The State of Latinos in the United States

Although This Growing Population Has Experienced Marked Success, Barriers Remain

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Our country is rapidly changing. As we approach the year 2050, our nation will be increasingly more diverse, and Latinos will be one of the forces driving this demographic change. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau population estimate, there are roughly 50.5 million Hispanics representing about 16 percent of the U.S. population. By 2050, when demographers tell us that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States, it is projected that the Latino population will double to 30 percent. Consequently, the role of Latinos in shaping our country’s political and economic climate is becoming more significant.

Since Latinos are one of the fastest-growing populations in the country, it’s imperative that we address the challenges that this community faces. It is well-documented that communities of color, including Latinos, face significant disparities in health care, education, and economic indicators. Thus, it’s crucial that our local and national leaders put into place policy solutions to address these disparities.

This issue brief examines the state of Latinos in the United States at large in regards to five key areas: the workplace, educational attainment, health, veterans affairs, and political leadership. Let’s examine each in turn.

Hispanic Americans: Who they are and where they live

Among Latino subgroups, Mexican Americans make up the largest subgroup at 63 percent and, at 38 percent, have the largest proportion of people under the age of 18. In 2010 the states with the largest Latino populations were California (14 million), Texas (9.5 million), Florida...
Of particular note is the fact that the rapid growth in communities of color, especially among Latinos, has created a significant racial-generational gap in the United States. In 2010, 34.9 percent of Hispanics were under the age of 18, compared to 20.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

U.S. labor force at a glance

The U.S. workforce is undoubtedly becoming more diverse. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of June 2012 Latinos represented 16 percent of the U.S. labor force, at nearly 25 million workers. By 2018 it is projected that Latinos will make up 18 percent of the workforce. Of Latinos in the labor force, 58 percent are men, and 42 percent are women, which is slightly smaller than the percentage of women—46 percent—who make up the white labor force. As Latinos continue to enter the workforce in greater numbers due to population growth, particularly among young adults, it’s important to note the education level and the unemployment rates among Latino workers.

Employed Latinos are less likely to hold a college degree than either whites or African Americans, and are heavily concentrated in certain industries and sectors. Only about one in six employed Latinos above the age of 25 holds a college degree, which is less than half the portion of employed whites. At 83.7 percent, Latinos are significantly more likely to work in the private sector than their white (78.5 percent) and black (76.9 percent) counterparts. In contrast, Latinos are far less likely to have a government job, and the gap widens at the senior executive level in the public sector.

Unemployment

Unemployment rates for Latinos vary depending on where they live, their education level, and whether they are foreign born or native. The unemployment rate for Latinos averaged 11.5 percent in 2011, compared to 7.9 percent for whites. The Latino unemployment numbers are tied in part to the fact that Latinos are overrepresented in industries such as construction and manufacturing, both of which lost the most jobs during the recession, and that they are underrepresented in sectors that experienced job growth during the recession—education and health services.

Unemployment rates for Latinos vary depending on educational attainment. Across all racial groups, greater educational attainment is correlated to improved employment outcomes. Unemployment continues to be higher for those with fewer years of schooling.
In 2011 unemployment for Latinos with only a high school degree was 10.3 percent,\(^6\) compared to 8.4 percent of whites with only a high school degree.

The Latino labor force is also more likely to be foreign born than the rest of the workforce. In 2011 more than half (52.2 percent) of the Latino labor force was foreign born, compared to 15.9 percent of the overall labor force. Historically, foreign-born Latinos experience lower unemployment rates than native-born Latinos. Across ethnic groups within the Latino community, Puerto Ricans have the highest unemployment rates, and Cubans experience the lowest level of unemployment.

For Latinos, as is the case for all Americans, one’s place of residence also affects employment rates. States with the highest levels of unemployment for Latinos in 2011 include California, Arizona, Illinois, New York, Florida, and Texas. It is no surprise that states with larger Latino populations have a larger number of unemployed Latinos. Within states, Latinos are more likely to move within a county, indicating they are more likely to move for employment opportunities.\(^7\)

During the Great Recession employment rates fell sharply—particularly among Latinos. As mentioned earlier, Latino workers lost jobs primarily in construction, manufacturing, professional and business services. Collectively, these jobs accounted for nearly 1.1 million jobs lost among Latino workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the construction industry will grow by 2.9 percent annually through 2020.\(^8\) This growth should greatly benefit Latinos, who are overrepresented in this industry; the majority of this growth, however, will be coming from regained jobs that were lost during the recession. The health care and social assistance industry is projected to grow the most, with an additional 5.6 million jobs projected between now and 2020. Unfortunately, Latino workers are significantly underrepresented in these sectors, making up only 10.4 percent of workers in these industries.

Conversely, one area holding great economic promise for Latinos—and an area in which they are prominent—is small-business ownership. According to the Census Bureau Survey of Business Owners,\(^9\) Latino-owned businesses were the fastest-growing small-business segment prior to the recession.

Hispanics own 2.3 million businesses. The strides in business ownership are particularly apparent among Latino women. In fact, Latina entrepreneurs start businesses in the
United States at a rate six times the national average and are the fastest-growing segment among women-owned businesses. Across the country, Latina-owned businesses have total receipts of $55.7 billion,¹⁰ and total receipts have grown by 57.8 percent since 2002.¹¹ Currently, 1 in 10 women-owned businesses are owned by Latinas.

The Census Bureau indicates that Hispanic-owned businesses increased at more than twice the rate of the national average.¹² It’s important to note that businesses owned by people of Mexican origin accounted for 45.8 percent of Hispanic-owned businesses. More than half (50.8 percent) of Hispanic-owned business revenue in 2007 came from wholesale trade, construction, and retail trade. About 30 percent of Hispanic-owned businesses were concentrated in wholesale trade, construction, and retail trade.

Despite promising trends, it’s important that we begin to address some of the barriers that Latinos experience in the workforce such as high unemployment rates and lower levels of educational attainment. As one of the fastest-growing populations, it’s crucial that we close these gaps now to have a successful workforce in the future.

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**Educational attainment**

Education has long been recognized as a gateway to success. As one of the fastest-growing demographics in our country, educational attainment among Latinos is especially important to ensure that our youth are academically equipped to meet the challenges of the future. Educational attainment among young Latinos has progressed significantly over past few years and has led to the narrowing of the education gap between Hispanics and other racial and ethnic groups, particularly when it comes to postsecondary education. While Latinos have been making great strides in educational attainment, they continue to lag behind other racial and ethnic groups.

From 2009 to 2010 there was a 24 percent increase in college enrollment among Latinos.¹³ The overall number of young adults aged 18 to 24 years old attending college in the United States hit an all-time high in October 2010 at 12.2 million, with Hispanics accounting for 15 percent of that population, or 1.8 million young adults. According to the Pew Hispanic Center,¹⁴ from 2009 to 2010 the number of Hispanic young adults enrolled in college grew by 349,000, compared with an increase of 88,000 young blacks and 43,000 young Asian Americans and a decrease of 320,000 young whites.

Certainly the current demographic changes have played a crucial role in the advanced educational attainment levels among young Latinos. Increasing levels of population growth and high birthrates have made Latinos the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country. Yet it is not just population growth, but rather rising educational attainment, that is the driving force behind the increase in Latino college enrollment rates. The share of young Latinos enrolled in college nearly doubled from 2009 to 2010,¹⁵ from 13 percent to 27 per-
There is still more work to be done, however, because while Hispanics have reached record numbers in terms of college enrollment—32 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds—they continue to lag in comparison to all other racial and ethnic groups. African Americans (38 percent), Asians (62 percent), and young white adults (43 percent) continue to be more likely to attend college than Hispanics.

It’s also important to note that the growth in Latino college enrollment has been primarily at community colleges. In October 2010 nearly half (46 percent) of all young Latinos attended a community college, while 54 percent attended four-year universities. Among other racial and ethnic groups, the vast majority of young adults who attend college are enrolled at four-year universities.

While enrollment rates have greatly increased among Latinos this does not always translate into a college degree. Clearly, Latinos are narrowing the gap in educational attainment, but they continue to lag behind other racial and ethnic groups in college-completion rates and are still the least educated. In 2010 only 13 percent of Latinos between the ages of 25 and 29 held at least a bachelor’s degree. The lower schooling levels of Latino immigrants can partly explain the low college-completion rates.

Factors behind increased college enrollment

While population growth has aided in the increase of Latino college enrollment, increases in high school graduation rates have been key to the booming Latino college enrollment numbers. One of the vital factors behind the increase in college enrollment is the record number of young Latinos earning high school diplomas. In October 2010 Hispanic high school completion reached its peak at 73 percent.

More eligible students are also enrolling in college. In October 2010, 43 percent of Latinos with a high school diploma enrolled in college—an increase of 5 percent from the rate in October 2009 (39 percent). The growth in the young Hispanic population has also increased the college-age population—18- to 24-year olds—by 1.6 million. Regardless of Latino educational strides, population growth alone would have increased college enrollment. Still, population growth numbers since 2000 show that population growth alone does not account for the significant increase in Hispanic college enrollment.
Given the growth of the Latino community, it is important to invest in this booming young population. Studies show that employers pay workers with a college degree approximately 50 percent more on average than a worker whose educational attainment is less than a high school diploma. Increased college attainment among the country’s fastest-growing demographic is not only transformational for the individuals who get a postsecondary education, it is also key for our nation if we are to continue to be competitive in the global market. Investing in education amid growing demographic changes is crucial to building our workforce for tomorrow.

Health

Just as the nation is dependent on its growing communities of color for its future economic health, the physical health of these communities depends on the investments we make and the policies we implement today. It should come as no surprise that the Hispanic population, similar to most working-class communities, faces significant barriers to accessing adequate health care. According to a 2007 study from the Pew Hispanic Center, 18 in 10 of those Latino adults who are not citizens or legal permanent residents lack health insurance coverage. The lack of health insurance and health care access, particularly among immigrant communities, has contributed to health disparities, differences in insurance coverage among Latino subgroups, and varied experiences in accessing preventive health care.

Health disparities

Research across the board has shown that racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Latinos, receive lower-quality health care, suffer worse health outcomes, and have higher rates of certain illnesses. Here are some of the most startling health disparities facing the Latino community:

- Hispanic children have the highest childhood obesity rate in the country, with about two in five Hispanic children aged 2 to 19 being overweight or obese.19
- Latinas are twice as likely to die from pregnancy-associated complications as their white counterparts.20
- Latinos are also disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS and are three times more likely than their white counterparts to be infected.21
- Latinas are 20 percent more likely to die from breast cancer than white women.22
- Latinos exceeded all other racial or ethnic groups with the largest percentage (29 percent) of reported tuberculosis cases in the United States in 2010.23
- Half of all Latino children born in 2000 are at risk of developing diabetes.24
Insurance coverage

Across all racial and ethnic groups, Latinos report the highest uninsured rates in the United States. Among Latino subgroups, those who lack health insurance coverage are mostly those of Central American or Mexican descent—42.4 percent and 33.6 percent, respectively. In 2010, 30.7 percent of the Hispanic population was not covered by health insurance, compared to 11.7 percent of the non-Hispanic white population. As a consequence, community health centers are crucial to communities of color accessing health care. In 2010, 34.4 percent of patients in community health centers were Latino.

The Affordable Care Act—more commonly referred to as “Obamacare”—will uniquely impact Latino communities by significantly increasing access to health care through expanding insurance coverage. By 2016 an estimated 5.4 million Latinos who would otherwise be uninsured will gain coverage. Among young Latino adults between the ages of 19 and 25, 736,000 young adults who would have otherwise been uninsured now have coverage under their parents’ employer-sponsored or individually purchased health plan.

Immigrant communities and those Latino adults who are neither citizens nor legal permanent residents also face high uninsured rates. In 2009 undocumented immigrants and their children comprised 17 percent of the estimated 46 million Americans who lacked health insurance. Approximately 37 percent of noncitizens or nonlegal permanent residents have no regular health care provider. The two most reported reasons for lacking a doctor are financial barriers (28 percent) and being uninsured (17 percent).

Medicaid

Medicaid is crucial to allowing low-income Latino families access health care. According to the Kaiser Foundation, 27 percent of Hispanics—13 million people, including 9 million children—were covered by Medicaid in 2009. In that same year Medicaid covered 45 percent of low-income Hispanics living below the poverty line—which was $22,050 for a family of four in 2009—and 29 percent of those with incomes above poverty but below twice the poverty line. Additionally, Medicaid covers nearly half of all Latino children and 63 percent of low-income Latino children. Medicaid continues to provide health coverage to those needing substantial health services, and covers more than one-third (36 percent) of Hispanics in fair or poor health and half of Hispanics living with HIV/AIDS.

Preventive care

The Affordable Care Act will make oral contraceptives more accessible to Latinas beginning this month. Contraceptives are often used to treat conditions unrelated to the prevention of pregnancy such as polycystic ovarian syndrome, which affects
13 percent of Latinas with a family history of diabetes and can lead to ovarian cancer if left untreated. Under the Affordable Care Act, women will be able to access contraception without cost sharing or copays.

Veterans affairs

As is the case in all areas vital to America’s well-being, Latinos are central to the nation’s security. Hispanics have been an integral part of our military for decades. Nearly 213,965 Hispanics soldiers are currently serving in the U.S. armed forces. Moreover, an estimated 5.3 percent of our nation’s 21.7 million veterans are Latino. In 2010 Latinas made up 19 percent of all new enlistees. On a national level, service members of Hispanic ethnicity and nonwhite races (including multiple races) are projected to make up an increasing share of the total veteran population, with an even higher share for female veterans.

Between 2001 and 2005 the number of Hispanics enlisted in the Army increased by 26 percent. This increase is also true for Latinas, who now make up a larger share of military women than Latino men make up of military men. Latina veterans account for 7 percent of female veterans, compared to 6 percent of Latino men. In the coming years Latinos are projected to make up even more of the veteran population—Latina women 9 percent of all military veterans and Latino men 7 percent of veterans by 2020.

Political influence and leadership

While Latinos are making great strides in increasing their number among elected officials, they are still grossly underrepresented in proportion to their population numbers. According to the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, in the past 15 years there has been a 53 percent increase in the total number of Latinos serving in elected office—from 3,743 in 1996 to 5,850 in 2011. Ninety-six percent of Latino elected officials serve in states or regions that are traditional centers of Latino populations, including California and the southwest, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Illinois. Yet, Latinos hold only 3.3 percent of elected seats nationally, in spite of the fact that they make up 16 percent of the overall population.

**FIGURE 5**

Latinos in elected office

Number of Latino elected officials growing but group still underrepresented

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1996</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Senate</td>
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<td>U.S. House</td>
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<td>State senates</td>
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In terms of voting power, there are 21.3 million eligible Latino voters in the United States, yet only an estimated 9.7 million turned out to vote in the 2008 election. Of the estimated 13.1 million legal permanent residents or green card holders living in the United States in 2011, 8.5 million were eligible to naturalize and become voters. Of these, 3.5 million—or more than 40 percent—immigrated from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and El Salvador. Latino voters already make up at least 5 percent of potential voters in almost half of all states, and they comprise more than 10 percent of adult citizens in 11 states. With dense populations in a number of battleground states, including Florida, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, and 50,000 Latinos turning 18 years old, and becoming eligible to vote, Latinos already hold the power to swing elections.

The growth in the number of Latino elected officials and voters is one sign of the political progress of the Latino population, but Latinos need to further translate its population growth into increased political participation in order to successfully influence elections and policy outcomes.

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**Immigrants and the foreign born**

While the majority of Latinos are native-born U.S. citizens, there is a sizable proportion that is foreign born, and of those, a fraction lack legal status. Immigrants of North and South American origin comprise 9.7 million of the estimated 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants. Consequently Congress’s failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform has had a disproportionate effect on the Latino community. A total of 16.6 million people, many of Hispanic origin, live in mixed-status families with at least one unauthorized immigrant family member. Hence, the consequences of lack of legal status, including lower wages and barriers to higher education and medical care, adversely impact not only undocumented Latinos themselves but also their families and communities.

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**Conclusion**

As we look toward the future, it’s imperative that we begin to address gaps for Latinos in educational and political attainment, in health coverage, and in the labor force. Recognizing that each American demographic faces different and unique challenges, it is important that we acknowledge our diverse perspectives and craft policy solutions emerging from an inclusive and thoughtful national discourse. Closing the gaps today will make us more competitive and stronger in the future.
Endnotes


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


11 Ibid.


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


17 Fry, “Hispanic College Enrollment Spikes, Narrowing Gaps with Other Groups.”


23 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hispanics/Latinos Quick Facts.


26 Ibid.


29 Ibid.


33 Kaiser Commission on Medicaid Facts, “Medicaid’s Role for Hispanic Americans.”


37 U.S. Census Bureau, Veteran Status (Department of Commerce, 2010), available at http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/acs_10_1yr_S2101&prodType=table.


39 Lisa Foster and Scott Vince, “Women Veterans by the Numbers” (California: California Research Bureau, 2009).

41 Ibid.


