

Conclusions and Implications

Since 1990, the pace of Hispanic population growth in nonmetro counties has surprised many demographers and challenged local officials and policy-makers. This report has reviewed some causes and examined the extent of recent Hispanic population and dispersion in nonmetropolitan counties of the United States. We have compared the socioeconomic profiles of Hispanics residing in all U.S. counties, emphasizing differences among counties characterized by rapidly growing and established Hispanic populations that may illustrate future prospects for social and economic integration of rural Hispanics. High-growth Hispanic counties often include significant percentages of recent migrants whose socioeconomic profiles contrast sharply with those of native Hispanic and non-Hispanic White residents. Accordingly, we have analyzed residential separation patterns at the county, place, and neighborhood levels. Where appropriate, we have compared these outcomes with those of metro counties to provide a basis for understanding settlement patterns in rural areas compared with more familiar urban patterns.

Hispanics remain among the most urbanized ethnic/racial groups in America, with over 90 percent living in metro areas in 2000. Moreover, they continue to be concentrated in the Southwest. Yet, nonmetro Hispanic growth in the 1990s was much greater and more widespread than in previous decades and appeared in hundreds of rural communities throughout the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest. The growth was both more dispersed and more concentrated than for non-Hispanics because, while almost all nonmetro counties experienced Hispanic population growth, 30 percent of this growth occurred in the 149 counties whose Hispanic population growth rates exceeded 150 percent.

Hispanic newcomers have forged communities in areas unaccustomed to seeing large numbers of foreign-born, particularly in the rapidly growing Hispanic counties of the Southeast and Midwest highlighted in this report. Hispanics in these counties include disproportionate numbers of young men who come from rural communities in economically depressed regions of Mexico and begin migrating as single teenagers or young adults without documentation. Such recent migrants typically have relatively fewer years of formal education and often speak little English. Despite these disadvantages, employment rates among Hispanics in high-growth nonmetro counties exceed those of all other nonmetro Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

Hispanic population dispersion into new nonmetro destinations reduced levels of residential separation at the national level between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites between 1990 and 2000, corresponding to a similar reduction within metro counties. However, increased residential separation among Census-defined places within counties became evident, especially in high-growth counties; Hispanics are more concentrated in these places than non-Hispanic Whites, and place separation increased during the 1990s. Among neighborhoods within places, separation increased within high-growth Hispanic counties despite rapid growth of both Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

Substantial empirical research on segregation demonstrates the importance of location for the distribution of public resources and less tangible public goods. If separation systematically restricts access to these resources for some population groups, the impact can be significant over the long term. Moreover, separation can have negative community effects. Numerous cases of urban “White flight” in previous decades illustrate how the depopulation of neighborhoods and even entire towns of typically better educated and higher income individuals leaves behind increasingly concentrated minority populations whose lower earnings reduce the tax base necessary for adequate social services. While large cities may have sufficiently diverse populations and industries to absorb such shifts in population, rural places are less likely to be insulated from changes posed by rapid demographic shifts. These issues will be magnified in scope and importance as Hispanics increasingly populate nonmetro counties.

How Hispanics are viewed in new rural destinations depends on one’s vantage point. Hispanic population growth has helped to stem decades of population decline in some States, revitalizing many rural communities with new demographic and economic vigor. Such population infusions may affect the allocation of State and Federal program funding to rural areas for education, health, other social services, and infrastructure projects. In addition to increasing the local tax base and spending money on local goods, services, and housing, recent migrant workers may fill labor market demands that otherwise might force employers to relocate domestically or internationally, or even abandon certain industries. Finally, new migrants clearly provide social and cultural diversity that introduces native residents to new cultures, languages, and cuisine.

Yet, many rural communities are unprepared, economically and culturally, for significant numbers of culturally distinct, low-paid newcomers who seek inexpensive housing, require distinct social services, and struggle to speak English. Residents in many rural communities have little experience with people of different backgrounds, and numerous popular reports suggest pervasive social conflict among communities that have experienced rapid influxes of Hispanic residents. While Hispanics in new destinations often work in relatively more dangerous or less well-paid industries than native workers, their presence in the labor market may exert downward pressure on local wage rates even in comparatively skilled industries (Newman, 2003).

Moreover, sizable increases in the Hispanic proportion of the total population can significantly affect empirical socioeconomic measures for the broader population. To cite one example, in five high-growth Hispanic counties where the Hispanic proportion of the population increased from under 10 percent in 1990 to over 25 percent in 2000, the proportion of males over 25 with less than a ninth-grade education averages 20 percent. The same proportion for the non-Hispanic population alone drops to 8 percent. Future research will expand on the extent to which such findings can be generalized to other measures of socioeconomic well-being.

In some respects, the challenges that communities face in addressing the needs of newcomers are intrinsic to international labor migration itself. The

complicated process of labor migration, including limited skill demands, arduous working conditions, and relatively low wages of many migrant jobs, means that recent migrants are often self-selected simultaneously for “favorable” characteristics such as initiative and youth, and “unfavorable” characteristics, such as lower education attainment. However, it is also important to remember that the term “Hispanic,” as used in this report, encompasses a wide range of experience, ranging from families having lived generations in the United States to recently arrived migrants whose experience we have emphasized in this report.

Prospects for Hispanics in rural America hinge on the same mechanisms for social and economic mobility utilized by earlier generations of U.S. immigrants. These include acquiring legal status, U.S. work experience, English skills, training, and education, as well as overcoming discrimination and prejudice. Long-term prospects for Hispanic social and economic mobility, on the other hand, depend critically on the degree to which the educational attainments of Hispanic children match those of their peers. Local communities and States can address some of these issues in public policies targeted toward helping new residents acquire information about basic public services, such as education, health care, transportation, and U.S. laws; many States have already done so. In some cases, States have established formal programs that help new residents acclimate to their civic environment. As their experience in the United States increases, they will become socially and economically integrated through various mechanisms, including the acquisition of English language skills and legal status acquired through sponsorship, marriage, and amnesty programs.

In rural America, these circumstances occur against the backdrop of an aging, mostly White, baby-boomer population that will increasingly rely upon the productivity, health, and civic participation of Hispanic children as boomers begin retiring in large numbers in the coming decades. Consequently, the social and economic adaptation, integration, and mobility of new rural residents and their children are critical public policy issues that merit attention of social scientists and policy analysts.