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In time, use of Spanish dies in immigrant families, study finds

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TRENTON, N.J.— A few generations after families move to the United States from Latin American countries, fluency in Spanish dies out and English becomes the dominant language, according to a new study.

The paper counters arguments that Latino immigration to the United States could create a bilingual society and a basic change in American culture.

Such sentiments have played a role in debates over U.S. immigration law.

The study — by sociologists Douglas Massey at Princeton University and Ruben Rumbaut and Frank Bean at the University of California-Irvine — found Spanish giving way to English among Southern California's heavily Hispanic population.

The study suggests that Mexican immigrants arriving in Southern California today can expect only five out of every 100 of their great-grandchildren to speak fluent Spanish.

"Even in the nation's largest Spanish-speaking enclave ... Spanish appears to be well on the way to a natural death by the third generation of U.S. residence," the two said in the paper, published in the September issue of the journal "Population and Development Review."

The authors used survey data to show that Hispanics with each successive generation are becoming English speakers, just like previous immigration waves in U.S. history.

The paper drew two studies, one conducted in 2004 and the other in 2001 to 2003, to assemble a sample of 5,703 Southern California residents; 1,642 had Mexican roots and a total of 2,262 had Latin American ancestry.

Survival of Spanish among the descendants of Mexican and Central American immigrants was higher than among other groups, but English took over as the years passed.

Among Mexican-Americans with two U.S.-born parents but three or more foreign-born grandparents, only 17 percent spoke fluent Spanish. Among those with only one or two foreign-born grandparents, Spanish fluency dropped to 7 percent.

Among the third generation of Mexican-Americans, 96 percent prefer to speak English in their homes.

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