

ASSESSING THE PRIVATE SAFETY NET: Social Support among Minority Immigrant Parents

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Traditional assimilation paradigms argue that immigrants are particularly disadvantaged in feelings of marginality and dislocation. Given these paradigms, we explore how minority and immigrant status are associated with perceptions of social support among parents of young children. We use the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative sample of children in kindergarten in 1998 and 1999. Most groups of minority immigrant parents, compared to their native-born white counterparts, report lower levels of perceived social support, and this gap persists even when demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are held constant. Additionally, English language ability, but not years spent in the United States, attenuates the disadvantages that Hispanic immigrant parents face in their perceptions of social support compared with white immigrant parents. Finally, Hispanic parents report substantial variation in their perceptions of social support by ethnicity. As social support is an important predictor of parents' economic stability and children's well-being, these findings have important implications for children of immigrants, an important and increasing demographic group in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Durkheim's (1897) theory of social integration suggests that one's attachment to others can have important and beneficial consequences throughout the life course. Individuals who create and maintain close relationships with kin members, friends, and neighbors may experience positive and lasting benefits from this social integration (Sarason, Sarason, and Pierce 1990; Lin 2001). This theoretical framework spawned a large body of empirical research that examines the predictors of social relationships between individuals as well as the consequences of these relationships. And, empirical research tends to consistently show that social support is an important predictor of economic and psychological well-being among adults (Thoits 1995; Henly, Danziger, and Offer 2005; Harknett 2006) and behavioral well-being of children (Ryan, Kalil, and Leininger 2009). Social support may also mediate or moderate the association between demographic characteristics and various outcomes (Cohen and Wills 1985; Baron and Kenny 1986; Wethington and Kessler 1986).

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Social support may be particularly important for two groups of individuals: minority immigrant groups, who are more likely to feel marginalized, and thus, may especially benefit from helpful friends and family members, and parents of young children, who may especially need assistance because of the emotional and financial cost of childrearing. Hence, minority immigrant individuals who are also parents of young children may be particularly at risk of having little support. This may be especially true of recent immigrants to the United States or those with limited English language skills. Immigrant parents are a substantial and increasing demographic population, as nearly one in four children has at least one immigrant parent (O'Hare 2004). Despite the growth of this population, and theoretical and empirical research that suggests this group may feel particularly marginalized (Kao and Tienda 1995), little research examines differences in perceptions of social support among minorities by nativity status.

To address this shortcoming, we focus our attention on minority immigrant parents. In this article, we use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a nationally representative sample of parents with children in kindergarten in 1998 and 1999. First, we look at the extent to which minority and immigrant parents believe they have social support available from their friends and family members, and how the magnitude of this support is different from native-born whites. Additionally, we examine how language ability and time spent in the United States may mediate the minority immigrant disadvantage in perceptions of social support. Finally, we consider ethnic origin as a predictor of perceived social support.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework integrates two streams of research: one that examines the importance of social support for all families, and another that considers immigrant adaptation and assimilation. The former has largely neglected minority immigrant families, and most studies of immigrant adaptation have not directly examined whether ethnic minorities (and immigrant minorities, in particular) are disadvantaged in their access to social support.

Importance of Social Support

A large body of research examines the exchanges of social support that individuals give to and receive from others. Intergenerational relationships, for example, are particularly important throughout the life course, with individuals giving and receiving instrumental assistance to and from their parents. In fact, about half of middle-aged Americans routinely engage in intergenerational support, and 10 percent are extensively engaged in such relationships (Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993). Common forms of instrumental support include the exchange of emotional or financial (including money, assistance with housing, or child care) resources. These intergenerational family bonds are

becoming more important and diverse in the 21st century, and in some cases, more important for well-being than nuclear family ties (Bengston 2001).

Thus, instrumental support provided by friends and family members can be crucial to individuals over the life course. Having someone able to provide a loan, for example, is useful if money runs out at the end of the month, or more consequentially, in the event of unexpected unemployment. Similarly, having friends or family members who provide advice or other emotional support is particularly important for family functioning. Indeed, empirical research suggests that individuals with an abundant private safety net (a term borrowed from Edin and Lein 1997; Harknett 2006) are likely to be better off financially than their counterparts with less support. Among low-income families, perceptions of available social support are associated with less perceived economic hardship and a reduction of the likelihood of living in poverty (Henly et al. 2005). In fact, for these families, such support may allow families to handle everyday life stressors such as a car breaking down or even assist families in social mobility (Thoits 1986; Briggs 1998).

Perceptions of social support are also important for the well-being of families with children through its direct influence on parenting behaviors, which is associated with favorable outcomes in children. Parents with high levels of social support, for example, are in better positions to garner parenting advice (Moncher 1995) and are more likely to be emotionally invested in and responsive to their children (Crnic et al. 1983; Burchinal, Follmer, and Bryant 1996; Bradley et al. 1997). Private support is also directly associated with children's well-being (Jackson et al. 2000; Ryan et al. 2008).

Race and Ethnic Differences in Private Support

Race is an important predictor of the type and amount of social support that individuals have available to them. Most large-scale, quantitative surveys, for example, find that whites are more likely than blacks to receive instrumental and emotional support (Angel and Tienda 1982; Hofferth 1984; Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; Eggebeen and Hogan 1990; Eggebeen 1992; Hogan et al. 1993). Other research paints a more nuanced picture of race differences in support. More recently, Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) conclude that blacks receive more practical kin support than whites (including help with transportation, housework, and child care), but less kin support in financial or emotional matters. Ethnographic research, however, paints a vivid portrait of the strength of familial support within low-income black communities, perhaps because this research often lacks a white comparison group or because the support exchanged is not comparable to the type of assistance asked of survey respondents (Harrington 1962; Hannerz 1969; Aschenbrenner 1973; Stack 1974; Newman 1999). Some of these ethnographic examinations also suggest that not all support is beneficial. For example, receipt of support may trigger an expectation of reciprocity (Stack 1974).

Although differences in social support received by white and black individuals have received the most attention in the literature, researchers have recently begun to examine exchanges of support among other minority groups. One of the only studies to compare differences in support across the four major racial groups—whites, blacks, Hispanics,

and Asians—concludes that minority groups, compared to whites, have more contact with their parents, as well as receive more financial and emotional support from them parents. Minorities, however, have less contact with siblings or other relatives (Kim and McKenry 1998). This research also suggests that cultural variation among race groups drive differences in social support (Kim and McKenry 1998).

Other research supports the idea that Hispanics consistently exchange resources with their kin members (Garcia 1993; Dietz 1995; Sherraden and Barrera 1997; Lee and Aytac 1998; Uttal 1999), although they may receive less emotional support (MacPhee, Fritz, and Miller-Heyl 1996). Regarding receipt of child care assistance, minorities may have an advantage over whites, as black and Hispanic mothers have a cultural preference for kin care over nonrelative care (Parish and Hao 1991; Uttal 1999; Early and Burchinal 2001).

Immigrant Advantage or Disadvantage in Social Support?

Drawing on Robert Park's traditional assimilation paradigm, we might expect immigrant parents to feel particularly marginalized because they lack the social ties and language skills to develop new ties with the majority of individuals in the United States. Park (1928) argued that when an individual immigrated, he suffered from being a "marginal man" who neither felt at home in his host country nor country of origin. Moving to the United States necessitates a loss of family and friendship networks that immigrants may draw upon. The feeling of dislocation is common to all immigrants and is a prevalent theme in popular images of the immigrant experience. Hence, it is reasonable to hypothesize that immigrants are particularly disadvantaged in the availability of social support in their everyday lives.

However, many immigrants may be integrated in co-ethnic communities. For instance, Zhou and Bankston (1998), in their study of Vietnamese American youth in New Orleans, argue that youth whose families are well integrated into the ethnic community are protected from negative peer influences and have higher educational achievement. However, youth whose families are not closely attached to co-ethnics seem to experience downward mobility as they reside in low socioeconomic status (SES) neighborhoods. In other words, some immigrants can garner and benefit from social support that is only available from their communities.

For minority immigrant families, the social support that parents have available to them may be particularly important. Such support may, in fact, be viewed as a socioeconomic outcome in itself, with those more fully incorporated into the host society receiving more social support (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). This support may also be important in transmitting benefits to children, as friends and family members might be able to help parents adjust to the educational system of the United States (Zhou 1997). Indeed, Mexican immigrant mothers with more kin support are less likely to have babies of low birth weight than their counterparts with less support (Sherraden and Barrera 1997). More financial and emotional support is associated with healthier children among Mexican families and Mexican immigrants to the United

States (Kanaiaupuni et al. 2005). Additionally, adolescents who rely on kin networks are buffered from other negative influences in their lives (Zhou and Bankston 1998; Stanton-Salazar 2001).

Immigrant status is also associated with the type and amount of exchanges. Many foreign-born households are characterized by the presence of extended family members, who may be available to provide assistance when necessary (Glick and Van Hook 2002). Foreign-born Mexicans, particularly those who migrated to the United States recently, are more likely than native-born Mexicans to receive financial support from their kin networks (Glick 1999). Hao (2003), on the other hand, finds that immigrant families, compared to their native-born counterparts, have less access to coresidence, housing, and transportation support. However, among immigrants, there is substantial variation by country of origin; Filipinos, Mexicans, and Vietnamese immigrants are most likely to receive any kind of assistance, and Indians, Japanese, and Chinese are least likely to receive assistance.

Qualitative work on immigrant families support Hao's (2003) findings that immigrant families, compared to their native-born counterparts, have fewer network members willing and able to assist. For example, Stanton-Salazar (2001) finds that Mexican immigrant families experience social isolation. On the other hand, South Asian immigrants do not rely on kin networks for support, both because of the cultural imperative to be self-reliant and because of a lack of extended family in the United States (Rao et al. 1990). Consistent with this research, which lacks a white comparison group, Schweizer, Schnegg, and Berzborn (1998) find that Hispanic immigrants rely on kin more often than native-born whites, particularly when individuals are in need of financial or emotional support. Elderly Cantonese- and Korean-speaking immigrants, according to focus group data, report not needing kin for emotional support (Wong, Yoo, and Stewart 2005). It may be that Western ideas of emotional support are not universal and Asian immigrants might refer to psychological support in different ways.

Despite studies that suggest immigrants may have access to different forms of social support compared to native-born parents, we believe that overall they experience a significant disadvantage. Minority immigrants are more likely to have support from others who are themselves resource poor, and thus, may be willing but not able to assist. Moreover, immigrant parents are still disadvantaged compared to their native-born counterparts because they lack access to many institutions. Additionally, the language and cultural differences of immigrant parents will likely hinder friendships with other nonethnic adults from whom they may have been able to garner support.

Although researchers have begun to pay closer attention to race, ethnic, and immigrant differences in perceptions of social support, several important gaps exist. First, the majority of nationally representative studies focus on differences in social support between white and black individuals; few studies include Hispanics or Asians, and virtually none compare native-born to foreign-born individuals. The few studies that do examine social support among other minorities or foreign-born individuals are usually based on small, nonrepresentative samples. Although these studies provide valuable

information about the processes that underlie exchange networks, they do not allow for comparisons between various race groups or make population-based estimates. Furthermore, we know little about the factors that may contribute to the support that minority immigrant parents receive.

Based on the limitations of past research, this study seeks to answer three questions. First, how do patterns of perceived social support among parents of elementary school children vary by race and immigrant status? We suspect that minority immigrant parents, compared to their native-born white counterparts, will experience disadvantages in their perceptions of social support as they may be marginalized by others (Kao and Tienda 1995), and these parents may have friends and family members who are less able to provide such support.

Second, how does English language ability and time spent in the United States mediate the disadvantages faced by minority immigrant parents? We expect that both English language ability and time spent in the United States will be positively associated with social support. Language barriers, for example, might prevent parents from developing social connections with nonkin. Additionally, parents who have spent less time in the United States may have fewer friends and family members to provide support, compared to their white, native-born counterparts, perhaps because they have substantial numbers of relatives living in other countries and have had less time to develop social connections in their communities. We expect that variation in language ability and time in the United States will mediate the disadvantages in support faced by minority immigrant parents.

Third, how does ethnicity predict perceptions of social support? Some prior research suggests substantial variation by ethnicity (Hao 2003), although few studies include more than one ethnic group. Our study systematically includes Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, other race Hispanics, Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Hmong and other race Asians to gauge the relative disadvantage of the groups in their perceptions of social support. We anticipate that those minority immigrant groups that are likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantages, such as Hmong and Mexicans, will report less perceived social support net of their own SES, as their family and friends may be less equipped to provide such support. In contrast, relatively advantaged groups such as Cubans and Asian Indians (Portes and Rumbaut 2006), whose SES profile is higher than their other Hispanic and Asian counterparts, respectively, may be more advantaged. For example, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 44.1 percent of Asian Americans aged 25 and older had at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). For Asian Indians, this percentage is 63.9 percent, although only 7.5 percent of Hmong aged 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher.

DATA AND METHODS

Data Source

This article uses data from multiple waves of the ECLS-K, a study conducted by the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES).¹ These data were collected in a

multistage sampling frame in which students were nested within about 1,000 schools in 100 counties. Data were collected from parents and schools of children who were enrolled in kindergarten in fall 1998, and families were followed longitudinally. The original sample includes 17,490 students in approximately 3,500 classrooms in 1,280 schools.²

These data are well suited to answer our research questions. To begin with, the data include rich measures of the social support parents perceive available from friends and family members. Importantly, these measures capture both instrumental assistance (i.e., being able to receive an emergency loan) and parenting assistance (i.e., being able to talk to someone if their child has problems in school). Additionally, and perhaps most relevant to our research questions, researchers oversampled for both minority children and children of immigrant parents—two groups generally neglected in the research on social support. This allows us to make comparisons between parents of native-born white children and parents of minority immigrant children. When weighted, these data are nationally representative of parents of children who began kindergarten in the United States during the 1998–1999 school year.

Key Variables

Perceived Social Support

We examine parental reports of the type and amount of instrumental assistance they have available to them. In the fourth wave of data collection, when most children were at the end of first grade, parents were asked to report on the extent to which they could rely on friends and family members for the following (0 = *never true*, 1 = *sometimes true*, and 2 = *always true*):

- If I need to do an errand, I can easily find someone to watch (*child*).
- If I need a ride to get (*child*) to the doctor, friends, or family will help me.
- If (*child*) is sick, friends or family will call or come by to check on how things are going.
- If (*child*) is having problems at school, there is a friend, relative, or neighbor I can talk it over with.
- If I have an emergency and I need cash, family or friends will loan it to me.
- If I have troubles or need advice, I have someone I can talk to.

Responses to these six questions are highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.770$ for this article's analytic sample). We create an index that measures the magnitude of perceived social support, which was motivated by a principal components factor analysis. All six items loaded positively onto the first factor, and all six had similar factor loadings. The similar factor loadings suggest that each of the six types of support should be given about equal weight in the scale. For ease of interpretation, the dependent variable in our multivariate analyses is a count of the types of support available (0 = *respondent has no social support available*, 12 = *respondent has all social support available*).³ We also present descriptive statistics for the six components of the index. Higher values are associated with greater perceived social support.

Race, Immigrant Status, and Ethnicity

In all multivariate analyses, we include the respondent's race and immigrant status as key independent variables. Race and immigrant status is represented by the following dummy variables: white native born (reference group), white foreign born, black native born, black foreign born, Hispanic native born, Hispanic foreign born, Asian native born, Asian foreign born, other race native born, and other race foreign born.⁴ We measure immigrant status by the mother's country of birth reported in the fourth wave of data collection.⁵ Unfortunately, data limitations preclude a complete examination of both parents' immigrant status.⁶

In some analyses, we move beyond panethnic categorizations of Hispanics and Asians and consider ethnicity in addition to race. Hispanics are subdivided into the following categories: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other race Hispanics. Asians are subdivided into the following categories: Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, and other race Asians. Because of the relatively small number of children from each ethnic group, we do not consider ethnicity and immigrant status jointly.

Control Variables

Our empirical models begin with several controls for SES.⁷ First, we control for total household income from the past year, which includes salaries, other earnings, interest, and retirement. Our multivariate analyses use a logged measure of household income. Additionally, we control for mother's and father's occupational prestige, which ranges from 29.0 to 77.5. Parents who are unemployed are coded as having an occupational prestige score of 0. We include dummy variables indicating whether parents are employed part time (working fewer than 35 hours per week) or unemployed, with parents employed full time the reference category. Finally, mother's and father's educational attainment are represented by the following dummy variables: less than high school (reference category), high school diploma or GED, some college, and college degree or higher.

We control for additional demographic characteristics. First, we control for mother's age, which is a continuous variable that ranges from 20 to 80 years. The respondent's marital status is represented by a dummy variable (1 = *married*, 0 = *unmarried*). We also control for the total number of individuals in the household, as household characteristics that might influence the amount of support parents have available to them. This variable ranges from 2 to 12.⁸

Accounting for depressive symptoms may be particularly important when predicting perceptions of available support; those who experience more depressive symptoms may be more likely to underestimate their available support than their counterparts with fewer or no depressive symptoms. We construct a factor analysis to measure parents' reports of depressive symptoms ($\alpha = 0.857$). Parents reported how often (never, some of the time, a moderate amount of the time, or most of the time) they felt the following: bothered by things that do not usually bother them; did not feel like eating or had a poor appetite; could not shake off the blues even with help from their family or friends; had

trouble keeping their mind on what they were doing; felt depressed; felt that everything they did was an effort; felt fearful; felt their sleep was restless; felt they talked less than usual; felt lonely; felt sad; or felt they could not get going. Higher values correspond to more depressive symptoms. Also, we control for the number of residential moves since the child was born, which is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 6. Mobility may be associated with a lack of social ties, and parents who move more often may have fewer friends or family members from which to receive support. Residential mobility may also be viewed as a measure of stability; families who move less may be more stable than those who move frequently. We include dummy variables indicating the respondent's region in the country: South (reference), Northeast, Midwest, and West. Finally, we include a dummy variable indicating the parent respondent's relationship to the child (1 = *mother*, 0 = *not mother*). In about 95 percent of observations, the parent respondent is the child's mother.

Parents' Language Ability and Time Spent in the United States

Finally, in multivariate models that are restricted to immigrant parents, we include two variables that pertain directly to the immigrant experience. First, we include a dummy variable indicating the parent's language ability (1 = *interview not conducted in English*, 0 = *interview conducted in English*). Although the majority of interviews were conducted in English, they were administered in the respondent's home language if he or she did not speak English (NCES 2001). Thus, although this variable is not a perfect measure of English language ability, it does capture one's ability to both understand and respond in English. Second, we include an indicator of years spent in the United States, as time in the United States may be associated with stronger support networks. This is a continuous variable that ranges from 0 to 51.

Analytic Plan

We first present descriptive statistics to explore race and immigrant differences in perceived social support. We use chi-square tests to determine the statistical significance of the differences between groups. We also use *t*-tests to determine the statistical significance of the difference in our index of perceived social support between native-born white and minority immigrant parents.

Next, we estimate ordinary least squares regression models to predict the magnitude of parents' perceived social support. Our first model only includes dummy variables for each of the race and immigrant groups (with white native-born children as the reference category). Our second model includes the following socioeconomic characteristics: household income, mother's and father's occupational prestige, mother's and father's education, and mother's and father's employment status. Our third model includes additional covariates: mother's age, marital status, total number in household, mother's depressive symptoms, number of residential moves, region, and relationship of parent respondent to the child.

Our subsequent multivariate models predict perceptions of social support for immigrant parents only, and consider how language ability and time in the United

States may mediate the disadvantages that immigrant parents face in their perceptions of social support (Baron and Kenny 1986). These models include only immigrant parents, as time spent in the United States was not asked of native-born parents. Finally, we run multivariate models that substitute measures of ethnicity for race and immigrant status.

Because of the complex stratified random sampling design, our descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses use appropriate design weights (c124pw0) to compensate for the unequal probabilities of selection into the sample and to adjust for nonresponse. Therefore, our findings are nationally representative of parents of children who began kindergarten in 1998 and 1999.

Analytic Sample

Our analytic sample only includes observations in which parents participated in all three waves that our analyses draw upon: fall of kindergarten, spring of kindergarten, and spring of first grade. Additionally, because race and immigrant status and perceived social support are crucial to our analyses, we drop observations missing these variables.⁹ Relatively few observations are missing data on the other variables, and we use a regression-based imputation to impute these data.¹⁰

Thus, our final analytic sample for the multivariate models is 12,580. Our analytic sample is generally more advantaged than the full sample of ECLS-K children and their parents surveyed in kindergarten. For example, those in the analytic sample have higher levels of household income ($p < .001$). Both mothers and fathers have more prestigious occupations ($p < .001$) and are more likely to have post-secondary education ($p < .001$). Additionally, parents are more likely to be married ($p < .001$). Importantly, parents in the full sample and the analytic sample report similar levels of perceived social support. There are also no differences in the representation of minority and immigrant groups between the full and analytic samples.

Description of Sample

Table 1 presents the weighted descriptives of all variables in our analyses. In interpreting these descriptive statistics, we encourage the reader to keep in mind that these statistics describe parents of a sample of children in kindergarten during the 1998–1999 school year. About three-fifths (60 percent) of parents of the children in the sample are native-born whites. The next largest race and immigrant group is black native borns (14 percent), followed by Hispanic foreign borns (11 percent), and Hispanic native borns (7 percent). About 30 percent of mothers and fathers of the children in the sample have a high school diploma or GED, and 26 percent of mothers and 28 percent of fathers have a college degree or higher. More than 4 in 10 (44 percent) mothers are employed full time, about 24 percent are employed part time, and 33 percent are unemployed. Parents, on average, are about 34 years old. Turning to family structure characteristics, the majority (71 percent) of parents are married. On average, households consist of 4.6 individuals. About 8 percent of interviews were conducted in a language other than English, although there is substantial variation by immigrant

TABLE 1. Weighted Means and Standard Errors of Variables Used in Analyses

Variable name	Mean	SE	Min.	Max.
Perceived social support				
Always have someone to watch child while running errands	.520	.006	.000	1.000
Always have someone to provide ride to get child to doctor	.766	.005	.000	1.000
If child is sick, someone will always call or come by	.699	.005	.000	1.000
If child is having problems at school, always have someone to talk to	.817	.004	.000	1.000
If have emergency and need cash, always have someone to provide it	.797	.005	.000	1.000
If have troubles or need advice, always have someone to talk to	.868	.004	.000	1.000
Support index	10.155	.026	.000	12.000
Race and immigrant status				
White native born	.595	.006	.000	1.000
White foreign born	.025	.002	.000	1.000
Black native born	.142	.004	.000	1.000
Black foreign born	.011	.001	.000	1.000
Hispanic native born	.066	.003	.000	1.000
Hispanic foreign born	.105	.004	.000	1.000
Asian native born	.005	.001	.000	1.000
Asian foreign born	.025	.001	.000	1.000
Other race native born	.023	.001	.000	1.000
Other race foreign born	.004	.001	.000	1.000
Ethnic origin				
Hispanics				
Mexican	.115	.004	.000	1.000
Puerto Rican	.014	.001	.000	1.000
Cuban	.005	.001	.000	1.000
Other race Hispanic	.032	.002	.000	1.000
Asians				
Asian Indian	.005	.001	.000	1.000
Chinese	.006	.001	.000	1.000
Filipino	.011	.001	.000	1.000
Japanese	.003	.000	.000	1.000
Korean	.003	.000	.000	1.000
Vietnamese	.002	.000	.000	1.000
Hmong	.002	.000	.000	1.000
Other race Asian	.004	.001	.000	1.000
Socioeconomic characteristics				
Household income (log)	10.677	.012	.000	13.800 ^a
Mother's occupational prestige	28.934	.281	.000	77.500
Father's occupational prestige	40.118	.180	.000	77.500
Mother's education				
Less than high school	.121	.004	.000	1.000

TABLE 1. *Continued*

Variable name	Mean	SE	Min.	Max.
High school diploma or GED	.300	.006	.000	1.000
Some college	.316	.006	.000	1.000
College degree or higher	.263	.005	.000	1.000
Father's education				
Less than high school	.140	.005	.000	1.000
High school diploma or GED	.321	.006	.000	1.000
Some college	.258	.005	.000	1.000
College degree or higher	.281	.005	.000	1.000
Mother's employment status				
Full time	.438	.006	.000	1.000
Part time	.236	.005	.000	1.000
Unemployed	.326	.006	.000	1.000
Father's employment status				
Full time	.913	.004	.000	1.000
Part time	.032	.002	.000	1.000
Unemployed	.055	.003	.000	1.000
Additional demographic characteristics				
Age	34.208	.075	20.000	80.000 ^a
Married	.712	.003	.000	1.000
Total number in household	4.577	.015	2.000	12.000 ^a
Depressive symptoms (standardized)	.047	.014	−.945	5.826
Number of moves	1.229	.007	.000	7.000
Region				
Northeast	.178	.004	.000	1.000
Midwest	.238	.004	.000	1.000
West	.219	.005	.000	1.000
South	.364	.006	.000	1.000
Respondent not mother	.044	.002	.000	1.000
Interview not conducted in English	.083	.003	.000	1.000
Years lived in United States (immigrants only)	15.227	.262	.000	51.000
N	12,580			

^aMaximum values are top coded to adhere to NCES regulations regarding restricted-use data.

status. Among immigrant parents, the mean length of time in the United States is 15 years.

A majority of parents report having friends and family members to assist in times of need, although the availability of such assistance depends on the type of support. Only 52 percent of parents report they always have someone to watch their child when they run errands. However, 82 percent always have someone to talk to if their child is having problems in school, and 87 percent have someone to talk to if they need general advice. About 80 percent of parents can always count on friends or family members for cash assistance.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows how perceived social support varies by race and immigrant group. The magnitude of the differences sometimes depends on the type of support, although several patterns emerge. Most notably, native-born white parents are most advantaged in their perceptions of social support. There are two exceptions to this pattern. First, most minority groups (including black native borns, Hispanic native borns, Hispanic foreign borns, and other race native borns) are more likely than white native borns to report always having someone available to watch their child if they have to run an errand. Second, native-born blacks are more likely than native-born whites to report that family or friends will always check in when their child is sick. The race and immigrant differences are relatively small for some types of support, such as having someone to watch the child, but they are more substantial for other types of support. For example, only 70 percent of foreign-born Hispanics and 75 percent of foreign-born Asians always have someone from whom to get advice, while 92 percent of native-born whites always have this support available.

Another pattern that emerges is that among Hispanics, native-born parents report higher levels of social support than foreign-born parents. Further, the magnitude of these differences is substantively large and statistically significant. About 79 percent of Hispanic native-born parents report always having someone available to talk to if their child is having trouble in school, while only 66 percent of Hispanic foreign-born parents report having this support available ($p < .001$, not shown). Similarly, 79 percent of native-born Hispanics and 63 percent of foreign-born Hispanics report being able to rely on a friend or family member for an emergency loan ($p < .001$, not shown). The differences between native- and foreign-born Asian parents are more nuanced. Native-born Asians are more likely than foreign-born Asians to report having someone to talk to if their child is having problems in school, someone to turn to for an emergency loan, and someone from whom to get advice, and the magnitude of these differences is substantial (the differences range from 10 percentage points to 13 percentage points). However, foreign-born Asians are more likely than native-born Asians to have someone to watch their child, get a ride to the doctor, or have friends or family members check in when the child is sick. The magnitude of these differences is less substantial, although statistically significant.

Turning now to our continuous measure of perceived social support, the descriptives suggest a pattern largely consistent with that discussed above. First, native-born white parents report more available social support than their minority immigrant counterparts. Second, within race groups, native-born parents report more support than foreign-born parents. Foreign-born Hispanic and Asian parents are most disadvantaged in the magnitude of perceived support they have available to them.

This table also shows the magnitude of the variation in English language ability by race and immigrant status. Not surprisingly, both native- and foreign-born Hispanics and Asians were most likely to have their interview conducted in a non-English

TABLE 2. Weighted Means of Perceived Social Support and English Language Ability, by Race/Immigrant Status

Variable name	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian		Other race	
	NB	FB	NB	FB	NB	FB	NB	FB	NB	FB
Perceived social support										
Always have someone to watch child while running errands	.493	.516	.577***	.518	.569***	.553**	.466	.529	.574**	.523
Always have someone to provide ride to get child to doctor	.804	.682***	.745**	.719	.754*	.647***	.663***	.656***	.793	.647***
If child is sick, someone will always call or come by	.698	.708	.752***	.760	.697	.654**	.567***	.620***	.670	.670
If child is having problems at school, always have someone to talk to	.866	.800***	.781***	.782**	.787***	.655***	.776*	.668***	.799**	.655***
If have emergency and need cash, always have someone to provide it	.856	.822	.707***	.740***	.792***	.631***	.801	.667***	.745***	.696***
If have troubles or need advice, always have someone to talk to	.916	.887	.828***	.823**	.850***	.701***	.848*	.746***	.851***	.725***
Support index	10.378	10.019**	10.112**	9.997*	10.081**	9.270***	9.656***	9.425***	10.138**	9.352***
Interview not conducted in English	.000	.007***	.001	.000	.056***	.735***	.010***	.079***	.000	.000
N	7,850	320	1,430	110	720	1,130	100	510	320	90

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Symbols compare race/immigrant groups to native-born whites.

NB, native born; FB, foreign born.

language. This was most common among foreign-born Hispanics, as 74 percent of them conducted their interview in a non-English language.

Race and Immigrant Status as a Predictor of Perceived Social Support

Table 2 shows substantial race and immigrant differences in perceived social support between native-born whites and minority and immigrant parents, with most immigrant parents reporting less private support. However, it is impossible to know whether these differences are simply artifacts of other differences between race and immigrant groups, such as differences in SES.

Thus, our multivariate analyses begin by predicting the magnitude of private support available to parents. The first model, which does not include any controls, shows that all race and immigrant groups except for foreign-born blacks and native-born other race parents are disadvantaged, compared to native-born whites, in their perceived social support. Consistent with Table 2, three foreign-born groups—Hispanics, Asians, and other race—are particularly disadvantaged in their social support. The second model includes controls for SES, which reduces the size of the coefficients of race and immigrant status. In fact, the disadvantages in private support experienced by black and Hispanic native-borns are completely attenuated once SES is included. The third model controls for additional demographic factors, which does little to attenuate the minority and immigrant disadvantage in perceptions of social support. Although native-born Hispanics are not disadvantaged, foreign-born Hispanics do have less support available to them ($-.855, p < .001$). Additionally, both native- and foreign-born Asians have significantly less perceived social support than native-born whites, although foreign-born Asians experience the most disadvantages ($-.712, p < .05$; $-.897, p < .001$). Foreign-born other race parents face similar disadvantages ($-.899, p < .01$).

An important limitation to these analyses is that they only consider the race and immigrant status of mothers. Foreign-born mothers may have partners who are native born or partners who are foreign born, and the immigrant status of their partners may be related to mothers' perceptions of social support. When both parents are foreign born, compared to when only one parent is foreign born, mothers may report less perceived support.¹¹

The demographic and socioeconomic predictors of perceived social support are consistent with prior research. Measures of SES, particularly household income and mother's education, are positively correlated with available support; those with greater resources report more available private support. Occupational prestige, however, is not associated with support. Mothers who are unemployed report less support than their employed counterparts, although mothers employed part time do not face such disadvantages. Family structure characteristics are also associated with support. Married respondents report more support, as do those with larger households. Additionally, as expected, depressive symptoms and number of residential moves are both significantly associated with less perceived social support.

Mediating Influence of English Language Ability and Time in the United States

Immigrant parents are particularly disadvantaged in their access to perceived social support, net of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. In Table 4, we examine how English language ability and time spent in the United States may mediate these disadvantages in social support. Unlike in Table 3, where the reference group is native-born white parents, the reference group in this table is foreign-born white parents. The first model looks at the bivariate association between race and perceived social support among immigrant parents. Hispanic and Asian immigrant parents, compared to white immigrant parents, report less perceived social support. The second model examines how English language ability and time spent in the United States are associated with perceived social support. This model includes all covariates from Table 3. Immigrant parents who do not speak English report significantly less support than their counterparts who do, although the association between time spent in the United States and perceived social support is not significant. The inclusion of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics in the third model attenuates the disadvantages that Hispanics face in their perceived social support. However, when these characteristics are included in the models, Asian immigrant parents face even greater disadvantages than white immigrant parents (both the magnitude and significance of the coefficient increases).

Finally, the last model in Table 4 includes variables that indicate if the interview was not conducted in English and time spent in the United States. Consistent with the second model, parents who had their interview conducted in another language report less social support than those who had the interview conducted in English, but time spent in the United States is not associated with such support. Interestingly, the inclusion of these variables reduces the Hispanic coefficient to nonsignificance. Thus, for Hispanic immigrant parents, compared to white immigrant parents, it is not necessarily their minority status that leads to disadvantages in social support. Instead, being proficient in the English language may help them build private support systems.

Ethnicity as a Predictor of Perceptions of Social Support

The prior analyses are limited because they do not consider the ethnic origin of Hispanic or Asian parents. Examining ethnicity and immigrant status jointly is beyond the scope of our analyses, as there are too few observations to consider ethnic origin along with immigrant status. However, in Table 5, we present multivariate regression models that predict perceived social support of Hispanic (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Hispanic) and Asian (Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, and other Asian) ethnic groups, compared to that of whites.

The variation in perceived social support is particularly striking among Hispanic groups. Once socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, including immigrant status, are controlled for (Model 2), Mexican parents report less perceived social support compared to whites ($-0.366, p < .01$). Given the extremely low SES of Mexicans in the United States, our findings suggest that net of a family's own SES, Mexican parents are still more disadvantaged. Other race Hispanics also report less support ($-.493, p < .01$).

TABLE 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Perceived Social Support (Robust standard errors in parentheses. Weighted to account for sampling design.)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Race and immigrant status			
Mom white native born (reference)	—	—	—
White foreign born	-.359* (.156)	-.319* (.161)	-.347* (.159)
Black native born	-.266** (.089)	-.054 (.094)	-.015 (.093)
Black foreign born	-.381 (.284)	-.317 (.280)	-.347 (.286)
Hispanic native born	-.299* (.138)	-.170 (.133)	-.163 (.128)
Hispanic foreign born	-1.108*** (.104)	-.766*** (.115)	-.855*** (.120)
Asian native born	-.722* (.308)	-.688* (.313)	-.712* (.312)
Asian foreign born	-.953*** (.154)	-.881*** (.154)	-.897*** (.156)
Other race native born	-.240 (.153)	-.050 (.158)	-.003 (.156)
Other race foreign born	-1.026** (.325)	-.940** (.316)	-.899** (.311)
Socioeconomic characteristics			
Household income (log)		.085*** (.025)	.061* (.024)
Mother's occupational prestige		.001 (.001)	.001 (.001)
Father's occupational prestige		.006*** (.002)	.001 (.002)
Mother's education			
Less than high school (reference)		—	—
High school diploma or GED		.465*** -.112	.424*** (.113)
Some college		.520*** (.113)	.452*** (.113)
College degree or higher		.318* (.124)	.229 (.126)
Father's education			
Less than high school (reference)		—	—
High school diploma or GED		.037 (.114)	.030 (.114)

TABLE 3. *Continued*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Some college		.029 (.119)	.011 (.119)
College degree or higher		-.049 (.124)	-.021 (.124)
Mother's employment status			
Full time (reference)		—	—
Part time		-.079 (.061)	-.073 (.062)
Unemployed		-.226** (.083)	-.214* (.083)
Father's employment status			
Full time (reference)		—	—
Part time		-.116 (.174)	-.078 (.170)
Unemployed		-.210 (.144)	-.165 (.143)
Age			-.009* (.004)
Married			.230** (.086)
Total number in household			-.001 (.021)
Depressive symptoms			-.294*** (.035)
Number of moves			-.170** (.056)
Region			
South (reference)			—
Northeast			-.096 (.072)
Midwest			-.048 (.063)
West			-.058 (.076)
Respondent not mother			-.099 (.124)
Constant	10.378	8.900	9.766
N	12,580	12,580	12,580

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

GED, general educational development.

TABLE 4. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting Perceived Social Support among Immigrant Parents (Robust standard errors in parentheses. Weighted to account for sampling design.)

	Perceived social support			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Race				
White (reference)	—			—
Black	-.022 (.322)		.119 (.345)	.111 (.346)
Hispanic	-.748*** (.183)		-.473* (.214)	-.206 (.243)
Asian	-.594** (.215)		-.701*** (.221)	-.686** (.225)
Other race	-.666 (.358)		-.610 (.376)	-.667 (.377)
Interview not conducted in English		-.480** (.180)		-.536* (.217)
Years lived in the United States		.003 (.008)		-.001 (.008)
Constant	10.019	8.472	8.439	8.741
N	2,160	2,160	2,160	2,160

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Models 3 and 4 include all covariates from Table 3.

The differences in support between Puerto Rican parents and white parents are not significant ($-.413$, n.s.), and Cuban parents report more social support than their white counterparts ($.842$, $p < .001$).

Earlier tables showed that both native- and foreign-born Asians generally report less available support than native-born whites. However, there are few differences in support among the various Asian groups. Compared to their white counterparts, only Hmong experience substantial disadvantages in their perceived social support (-3.145 , $p < .001$). This is consistent with our expectations, given the extremely low SES of the Hmong population. In other words, even after controlling for a family's own SES, Hmong parents are less likely to perceive social support compared to native-born whites. These results are consistent with the notion that the mean SES of co-ethnics matter to perceptions of social support.

DISCUSSION

We use data from a nationally representative sample of children who began kindergarten the 1998–99 school year to look at social support that their parents perceive available to them. First, we find that some groups of immigrant parents experience substantial

TABLE 5. Association between Ethnic Origin and Perceived Social Support (Robust standard errors in parentheses. Weighted to account for sampling design.)

	Support	
	Model 1	Model 2
Race/ethnicity		
White (reference)	—	—
Black	-.244** (.086)	-.025 (.090)
Mexican	-.565*** (.122)	-.366** (.121)
Puerto Rican	-.565* (.243)	-.413 (.238)
Cuban	.922*** (.241)	.842*** (.234)
Other race Hispanic	-.586** (.169)	-.493** (.166)
Asian Indian	.500 (.274)	.427 (.274)
Chinese	-.353 (.245)	-.377 (.249)
Filipino	.087 9.210)	.013 (.028)
Japanese	-.273 (.314)	-.397 (.317)
Korean	-.251 (.410)	-.285 (.408)
Vietnamese	-.266 (.480)	-.370 (.485)
Hmong	-3.248*** (.365)	-3.145*** (.385)
Other race Asian	-.973* (.418)	-.877* (.397)
Other race	-.255 (.141)	-.097 (.143)
Foreign born	-.565*** (.098)	-.521*** (.099)
Constant	10.395	9.755
N	12,580	12,580

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Model 2 includes all covariates from Table 3.

disadvantage in the amount of social support that friends and family members are willing and able to provide, compared to their native-born white counterparts. Native-born Asian parents also report less perceived social support than their native-born white counterparts. These findings are consistent with a growing body of literature that links race and social support (Angel and Tienda 1982; Hofferth 1984; Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; Eggebeen and Hogan 1990; Eggebeen 1992; Hogan et al. 1993), and extends much of this literature by considering whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other race individuals. Our findings also suggest that race and immigrant status interact, and that some groups of minority immigrant parents are particularly disadvantaged. Thus, these findings are consistent with traditional assimilation paradigms that suggest immigrants may experience disadvantages in their feelings of marginality and dislocation (Park 1928). Of course, social support disadvantages are only one source of disadvantage for these parents, and it is likely that a lack of social support could lead to additional problems. In terms of having a private safety net equal to or greater than native-born white parents, assimilation among foreign-born parents may be particularly important for families in buffering against job loss or illness. Given the limited English proficiency of newly arrived immigrants, immigrants are also less able to utilize public support mechanisms. This suggests that private safety nets may be especially important for immigrant families.

To better understand the minority immigrant disadvantage in perceived social support, we consider the extent to which English language ability and time in the United States attenuated this association. We find that English language ability, but not time spent in the United States, attenuates the private support disadvantages faced by Hispanic immigrant parents compared to white immigrant parents. These findings suggest that English language ability, by providing individuals with a larger support system or a support system with individuals who are more willing or able to assist in times of need, may be one avenue of inclusion for immigrants. Thus, linguistic assimilation is crucial in being able to provide immigrant parents social support. We also find that some ethnic groups are particularly disadvantaged in their perceptions of social support, which is consistent with other research (Hao 2003). For example, there is great variation in the amount of social support reported by the various groups of Hispanic parents, with Cubans reporting more support than white parents and Mexican parents reporting less support. One explanation for these differences may be related to the fact that these groups have had different modes of incorporation into the United States. These different modes of incorporation may lead to differing amount of available support from friends or family members and different norms surrounding giving and receiving of instrumental support. Furthermore, it is likely that some groups may have more advantaged family members who are better able to assist in times of need.

Of course, in addition to English language ability, there are other potential explanations for the social support disadvantage experienced by some minority immigrant groups. First, these immigrant groups may have economically disadvantaged friends and family members, and perhaps these support networks simply cannot assist in times of financial need. Another explanation could be that, even if network members are equally

able to assist, networks of minority and immigrant parents are less willing to assist than those of their native-born white counterparts. Immigrants tend to have networks that are similar to themselves, and perhaps it is less acceptable to ask for help in times of trouble. Overall, we find that Asians—particularly native-born Asians—are generally more advantaged in their access to social support than Hispanics. This may be a result of the fact that Asians have social networks with greater resources, although we cannot test this explanation because the data do not include measures of the resources of such networks. It is also possible that Asian Americans are less likely to be vocal about their lack of support.

Our measures of social support cover a wide range of assistance that parents might need as their children progress through elementary school. However, several limitations exist. First, with respect to our measures of private support, parents are not asked about the most likely provider of the various forms of support. It is possible, for example, that certain minority and immigrant groups might be more likely to turn to kin networks as opposed to friends. If this is the case, immigrant groups may be particularly advantaged if they live in ethnic enclaves surrounded by kin networks; on the other hand, immigrant groups may be particularly disadvantaged if they do not have any family in the United States. Additionally, although our measures represent the type of private support parents have available to them, we cannot directly assess the amount of support they receive. Parents are asked to distinguish between whether they can always, sometimes, or never receive each type of support, but these are relatively crude categories that may mask important variation. Finally, it is possible that parents' perceptions of their private support networks are different from the reality of how much their friends and family could assist in times of need. Parents who do not often rely on their friends and family members for support—those with lower levels of need—may be particularly unsure about how much support is actually available to them. We are able to at least partially account for this by including a control for SES into our models. Further, regardless of the accuracy of parents' reports of their available private support, perceptions of support are as important as the reality. Parents who perceive they cannot count on their network members—even if they are wrong—will be unlikely to attempt to rely on these individuals for assistance in times of need.

These results extend previous literature on social support in several ways. Most importantly, because our data include large numbers of parents of minority and immigrant children, we are able to draw conclusions about how perceptions of social support vary by race and immigrant status. Although researchers agree that support networks are important for immigrants and their children—these networks can help them adjust to life in the United States and provide a safety net in times of need—few studies document the availability of these support networks. Furthermore, the studies that do document the availability of assistance are generally based on small or nonrepresentative samples.

Because of the fact that social support can help individuals cope with everyday stressors or leverage upward mobility, the fact that such support is a source of disadvantage among immigrant parents is particularly troublesome. Available support also has important implications for child well-being (Jackson et al. 2000; Ryan et al. 2009).

Parents who are able to consistently rely on friends and family members for support may be in better positions to help their children succeed in school. Having someone to talk to when their child is having problems at school, for example, may allow parents to garner support and advice from their network members. This, in fact, may particularly important for immigrant parents, as immigrants and children of immigrants comprise an important and increasing demographic in the United States and elementary school achievement is associated with later schooling outcomes (Entwisle and Alexander 1989; Zhou 1997; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001).

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge support from The Spencer Foundation and The Russell Sage Foundation. We thank Frances Woo and Melissa Gradilla for clerical assistance.

NOTES

¹Comprehensive documentation is available from the NCES Web site.

²In adherence to NCES regulations for using restricted-use data, we have rounded all sample sizes to the nearest 10 in all text and tables.

³Nevertheless, our results are consistent in magnitude and significance when we substitute the count scale with the factor.

⁴Because some race groups are too small to analyze separately, we combine the following children into an other race category: Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and non-Hispanic multiracial.

⁵Thus, this approach lumps together two groups of immigrants: those parents who immigrated to the United States when they were young and who received the majority of their schooling in the United States, and those parents who came to the United States as adults. In supplemental analyses, we consider these two groups of immigrants separately by race. However, we find no differences between these two types of immigrants in their perceptions of instrumental support.

⁶First, mothers were asked where the child's father was born, and if not in the United States, the age at which he came to the United States, although these data were not collected until the fifth wave of data collection. Mothers' reports of their own immigrant status, on the other hand, come from the fourth wave of data collection. Substantial attrition occurs between the fourth and fifth waves. If we use information on fathers' immigrant status, our sample size is reduced from 12,580 to 8,510 (a difference of 32 percent). Second, respondents were asked to report on where the child's father was born. Because not all mothers are in relationships with their child's father, and there is no information about the immigrant status of their current partner, this presents an additional problem.

⁷The ECLS-K data set provides a standardized five-category composite family SES measure that includes mother's education, father's education, mother's occupational prestige, father's occupational prestige, and household income. Because some of these categories, such as education, may not translate into the same rewards for native- and foreign-born individuals, we include the five measures separately. However, our main substantive findings do not change when we use the standardized composite measure.

⁸Number of siblings and number in household are skewed. In analyses not shown, we substitute the continuous variables for categorical variables, but this does not substantively change our results.

⁹Of the 13,410 parent respondents who completed interviews in the three waves we use for our analyses, we delete an additional 610 observations missing race and immigrant status and 170 observations missing information on private assistance.

¹⁰Using listwise deletion produces consistent results.

¹¹Despite these limitations, we run supplemental analyses that take into account the immigrant status of both parents. For each race group, we include a series of mutually exclusive dummy variables: both parents born in the United States, one parent born in the United States, and neither parents born in the United States (with white parents born in the United States as the reference group). About 77 percent of respondents report that both the mother and father are native born, about 7 percent report one immigrant parent, and about 15 percent report two immigrant parents. Results are as expected. Across all race groups, respondents are most disadvantaged in their perceptions of social support when both parents are foreign born. When only one parent is foreign born, compared to when the respondent is white and both parents are native born, parents of all race groups report less social support. Other race individuals are the exception here, as they report similar amounts of support as native-born whites when one parent is native born and one parent is foreign born. We caution putting too much emphasis on this finding, however, because of the limitations discussed as well as the small number of other race parents.

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