occupations, these two occupational groups account for about twice that proportion (18.6%) of all Mexican-born union members. And a comparison between Figures 6 and 7 reveals that Mexicans are more heavily employed in occupations (like services) where overall unionization rates are relatively low. Even at this high level of aggregation, these variations are evident; a more detailed analysis of specific occupations would expose them even more starkly.





In short, immigrants generally, and Mexican-born workers in particular, have a lower unionization rate than their native-born counterparts not because they are less receptive to unionism – indeed, the opposite is true – but because of their particular employment patterns. The “brown collar” occupations in which they are concentrated are, for the most part, among the less-unionized fields in the U.S., although that may be changing. The fact that so few Mexican-born workers (or immigrants generally) are in the public sector is a critical factor in explaining their relatively low unionization rate.

Although there are no reliable data on the extent to which different types of unions have been involved in immigrant organizing, qualitative evidence suggests that the pattern is an uneven, yet systematic one. The industrial unions that once constituted the independent CIO (from 1935-1955) have not been active on this terrain. Most of them are centered in the high-wage manufacturing industries that have been decimated by outsourcing and plant closings. They have lost huge numbers of members in recent decades, and have not been engaged in much new organizing of any kind. The bulk of

their foreign-born members are those who have found employment in already-unionized industrial bargaining units – and immigrants are seldom hired in such jobs, which are generally well-paid and in settings where little new hiring has occurred during the wave of new immigration from the global South that began in the late 1960s. For different reasons – mostly related to language and citizenship issues, the public sector unions, as noted above, also have relatively few foreign-born me

economic justice issues. Some of these organizations have close ties to organized labor, while others were entirely independent. The living wage movement figures prominently here, due to its success in passing ordinances in several jurisdictions raising wage levels for private-sector workers employed under government contracts (Luce 2004). A variety of other groups also took shape around the nation with a focus on advocacy for low-wage workers – a group that typically includes Mexican-born and other foreign-born Latinos. Most of these organizations focus explicitly on immigrant workplace rights, especially for domestic workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) and day laborers with little or no access to conventional unionism (see Gottlieb et al 2005: 45-48).

The broad spectrum of “worker centers,” of which Janice Fine’s comprehensive national study identified 135 by 2005 (up from only 5 in 1992), typically focus their appeals on the ethnic identities of low-wage immigrant workers, and advocate for workers’ rights using rhetorical and organizational forms distinctly different from those historically associated with unionism. Mexican-born workers are a key constituency for these groups; although few are limited to any particular nationality, the vast majority (120 of Fine’s 135 centers) focus on immigrants. (Fine 2005; and see Gordon 2005)

Although they are not unions themselves, most of the advocacy efforts of these CBOs and worker centers aim to improve wages and working conditions for immigrant workers, putting direct pressure on employers and/or governmental agencies responsible for enforcing wage and hour laws and other legal protections for workers. Some of these groups have close ties to organized labor, others are more distant from (and in some cases, critical of) unions, but in practice their goals are strikingly similar to those of organized labor’s mainstream; it is mainly their strategies and tactics that differ. Both

provide a variety of direct services to workers, advocate for both individual workers and groups facing similar problems, organize immigrants politically and educate them about their legal rights.

If the goals of unions and these CBOs/worker centers are similar, their organizational forms are quite different. Although some worker centers have “members,” for example, they are small organizations, typically funded by foundations rather than their own memberships. And as Fine points out, worker centers (like other CBOs) define their boundaries in terms of geography, while unions are usually tied to a worksite, occupation or industry. As a result the geographical spread of worker centers mirrors that of the immigrant population itself more directly than is the case with the labor movement. Historical artifacts like patterns of union density that were built up over long periods of time (and which, as noted above, have a major impact on patterns of immigrant unionization) are only indirectly relevant here. Thus while these organizations are widespread in California, which was home to 26 of the 135 worker centers Fine identified in the U.S. in 2005 (Fine 2005), their geographical concentration is far less extreme than that of immigrant union membership (see discussion above).

Another organizational form that deserves mention here is the immigrant hometown association (HTA). Although most Mexican (and other) HTAs began as largely apolitical groups, whose normal activities revolved around beauty pageants and sporting events, they have been increasingly drawn into the world of workplace advocacy and political mobilization (Zabin and Rabadán 1998, Rivera-Salgado and Escala Rabadán 2004, Hecht 2005). As in the case of worker centers, which in a minority of cases do take on some organizational features of traditional unions, hybrids that merge the typical

activities of HTAs and unions emerge at times as well. Not only have HTAs become increasingly engaged in advocacy impacting the workplace, but some labor unions – especially at the local level – take on the functions traditionally assumed by HTAs. David Fitzgerald (2004) has documented one fascinating example, a local union in southern California whose membership is overwhelmingly Mexican-born and whose activities include not only political mobilization on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border, but also extensive interplay between union politics and HTA-like activities and networks.

Further stimulating these developments was an extraordinary process of Latino immigrant political mobilization in the 1990s – a process both rooted in and contributing to the immigrant organizing efforts of unions and CBOs. The catalyst here, ironically, was Proposition 187, a ballot measure proposed by California's then-governor Pete Wilson in 1994 and approved by the state's voters that would have denied public services – including schooling – to undocumented immigrants and their children, had it not been found unconstitutional. The Proposition 187 campaign had a dramatic and entirely unintended impact on voting rates among first- and second-generation immigrants in California (Ramakrishnan and Espenshade

L.A. County Federation of Labor (to insiders, “the Fed”) underwent a metamorphosis from an insider ally of the city’s Democratic Party establishment to an independent political force with extensive capacity for grassroots mobilization. Among other things, the Fed began to devote extensive resources to helping immigrants eligible for naturalization become citizens (and thus potential voters), which ma

Latino labor leaders rapidly edged out the old-guard Mexican-American political leadership. One pivotal example was the 1994 election of progressive union organizer Antonio Villaraigosa to a state Assembly seat representing northeast Los Angeles. Two years later, the Fed helped the Democrats regain control of the state Assembly, conducting field and direct mail campaigns for three Democratic challengers, all of whom were elected. In 1997, the Fed backed Gilbert Cedillo, then a politically unknown SEIU official, in a special election for an Assembly seat in a heavily Latino downtown L.A. district. Cedillo came from behind to win this contest by a huge margin (Frank and Wong 2004: 160; Gottlieb et al 2005: 160-61).

In 1998, organized labor throughout California campaigned successfully to defeat Proposition 226, which would have prohibited union dues being used for political purposes without annual written authorization from members. This measure was defeated, with Latinos voting against it 3 to 1. In the same election, the Democrats won

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2004: 160-62; Meyerson 2001). Broadly defined to include not only traditional workplace-based unions, but also CBOs, HTAs and mobilization in the realm

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