

## **The 'Typical' Hispanic Family**

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By HARRY PACHON

My parents were Latin American immigrants who came to this country in the 1940s. My mother left school after the first grade; my father completed high school. Their three sons, all born in the United States, are college graduates and went on to become an engineer, a banker and a college professor. Is this an atypical Hispanic immigrant family history? It is if you try to reconcile it with the images that many Americans have of Hispanics.

Images of Hispanics in film and television are too often Maria the maid, Jose the busboy or, even worse, Carlos the drug dealer. But it isn't just the entertainment industry that perpetuates these stereotypes. Several months ago, and not for the first time, national newspapers ran stories revealing that Hispanic family income has declined in the past 10 years. As a consequence, my Washington friends tell me that the Beltway image of the Hispanic community is often tinged with concerns of Hispanics becoming the next underclass in American society -- this even as the Census Bureau reports that Hispanics are on the verge of becoming America's largest minority grouping.

In certain academic circles, there is some discussion that immigrants from Latin America (anywhere south of San Diego or Key West) are not as "qualified" as previous generations of immigrants.

Yet a recently released report of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI) on the Hispanic middle class tells a different story.

The research report -- conducted by professors Frank Bean of the University of California, Irvine, and Steve Trejo of the University of Texas, Austin -- paints a picture of a Hispanic middle class that has grown by 80 percent in the past 20 years. Close to 3 million Hispanic families moved into this category in 1998. Moreover, by the third generation (the grandchildren of immigrants), there is virtually no difference in income between Hispanic and white non-Hispanic workers with the same level of education.

The professors' report also makes a key distinction between native and foreign-born Hispanics. It is literally a tale of two worlds: Native-born Hispanics complete at least three grade levels more in school than their foreign-born counterparts.

In my opinion, the public and private sectors are not fully aware of the heterogeneity of Hispanic life in the United States. If we paint the Hispanic community with one broad brush stroke, public policy prescriptions will fail to allow for the differences present in the community. Two examples come to mind:

If real income among foreign-born Hispanics has actually declined over the past two decades, as the TRPI report indicates, then a close look at our policy for integrating immigrants into the society needs to be undertaken, much as the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform recommended four years ago. For other than refugees, we currently have no specific federal policies aimed at our newcomer populations, either through targeted English-language or job-improvement skill centers.

For the children of immigrants, who make such dramatic gains over their parents, public education is obviously paying off. It is therefore puzzling that federal money targeted at these children through the Emergency Immigrant Education Act -- a program designed to assist school districts with large immigrant populations -- amounts to only about \$50 per child.

Yet it isn't only the public sector that needs to be aware of Hispanic heterogeneity. A corporate mind-set that Hispanics are poor and downtrodden will make marketing of upscale products to this population an impossibility. Until recently, the best example of this was the computer industry, which had almost no advertising targeting the Hispanic community. The result? A loss to both the industry -- of customers -- and to the community, which still remains on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Perhaps most important, the presence of Hispanic heterogeneity needs to be acknowledged by all in the Hispanic community itself. There is no doubt that this community faces major challenges. I would agree with those who say progress in meeting these challenges has been too slow. But progress has been made. You can see it in cities such as Miami and Los Angeles. There, the "Latinoization" of metropolitan areas includes not only the obvious presence of the culture but also Latino economic penetration in almost every sector of city life.

Do I have a typical Hispanic immigrant family history? The best answer may well be that, given the heterogeneity of the Hispanic population in the United States, "typical" is as diverse as the community itself.