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New Patterns of Hispanic Settlement in Rural America

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Hispanics, although just 5.5 percent of the nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) U.S. population in 2000, accounted for over 25 percent of population growth in nonmetro areas during the 1990s. In the past two decades, the Hispanic population in rural and small-town America has doubled from 1.5 to 3.2 million and is now the most rapidly growing segment of nonmetro county residents.

What Is the Issue?

Although Hispanics continue to be concentrated in the Southwest, the nonmetro Hispanic population more than doubled in 20 mostly Southern and Midwestern States, with growth rates as high as 416 percent. A significant proportion of Hispanics in nonmetro areas outside the Southwest have relatively low education levels and poor English skills, and are employed in low-wage jobs with limited economic mobility. Consequently, they are more likely to reside in isolated low-income areas.

This accelerated influx of Hispanics into nonmetro America will affect hundreds of small towns and rural areas. Of particular interest are trends in residential separation between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites, which measures how evenly distributed the groups are in a given area. Where these recent arrivals choose to reside and how well Hispanics integrate with non-Hispanic Whites can influence their access to public services and economic, social, and cultural resources

What Did the Project Find?

Hispanics are among the most urbanized ethnic groups in the U.S. Over 90 percent live in metro areas, and 8 of the 10 largest U.S. cities have populations that are over 25 percent Hispanic. Moreover, Hispanics continue to be concentrated in the Southwest. But, by 2000, for the first time, half of all nonmetro Hispanics lived outside the Southwest, increasingly in areas of the Midwest and Southeast. While almost all 2,289 nonmetro counties experienced Hispanic population growth, 30 percent of this growth occurred in 149 "high-growth Hispanic" counties. Since 1990, Hispanic population growth has prevented overall population decline in over 100 nonmetro counties, many of which lost population during the 1980s.

Hispanic newcomers have forged communities in nonmetro areas unaccustomed to seeing large numbers of foreign-born, particularly in the Southeast and Midwest. Hispanics in these counties include disproportionate numbers of undocumented young men from rural communities in economically depressed regions of Mexico. Such recent migrants typically have relatively less formal education and often speak little English. Despite these disadvantages, employment rates among Hispanics in nonmetro, high-growth Hispanic counties exceed those of all other nonmetro Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

Across all nonmetro counties nationally, residential separation between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites decreased. Hispanic communities grew in many nontraditional destinations

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throughout the country, particularly in counties in the Southeast and Midwest previously unaccustomed to large numbers of foreign-born residents.

In small cities and towns within nonmetro counties, residential separation between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites increased slightly. On average, Hispanic population growth was concentrated within incorporated places, while non-Hispanic White population growth was higher outside of them. The only significant increase in separation occurred in nonmetro, high-growth Hispanic counties, where Hispanics were more concentrated in places than either non-Hispanic Whites or Blacks.

At the neighborhood level within nonmetro small cities and towns, residential separation between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites increased noticeably. Residential separation increased the most in high-growth Hispanic counties, despite the rapid growth of Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites. While neighborhood separation was greater in metro areas than nonmetro areas in 2000, nonmetro separation levels increased at a higher rate during the 1990s.

How Was the Project Conducted?

This report uses 1990 and 2000 Census data and a typology of county types--based upon their Hispanic population growth and composition--to examine recent Hispanic settlement patterns, compare socioeconomic characteristics of Hispanics with non-Hispanic Whites, and analyze residential separation between those two groups at the county, place, and neighborhood levels.

Residential separation is a multi-dimensional characteristic comprised of evenness of population patterns, exposure to majority members, concentration within certain areas, centralization around core areas, and clustering toward enclaves. This report computes the relative evenness of the distribution of two population groups within a given area by comparing their distributions across subareas.