Population Growth in New Hispanic Destinations

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The spread of America’s Hispanic population has been a major source of new population growth in the United States outside traditional immigrant gateways, such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Much of the debate and conversation about Hispanic immigration has focused on immigration-induced population growth. Far less attention has been paid to the impact of Hispanic natural increase (more births than deaths). Natural increase is now the major engine of Hispanic population growth in both the core and suburbs of large metro areas, in many smaller metro areas, and in rural communities. The increasing importance of natural increase adds a new dimension to the challenge of integrating the growing Hispanic population into rural and urban areas. This brief provides a new demographic portrait of rural and small-town America, one now being redrawn by the infusion of Hispanic migrants and, perhaps more important, by the large number of Hispanic births in the United States.

Our analysis provides a glimpse of America’s future. Current trends will remake the social and cultural fabric of communities for decades to come. They raise new concerns about ethnic conflict, flagging immigrant incorporation, and the burdens on local taxpayers (e.g., bilingual education, property taxes, health care, and social services).

More important, the rapid rise in the Hispanic population in America is likely to continue, with or without restrictive immigration legislation. Through natural increase, Hispanic population growth has taken on a momentum of its own.

Hispanics Now Account for Half of U.S. Population Growth

The share of overall U.S. population gain attributable to Hispanics has grown rapidly over the past two decades. During the 1990s, for example, the U.S. population grew by 32.7 million persons—the largest population increase in U.S. history. Hispanics accounted for 13.3 million, or nearly 41 percent, of this population growth. The Hispanic population grew by 60.6 percent during the 1990s, while the overall U.S. population grew by only 13 percent. Hispanic growth since 2000 has accelerated, and by July 2007 had already grown by 10.2 million. Even more remarkable, though Hispanics represented only 12.5 percent of the U.S. population in 2000, they produced one-half of the entire U.S. population increase between 2000 and 2007. As a result, Hispanics now constitute 15 percent of the population.

For many communities, Hispanic population growth often makes the difference between growth and decline. Indeed, between 2000 and 2005, an unprecedented 221 counties experienced population increases only because Hispanic gains more than offset population decline of non-Hispanics (Figure 1). Hispanic population gains also diminished the overall loss in another 1,100 counties, including large swatches of the Great Plains, where years of decline have threatened the region’s economic and demographic viability. In another 1,600 counties, Hispanic population increase combined with gains among the non-Hispanics to accelerate population growth.

Figure 1: The Impact of Hispanic Population Change on Overall Population Change, 2000 to 2005

Data: Census 2000 and FSCPE 2007
A Young Population Means Many Births and Few Deaths, Fueling Population Gains

1. Populations grow when more people move into an area than leave or when there are more births than deaths. In the case of Hispanics, these demographic processes are occurring simultaneously, producing remarkable Hispanic gains. To be sure, the initial impetus for the recent population surge was immigration—between 2000 and 2007, 4.2 million Hispanics immigrated to the United States, supplementing the 7.7 million who arrived during the 1990s. Most of these immigrants were young adults on the cusp of parenthood, and many started families. The natural increase that resulted from this has now taken center stage in explaining Hispanic growth in the twenty-first century. Between 2000 and 2007, somewhat more than one-half (58.6 percent) of the Hispanic population gain of 10.2 million was from natural increase. And, this natural increase is accelerating.

2. The current Hispanic population gains result from a very high birth to death ratio. For every Hispanic death, there are 8.36 births. In contrast, among non-Hispanics, the ratio is 1.37 births for every death. This pronounced difference reflects, among other things, a much younger Hispanic population (median age of Hispanics is 27.6 compared with 38.6 for non-Hispanics in 2007). In all, 47.3 percent of Hispanic women are of childbearing age (15-44) compared with only 40.6 percent of non-Hispanic women. Hispanic women also tend to have children earlier and they tend to have more children (2.8 children, on average, compared with 2.0 for all U.S. women in 2004). Adding to the impact of high fertility is a comparatively low death rate, among Hispanics, who are much younger than the native population.

3. The large demographic impact of Hispanics is perhaps best reflected in the demographic components that account for overall U.S. population growth (not Hispanic growth alone). As shown in Figure 2, Hispanics accounted for 50.4 percent of the U.S. population gain between 2000 and 2007, yet they represented only 12.5 percent of the population in 2000. They contributed 52.8 percent of the net migration gain in 2000. They contributed 52.8 percent of the net migration gain (immigration) during the period and 49 percent of all the natural increase in the country.

4. The geographic reach of natural increase is broad and deep. In 251 counties (8.0 percent), natural increase is great enough to offset a Hispanic migration loss (Figure 3). Included among these counties are large urban core counties such as Cook (Chicago) and Los Angeles as well as numerous Southwestern counties which have long included substantial Hispanic populations. The net out-migration from such counties reflects the spillover dispersion of Hispanics from traditional gateways into the rural Midwest and South as well as to the urban fringe. In another 594 counties (18.9 percent), Hispanic growth is fueled primarily by natural increase, though it was supplemented by net in-migration. Migration remains the primary source of Hispanic growth in 1,386 counties (44.1 percent), though nearly all are experiencing natural increase as well. Some of these counties are places where Hispanic growth is recent, in others immigration is ongoing. In only 120 counties is the Hispanic population declining. Finally, although Hispanics have spread beyond traditional gateways, there are still large areas of the country with few Hispanics. One-fourth of U.S. counties had fewer than 200 Hispanics in 2005. Most of these counties are located in the northern and central Great Plains, the Appalachians, and the interior Southeast.

Figure 2: Hispanic Percentage of U.S. Population and Demographic Change, 1990-2000 and 2000-2007

During the 1990s, migration accounted for 57 percent of the overall Hispanic gain in metropolitan areas. In rural areas, migration was an even larger factor, accounting for 67 percent of the Hispanic population gain. The situation changed dramatically after 2000, when natural increase became the main driver of growth. More than 58 percent of the nonmetro Hispanic increase and 55 percent of the metro Hispanic population since 2000 was fueled by natural increase.

The impact of Hispanic population gains on rural communities has as much to do with the aging white population with Hispanic high fertility and low mortality. The toll from a steady exodus of youth from rural communities is a graying population. Many nonmetro counties, in fact, report more deaths than births. Thus, substantial Hispanic natural increase together with migration is critical to the future of many rural areas.

Hispanics Helped Stem Population Loss in Rural Areas

Hispanics are a major source of growth in rural America (see Figure 4). Between 2000 and 2005, Hispanics accounted for 45.5 percent of nonmetro population growth. The large demographic footprint belies the small size of the rural Hispanic population. Hispanics represented only 5.4 percent of the nonmetro population in 2000. Yet, they accounted for over half (53.4 percent) of all nonmetropolitan natural increase and 37.8 percent of the rural net migration gain between 2000 and 2005. For many rural communities, such Hispanic gains represent the first population growth in decades.

Figure 3: The Contribution of Natural Increase to Hispanic Population Change, 2000 to 2005

During the 1990s, Hispanic population growth in new destinations was accompanied by a spreading of the population to new destinations. Not surprisingly, most nonmetro Hispanics (1.3 million) reside in the 205 established Hispanic counties—counties at least 10 percent Hispanic in both 1990 and 2000 (see Figure 5). However, 115 counties are Hispanic high growth counties—those with Hispanic population gains during the 1990s of at least 150 percent and with at least 1,000 Hispanics in the population. These counties were home to 359,000 Hispanic residents in 2000, some 13.6 percent of all nonmetro Hispanics. The newest destinations are the 13 emerging nonmetro Hispanic counties—those with at least 7.5 percent Hispanic population increase between 2000 and 2005 and an absolute gain of at least 500 Hispanics. An additional 945,000 reside in the other nonmetro counties.

The large majority of America’s Hispanic population continues to reside in metro areas. Here Hispanics are heavily concentrated in 121 established Hispanic counties, which account for 74 percent of the 32.7 million urban Hispanics. The 178 high growth counties contain an additional 7.2 percent of urban Hispanics, and the 20 emerging Hispanic counties contain only 0.3 percent. The remaining 770 metro counties are home to 18.4 percent of urban Hispanics.

The increasing importance of natural increase for Hispanic growth means that Hispanics have gained demographic momentum. Both natural increase and migration have contributed to Hispanic population growth in new destinations. The ascendancy of natural increase, not surprisingly, is most

Figure 5: Hispanic Population Growth Patterns, 1990 to 2005

Hispanics are settling in new destinations

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Hispanics are Here to Stay even without Continued Immigration

Hispanic natural increase is a vital but often ignored component of population growth. Well over one-half of the recent Hispanic population growth was due to natural increase—compared with about one-third in the 1990s. Clearly, we are seeing a large secondary effect of past immigration on the demographic components of change. The demographic implications are clear. Hispanic population growth is self-sustaining, even if immigration were to be reduced to one-third in the 1990s. Many have arrived only recently, which presents additional cultural challenges. New Hispanic immigrants are often highly segregated and isolated from mainstream institutions.

The policy implications associated with in-migration are clearly different from those associated with high fertility and natural increase. Natural increase and the growth of a new second generation in rural America reinforce the need to address questions about immigrant incorporation, education and language, and intergenerational economic mobility.

This new demographic portrait provides a window to America’s future. Recent trends portend continuing growth that will shape the social fabric of many communities for decades to come. The ascendency of Hispanic fertility and natural increase is unlikely to stall anytime soon. While many observers have lamented for decades the decline of small towns, today the most interesting and controversial questions arise from minority population growth and native responses. And now these debates are likely to center as much on high fertility as on immigration.

Data and Methods

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) provided us with special tabulations of births and deaths by county by Hispanic origin. These data are supplemented with data from the Federal State Cooperative program (FSCPE), which provides population estimates, number of births and deaths, and migration for each U.S. county. Net domestic migration is estimated by subtracting the FSCPE estimate of immigration from net migration. We calculate population change by comparing data from the 2000 Census to the FSCPE estimate.

We calculated the demographic components of change between 1990 and 2000 following similar procedures, but we based them on 1990 and 2000 census-enumerated populations rather than on population estimates. Data for the Hispanic population are from the 1990 and 2000 censuses and from the 2005 and 2007 Census Bureau estimates of population by race/Hispanic origin.

We examine patterns of immigration and Hispanic population change for all 3,141 U.S. counties. County equivalents are used in the New England states.

Counts are classified as metro or nonmetro using the 2003 definition of the Office of Management and Budget. Under this definition, metro areas are defined as those containing an urban core of 50,000 or more population. Metro areas include the county containing the urban core (or central city), along with any other counties that are highly integrated with the core county as measured by commuting patterns. There are 1,990 metro counties. The remaining 2,151 counties are classified as nonmetro. We use the terms metro and urban interchangeably as we do the terms nonmetro and rural. By convention, counties classified as nonmetro prior to the 2003, but reclassified as metro by 2003, are treated as metro throughout the analysis.

## Figure 6: Percent of Hispanic Population Growth Due to Natural Increase by Type and Metropolitan Status, 1990 to 2005

![Figure 6: Percent of Hispanic Population Growth Due to Natural Increase by Type and Metropolitan Status, 1990 to 2005](image)

Source: Census Bureau and National Center for Health Statistics

Figure 6 shows the percent of Hispanic population growth due to natural increase by type and metropolitan status from 1990 to 2005. The data indicate that the role of natural increase increased significantly between 2000 and 2005. In the other areas, the contribution of natural increase to Hispanic population growth accelerated from 25 percent of the gain in the 1990s to approximately 45 percent between 2000 and 2005. Even in the high growth counties of the 1990s, the role of natural increase increased significantly after 2000.


For data on the 1990s, see Kandel and Cromartie, “Changing Faces, Changing Places” (note 4 above).


We focused here on Hispanic data on births and deaths through 2005. In a small number of counties, NCHS suppressed the number of Hispanic births and deaths for confidentiality purposes. We allocated these suppressed births and deaths to specific counties based on historical trends. This introduces a small but unknown degree of error in our estimates, but we are confident that at the level of aggregation at which we present our results, it has no material impact on our overall conclusions.

We used a similar procedure to calculate the components of change for the Hispanic population, though it was not possible to disaggregate net migration into its domestic and immigration components.


A similar practice is used for counties that were metro prior to 2003 but reverted to nonmetro status under the current definition. The overall effect of our decision to use the 2003 classification is to significantly reduce the number of counties included in the nonmetro group when compared with research using prior metro definitions. Using a fixed definition of nonmetropolitan and metropolitan removes the effect of classification change from the calculation of longitudinal change.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This report is based on the authors’ recent article titled, “Natural Increase: A New Source of Population Growth in Emerging Hispanic Destinations in the United States,” which appeared in Population and Development Review 34(2): 327-346 (June 2008). The authors acknowledge the assistance of Robert Anderson and Stephanie Ventura at NCHS for providing unpublished data on Hispanic mortality and fertility. This research was supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Northern Research Station of the USDA Forest Service. The authors thank Sharon Sasser and Barbara Ray for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Allison Churilla of the Carsey Institute provided research assistance.