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# Serendipitous Sociologist: Transitions and Turning Points in My Journey

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## Abstract

Serendipity, curiosity, and lived experience shaped my career as a social demographer and my interests in social policy. I transitioned from the humanities to sociology and demography as a graduate student the University of Texas at Austin, where I discovered my affinity for quantitative research. My interest in Latin American demography gave way to domestic concerns as new opportunities arose at each of the three institutions where I have had the privilege to work—the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Chicago, and Princeton University. That all three institutions hosted vibrant demography and policy programs facilitated my research about the Hispanic population, family structure, urban poverty, college access, and myriad aspects of socioeconomic inequality and immigrant integration. Superb colleagues and talented graduate student collaborators deserve major credit for my career accomplishments. I attribute numerous opportunities to serve on philanthropic and corporate boards to the strength of weak ties.

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## INTRODUCTION

My childhood and adolescence became the template for a research career I could not imagine even during graduate school. Writing this article prompted me to reflect on the links between my lived experiences and how serendipity and opportunities shaped my career, which coincided with the expansion of the population studies centers program at the National Institutes of Health, the launch of the World Fertility Surveys, the addition of Hispanic identifiers to US Census schedules, and relitigation of the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) decision. Each development shaped my research agenda in unexpected ways. As prologue, I offer a brief biography.

I was born in the town of Donna in Hidalgo County, Texas—one of the poorest counties in the state, both in 1950 and today. Hidalgo County sits on the border with Mexico, which for decades was a gateway for able-bodied men seeking jobs on farms and ranches throughout Texas and as far north as Michigan. My father, Toribio Tienda, first crossed the Rio Grande as a teenager to support his mother and siblings by working on Texas farms and citrus orchards. Lax surveillance of the US-Mexico border facilitated circular, undocumented migration for many decades; despite frequent crossings, my father avoided apprehension. Although my mother, Azucena Hernández, spent her childhood on a Mexican hacienda, she and my uncle Rodrigo were born in Detroit while my maternal grandfather, Rodolfo, worked in the automobile industry. Lacking legal status, the family returned to Mexico after the Great Depression shuttered plants and left them jobless. When economic conditions improved, my then-widowed grandmother, still undocumented, returned to Texas with three orphaned children, including my adolescent mother.

My parents met while working in a citrus processing plant. She was 17 and he was 21 when they married in the fall of 1946. Neither had completed primary school because both had worked since a young age to supplement their families' incomes. Flagrant discrimination against Mexicans in South Texas drove them to seek better fortunes in the industrial Midwest. Early in 1951, they boarded a Michigan-bound Greyhound bus with two toddlers in tow. Through networks of migrant relatives, they learned about housing, jobs in the steel industry, and how to navigate the immigration bureaucracy so my father could become a citizen. Herman Gardens, a low-rise public housing project in Detroit, offered affordable shelter until 1956, when the young family moved to Lincoln Park, a working-class neighborhood in Detroit's Downriver suburbs that housed industrial workers. I was six years old at the time; I had a brother one year my junior and three sisters ages eight, three, and one.

I did not speak English when I started kindergarten in 1955, but I was reasonably proficient by first grade, and in second grade I was in the top reading group. My mother's unexpected death in spring 1957 challenged the family's precarious economic condition, yet my father managed to keep his five children out of the foster care system. Surplus commodities provided by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) stretched the meager food budget, and the Catholic Church donated clothes and shoes. After a succession of live-in childcare providers, my father remarried in 1959, adding a stepbrother and half-brother to the mix. Our crowded bungalow was devoid of books, yet we understood that good grades were not negotiable. Even as a young widower with five children, my father never missed a back-to-school night. I later learned that he had promised my ailing mother five high school diplomas. He delivered several advanced degrees.

Although I excelled in school, I planned to attend a cosmetology program after graduation—that is, until my seventh-grade English teacher suggested I consider college. "College is for rich people," I said, but she explained that scholarships were available for high achievers. It was a moment that forever altered my educational aspirations—a topic I later researched.

My decision to attend Michigan State University (MSU) also was fortuitous. A visit to the East Lansing campus as part of a school-sponsored athletic event reinforced my college plans. I was fascinated by the prospect of living on campus, with all the autonomy it afforded, and did not

apply anywhere else. At the time, MSU offered rolling admissions; tuition was calculated on a sliding scale (based on family income), and I qualified for a Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (renamed Pell Grant in 1980). In November of my senior year of high school, MSU welcomed me to the class of 1972.

In the 1960s, teaching was deemed a safe occupation for women, and as a native Spanish speaker, I imagined becoming a high school Spanish teacher. At MSU I excelled in classes, and after freshman year I was admitted to the honors college. This privilege exempted me from the required second-year social studies and humanities curriculum, which I substituted with advanced electives. Sociology did not make the list. A demoralizing student teaching experience followed by a summer USDA internship certifying migrant farmworker families for food stamps in Alpena, Michigan, sowed doubts about my teaching plans.

Most of Alpena's migrant workers hailed from South Texas, and except for very young children, entire families labored in the strawberry fields. Their economic circumstances resonated with my childhood experiences: In the summer of 1960, before my tenth birthday, the steel mill laid off hundreds of workers, including my father. To replace the lost earnings, my entire family temporarily lived in migrant housing while we harvested tomatoes in Monroe, Michigan (Tienda 2024). Two years later, we harvested cherries in Traverse City, Michigan, to make ends meet during a steel worker strike. Had my parents not boarded that Greyhound bus to Michigan in 1951, it could have been my family eking out a livelihood in Michigan's migrant worker stream. The USDA summer internship provided a practical introduction to sociology and proved valuable in both securing a "bridge" job at MSU before graduate school and later bolstering my teaching about rural poverty and migrant farmworkers.

## ACADEMIC U-TURN

Serendipity and opportunity opened a formal path to sociology. The Ford Foundation had launched a graduate fellowship to diversify the professoriate by targeting underrepresented groups across all disciplines. A Mexican American professor urged me apply for the fellowship and seek admission to the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), which had a premier romance language department. Assuming I had little chance of success on either count, I respectfully obliged. With the USDA internship experience still fresh, in March 1972 I accepted a position in MSU's Cooperative Extension Service to serve the growing numbers of Mexican American migrant farmworkers displaced by mechanization. Notice that I had been awarded the Ford fellowship arrived my first week working at the Extension Service, where I worked five months unaware that I was "doing sociology."

My transfer from the romance language department to the newly established interdisciplinary PhD program in Latin American studies at the University of Texas was seamless, and course selection paved the way to sociology. In fall 1972, I took my first courses in sociology (Modern Mexico) and economics (Latin American Economies) and simultaneously audited undergraduate introduction courses to learn about the foundations of both disciplines. Harley Browning, an expert on Mexican society and then director of the Population Research Center (PRC), offered to sponsor my transfer to the department of sociology. My admission to sociology was official in fall 1973, and I was assigned a desk at PRC. But lacking coursework in statistics, research methods, and demography, I had some catching up to do. Statistics professor Daniel Price recommended that I complete an undergraduate statistics course before taking graduate-level quantitative coursework. Over the summer I found my stride in statistics, became a tutor for struggling classmates, and completed my U-turn from the humanities to empirical social science.

Under Browning's leadership, UT-Austin's PRC received core funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's (NICHD) centers program. The university's



demography training program was bolstered by several recent hires in sociology, including Dudley Poston Jr., Parker Frisbie, and Frank Bean. Omer Galle and Theresa Sullivan joined the faculty shortly thereafter, and both, along with Poston and Browning, served on my dissertation committee. I honed my sociological skills writing research proposals to fulfill seminar requirements, and at PRC I learned the basics of quantitative research. Browning was a superb mentor who insisted on clearly formulated questions and adeptly balanced encouragement with constructive criticism as I forged a sociological career (Tienda 2022).

Two courses influenced my master's thesis and PhD dissertation: Browning's course in Latin American demography and Michael Conroy's seminar on population and development. Both courses exposed poorly understood links between population growth and economic development, including questions about the economic value of children. Esther Boserup's (1970) cross-national study about women's role in economic development inspired my master's thesis about women's labor force participation in Mexico. Fulfilling the thesis requirement tested my resolve to complete the transition from humanities to social science (Tienda 2022). The lack of digitized Census data required tedious hand-coding to generate descriptive statistics, executing regression commands using IBM punch cards, and writing about numbers—an unfamiliar skill for a literature student. Browning's sharp pencil left extensive “track changes” on manuscripts that rivaled those received by nonnative English speakers. But under his patient guidance, by studying Mexico I corroborated Boserup's claims about how female employment changes with economic development. Both empirical chapters were published in leading Mexican sociology and demography journals (Tienda 1975, 1977). Browning's interests in the industrial transformation of employment also influenced my early writings about the Latin American and US labor force (Singelman & Tienda 1979, 1985).

Conroy's population and economic development seminar focused my interest on family labor supply, a construct familiar from both my lived experiences and class readings about the household division of labor. The new home economics paradigm, which explicitly acknowledged that decision-making occurs in a household context, had not yet permeated the development literature. I was struck by cost-benefit analyses that presumed to estimate the cost to society of averting births despite pervasive evidence about the economic value of children in developing economies. In the 1970s, family and household demography was a relatively underdeveloped subfield compared with fertility, mortality, and demographic methods. John Caldwell (1976) had not yet published his provocative restatement of demographic transition theory about how shifts in intergenerational wealth flows between parents and children change the economic value of children.

Using the 1970 National Multipurpose Survey of Peru, my seminar paper for Conroy's course described variations in children's labor force activity according to household structure, employment status of the household head, and rural-urban residence (Tienda 1979). This assignment inspired my dissertation, which examined how Peruvian families absorbed the costs of childbearing by relying on kin to rebalance the ratio of workers and dependents over the life cycle. At the time, Peru's total fertility rate hovered around 6.5, and household size ranged from 2 to 21. Changes in age and economic dependency ratios over the family life cycle revealed that Peruvian families added extended relatives and increased labor supply, including that of children, when dependency ratios peaked (Tienda 1980a). My dissertation was anchored in family demography, and specifically the intersection of work and household structure, and it subsequently influenced research about Hispanic families (Angel & Tienda 1982, Tienda & Angel 1982), immigrants (Tienda 1980b), and women (Tienda & Glass 1985, Glass et al. 1988).

## INSTITUTIONS AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

My research agenda was influenced by colleagues and opportunities offered at the three institutions where I was privileged to work. At Browning's urging, I entered the academic job market

in fall 1975 after defending my dissertation proposal. The Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (now the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology) advertised a job that was shared with the experiment station in the College of Agriculture. My brief work experiences at USDA and MSU's Cooperative Extension Service gave me an edge for the job, which I accepted in early December. Wisconsin was an ideal, if somewhat intimidating, institution in which to launch a career in social demography. Recent hires of tech-savvy faculty trained in advanced statistics deepened the sociology department's quantitative expertise, and both the Center for Demography and Ecology (CDE) and the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) provided research support, including access to staff seasoned in federal budgeting and grantsmanship (Marwell 2012).

In the 1970s, CDE operated an IBM 360 Model 30 computer that was well suited for processing survey data stored on magnetic tapes. Then, in the 1980s, CDE purchased a VAX, which allowed faculty associates to analyze an expanding volume of machine-readable Census volumes and demographic surveys (Flory & McDermott 1999). That faculty affiliates did not incur per-job costs for VAX computing encouraged innovation in novel statistical applications. Empirical analyses were facilitated by CDE staff programmers with deep expertise processing large surveys, including multi-reel decennial Censuses. CDE was also at the vanguard of distributed computing when minicomputers altered data processing. And numerous talented graduate students were willing to apply their newly acquired statistical skills in quantitative research. Many research papers published during my tenure at Wisconsin were coauthored with graduate students.

Affiliation with UW's IRP, a federally funded interdisciplinary research center, broadened my substantive interests to include poverty, program participation, and, importantly, social policy. IRP proved a valuable training ground for subsequent appointments at the University of Chicago and the policy school at Princeton University. Then-director Sheldon Danziger introduced me to Gary Sandefur, who shared interests in racial and ethnic stratification and became a collaborator (Sandefur & Tienda 1988).

Although I maintained a research program in Peruvian demography during my 11 years as a Wisconsin faculty member and secured my first NICHD grant to analyze the Peruvian World Fertility Survey (Tienda 1984; Tienda et al. 1985; Palloni & Tienda 1986, 1992), my interests in Latin American demography gradually gave way to characterizing the demographic and social contours of the burgeoning Hispanic population in the United States. In graduate school, I had deliberately avoided research about Mexican Americans because I was more interested in linkages between population and international development, and because I was sensitive to criticisms that I received special treatment because of my ancestry. After publishing several articles from my dissertation and receiving tenure in 1980, I set those concerns aside.

## RESEARCH ON THE HISPANIC POPULATION

My early career coincided with growing interest in the Hispanic population buttressed by legislation (Public Law 94-311) requiring publication of economic and social statistics for "Americans of Spanish origin or descent" in federal surveys. Before 1970, most research about Hispanics focused on specific groups: Mexican Americans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, and Cubans in Florida. In response to political pressure to generate a national count of Hispanics, the "Spanish origin" item was added to the 1969 Current Population Survey (CPS) on an experimental basis, and later to the 5% sample long-form questionnaire of the 1970 Census. The Census Bureau reported 9.1 million Hispanics (4.5% of the national population) in 1970, but postenumeration analyses raised the count to 10.5 million (5.2% of the total) (Davis et al. 1983). Today nearly one US resident in five identifies as Hispanic or Latino, a label added to the 2000 Census.



Release of the 1976 Survey of Income and Education (SIE) coincided with my arrival at Wisconsin. Building on the CPS's battery of labor force questions and its large sample size, the SIE included an extensive set of questions about education, bilingualism, program participation, and, importantly, Spanish/Hispanic origin. Although I was focused on publishing papers from my dissertation, I responded to a request for proposal issued by the National Commission on Employment Policy (NCEP). At the time, the US Department of Labor was seeking to build a portfolio of research about Hispanic workers. Coursework in labor economics and demography of employment served me well. My first grant application was successful, and my affiliation with CDE and IRP facilitated interdisciplinary collaboration.

My early articles about Hispanics merged my dissertation interests in the household division of labor with those of the labor department; these articles routinely compared Hispanics with blacks and non-Hispanic whites, and, sample sizes permitting, also included comparisons among national origin groups. A set of articles I wrote with then-graduate students Ronald Angel and Jennifer Glass investigated whether and how the prevalence of extended living arrangements was associated with labor market behavior, asking whether the inclusion of nonnuclear relatives reflected cultural preferences or adaptations to supplement family income in response to economic hardship (Angel & Tienda 1982, Tienda & Angel 1982). Black and Hispanic households were more likely than their white counterparts to include extended members, many of whom either contributed meaningfully to household income or allowed mothers to enter the labor force (Tienda & Glass 1985). Paralleling my dissertation findings, we established associations between extended living arrangements and economic precariousness, revealing group differences in both the propensity to double up and to compensate for low wages or husband absence by relying on economically active extended relatives.

With NCEP funding, I began a multiyear collaboration with economist George Borjas, who was working at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that culminated in *Hispanics in the U.S. Economy* (Borjas & Tienda 1985)—the first collection of sociological and economic empirical studies that advanced the study of the Hispanic labor force beyond descriptive aggregate comparisons among national origin groups. We invited contributions from new and established scholars and asked authors to consider what could be learned about social institutions (schools, labor markets, families) by studying Hispanics specifically rather than describing how groups differ. The volume identified several puzzles that warranted explanation, such as why employment rates of non-Hispanic whites lagged those of some Hispanic groups, or why the wage returns to education differed among national origin groups.

Census 1980 greatly expanded opportunities to learn about the Hispanic population. Federal legislation required accurate counts for small areas, and Census advisory committees pressed for an improved enumeration of Hispanics. In response, the bureau included the Spanish origin item in the questionnaire administered to 100% of households and added several new and modified questions to the 20% sample questionnaire, including home language, English proficiency, ancestry, job search, and income (Littman 1979). With funding from the Russell Sage and Alfred P. Sloan foundations and several federal agencies, the Social Science Research Council organized the National Committee for Research on the 1980 Census. The committee commissioned several monographs that collectively would produce “a definitive, accurate, and comprehensive picture of the US population in the 1980s, that would be primarily descriptive but also enriched by a historical perspective and [provide] a sense of the challenges for the future” (Bean & Tienda 1987, p. ix). In all, the Russell Sage Foundation published 18 monographs.

Frank D. Bean and I proposed a monograph about Hispanics. Our volume, *The Hispanic Population of the United States* (Bean & Tienda 1987), paints a comprehensive picture of changes in the demography and socioeconomic standing of Hispanics during the 1960s and 1970s. Although

Jaffe et al. (1980) had published a monograph about the Spanish-origin population based on the 1970 Census, theirs followed the tradition of describing the major national origin groups separately, with only one chapter dedicated to heritage group comparisons. Bean & Tienda (1987) used the 1960, 1970, and 1980 microdata Census files to document changes in demographic characteristics and socioeconomic standing of the major national origin groups. Building on Nelson & Tienda's (1985) social history, we introduced the volume with an essay about the distinctive social and economic integration of the three major heritage groups, and we organized the volume thematically. Chapters dedicated to the components of demographic change, immigration, marriage and family, fertility, education, employment, and earnings systematically compared Hispanic heritage groups with blacks and whites.

In addition to showing why it was important to disaggregate Hispanic heritage groups for policy purposes, the volume raised questions about the coherence of "Hispanicity" as an ethnic construct (Tienda & Ortiz 1986). Since the Spanish origin question was first included on the 100% Census schedule over 50 years ago, the Census Bureau instructions have explained that Hispanics are an ethnic group and could be of any race; however, to the bureau's chagrin, 30% to 40% consistently eschew the canonical federal race categories and write in "some other race," even after Census 2020 allowed respondents to select more than one race. Because Hispanic is usually listed alongside black, white, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American for reporting purposes, the label has morphed into a pseudorace in practice. In 2030, the racialization question may become moot because, as recommended by the Census Scientific Advisory Committee, the two-question format asking race and Hispanic origin separately will be replaced by a single question that asks about race or ethnicity—unless the instruction is again blocked by the Office of Management and Budget, as it was in 2020 (Wang 2023). Whether Hispanic becomes an enduring social category will depend partly on changes in questions about race and Spanish/Hispanic origin, but even more so on future economic opportunities afforded to youth and the foreign-born population.

My interest in the Hispanic population, cultivated at Wisconsin, extended over my career, even as my research agenda expanded to include poverty, gender, immigration, higher education, and adolescent development. I had not planned to conduct another Census-based study about Hispanics, but this decision was upended when I was invited to chair the National Research Council (NRC) Panel on Hispanic Americans (2003–2006). Driven by both immigration and above-replacement fertility, the Hispanic population more than doubled between 1980 and 2000, accounting for about half of US population growth. Sweeping claims that Latinos were remaking America piqued my curiosity (e.g., Suárez-Orozco & Pérez 2002). The panel's report (Tienda & Mitchell 2006b), along with a companion research volume (Tienda & Mitchell 2006a), was released in 2006, the year the US population reached 300 million; already, Hispanics had surpassed blacks as the largest numerical minority. Beyond the demographic narrative of rapid growth and greater source country diversification, the report highlighted two developments with long-term implications for the socioeconomic standing of Hispanics: new settlement patterns and a major generational transition set in motion by shifts in the components of population change.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Hispanics underwent an unprecedented geographic dispersal that was most pronounced in the South and spearheaded by recent immigrants. North Carolina's Hispanic population increased fivefold during the 1990s, for example, and that of Georgia quadrupled. Although the geographic scattering cemented Latinos' standing as a national pan-ethnic group, reception of new arrivals was as varied as their new destinations, ranging from small rural towns to suburban places where few Hispanics had settled before (Fischer & Tienda 2006). Black–white segregation levels fell in some of the largest metro areas, suggesting that Hispanics buffered longstanding racial divides. In some new destinations, Latin American immigrants were welcomed by employers eager to hire cheap labor; in others, the presence of day





laborers waiting for employers on street corners triggered local ordinances and vigilante activities that fomented anti-immigrant sentiment and sharpened ethnic class divisions. How intergroup relations will evolve in the future is an open question, but a follow-up review of Latinos' residential dispersal since 2000 documented rising segregation along with instances of hypersegregation, which signaled qualified acceptance and stagnant spatial assimilation in some places (Tienda & Fuentes 2014).

Another important finding of the NRC report centered on immigrant children and children of immigrants from Latin America, who were coming of age in an era of rising inequality and population aging. The looming policy question was whether they would acquire sufficient human capital to replenish the projected losses from impending retirements of the bloated baby boom cohort. Despite improvements since 1980, Hispanics lagged whites and blacks in educational attainment, especially in college completion (Schneider et al. 2006). Even as college completion levels rose among all groups, gaps between Hispanics, whites, and Asians continued to widen (Tienda 2017, Flores et al. 2021). The NRC panel did not make policy recommendations, but the report cautioned that failure to close education and language proficiency gaps would weaken Latinos' future economic contributions and hamper their social mobility. I have made the policy case for increasing educational investments in op-eds (Tienda 2013, 2016b), research articles (Tienda 2016a), and policy briefs based on coedited volumes dedicated to immigrant youth (Tienda & Haskins 2011) and Hispanic youth (Gennetian & Tienda 2021).

### POVERTY, INEQUALITY, AND MINORITIES: CHICAGO YEARS

In anticipation of Evelyn Kitagawa and Donald Bogue's retirements, Douglas Massey and I were recruited to the University of Chicago Department of Sociology in 1987. At the time, the university featured three small population centers—two in sociology and a P50 Population Center housed at the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), conveniently located across the street from the sociology department. Under Massey's leadership, and with increased support from NICHD, the three centers merged and became the Chicago Population Research Center. NORC provided an ideal environment for building a shared services ecosystem conducive to conducting quantitative research, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and mentoring superb graduate students.

At Chicago, my research program shifted from documenting the contours and evolution of labor market inequality and poverty by race, ethnicity, nativity, and gender based on Census surveys (Sandefur & Tienda 1988, Tienda & Jensen 1988) to clarifying how differentials arose and why they persisted. Three major surveys underway at NORC—the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), the National Education Longitudinal Survey of 88 (NELS:88), and the Chicago Urban Poverty and Family Life Survey (UPFLS)—each provided propitious opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and graduate students experienced in longitudinal methods.

William Julius Wilson invited me to join his UPFLS team as a research associate. The study was designed to evaluate hypotheses about the causes and consequences of urban poverty that he had advanced in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson 1987). One hypothesis tied increased nonmarital childbearing to rising joblessness among black men caused by outmigration of industrial jobs to the suburbs, which made them unattractive marriage prospects. Wilson argued that the exodus of the black middle class from the inner city, coupled with massive job losses during the 1970s, not only concentrated the urban poor spatially in underclass neighborhoods but also socially isolated the young from middle-class role models. In-depth interviews supported Wilson's claim that the value of marriage as an institution had changed among poor blacks, though not among Mexicans, most of them foreign-born (Forste & Tienda 1996). Even when they were unable to provide economic

support, however, most inner-city fathers kept ties with their partners and children (Stier & Tienda 1993). Later studies showed that high rates of incarceration and violence also contributed to the shortage of marriageable black men (Sawhill & Venator 2015, Ruggles 2022).

In retrospect, Wilson's focus on spatial arrangements was prescient, even if his analysis overlooked important distinctions between poor people and poor places (Tienda 1991), downplayed the continuing significance of race (Staley 1989), ignored the literature about racial segregation (Massey & Denton 1993), and undertheorized the significance of exposure to poverty (Sharkey 2013). Neighborhood effects were later investigated by the multiyear Moving to Opportunity experiment, and they proved more nuanced than Wilson had initially hypothesized (Ludwig 2012).

Wilson's ideas about the urban underclass galvanized the social science community to revisit claims about race, poverty, and place by focusing attention on the structural dimensions of neighborhoods (Sampson et al. 2002). However, his claims about concentration effects focused on a single measure—Census tract poverty rates—and a single tumultuous decade characterized by two recessions and unprecedented stagflation (Blinder 2023). A multidimensional typology of Chicago neighborhoods over 20 years revealed a more complex portrait of changing labor market conditions set in motion by immigration and unequal economic recovery. A longer time frame revealed that Chicago witnessed spatial polarization of both poor and affluent Census tracts, contraction of working-class neighborhoods, consolidation of Hispanic immigrant neighborhoods, and neighborhood upgrading with race-specific patterns (Morenoff & Tienda 1997). In poor Hispanic neighborhoods, a thriving informal economy allowed immigrants to supplement low wages (Tienda & Raijman 2000) and provided pathways to business ownership (Raijman & Tienda 2000, Raijman & Tienda 2003).

The centerpiece of UPFLS was a survey of black, white, Mexican, and Puerto Rican parents residing in poor places (20% or higher poverty rates) in the Chicago metropolitan area. The survey relied on retrospective methods to capture work and family histories. Pursuing our shared interests in family demography (Stier & Tienda 1992) and labor force behavior (Tienda & Stier 1991, 1996), Haya Stier and I coauthored the only monograph based on the household survey (Stier & Tienda 2001). To examine whether and how the inner-city poor differed from the urban poor in general, we used an urban sample from the 1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households as a comparison. We found little evidence of ghetto-specific behaviors. For example, when compared with their national urban poor counterparts, blacks, whites, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans living in poor Chicago neighborhoods differed in their experiences with early material deprivation and accumulated labor market disadvantages but not in their sequencing of births and marriage, welfare participation, or labor force attachment (Stier & Tienda 1997, 2001).

Both shrinking job opportunities and pervasive racial discrimination generated labor market disparities. Blacks living in poor places were less likely to be hired than Mexican immigrants with less education and employed blacks earned lower wages than comparably skilled whites (Stier & Tienda 2001). Retrospective work histories revealed that both black and Puerto Rican men suffered greater employment instability and accumulated large experience deficits over their work lives than Mexican and white men, which compromised their lifetime earnings (Tienda & Stier 1996). Work histories also showed that adolescent childbearing undermined high school completion for Hispanic girls but not black girls (Forste & Tienda 1992). Both findings invited further exploration.

In collaboration with NORC colleagues, I focused on the school-to-work transition to investigate how early work experience stratified adult earnings. The empirical record showed that both the timing and nature of early work experiences differed by race, but there was limited evidence about Hispanic youth. Studies disagreed about the value of youth employment for adult outcomes, reflecting differences in definitions of adolescent work, changing labor market conditions, and



differences between youth who did and did not work (Hotz & Tienda 2002). Early results using NELS:88 indicated that employment distracted young people from school if they worked over 20 hours per week (Schoenhals et al. 1998).

The NLSY79, which had interviewed teenagers annually for more than a decade, included more precise measures of labor market status than NELS:88. In addition to showing that most black and Hispanic youth worked while they attended high school and college, age-specific activity distributions revealed three distinct ethno-racial pathways from school to work (Ahituv et al. 2000). The modal Hispanic pathway combined early labor market entry with early school departure, which lowered adult earnings despite an initial wage advantage. Among blacks, the most typical school-to-work pathway involved prolonged schooling with limited work experience. White youth featured extensive overlap of work and school after age 16, but at lower work intensities than among Hispanics and blacks. Hispanic adolescents' wage advantage over white teens was reversed among young adults because whites completed more schooling.

Our research based on NLSY79 also challenged claims that the wage benefits of youth employment persisted through early adulthood. In addition to considering age-specific employment and school status, our analyses for men also examined military enlistment and idleness (neither enrolled nor working) and analyses for women considered births. Dynamic, sequential, discrete-choice estimation accounted for selection among men (Hotz et al. 2002) and the endogeneity of births and school continuation decisions for women (Ahituv & Tienda 2004). Wage returns to job experience acquired while enrolled in school were negligible, as were racial and ethnic differences (Hotz et al. 2002). Young women who delayed childbearing and remained enrolled in school full-time reaped significant labor market benefits in young adulthood (Ahituv & Tienda 2004). Prolonged school enrollment was particularly consequential for Hispanic women, whose college attainment lagged that of whites and blacks.

Joe Hotz and I both left the University of Chicago in 1997, when I went to Princeton and he took a job at UCLA, but collaborating with him left an indelible impact on my understanding of selection bias and causal inference in observational research. I continued investigating variations in young women's labor market dynamics, market attachment, and wage growth at Princeton (Alon et al. 2001, Alon & Tienda 2005b) until new opportunities beckoned.

## UNEQUAL ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION: PRINCETON YEARS

I joined the Princeton University faculty in 1997 unaware of legal challenges to college admissions practices that would lead me to refocus my research agenda again. Having led Princeton University during the 1978 *Bakke* decision, William Bowen, then president of the Mellon Foundation, anticipated relitigation of affirmative action and preemptively mobilized the research community to its defense. The prior year, the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit had outlawed race preferences in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas (*Hopwood v. Texas* 1996). Predictably, Hispanic and black enrollment dropped at Texas's public flagships—UT-Austin and Texas A&M University (TAMU). Seeking to restore hard-won diversity, the Texas legislature hastily crafted the Top 10% law, which guaranteed that students who graduated in the top decile of their class would be admitted to any public institution of their choice. The law's architects sought to better align the geography, demography, and economic composition of the state with that of the public flagships, but they failed to consider institutional carrying capacity relative to the size and projected growth of the college-age population (Tienda & Sullivan 2009). The Top 10% law essentially converted an opaque de facto practice of admitting nearly all top decile graduates into a de jure policy requirement (Long et al. 2010).

Before the release of his and Derek Bok's *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Bowen & Bok 1998), Bowen invited me to

discuss a possible research project. Because his forthcoming tome demonstrating the benefits of race-sensitive admissions focused on African Americans, the Mellon Foundation would welcome a proposal about Hispanics' experiences at selective institutions and would provide access to the proprietary College & Beyond (C&B) data. Although C&B excluded selective institutions in Texas and California, national longitudinal data (NELS:88 and High School & Beyond) remedied that concern. A study of higher education would build on my Chicago investigations of racial and ethnic differences in high school achievement (Kao & Tienda 1995, 1996) and college aspirations (Kao & Tienda 1998). Another opportunity arose when Jorge Balán, then senior program officer at the Ford Foundation, invited me to submit a planning grant to evaluate how the Texas Top 10% law impacted college attendance.

Thus, I began the multiyear Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project (THEOP), with generous support from Ford and supplements from the Mellon, Spencer, and Hewlett foundations. Teresa Sullivan, then UT-Austin's executive vice chancellor for academic affairs, joined as coinvestigator. Her legal scholarship and administrative experience in Texas higher education, including through the *Hopwood* litigation, proved invaluable because the study required access to institutional administrative data and longitudinal survey research in schools. THEOP findings were used in support of the 2003 Supreme Court decision that upheld the legal basis of narrowly tailored affirmative action in college admissions (*Grutter v. Bollinger* 2003), and again when Abigail Fisher, who is white, sued UT-Austin alleging that she was denied admission because of her race (*Fisher v. University of Texas* 2016).

Analyses of national data (NELS:88 and High School & Beyond) focused on race preferences in admissions. Based on differential graduation rates within institutions, critics of affirmative action claimed that black and Hispanic students would be better matched for success at less selective institutions. That comparison was incorrect: Group-specific comparisons between comparable students attending more versus less selective institutions were needed. Using two national data sets and four different statistical methods that accounted for selection and endogeneity bias, Alon & Tienda (2005a) decisively debunked the mismatch hypothesis. Black and Hispanic graduation rates were actually higher at more selective rather than less selective institutions. Moreover, the alleged tradeoff between diversity and merit resulted because institutions increasingly relied on a narrow test-based definition of merit that was a weaker predictor of college success than high school grades and consequently raised the need for affirmative action (Alon & Tienda 2007). The Texas admission experiment confirmed this claim (Niu & Tienda 2010a) and also revealed that college success improved when multiple students from the same high school enrolled together (Fletcher & Tienda 2009).

Although it was initially applauded as a race-neutral alternative to affirmative action, public support for Texas's Top 10% law waned as graduates from affluent schools were denied admission to the public flagships (Tienda & Niu 2006b). Disapproval shifted criticism from race to school quality as the basis for exclusion and reliance on a single indicator of merit that allegedly privileged underqualified minority graduates from low-performing schools over lower-ranked, ostensibly better-qualified students from affluent schools. Attempts to rescind or amend the law met with limited success; however, because UT-Austin became saturated with automatically admitted students, the guaranteed threshold was gradually lowered (it is currently 6%).

Following the 2003 *Grutter* decision, then-president Faulkner announced procedures that would produce even greater diversity than the Top 10% law alone. This declaration led to Abigail Fisher's lawsuit alleging reverse discrimination. Fisher asserted that a race-neutral alternative was available, that black and Hispanic representation surpassed the shares enrolled before the policy change, and that less qualified students were being admitted. Analyses of THEOP data disproved these and many other claims.

First, the Top 10% law is not race neutral. The policy exploited racial and ethnic segregation of Texas public high schools, allowing universities to accept students from a wider array of schools without explicitly considering students' race. Observed gains in black and Hispanic representation at the public flagships derived from pervasive school segregation because qualifying students hailed disproportionately from minority-dominant schools (Tienda & Niu 2006a), but income segregation constrained enrollment of top-decile students (Niu & Tienda 2010b). Second, top-decile black and Hispanic students matched or outperformed lower-ranked white students who had superior test scores in first-year persistence rates, grades, and four-year graduation rates (Niu & Tienda 2010a). Third, flagship diversity improved because the state's college-eligible minority population grew faster than the population of college-eligible whites (Tienda 2015). Analyses that considered both changes in the size of graduation cohorts and institutional carrying capacity revealed that changing demography, not the admission guarantee, drove campus diversification, and that affirmative action was the most efficient policy to diversify college campuses, even in a highly segregated state like Texas (Harris & Tienda 2010). Fisher's claim that the 10% law restored diversity was mistaken.

Revealed college preferences also disproved allegations that the 10% law triggered a brain drain because students denied admission left for college in neighboring states (Tienda & Niu 2006b). Partly owing to constraints on the flagships' carrying capacity, applicants not qualified for automatic admission expanded their choice sets, which boosted average test scores at less selective Texas institutions (Long & Tienda 2010). UT-Austin witnessed an increase in the number of new feeder high schools and the geographic diversity of its student body, but TAMU did not (Long et al. 2010). Neither institution saw appreciable gains in socioeconomic diversity (Koffman & Tienda 2008), partly because highly ranked students from low-socioeconomic status families were less likely to know about the admission guarantee or college options than their more affluent counterparts and because the admission guarantee did not ensure financial aid (Niu & Tienda 2008, Niu et al. 2008).

Both the University of Michigan and UT-Austin beat back legal challenges to their admission regimes before the Supreme Court in 2003 and 2016, respectively, but in 2023, Harvard and the University of North Carolina did not. While I was writing this article, the Court made it unlawful for colleges and universities to consider race in admissions decisions (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* 2023). Criticism from suburban parents, state lawmakers, and university leaders who believe deserving students from well-resourced schools are denied admission to the state's flagship universities may again attempt to rescind the Texas law on grounds that it exploits racial segregation. It is unclear whether changes in demographic composition, in application behavior, and in feeder school networks since 1998 will prevent erosion of flagship campus diversity. That question remains for future research.

## DEMOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

In 2000 I was elected to serve as the 2002 president of the Population Association of America, which requires delivering a scientific address to the association. Coincidentally, I learned that noncitizens had at one time been able to legally vote in federal elections. Puzzled and curious, I began investigating when and where noncitizens had voted. By chance, I also discovered a graph showing declining congressional seats for New York and Illinois—the top two immigrant destinations at the turn of the century—and wondered whether the two facts were connected. My prior research considered birthplace as a covariate to explain variations in socioeconomic outcomes (Bean & Tienda 1987, Stier & Tienda 1992, O'Neil & Tienda 2015), and I had investigated the labor market experiences and wage mobility of legalized immigrants (Borjas & Tienda 1993,



Tienda & Singer 1995) and Mexican immigrant entrepreneurs in Chicago (Raijman & Tienda 2003, Tienda & Raijman 2004). But an address focused on the civic implications of immigration pushed me out of my comfort zone (Tienda 2002).

Historically, immigration has contributed to nation-building while straining commitment to democratic principles of equity and inclusion, as Congressional debates about noncitizen voting and apportionment reveal. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, over 30 states permitted noncitizens to vote in federal elections, mostly for instrumental goals: to populate new states and to repopulate states decimated by the Civil War, to settle public debt, and to gain political power in Congress (Keyssar 2000). By 1900, all but 11 states had rescinded noncitizen suffrage, and all did so by the late 1920s (Harper-Ho 2000). Although noncitizen voting is permitted in local elections, unfounded allegations of noncitizen voting continue; in recent federal contests, they were used to justify voter suppression policies (Famighetti et al. 2017).

When immigrants shifted the geography of political influence in both the early and late twentieth century, Congressional debates about apportionment focused on the foreign born (Woodrow-Lafeld 2001). The Constitution is clear that apportionment is based on all persons residing in a state, yet Congress proposed amendments to exclude either noncitizens or naturalized citizens from apportionment counts. Based on proposed amendments, I evaluated three counterfactuals illustrating how Congressional seats would have changed for two periods of mass migration during the twentieth century: if apportionment had been restricted to the native born (thus excluding all naturalized immigrants); if it had been restricted to citizens, both naturalized and native born; and if immigration had not occurred. In 1930 and 2000, restricting apportionment to natives would have reshuffled 15 and 16 seats, respectively. Limiting apportionment to citizens would have reshuffled seven and nine seats, respectively, with less immigrant-friendly states benefitting from immigrants' geographic dispersal since 1980. Population shifts due to internal migration and differential growth have benefitted Texas and Florida, the least immigrant-friendly traditional destinations, while New York and Illinois lost three and two seats, respectively. My address called for a realignment of demography with the founding principles of inclusion and egalitarianism. Since my 2002 address, four of the top immigrant destination states lost seats in Congress, while Texas and Florida acquired six and nine, respectively.

In the two decades since my address, political polarization has intensified, and the 2020 enumeration witnessed unprecedented political meddling to influence apportionment. It is unclear how the 2020 reapportionment would have changed had the Trump administration succeeded in adding a citizenship question to the Census schedule—ostensibly to exclude undocumented migrants from the enumeration in violation of the Constitution [*Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) v. Klutznick* 1980]. Political scapegoating of immigrants, theatrics along the southern border, and highly partisan gerrymandering facilitated by the Supreme Court's 2013 dilution of the Voting Rights Act (*Shelby County v. Holder* 2013) signals a troublesome return to ascriptive democracy (Smith 1997) rather than the realignment of demography and democracy.

## CLOSING ACT: CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In a prescient presidential address to the Population Association of America, Samuel Preston (1984) delineated the diverging economic and health status of seniors and youth, noting that the elderly enjoyed stronger political support for public programs (notably Medicare and Social Security) that benefitted them. Waning public expenditures on schools and childcare centers, Preston argued, warranted increasing public support for the next generation. His address, combined with new insights about how age structure is linked with human capital investments (Lutz & KC 2011), rekindled my longstanding interest in child dependency. Membership on the board of the Jacobs Foundation (1998–2000) and affiliation with the Center for Research on Child and Family



Wellbeing at Princeton supported new comparative research about children and youth (Tienda & Wilson 2002, Adserà & Tienda 2012).

There was good reason to be concerned about the plight of youth, particularly Hispanics, who were coming of age as support for public higher education was falling (Tienda 2016b). In the 2017 American Educational Research Association's *Brown* lecture (Tienda 2017), I argued that the shifting of dependency burdens from youth to seniors warrants larger educational investments so that smaller birth cohorts can replenish public coffers to support large baby boom cohorts in retirement. Yet because two-thirds of public spending on youth comes from state and local governments (Isaacs et al. 2018), state disparities in school funding risk widening educational attainment gaps among demographic groups, as I showed for the state of Texas (Tienda 2015).

In policy briefs based on two scientific volumes, one focused on immigrant youth (Tienda & Haskins 2011) and another on Latino youth (Gennetian & Tienda 2021), my colleagues and I proposed three youth-centric policies to bolster the human capital of children and youth: expanded preschool programs, improved language instruction for school-age youth, and granting legal status to immigrant youth brought to the United States by their parents. These policies are even more urgent today because of learning delays and widened achievement gaps associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and because children brought to the United States without authorization risk deportation and loss of their potential economic contributions.

## POSTSCRIPT

My sociological journey began on the job when I worked with migrant workers, but throughout my career I also practiced sociology through service on philanthropic and public boards, and I enjoyed ample opportunities to pursue new interests with brilliant collaborators. There is no playbook for nomination to boards, but my research about Hispanics, poverty, and youth put my name on recruiters' radar. A *New York Times* op-ed about Puerto Ricans (Tienda & Díaz 1987) caught the attention of the then-president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY), who extended an invitation to join the CCNY board.

A former aide to New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan with ties to the University of Wisconsin introduced me to Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), at a time when a major board transition was underway. A political scientist by training with government connections, Altman transformed KFF into a bicoastal philanthropy with a formidable policy presence in Washington, DC. As a KFF board member, I learned an enormous amount about health care policy in the United States and South Africa, where I witnessed the egregious scourge of apartheid. That experience deepened my understanding of race relations and economic deprivation and influenced my course syllabi. Board service was and remains a source of continuing education.

Before completing my second term on the CCNY board, I met William McDonough, who was then president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (FRBNY) and an incoming CCNY trustee. A former Chicago banker, he was fluent in Spanish and regularly visited Mexico. After reading *The Color of Opportunity* (Stier & Tienda 2001), he invited me to join the board of the FRBNY as a Class C director, representing the public rather than other banks. FRBNY service deepened my understanding the US banking system and its contribution to economic inequality. Although I have no proof, I suspect that my election to the board of the Teachers Insurance Annuity Association was tied to the FRBNY appointment. On both corporate and several philanthropic boards, I was the lone sociologist, but my training in social demography and extensive labor market research served me well. My board appointments to the boards of the Russell Sage Foundation, the Jacobs Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and several others reflect the strength of weak ties, as network ties multiplied across organizations (Granovetter 1973).

Although now technically retired from the professoriate, I continue to practice sociology on the boards of three organizations—the Robin Hood Foundation, the Urban Institute, and the Holdsworth Center—respectively dedicated to fighting poverty, advancing economic mobility and equity through policy research, and improving public education. Beyond sociology and public service, I am making up for the family time lost during years of research deadlines and business travel, but I remain active in causes I am passionate about, especially how public education can foster mobility. That was my lived experience. How serendipity will shape my retirement years is unclear, but Spanish poet Antonio Machado's poem, *Caminante, no hay camino* (Traveler, there is no road) succinctly captures my serendipitous past:

Traveler, there is no road;  
you make your own path as you walk.

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