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.
A Young Population Means Many Births and Few Deaths, Fueling Population Gains

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.

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. 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 counties with Hispanic population gains, including counties in metropolitan 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. Between 2000 and 2005, Hispanics accounted for 45.3 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.
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 natu-
ral increase—compared with about one-third in the 1990s. Clearly, we are seeing a large secondary effect of past im-
migration in the form of high fertility and natural increase. The demographic implication is clear: 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.

Hispanics are now playing an important role in the demo-
graphic and economic transformation of many communities. About one-half of the nonmetro Hispanic population now resides outside traditional Hispanic settlements in the rural Southwest. Moreover, a substantial and growing number of nonmetro counties experiencing non-Hispanic white population declines, especially in the Great Plains, have growing Hispanic populations. Hispanics clearly are a source of new demographic vigor in rural America. As we have shown here, more than 200 nonmetro counties—double the number observed for the 1990s—would have experienced population decline between 2000 and 2005 without the sub-
stantial influx of new Hispanics and the natural population increase they spurred.

To be sure, Hispanics have revitalized many previously declining and economically stagnant small towns, but they have also brought serious and unprecedented challenges, including new demands for health care, bilingual education, as well as ethnic conflict and competition for scarce jobs. Nonmetro immigrants are often younger, less educated, and less likely to speak English than their counterparts in metro areas. Many have arrived only recently, which presents ad-
tional cultural challenges. New Hispanic immigrants are often highly segregated residentially and isolated from main-
stream institutions. The political and administrative chal-
lenges (e.g., involving cash assistance or food stamps) are further complicated by the fact that Hispanic children are often U.S. citizens—most have been born in America—while their parents are foreign-born and often undocumented. 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 ad-
dress 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.
Endnotes


3. Hispanic population increases were not restricted to locations proximate to metropolitan areas. The overall nonmetro Hispanic population gain from 1990 to 2000 was 65.7 percent. The gain was larger in nonmetro counties adjacent to a metropolitan area (73.4 percent) than in nonadjacent counties (54.2 percent). In all, nonmetro counties gained just over 1 million Hispanic residents during the 1990s. The metro percentage gain was slightly smaller than that in nonmetro areas (60.2 percent), although it was considerably larger in absolute terms at 12,272,000. Between 2000 and 2005, the nonmetro Hispanic population grew by 18.9 percent adding another 497,000 residents, with the gains in adjacent areas again exceeding those in nonadjacent counties. The metro population also continued to gain Hispanics, with a 21.1 percent gain of 6,885,000.


6. The definition of nonmetropolitan counties used for this study is from the 2003 classification. Using a fixed definition of nonmetro and metro removes the effect of classification change from the calculation of longitudinal change.

7. 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.

8. For data on the 1990s, see Kandel and Cromartie, New Patterns of Hispanic Settlement (note 4 above).


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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 Sassler and Barbara Ray for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Allison Churilla of the Carsey Institute provided research assistance.