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Examining the Long-Run Impacts of Racial Terror with Data on Historical Lynchings of Mexicans in Texas

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DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

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of Mexicans in Texas**

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MAY 2024

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ABSTRACT

Examining the Long-Run Impacts of Racial Terror with Data on Historical Lynchings of Mexicans in Texas*

We merge the longitudinally linked historical U.S. Census records with data on lynchings of Hispanics in Texas to investigate the impacts of historical lynchings of ethnic Mexicans in Texas on U.S.-born Mexican Americans. Using variation in lynching incidents across counties over time, we explore the impacts of local exposure to lynchings during childhood on long-run outcomes such as earnings, education, and home ownership of adults in 1940. Our findings are suggestive of small, negative impacts, but we caution that more research in this area is needed for a more robust interpretation of the results.

JEL Classification: J15, N31, N32, I2

Keywords: historical lynchings, Mexican Americans, Texas

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*“Lynched by Masked Men.
COTULLA, Tex., Oct. 13[1895].—Floantina Suiato, a Mexican who is charged with the murder
of U. T. Saul, was lynched here Friday night by ten masked men. The men took him to the bank of
the Nueces River, strung him to a tree and riddled his body with bullets.”*
- *The San Francisco Call*, October 14, 1895, posted on Lynching in Texas website¹

1. Introduction

Recent economic research has drawn attention to the relationship between historical racial violence and long-run outcomes in the United States. Albright et al. (2021) find persistent negative impacts of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre on home ownership and Williams (2022) demonstrates that counties with higher lynchings of Black/African Americans in the U.S. South have lower Black voter participation today. While this research has understandably focused on Black/African American individuals and communities who faced the highest lynching rates of any racial/ethnic group (Carrigan and Webb 2003), little is known about the long-run impacts of racial terror on other persecuted groups such as Mexicans and Mexican Americans, despite significant historical evidence of the lynchings of persons of Mexican descent in the U.S. (Martinez 2020, Villanueva 2017, Carrigan and Webb 2013).² To address this gap in the literature, we merge the longitudinally linked historical U.S. Census records with historical data on lynchings in Texas, the state with the highest rates of lynchings of Mexicans on record (Carrigan and Webb 2013). Using variation in lynching incidents across areas over time, we examine the impacts of local exposure to lynchings during childhood on investments in land and education, as well as long-run outcomes such as earnings of adults in 1940.

This paper contributes to a now robust literature demonstrating the importance of childhood environment for long-run outcomes as well as a growing body of research which ties

¹ Available <https://www.lynchingintexas.org/items/show/348#&gid=1&pid=1>, accessed on January 2, 2024.

² Carrigan and Webb (2003) estimate that from 1880-1930 the lynching rate of African Americans and Mexicans was 37.1 and 27.4, respectively, per 100,000 population.

geographical variation in historical lynchings to racial disparities. Our contribution is to link individual long-run outcomes using historical U.S. Census samples with the extent of racial terror experienced in childhood, as measured by historical lynchings, and to extend the historical quantitative analysis of racial terror incidents to include lynchings of ethnic Mexicans, which includes both Mexicans and Mexican Americans, since the citizenship of lynching victims was often unknown. We also consider the impacts of racial terror, as measured by lynchings, on U.S.-born Mexican Americans. While data on lynchings in Southern states outside of Texas have been used by other authors to demonstrate correlations between lynchings and racial segregation (Cook, Logan, and Parman 2018) as well as with contemporary voting behavior of African Americans (Williams 2020)³, to our knowledge there have been no quantitative studies estimating the long-run impacts of the lynchings of ethnic Mexicans or lynchings in Texas on U.S.-born Mexican Americans, significantly raising the contribution of our analysis. The considerable involvement of law enforcement officials in perpetrating lynchings during this period of racial terror, most notably by the Texas Rangers who operated with relative impunity (Harris and Sadler 2004), also highlights the importance of this work for the literature on police brutality and minority communities. While others have examined the impact on violence in Mexico on migration to the U.S. (Escamilla-Guerrero, Kosack, and Ward 2023) and the relationship between Mexican lynchings and immigrant assimilation (Escamilla-Guerrero, Kosack, and Ward 2021), to our knowledge, this is the first study to quantitatively estimate the impacts of racial terror against Mexicans in the U.S. on U.S.-born Mexican Americans.⁴

³ For a review of the broader historical and sociological literature on the lynchings of African Americans in the U.S. South see Smångs (2017).

⁴ The paper closest to ours, Escamilla-Guerrero, Kosack, and Ward (2021), estimates the relationships between a host of factors, including lynchings and residential segregation, and the earnings assimilation of immigrants. As the authors acknowledge, causal interpretation is complicated by concerns regarding endogenous location choice of immigrants in the U.S. It should also be noted that Escamilla-Guerrero, Kosack, and Ward (2021) uses imputed

2. Historical Background

Although Mexicans in the U.S. were granted U.S. citizenship under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848, articles VIII and IX), a pattern of segregation, discrimination, and anti-Mexican attitudes was common throughout the American Southwest (Antman and Cortes 2023, Carrigan and Webb 2013).⁵ In Texas, hostilities toward individuals of Mexican descent were heightened throughout the Texas War for Independence from Mexico (Texas Revolution, 1835-36), subsequent annexation of Texas by the U.S. (1845), and the Mexican-American War (1846-48).⁶ The onset of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), a civil war between rival political factions in Mexico, fueled a Mexican population surge in Texas which further raised racial tensions while violence on both sides of the border fueled hostilities against Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the U.S. (Villanueva 2017). Ethnic Mexicans in Texas were regularly suspected of sympathizing with Mexican revolutionaries in the U.S. press. Similarly, incursions of Mexican revolutionaries into Texas, and the discovery of the Plan of San Diego, a manifesto found in Texas declaring the intent of insurgents to retake lands previously owned by Mexico and to engage in what was perceived as a race war, were used as justification for illegal searches and extra-judicial killings (Harris and Sadler 2004). Racial violence was also used to exert economic control as ethnic Mexicans were sometimes forced to relinquish their property in response to the threat posed by lynch mobs, and thefts were the second-most cited motive, behind murder, for the lynchings of ethnic Mexicans (Carrigan and Webb 2013).

earnings and a different data set on lynchings with few observed after 1910, the peak period of lynchings in Texas observed in our study.

⁵ This is sometimes described as “Juan Crow,” due to its similarities with the Jim Crow laws aimed at African Americans (Martinez 2018).

⁶ It should also be noted that the institution of slavery features prominently in Texas history, as Mexico had outlawed slavery in Texas shortly before the Texas Revolution, and Texas was subsequently admitted to the U.S. as a state where slavery would be legal.

2. Data

2.1 Data on historical lynchings

The data on historical lynchings come from the Lynching in Texas project of Sam Houston State University (Littlejohn 2023). These are publicly available on the website <https://www.lynchingintexas.org>, collected from the *Chicago Tribune*, Tuskegee Institute, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The definition of lynching corresponds to that which was established in 1940 by the NAACP and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), which includes the following four criteria: “(1) There must be legal evidence that a person was killed; (2) That person must have met death illegally; (3) A group of 3 or more persons must have participated in the killing; (4) The group must have acted under the pretext of service to justice, race or tradition.”⁷ The lynching data include the date, city and county where the lynching occurred, as well as the name, gender, age, race/ethnicity, alleged crime, and manner of death of the victim.

Figure 1 shows a timeline of the number of lynchings that occurred in the state of Texas from 1881 to 1939. Years on the *x*-axis are grouped in 5-year intervals. The spike in the lynchings of Hispanics in 1915 to 1919 corresponds to the period of violence between Mexican revolutionaries and the Texas Rangers, the US Army, and groups of vigilantes described by some as the 1915 “Bandit War” (Harris and Sadler 2004) and by others as the *Hora de Sangre* (Carrigan and Webb 2013). During this period, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were often racially profiled, suspected of sympathizing with Mexican revolutionaries, and subjected to extra-judicial searches and killings (Villanueva 2017). Most of the lynchings during the peak period of violence in our data occurred in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, which shares a

⁷ See <https://www.lynchingintexas.org/about>, accessed on January 2, 2024.

border with Mexico and includes Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy counties. The left panel of Figure 2 shows the location of each lynching in Texas by racial group from 1881 to 1939. The right panel of Figure 2 shows the location of lynchings in Texas from 1915 to 1919 which corresponds to the spike in the timeline noted in Figure 1.

2.2 *Historically linked USA full count Census microdata.*

The individual-level data used in this analysis come from the full-count 1880 through 1940 Census data from IPUMS-USA (Ruggles et al. 2022). Since these data do not include information on county of birth, further efforts are required to address the possibility that individuals may have migrated. To address this limitation, we restrict the sample to U.S.-born Mexican Americans aged 18 to 59 in 1940 who can be linked to a 1930 or earlier Census.⁸ We track individuals across censuses using links provided by the Multigenerational Longitudinal Panel (MLP) project (Helgertz et al. 2023). We further limit the sample to individuals in the 1940 Census who are observed in an earlier Census at age 17 or younger residing in a Texas county. For simplicity, we refer to the county in which an individual resides at age 17 or younger as an individual’s “county of origin.”

The Census data are matched to the Lynching in Texas data based on county of origin. The independent variables of interest in the analysis are the number of lynchings in an individual’s county of origin when they were growing up, specifically at ages 0 through 5, 6 through 10, and 11 through 17. Outcomes of interest include years of schooling, log of annual labor market earnings, and home ownership measured in the 1940 Census.⁹

⁸ Individuals aged 18 to 59 in 1940 were born in years 1881 through 1922, and so none should match to the 1880 Census. However, the MLP does not match on exact age. As a result 0.04% percent of our sample is matched to a record in the 1880 Census.

⁹ We utilize outcomes in 1940 because this is the first Census year in which measures of educational attainment and earnings were collected.

4. Empirical strategy

To investigate the relationship between historical lynchings of Hispanics on educational attainment, earnings, and home ownership of Mexican Americans, we begin with the longitudinally linked historical U.S. Census data. With these data, we estimate the following regression model:

$$Y_{ikc} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{LynchingsAge0} - 5_{kc} + \beta_2 \text{LynchingsAge6} - 10_{kc} + \beta_3 \text{LynchingsAge11} - 17_{kc} + \mathbf{X}_{ikc}\boldsymbol{\pi} + \gamma_k + \mu_c + \epsilon_{ikc}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ikc} is a 1940 outcome measure for individual i born in cohort year k who lived in county c at age 17 or younger. The *Lynchings* variables are the number of lynchings of Hispanics in an individual's county of origin c during three age ranges: 0 to 5 year old, 6 to 10 years old, and 11 to 17 years old, respectively. The vector \mathbf{X}_{ikc} includes controls for gender. The regression includes county of origin fixed effects μ_c and birth-year cohort fixed effects γ_k . Standard errors are clustered at the county of origin level. The sample includes U.S.-born Mexicans ages 18 to 59 in 1940 with a county of origin in Texas. Equation (1) is also estimated on a sample limited to individuals with a county of origin in the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley, as these were the counties most affected by the peak period of lynchings in our data set.

5. Results

Table 1 presents the results from estimating equation (1). Panel 1 shows the results for schooling investments and Panel 2 shows the impacts of exposure to lynchings in childhood on annual earnings and home ownership in 1940. Most coefficients are negative, suggesting a negative impact of exposure to lynchings during childhood on long-run outcomes for Mexican Americans, however, magnitudes are small and not always statistically significant, in particular for the larger set of all Texas counties. Restricting the sample to the Lower Rio Grande Valley origin counties generally raises the magnitudes and statistical significance of the estimates. For

instance, panel 1, column 3 shows that one additional lynching between the ages of 6-10 reduces years of schooling by about .04 years, relative to an average of about 5.6 years. At the same time, one additional lynching occurring in the county of origin from ages 11-17 reduces the probability of reaching educational attainment of 12 years or above by .09 percentage points, or about 1% relative to the mean of the dependent variable, both in the larger set of Texas counties and the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The impacts on log earnings are small in magnitude and not statistically significant, however, panel 2 shows that exposure to an additional lynching in Texas during ages 11-17 reduces the likelihood of home ownership in 1940 by about .4 percentage points for the sample of all Texas origin counties (column 2) and .3 percentage points for the Rio Grande counties (column 4). Nevertheless, these are very small magnitudes as well since both are less than 1% relative to the respective average home ownership rates in the sample.

6. Conclusion

As the first project to merge the longitudinally linked historical U.S. Census records with data on lynchings of Mexicans in Texas over a critical period of racial violence, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature. Using variation in lynchings across space and time, we explore the impacts of the long-run effects of growing up, or having family roots in, areas with historically high lynchings on U.S.-born Mexican Americans. Although the results show what appear to be very small negative impacts of exposure to lynchings during childhood on the education, earnings, and home ownership rates of Mexican Americans, given the challenges surrounding the measurement of lynchings during this historical period, we emphasize that they should be interpreted with caution as they are but a first step in understanding the long-run impacts of racial terror in the U.S. While this paper makes a significant contribution by expanding the historical quantitative analysis of racial terror incidents to assess the impact of

lynchings of ethnic Mexicans on U.S.-born Mexican Americans, we duly acknowledge the limitations of this preliminary exercise. Further work should seek to understand the differences between areas where lynchings occurred to better address concerns over endogeneity and the extent to which these estimates can be interpreted as causal.¹⁰ Although concerns about location choice are somewhat mitigated in our focus on exposure to lynchings in childhood, further studies should also take into account the complexities of migration during this turbulent period to better understand how they are connected to racial terror and economic opportunity. As data sources on lynchings, extra-judicial killings, and periods of racial violence improve, additional analyses should aim to evaluate their long-run impacts to better understand their legacy on all demographic groups.

¹⁰ For example, if lynchings were used as an attempt to suppress the economic advancement of the Mexican-origin population, they may have been more common in areas with rising opportunities for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, resulting in a spurious positive correlation between earnings and lynchings (Escamilla-Guerrero, Kosack, and Ward 2021).

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Figure 1. Timeline of Lynchings in Texas from 1881 to 1939, by Race

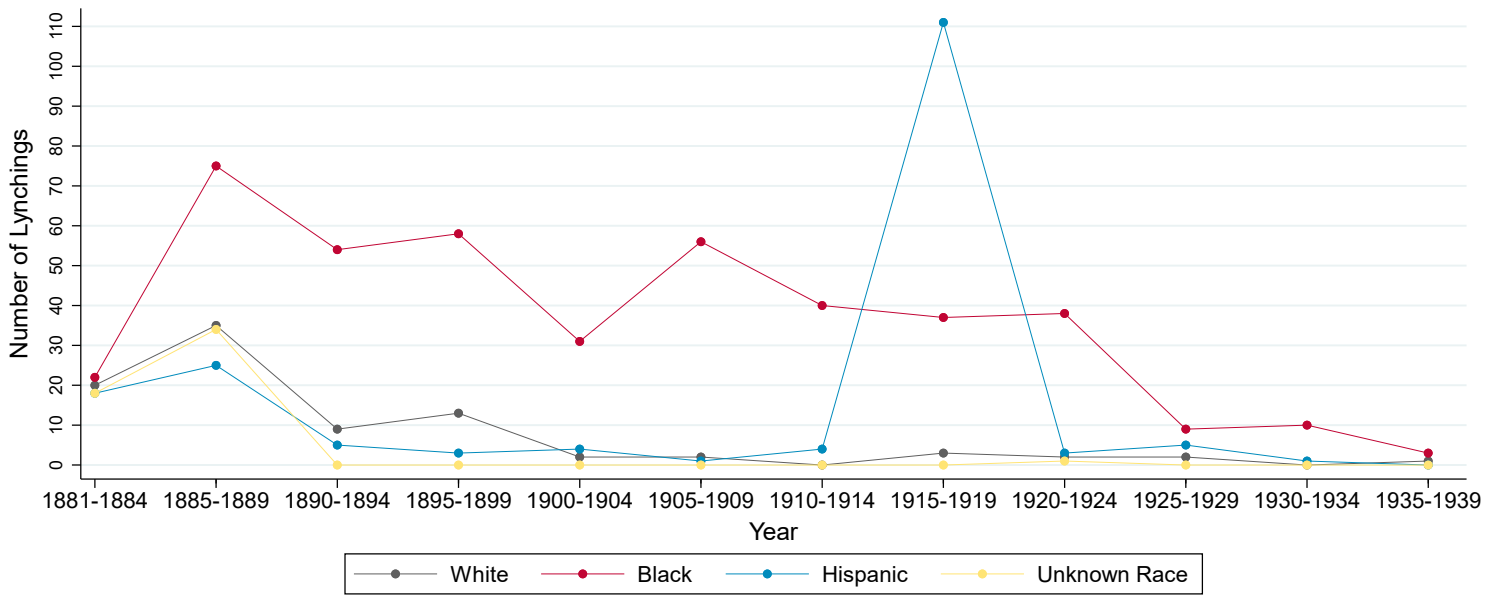
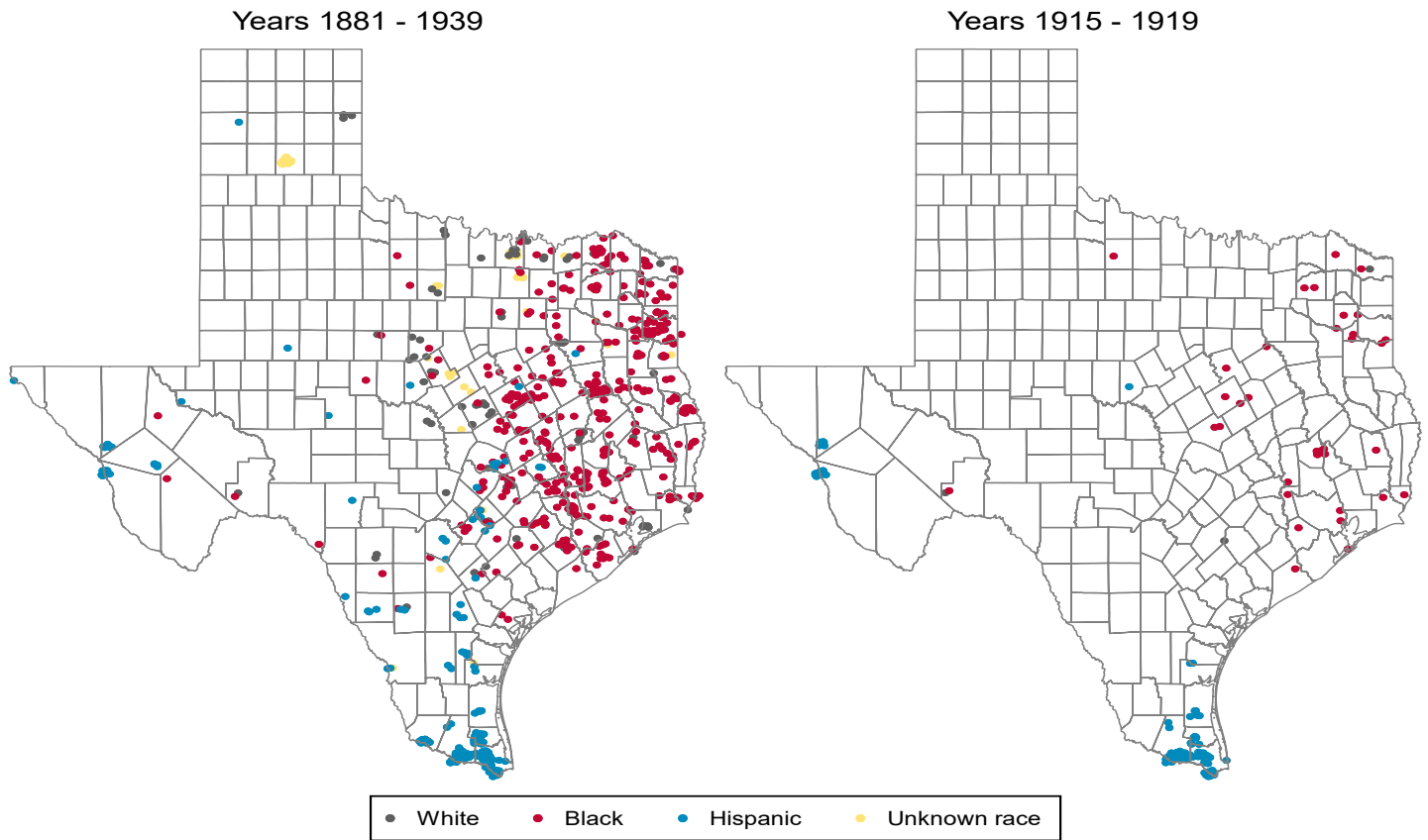


Figure 2. Location of Lynchings in Texas, by Race



Source: Lynching in Texas website (www.lynchingintexas.org, downloaded 4/5/2023)

Table 1: Impact of lynchings in Texas county of origin on U.S.-born Mexicans in 1940

	All Texas counties		Lower Rio Grande Valley	
	Years of schooling (1)	12+ years of Schooling (2)	Years of schooling (3)	12+ years of Schooling (4)
Panel 1:				
Lynchings in county at ages 0 to 5	-.0004 (.0033)	-.0002 (.0002)	-.0029 (.0056)	-.0006* (.0003)
Lynchings in county at ages 6 to 10	-.0032 (.0091)	.0006 (.0007)	-.0398*** (.0093)	-.0017* (.0009)
Lynchings in county at ages 11 to 17	-.0050 (.0060)	-.0009** (.0005)	-.0101 (.0090)	-.0009* (.0005)
Sample size	31,450	31,450	4,475	4,475
Mean of dependent variable	5.998	.1075	5.589	.09721
Panel 2:				
	Log of annual earnings (1)	Home ownership (2)	Log of annual earnings (3)	Home ownership (4)
Lynchings in county at ages 0 to 5	-.0021 (.0021)	-.0002 (.0002)	.0014 (.0024)	.0006 (.0006)
Lynchings in county at ages 6 to 10	-.0018 (.0022)	-.0003 (.0007)	.0029 (.0030)	-.0002 (.0006)
Lynchings in county at ages 11 to 17	-.0067 (.0080)	-.0041*** (.0007)	.0045 (.0117)	-.0033** (.0014)
Sample size	17,499	32,995	3,182	5,724
Mean of dependent variable	5.436	.5127	5.373	.7065

Source: 1880 - 1940 100% Census Data. U.S.-born individuals ages 18 to 59 in 1940 matched to a 1930 or earlier Census with a Texas county of origin observed at age 17 or younger.

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors clustered at the county of origin level are shown in parentheses. Rio Grande Valley region of Texas includes the counties of Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy. Regressions include gender, county of origin, and birthyear fixed effects.