



The Changing Geography of Hispanic Children and Families

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Why research on low-income Hispanic children and families matters

Hispanic or Latino children currently make up roughly one in four of all children in the United States,^a and by 2050 are projected to make up one in three, similar to the number of white children.^b Given this, how Hispanic children fare will have a profound and increasing impact on the social and economic well-being of the country as a whole.

Notably, though, 5.7 million Hispanic children are in poverty, more than in any other racial/ethnic group.^c Additionally, two thirds of Hispanic children live in poverty or near poverty, defined as less than two times the federal poverty level.^d Despite their high levels of economic need, Hispanics, particularly those in immigrant families, have lower rates of participation in many government support programs when compared with other racial/ethnic minority groups.^{e-g} High-quality, research-based information on the characteristics, experiences, and diversity of Hispanic children and families is needed to inform programs and policies supporting the sizable population of low-income Hispanic families and children.

^a Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2014). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2014, Table POP3*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>

^b Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2012). *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2012, Tables POP1 and POP3*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>

^c DeNavas-Walt, C., & Proctor, B.D. (2015). *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014, Table B-2, Current Population Reports, P60-252*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. from <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf#TableB-2>

^d Lopez, M. H., & Velasco, G. (2011). *Childhood Poverty Among Hispanics Sets Record, Leads Nation*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Hispanic Center. from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/>

^e Williams, S. (2013). *Public assistance participation among U.S. children in poverty, 2010*. Bowling Green, Ohio: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. from <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-13-02.pdf>

^f Lichter, D., Sanders, S., & Johnson, K. (2015). *Behind at the starting line: Poverty among Hispanic infants*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy. from <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=carsey>

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The Hispanic^a population in the United States has grown rapidly over the past few decades and continues to do so. In 2014, nearly 17 percent of the population was Latino,¹ almost double what it was in 1990.² By 2050, Latinos are projected to be one in four of all individuals in the United States, making up 26 percent of the general population.³ As the Latino population continues to grow, it has become increasingly diverse across a range of individual characteristics, including nativity status, country of origin, and, among immigrants, citizenship status. Strides are being made to better document and understand the varied experiences of Hispanics.⁴⁻⁶

The communities in which Hispanics live are also increasingly diverse, both in location and character.⁷ The characteristics of the communities in which Latino children and families live and grow up have implications for their well-being, both positive and negative. For example, the communities in which children and families live can determine the type and quality of schools that children attend, the availability of family and other social networks, the availability and accessibility of social services, access to healthy food and green space, and exposure to violence.⁸⁻¹²

In this brief, we review the changing geography of Hispanics in the United States. We also discuss the key demographic drivers of these changes.

Where Hispanics live

Hispanic and Latino are pan-ethnic terms used in the United States to identify individuals with Spanish or Latin American ancestry.^{13,14} Notably, many Hispanics have lived in certain parts of the United States for centuries, with roots reaching back prior to statehood. Others immigrated to various regions across the United States or are descended from these immigrants. Because of this history, Hispanics have generally been concentrated in certain states and cities:

^a Throughout this brief, we use the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably. Both terms refer to individuals with Spanish or Latin American ancestry (i.e. heritage of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, etc.). Hispanic is used when reporting findings from federally support data sources.

- **The Southwest:** Many Hispanics live in the areas of the Southwest that became states in the 1800s—in particular, California, Texas, and Arizona. Nearly half (46 percent) of U.S. Hispanics, in 2014, lived in two states: California and Texas.¹⁵
- **Gateway cities:** Many Hispanics also live in cities that have served as arrival sites, at various points in time, for large numbers of immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, among other countries. These include large urban areas such as Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Chicago, and New York City.¹⁶

Since the 1990s, Hispanics have become increasingly geographically distributed across the United States. For example, some of the fastest growth in the Hispanic population between 1990 and 2010 occurred in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia (See Figure 1).¹⁷ Currently, cities in the Southeast, such as Charlotte, N.C., have the highest rates of Hispanic growth in the United States.¹⁸ Moreover, Hispanics also increasingly live in different types of communities—that is, they are less likely to live in city centers and are more likely to live in rural areas and suburban towns.^{19–22} Since 1990, the Hispanic population in rural areas of the United States has more than doubled.²³

The Hispanic population is relatively large, and the movement of Latinos into rural and suburban areas alters the demographic landscape of the nation substantially. In contrast to older immigration patterns, some recent Hispanic immigrant groups have bypassed traditional urban gateway cities and have settled directly into rural and suburban communities.²⁴ These newer patterns are playing a critical role in counteracting the population decline that has been occurring in many parts of rural United States.²⁵



Drivers of Hispanic geographic diversity

A large body of research has focused on the changing geography of Hispanics in the United States and describes the types of communities in which Hispanics live.^{26–28} Over the past few decades, these communities have been classified primarily based on three factors:

- **the size of the Hispanic population,**
- **the rate of growth of the Hispanic population, and**
- **whether the area is rural, suburban, or urban.**

New or emerging communities are umbrella terms that refer to communities that have experienced an influx of Hispanics since the 1990s.^{29–31} Hispanics in established gateway cities are often compared to their counterparts in rural or suburban emerging destinations across ranging dimensions, including, for example, exposure to violence, residential segregation, and health.^{32–34}

However, emerging communities can also occur in large cities that have preexisting Hispanic populations. For example, in New York City—a city with strong immigrant ties and well-established Puerto Rican and Dominican populations—the number of residents of Mexican heritage has increased six-fold since 1990, from about 56,000 in 1990 to 354,000 in 2014.^{35,36} Thus, for Mexican-origin Hispanics, New York City is an emerging community.

What contributes to changing Hispanic communities and diversity

Three demographic factors contribute to the changing geography of U.S. Hispanics: immigration, migration, and childbearing. These same factors shape the Hispanic population of local communities, with important implications for programs and providers seeking to serve them. The following section details these sources of Hispanic population change and how each is linked to changing characteristics of Hispanic communities.

Immigration

Immigration is the movement of people from one country to another. In the United States, waves of Latino immigration have occurred at multiple times, from multiple countries, and for a variety of reasons. For example, the Bracero program facilitated the immigration of Mexican laborers to the United States to meet economic demands during World War II, and two major waves of Cuban refugees settled in the United States in the 1960s and 1980s.³⁷

Over the course of the past century, Hispanic immigrants have generally settled in the urban core of “gateway” cities. However, since 1990, more Hispanic immigrants are settling directly in rural and suburban destinations in non-traditional areas.^{38,39} This is largely due to changing economic and employment opportunities that have been advantageous in non-urban relative to urban areas.⁴⁰

Hispanic immigrant flows to the United States have always been dominated by Mexican immigrants, and still are, though to a lesser extent.⁴¹ For many years, this was followed by Puerto Rican migrants and Cuban immigrants.⁴² However, the flow of immigrants from Central American countries (i.e., El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, etc.) has increased in recent decades. The number of Central American immigrants more than doubled in the 2000s, and those of Central American ancestry now account for 10 percent of the total population of Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Maryland.^{43,44} Those of Salvadoran ancestry are now the third-largest Hispanic group in the United States, behind those of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage.^{45,46}

Migration

Movement of Hispanics—U.S.-born and foreign-born—within the United States is another source of growth and change in many communities. The pull of better economic opportunities draws both Hispanic immigrants and internal migrants to different communities.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ Currently, over half of the Hispanics who settle in new and emerging communities stem from traditional gateway cities within the United States.⁵⁰ This movement contributes to rural and suburban growth. In fact, the growth in many rural areas over the past decade is due to growth in their Hispanic populations.⁵¹

Childbearing

When women, on average, have more than two children, the population grows, as opposed to remaining steady or decreasing. Recent estimates indicate that the total fertility rate for Hispanic women in the U.S. exceeds this number,^b while fertility remains lower than this among non-Hispanic white women.⁵² Fertility among Hispanics is higher in new and emerging destinations than it is in gateway cities, in part because foreign-born Hispanics, who are more likely than the U.S.-born to settle in these communities, have more children on average than do U.S.-born Hispanics.^{53,54} In addition, a greater proportion of Hispanics are in the family-building stage of life—in their childbearing years (ages 15 to 44)—than are their non-Hispanic counterparts.⁵⁵

In 2014, over one fifth (23 percent) of all U.S. births occurred to Hispanic women.⁵⁶ Notably, fertility now contributes more than immigration does to the growth of the Hispanic population. This means an increasing proportion of Hispanic children are U.S.-born; in fact, over 90 percent of Hispanic children under age 18 were born in the United States.⁵⁷

Hispanic diversity

To illustrate the changes in the Latino population that have occurred in recent decades, we look to three counties that have experienced Hispanic growth: Los Angeles County, Calif.; Gwinnett County, Ga.; and Mecklenburg County, N.C. These are very different communities. Los Angeles County is one of the most populous counties in the country and has historically been a gateway for Hispanic immigrants, with the size and share of its Hispanic population continuing to grow over time. Gwinnett County, comprised of suburbs of Atlanta, is the most racially and ethnically diverse county in the metropolitan area. Charlotte, N.C., is a southeastern city with high growth, and its combined suburban and rural communities are located in Mecklenburg County.

Table 1. Hispanic population’s size, share, and growth, 2000 and 2014

| County | 2000 Hispanic population | 2000 Hispanic share of population | 2014 Hispanic population | 2014 Hispanic share of population | Percent increase in hispanic population 2000-2014 |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Los Angeles County, CA | 4,242,000 | 45% | 4,898,000 | 48% | 15% |
| Gwinnett County, GA | 64,000 | 11% | 180,000 | 20% | 180% |
| Mecklenburg County, NC | 45,000 | 6% | 128,000 | 13% | 186% |

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 Census and U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

^b A total fertility rate (TFR) of 2,100 births per 1,000 women is considered to be replacement level. Recent estimates indicate that the total fertility rate for Hispanic women is 2,149 per 1,000 women. Non-Hispanic white and black women have below-replacement fertility rates—1,751 and 1,881.5, respectively.

Table 1 shows growth in the Hispanic population between 2000 and 2014, in the three counties of interest.^{cd} In 2000, 45 percent of Los Angeles County residents were Hispanic. By 2014, 48 percent—close to half of all residents—were Hispanic. The Hispanic population in Los Angeles County increased by 15 percent (or about 650,000 Hispanics) in roughly one and a half decades. In Gwinnett County, the Hispanic portion of the population more than doubled in this time period, from about 64,000 Hispanics residents (11 percent of the population) to just under 180,000 residents (20 percent of the population). This translates to a growth of 180 percent. Similarly, between 2000 and 2014, the share of Hispanic residents in Mecklenburg County increased from 6 percent to 13 percent of the total population—a growth of 186 percent.

Table 2. Characteristics of Hispanics by county, 2014

| County | Mexican Origin | Foreign-born | Speak English “Well” |
|------------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Los Angeles County, CA | 77% | 41% | 65% |
| Gwinnett County, GA | 54% | 50% | 60% |
| Mecklenburg County, NC | 40% | 52% | 54% |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

Table 2 shows the varying characteristics of Hispanics across these three communities, based on estimates from the 2014 American Community Survey.⁵⁸ In 2014, three out of four Hispanics in Los Angeles County were of Mexican ancestry, compared with just over half of Hispanics in Gwinnett County and 40 percent of Hispanics in Mecklenburg County (Table 2).^e About half of Hispanics in Gwinnett and Mecklenburg were foreign-born, whereas 41 percent of Hispanics in Los Angeles County were foreign-born. Interestingly, even with half of Hispanics being foreign-born, over half of Hispanic residents in Gwinnett and Mecklenburg Counties report that they speak English well. In these newer communities, English fluency may be more critical to successful employment and social mobility than in gateway cities, where there are more Spanish speakers.^{59,60}

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate some aspects of the diversity among Latinos in the United States. In Los Angeles County, a historical gateway, most Hispanics are of Mexican heritage and there is a continual influx of immigrants. This means that LA County has a consistently large immigrant population with enclaves—communities with distinct cultural identities that are, for better or worse, socially and economically integrated. Gwinnett and Mecklenburg Counties look quite different than Los Angeles and represent the growth of smaller communities that have proportionally more residents of Central American ancestry.

Implications of Hispanic population growth, change, and diversity

Where Hispanics live matters for the well-being of Hispanic children and families, as well as for the nation as a whole. The three demographic forces described above—immigration, internal migration, and childbearing—are working collectively to shape what Hispanic communities look like in the United States, and which communities Latinos live in. Since the 1990s, there is increasing diversity, by region and character, in the communities Hispanics live in, including substantial settlement in the Southeast and in rural and suburban communities.

Various stakeholders within communities often pay close attention to the makeup of their population in terms of gender, age, racial/ethnic composition, employment status, and educational attainment in order to identify community strengths and needs. The increasing diversity of Hispanics, across different types of communities, needs to be considered as well. The influx of Latinos in a community may present both opportunities and challenges. In rural areas, particularly those with aging populations, new Hispanic residents can help meet labor demands and stave off population declines. At the same time, a community with a new Hispanic population may lack the infrastructure to provide culturally appropriate/sensitive human and social services, such as Spanish-speaking capabilities or translation services.



^c County-specific estimates are derived from the 2000 decennial census and the 2014 American Community Survey 1-Year estimates, using [Social Explorer](#) and [American Fact-Finder](#), respectively.

^d County-specific Hispanic population estimates are rounded to the nearest thousand. The county-specific percent change in the Hispanic population between 2000 and 2014 is calculated using unrounded population estimates, and then rounded to the nearest whole number.

^e Hispanics of Salvadoran ancestry were the second-largest Hispanic group in Los Angeles and Gwinnett Counties, whereas Hondurans were the second largest group in Mecklenburg (results not shown).

Hispanics that move within the United States—those who settle in one place then move to another—are more likely to be foreign-born than those who do not move.⁶¹ Despite often being socioeconomically disadvantaged relative to their U.S.-born peers, Hispanics adults who are foreign-born also have strong attachments to the labor market which can often provide critical social and economic supports.^{62,63} Hispanic enclaves are now forming outside of gateway cities, but they may differ in important ways from more established Hispanic enclaves.⁶⁴ Specifically, traditional enclaves are more “linguistically isolated”⁶⁵ than those in new and emerging communities, given that they lack the cross-cultural interactions often necessary for employment in rural and suburban areas that would facilitate English fluency.⁶⁵ While dual-language learning can have emotional, social, cognitive, and economic benefits for children,⁶⁶ children may be disadvantaged by non-English-speaking parents’ potential inability to navigate certain systems, such as education or social services.

Schools offer opportunities for social mobility for Hispanic children, providing the skills and social capital necessary for educational achievement and success in adulthood.^{67,68} As one out of four children in the United States is Hispanic,⁶⁹ investments in Latino children are investments into the future labor force; it is important that children’s services are able to meet the needs of Hispanic children specifically.⁷⁰ Furthermore, given that bilingualism is positively linked with children’s development and academic performance,⁷¹ communities with a critical mass of Latino students can offer curriculums for dual-language learners that are beneficial to Hispanic and non-Hispanic students alike.⁷²

It is important to understand the characteristics of Hispanics who live in a range of communities, as well as the characteristics of the communities themselves. The interaction between characteristics of Hispanics and the communities in which they live has implications for the well-being and integration of Latino children and families.

Endnotes

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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families is a hub of research to improve the lives of low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. It is comprised of a team of national experts in Hispanic issues, led by Child Trends and Abt Associates along with university partners (University of Maryland - College Park, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the Institute for Human Development and Social Change at New York University). The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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