

Study reveals racial inequality in Mexico, disproving its 'race-blind' rhetoric

December 13 2017, by Daniel Zizumbo Colunga

Race and education in Mexico

Vanderbilt's Americas Barometer survey found that Mexicans with light skin tend to complete significantly more years of schooling than people with darker skin. The survey-wide national average for education in Mexico is nine years of schooling.



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Source: AmericasBarometer

For centuries, the United States has been engaged in a [thorny, stop-and-go conversation about race and inequality](#) in American society. And from [Black Lives Matter demonstrations](#) to [NFL players protesting](#)

[police violence](#), public discussions on racism continue in full force today.

That's not the case in Mexico. Mexicans have divergent ancestry, including Spanish, African, indigenous and German. And while [skin color](#) in Mexico [ranges from white to black](#), most people – [53 percent](#) – identify as mestizo, or mixed [race](#).

In Mexico, inequality, though [rampant](#), has long been viewed as a problem related to ethnicity or socioeconomic status, not race.

Our new report suggests that assumption is wrong. Published in November, ["Is Mexico a Post-Racial Country?"](#) reveals that in Mexico darker skin is strongly associated with decreased wealth and less schooling. Indeed, race is the single most important determinant of a Mexican citizen's economic and educational attainment, our results show.

Unequal in every way

The study, published last month by the [Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University](#), or LAPOP, drew on data from the university's Americas Barometer, a poll of 34 nations across North, Central and South America, as well the Caribbean.

To capture information on race, which is often [not reflected in Latin American census data](#), the pollsters themselves categorized respondents' face skin tone on a [standardized](#) 11-point scale that ranges from darkest to lightest.

We were fascinated to see that the Mexico data clearly showed people with white skin completing more years of schooling than those with browner skin – 10 years versus 6.5. That's a stunning 45 percent gap in

educational achievement between the darkest- and lightest-skinned Mexicans.

Darker-skinned Mexicans surveyed had also completed fewer years of schooling than the survey's average nationwide finding of [nine years](#).

Wealth, we found, similarly correlates to skin color. The average Mexican household income in the LAPOP study was about US\$193 a month. Citizens with lighter skin reported bringing in more than that – on average, \$220 a month. Darker-skinned citizens, on the other hand, earned just \$137 – 41.5 percent less than their white compatriots.

Overall, populations identified as having the lightest skin fall into the highest wealth brackets in Mexico, while those with the darkest skin are concentrated at the bottom. These dynamics, [other studies have found](#), seem to persist across generations.

Similar disparities emerged when we examined other measures of economic well-being, such as material possessions – like refrigerators and telephones – and basic amenities.

For example, only 2.5 percent of white Mexicans surveyed by Vanderbilt's pollsters don't have running water, while upwards of 11 percent of dark-skinned citizens said they lack this basic necessity. Likewise, just 7.5 percent of white Mexicans reported lacking an in-home bathroom, versus 20 percent of dark-skinned Mexicans.

Not a post-racial nation

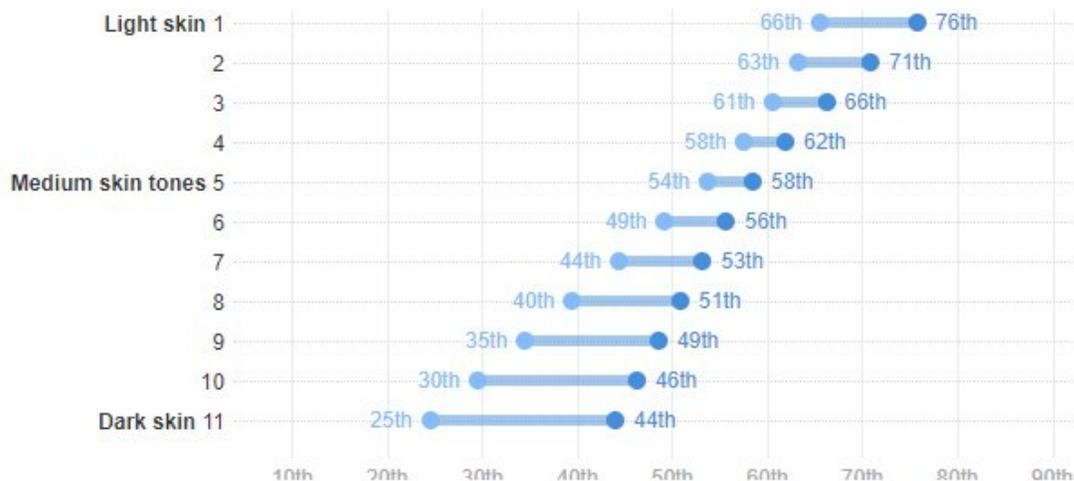
Our findings complicate the results of [numerous prior studies](#) showing that Mexicans [do not perceive skin color](#) as a meaningful source of prejudice in their lives.

According to a 2010 [national survey on discrimination](#), Mexicans believe that age, gender and social class have a greater impact on their daily lives than race.

This perception likely relates to the country's tradition of celebrating its raza mestiza, or multiracial heritage. Just last September, President Enrique Peña Nieto declared el mestizaje – racial mixing – as "[the future of humanity](#)."

Race and wealth in Mexico

A Vanderbilt survey in Mexico found that people with light skin fall in the 70th percentile for wealth on average, while people with darker skin are concentrated in the bottom 50 percent. The average reported monthly Mexican household income in the study was about US\$193. Citizens with lighter skin reported bringing in, on average, \$220 a month. Darker-skinned citizens earned 41.5 percent less, just \$137 a month.



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 Source: AmericasBarometer

The data paints a much less rosy picture. Race, it turns out, has a greater impact on a Mexican's human development and capital accumulation than any other demographic variable. Our results show that Mexico's "skin-color gap" is two times the achievement gap documented between northern and southern Mexicans, which is [an inequality more often cited in Mexico](#).

It is also five times greater than [the urban-rural divide](#) reported in the poll. We even found that skin color has a significantly greater impact on wealth and education than does ethnicity – that is, indigenous versus white or mixed-race Mexican.

Not an isolated case

Our results add to a growing body of [academic research](#) highlighting a reality the government doesn't want to admit: [Racism](#) exists in Mexico.

Racial and ethnic biases have so far been documented in Mexico's [allocation of public resources](#), [politics](#) and, notably, the [labor market](#).

A [recent report](#) from the National Institute of Statistics, for example, finds that white people comprise 27 percent of all white-collar workers and just 5 percent of the agricultural sector.

Occasionally, some high-profile incident will bring Mexico's racism to light. For example, there was outcry in 2013 when Aeromexico, Mexico's most important airline, issued a commercial casting call saying that "nadie moreno" – [no dark-skinned people](#) – need to audition.

More often, though, racism is [ignored](#) or explained away. Many Mexicans, for example, argue that dark-skinned Mexicans tend to belong to ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities and live in historically disadvantaged areas, like the rural south and the heavily indigenous high

mountains.

Since this is the case, [they reason](#), data that appears to show race-based inequality in Mexico is actually capturing class, ethnic and regional inequalities.

Although the premise of this argument holds true, the conclusion is incorrect. Our study accounted for gender, age, region of residence and ethnic origin – and still skin color emerged as a powerful determinant of wealth and education levels.

Worst in show

A second critique of racism in Mexico is that yes, it exists, but it is not as bad as in other places in the region, [like Brazil](#) or [the United States](#).

[Our study](#) runs contrary to that argument. Among nations surveyed in the Americas Barometer, Mexico ranks fourth in terms of the negative impact of skin-tone on an individual's wealth, behind Bolivia, Uruguay and Ecuador.

On the relationship between race and lower levels of education, Mexico moves up one spot to trail only Ecuador and Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed, the sole place in the Americas where people of color seem to fare worse overall than in Mexico is Ecuador, where Americas Barometer data shows that having dark skin reduces educational achievement by one year more than it does in Mexico.

This is in stark contrast to countries like Chile and Costa Rica, where race appears to have only a minor impact on wealth and education.

Our analysis unambiguously disprove the notion that Mexico is somehow so mixed race – so mestizo – as to be race-blind. Quite to the contrary:

Racism is [a severe social challenge](#) that people in society and government would do well to take more seriously.

Going forward, our research will focus on examining the origins of this problem, from employer discrimination to access to health care. That should help lawmakers design policies to reduce inequalities based on [skin color](#).

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