

## Why Hispanic Students Drop Out of High School Early: Data from North Carolina

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A recent study of ninth- and tenth-grade dropouts in North Carolina shows that Hispanic adolescents have the highest early dropout rate among the state's largest ethnic groups: 7.9% compared to 5.8% for Native Americans, 4.5% for African Americans, and 3.1% for whites. This relationship persists when boys and girls are analyzed separately. Hispanic boys are more likely to drop out early than other boys are, and Hispanic girls are more likely to drop out than other girls. Both Hispanic boys and girls are more likely than their ethnic counterparts to drop out because they move or because they are tending to family (marriage, pregnancy, or leaving to care for other children).

### Policy Implications

Regardless of a student's ethnicity or gender, dropping out of school is likely to have negative consequences for individuals throughout their lives. On average, high school dropouts are less likely to be employed than other adults.<sup>1</sup> High school dropouts tend to have poorer mental and physical health, a greater likelihood of committing criminal acts, and a higher likelihood of becoming dependent on welfare and other government programs than people with higher educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> All of these consequences translate into high social costs in the form of costs for incarceration, income-transfer programs, and foregone tax income.<sup>3</sup>

Every year, states spend significant resources on dropout-prevention programs. As Hispanics have a high dropout rate and a unique dropout profile, current programs may not benefit them as much as they benefit other students. It is imperative to analyze the reasons behind the dropout rate of this relatively new group of North Carolinians in order to craft effective dropout-prevention programs for them.

### Findings

Recently, the Hispanic population has increased in the United States, particularly in North Carolina, where it grew by 394% between 1990 and 2000.<sup>4</sup> The percentage of North Carolina children who are Hispanic grew from 1.5% in 1990 to 6.1% in 2000.<sup>5</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the national dropout rate in 1999 for people 16 to 24 years old was 28.6% for Hispanics, 12.6% for black non-Hispanics, and 7.3% for white non-Hispanics.<sup>6</sup> Dropout rates for Hispanic youth in North Carolina have also traditionally been high, with recent estimates indicating that only 38% of Hispanic students in North Carolina complete high school in four years.<sup>7</sup> Much of the Hispanics' high dropout rate can be traced to disadvantages in socioeconomic status, family structure, and prior negative academic experiences, such as retention.<sup>8</sup>

This study focused on students who were in the ninth grade at the beginning of the 1997-98 school year and followed them through 1998-99: to the end of their tenth-grade year or their exit from school, whichever came first. Following federal guidelines, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction defines a dropout as a student who was enrolled in a school in the previous year and did not enroll in the current year even though that student did not graduate or transfer to another school or home school. For each dropout, school personnel must enter one reason code, choosing from certain prescribed options. A school staff member who knows the student, such as a counselor, should provide this information.

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This study examined the following reasons for dropping out:

- \* Academic problems
- \* Discipline, including expulsions, incarcerations, and failure to return from a long-term suspension
- \* Employment, which covers those who leave school to get a job
- \* Family, which includes marriage, pregnancy, and leaving to take care of a child
- \* Moving, referring to those who change residence and do not indicate that they transferred to another North Carolina school (These adolescents might eventually enroll in a school in another state.)
- \* Other, which includes running away and leaving school for health reasons, categories that did not include many dropouts in this study
- \* Unknown reason, indicating students who left school without providing a specific reason

The reasons Hispanic youth leave school often vary from the reasons for other ethnic groups. (See Table 1.) The most prevalent reason, true for almost half of Hispanic dropouts-47.6%-is unknown, although this percentage for “reason unknown” dropouts is actually lower than that for white, Native American, or African Americans.

**Table 1  
Dropout Reasons by Ethnicity  
(by percentages)**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Native American</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>
Academic	7.4	6.0	3.2	7.5	7.8
Disciplinary	12.0	8.7	8.2	17.2*	8.9
Employment	9.8	10.1	6.3	5.4*	12.9
Family	4.8	8.4	4.1*	3.7*	5.2*
Move	6.4	16.0	2.3*	6.6*	5.6*
Other	1.8	3.3	1.4	1.4	1.8
Unknown	57.9	47.6	74.7*	58.2*	57.9*
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Total in sample</b>	<b>9,317</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>3,434</b>	<b>5,141</b>

Note: Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

\* Indicates that the difference is statistically significant, or too large to attribute reasonably to chance factors.

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Hispanics are significantly *more* likely than any other group to leave school for family reasons. While 8.4% of Hispanic dropouts leave for this reason, only 5.2% of whites, 4.1% of Native Americans, and 3.7% of African American dropouts leave for this reason. Hispanics are also significantly more likely than any other group to leave for moving reasons. While 16.0% of Hispanic dropouts leave because of moving, only 5.64% of whites, 2.26% of Native Americans, and 6.5% of African American dropouts left school for this reason. Whether these students actually drop out or continue their education in a different state is unknown, but the high rate illustrates the residential instability of this population.

Comparing dropout reasons for Hispanics and African Americans yields important results. In addition to the above-mentioned differences, Hispanics are significantly less likely than African American students to be leave school for disciplinary reasons (such as suspensions or expulsions) and significantly more likely than African Americans to leave for employment reasons. Thus, dropout-prevention programs aimed at “minorities” in general may not be effective across ethnic groups.

Hispanics are similar to other groups in terms of leaving school due to academic problems. The findings that Hispanics are as likely as others to leave for academic reasons, less likely to leave without providing a dropout reason, and more likely to leave for family and moving reasons suggest that factors outside of school may be influencing Hispanic students to dropout.

Typically, boys and girls across ethnic groups have different reasons for leaving school. In general, boys are more likely than girls to leave for employment and disciplinary reasons, and girls are more likely than boys to leave for family reasons. These relations hold true for Hispanic students.

Although gender influences the dropout process, analyzing boys and girls separately shows that ethnicity has an independent influence on the dropout process. Hispanic girls are far less likely than whites, Native Americans, or African Americans to leave for unknown reasons (43.0%) and more likely to leave because of moving (19.0%) or family (13.0%) reasons. In addition, like Hispanic girls, Hispanic boys are less likely than other boys to leave for unknown reasons. Although Hispanic boys are less likely than Hispanic girls to leave school for family reasons (4.5% versus 13.0%), Hispanic boys are more likely than boys of any other group to leave school for this reason.

## Conclusion

The results presented here indicate that the dropout process for Hispanic adolescents differs from that of other adolescents. Other reports show that the Hispanic population is rapidly increasing in North Carolina, and this group has the highest dropout rate in this state. That Hispanics have a unique dropout process and the highest dropout rate suggest that existing dropout-prevention programs may not give Hispanics the same benefits as other students. Such programs will need to account for circumstances that are unique to this relatively new population in North Carolina.

As the Hispanic population is mobile, dropout prevention programs aimed at Hispanic students should place a greater emphasis on transition services to other schools and track what happens to students who move. Furthermore, regardless of the child’s race, much of the time, the school system does not know the reason the student dropped out. Therefore, we advocate that schools collect more detailed information about dropouts so that prevention programs can be better crafted to meet students’ needs.

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## Footnotes

1. R. Rumberger, "High School Dropouts: A Review of Issues and Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 57 (1987): 101-21; L. Steinberg, P. Blinde, and K. Chan, "Dropping Out among Language Minority Youth," *Review of Educational Research* 54 (1984): 113-32; J. Catterall, *On the Social Costs of Dropping Out of School* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).
2. A. D. Witte, "Crime," in Jere R. Behrman and Nevzer Stacey, eds., *Social Benefits of Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); M. Grossman and R. Kaestner, "Effects of Education on Health," in *ibid.*; T. Thornberry, M. Moore, and R. Christenson, "The Effect of Dropping Out of High School on Subsequent Criminal Behavior," *Criminology* 23 (1985): 3-18; Rumberger, "High School Dropouts."
3. These costs are quantified extensively in G. Vernez, R. A. Krop, and P. Rydell, *Closing the Education Gap: Benefits and Costs* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999).
4. T. Funk, "Growth Rate Breathtaking for Hispanics and Asians," *Charlotte Observer*, March 23, 2001, 1A.
5. U.S. Census Bureau, *American FactFinder 2002*, at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>
6. United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), table 106. These rates reflect the percentage of people ages 16 to 26 who are high school dropouts and thus are higher than the rates in this study, which capture only ninth- and tenth-grade dropouts.
7. J. Greene, *High School Graduation Rates in the United States* (New York: Manhattan Institute, 2001). In contrast to the National Center for Education Statistics, Greene does not consider GED recipients to be high school graduates. He also argues that the methodology used by NCES underestimates the dropout rate for a variety of reasons, including respondent underreporting and political pressure on school systems leading them to underreport their dropout rate significantly.
8. R. Rumberger, "Dropping Out of Middle School: A Multilevel Analysis of Students and Schools," *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (1995): 583-625; P. Goldschmidt and J. Wang, "When Can Schools Affect Dropout Behavior? A Longitudinal Multilevel Analysis," *American Educational Research Journal* 36 (1999): 715-38.

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