

Ellen and Tom Evans live in a nice suburban home in a safe neighborhood. They both have good jobs – Ellen's a nurse and Tom's a high school teacher - and have raised two teenagers who enjoy material comforts beyond Tom and Ellen's own middle-class origins. Their children, Mike and Lisa, are good kids, doing reasonably well in school, who aspire to go to college and become successful professionals¹.

Maria and Jose Lopez are first-generation Mexican immigrants. Maria works part-time and Jose holds down two jobs – a daytime construction job and part-time evening work as a security guard – in order to support their four kids, who range in age from eight to 16. They live in a modest home on an urban street with lots of traffic and not much green space for recreation; they worry about the crime rate, the homeless, and the gangs in their part of the city.

So who enjoys a greater quality of life and tighter family bonds? The answer's not as simple as you might think.

When we take a closer look, we find that Ellen and Tom are struggling to balance work and family obligations as they try to maintain their comfortable suburban lifestyle. Their closest relatives live in another state, and they have few friends in the community. “It makes me sad that our kids don't see their grandparents regularly,” says Ellen. “It's like they hardly know them.” Although not divorced, Tom confesses that “we've talked about it on and off but so far we are holding things together.” [...]

In contrast, the Lopez family enjoys a high level of support from their extended family and community. Their home is located close to their jobs, and they are part of a tightly knit Mexican-American community. [...] “I feel real lucky that my family is close by,” says Maria. “They help a lot with money when things get tight, and of course look out for the children. It's great.” Unlike the Evanses, they do most things together - taking walks, going to the movies, socializing, and attending church as a family. [...]

At a time when people are lamenting the death of the American family, we've found that many of the ideals of the American family are alive and well – and some of them are being imported from Mexico.

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Culture Flash

Mexican Americans comprise about two thirds of US Hispanics. They are about 29 million and make up roughly 9% of the US population. They are the fastest growing but also the poorest Hispanic group. Many of them work in blue-collar occupations as restaurant employees, truck drivers, gardeners or construction workers. They live mainly in the US Southwest and Midwest, but also in big cities like New York, Washington or Miami.

Word help

1. *professions libérales*