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Hispanics of Mexican ancestry will become increasingly important to the economic and social well-being of the United States. Yet, a number of barriers may seriously hurt the full partnership of Mexican Americans in the future development of our society (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988). These barriers notably include low educational attainment and achievement. In many ways, the educational problems of Mexican Americans are not behind them, but, instead, loom in front of them. This Digest is a summary of the latest available demographic and socioeconomic trends on this important major American ethnic group. The discussion includes broad implications for education that follow from these trends.

THE DIVERSITY AND GROWTH OF THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION

Mexican Americans are a diverse group, and as used here, the term refers to both citizens of the U.S. and to Mexican immigrants. The latter term (immigrants) usually labels someone who intends to stay permanently in the U.S. (Bean & Tienda, 1987). An estimated 12,565,000 Mexican Americans lived in the United States in 1989 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). This figure represented a large increase--45 percent--from 1980 to 1989, attributable to a combination of high immigration and the group's high fertility. By 1990, the Mexican-American population is projected to increase to 13,174,000, only 1.5 million fewer than all of the Hispanics counted in 1980. The three other major Hispanic groups include: (1) Puerto Ricans; (2) Cubans; and (3) Central and South Americans. Together, all four major Hispanic groups account for approximately 92 percent of U.S. Hispanics (Bean & Tienda, 1987; U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Through the early 1900s Mexican Americans were mainly a rural and agricultural people, but today over 90 percent of this population is estimated to live in metropolitan areas. Mexican Americans, therefore, are more urbanized than the U.S. population in general. Fully 73 percent of all Mexican Americans in 1980 lived in just two states, California and Texas. Illinois and Arizona together contributed another 9 percent, to account for 82 percent of the total Mexican-American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1983).

During the 1980s, Mexico was the origin of more legal emigrants bound for the U.S. than any other country in the world. Mexican emigrants were about 11 or 12 percent of the 600,000 yearly arrivals in the U.S. from all countries. Mexico is also the source of the most undocumented immigration from any country into the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Justice (1989). Moreover, as the result of court cases, hundreds of thousands of undocumented Mexican-American children have the legal right to attend public school in this country (Willshire Carrera, 1989).

Among major Hispanic groups, however, Mexican Americans are far more likely to be native born (that is, born in the U.S.) than to be foreign born. Of Mexican Americans counted in the 1980 census, 74 percent were native born. The equivalent percentage for other major Hispanic groups varied from 49 to 20 percent (Bean & Tienda, 1987).

SOME IMPORTANT COMPARISONS

In 1980, Mexican Americans comprised 60 percent of all Hispanics in the United States. By 1989, they were estimated to comprise 63 percent of all U.S. Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). If this proportion merely holds constant, the Mexican-American population in the year 2080 would account for approximately 13 percent of the total U.S. population (based on data in Spencer, 1986).
While the median age of all U.S. residents is 33 years, the median age of Mexican Americans is 24 years, which makes them the youngest Hispanic group. In fact, 71 percent of the Mexican-American population is under 35, compared to 54 percent of the U.S. population as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Moreover, the average size of the Mexican-American household is, at 4.1 persons, the largest among all Hispanic groups. This figure is nearly one person higher than the average for the non-Hispanic white population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Census data also indicate that, in comparison with major Hispanic groups and with non-Hispanic whites, Mexican Americans tend to marry and have children at earlier ages. Nonetheless, Mexican-American women tend to experience less marital instability than other Hispanic women, except for Cubans. As a result, the proportion of Mexican-American children living in two-parent households is comparatively high among Hispanic groups, at 74 percent (Bean & Tienda, 1987). At the same time, the number of single-parent households is rising among all ethnic groups in the U.S., including Mexican Americans.

Mexican Americans are the least well educated group among both major Hispanic groups and among the total U.S. population. The dropout rate among Mexican-American students is estimated at 40 percent or more (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988). In addition, a large majority of the group's recent immigrants have come poorly educated to this country. In 1989, the Mexican Americans in the 25 to 34 age bracket were almost five times as likely not to have completed high school as non-Hispanics (50 percent to 11 percent). These adults, unfortunately, are those most likely to have school-age children. Only 6 percent of those in this age group have completed 4 years or more of college, compared to 26 percent for non-Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Similarly, only 50 percent of Mexican Americans in this age group have completed high school. This rate is the lowest for all Hispanic groups, substantially lower than the 89 percent high school completion rate for non-Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Lack of education probably contributes to the fact that, as a group, Mexican Americans

have lower-status occupations than does the U.S. population as a whole. Mexican Americans are concentrated in blue-collar jobs, farm work, and service occupations; comparatively fewer hold white-collar jobs. Some 35 percent of Mexican Americans hold white-collar positions, compared to 57 percent of the total population. Conversely, 41 percent of the group are blue-collar workers, compared to 27 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1989).

MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN IN DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Lower-status jobs translate, in turn, into lower income and higher poverty rates. The median family income of Mexican Americans for 1988 was $21,025. This figure is about two-thirds of the national median family income of $32,191. Some 57 percent of Mexican-American families earned under $25,000 per year, 33 percent earned between $25,000 and $49,999 per year, and only 10 percent earned in excess of $50,000 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990).

Even with a substantial, rising middle class, about 25 percent of all these families lived below the official poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). This poverty rate is more than two and a half times as high as the rate for non-Hispanics. Except for Puerto Ricans, this poverty rate also exceeds that of all Hispanic groups. Many poor families have working adults, but Mexican Americans' wages are generally so low that they remain part of the working poor. Not only are their wages low to begin with, but they are likely to experience unemployment more frequently and for longer periods of time than other workers (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988). The combination of large families and small incomes means that Mexican-American parents must do more with less money than average parents in the U.S. (Valdivieso & Davis, 1988).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

The implications of these broad demographic and socioeconomic characteristics for schooling are enormous. First, the Mexican-American population includes many young adult dropouts who need adult education and training. Many of these individuals will be recent immigrants in need of English language instruction, as well.

From the point of view of policy, this "backlog" of dropouts is generally ignored. Nonetheless, in large measure, these individuals are the parents of the next generation of Mexican-American students. These young parents often had unproductive experiences in school, experiences that will be reflected in how they raise their children. In fact, most young Mexican-American children have parents who have not completed high school.

Second, it follows that this young parent population, especially the immigrant subgroup, needs to be better tied to the schools. Parent and school partnerships can help both parties understand each other's cultures, goals, hopes, and needs in order to promote

the academic achievement of Mexican-American children (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Sosa, 1990).

Third, school staff development should appreciate and value the culture and language of Mexican Americans. Such an attitude will probably be required if the low expectations often held for these children are to be reversed. Bilingual education is an important part of such valuing (Veltman, 1988). This population is learning to speak English. Nonetheless, the process of language shift takes time, and bilingual services provide help to facilitate the inevitable shift (Veltman, 1988).

Fourth, a great need exists for expanded preschool opportunities for Mexican-American children, who are not as likely to attend a preschool as non-Hispanics. In particular, children of recent immigrants need preschool education that can help them learn English early. However, it is important that these children also continue to learn Spanish, so they will be able to communicate with their parents and relate to their culture while they are becoming a part of U.S. society (Veltman, 1988). A related concern in the 1990s will be an even greater need for special language programs for an expanding language minority population among the school-age children of the young adults who immigrated into the U.S. during the 1980s.

Fifth, in addition to the need of most U.S. children for improved, restructured schools, Mexican-American children (and their parents) need a lot more encouragement, guidance, and counseling than they presently receive. Such attention is required if these children are to remain and excel in school (see Sosa, 1990, for examples of successful community-based programs).

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