



Nation & World | Health | Money & Business |

Monday, January 14, 2008

A Population's Assimilation

Will the next generation of Hispanics be part of the American melting pot?

By Will Sullivan

Posted 4/15/07

Good Friday is meant to be a reflection on death, but new life was the order of the day at St. Anthony of Padua's Way of the Cross procession. More than a thousand predominantly Latino onlookers lined the streets for the Spanish-language ceremony, whose cast of over a hundred wound through several blocks of Falls Church, Va. But even in the large crowd, the number of baby strollers weaving through the throng stood out.



A class in English as a second language at St.

President Bush was back on the U.S.-Mexico border last week, pushing for immigration reform and renewing the debate about the booming Hispanic influx. But researchers are increasingly turning their attention to

CHARLIE ARCHAMBAULT FOR
USN&WR

whose U.S. birth automatically makes them citizens. As many in the second generation approach adulthood, they will be the ones who begin to assuage or aggravate concerns about how schools, the economy, and the culture will fare in an increasingly Latino America. The data so far reveal a population that is moving forward but one with significant ground to cover as well.

The demographics are changing rapidly. While Hispanics made up less than 15 percent of the population in 2005, the Census Bureau predicts they will be a quarter of the country by 2050. The Hispanic population is expected to jump from 42 million to over 100 million, making up nearly half of the nation's total projected growth during that time.

Births. Immigration, both legal and illegal, is an important component of that growth. But native births-spurred by a high, though declining, Hispanic birthrate-have now topped immigration as the largest driver of the population surge. The median second-generation Latino is still in his or her early teens, and children are rapidly supplanting adults as the face of the Hispanic boom. "We do about 70 percent of our baptisms in Spanish, even though only about 35 percent of our parish is Hispanic," says the Rev. Kevin Walsh, the pastor at St. Philip Roman Catholic parish in Falls Church.

The trend has caused plenty of teeth-gnashing. In his 2004 book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Harvard Prof. Samuel Huntington argues that Hispanic, and particularly Mexican, immigrants have been unusually resistant to assimilation. He cites the high Hispanic high school dropout rate, the large number of Mexican immigrants receiving some form of welfare, and research suggesting Hispanic parents want their kids to retain fluency in Spanish.

"There is no Americano dream," Huntington writes. "There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society."

A portrait of the country's Latino population, released by the Census Bureau in February, shows a community that lags on key measures. A full 40.4 percent lack a high school diploma, compared with 16.1 percent of the general population. The median income in Hispanic households is nearly \$13,000 lower than in white households.

But the picture is more optimistic when only native-born Hispanics are included. In 2003, Rand economist James P. Smith's research suggested that Hispanics had historically made educational and economic progress similar to that of previous European immigrant waves. While Hispanic immigrants had only about 70 percent the lifetime earnings of

native-born whites, the most recent data showed the second generation cutting that gap nearly in half.

Perhaps the best sign of this growing assimilation is the high rate of Hispanics marrying outside of their ethnic group. Few foreign-born Hispanics marry non-Hispanics, partly because many arrive married. But studies show only 68 percent of their children, and 43 percent of their grandchildren, marry fellow Latinos.

Definitions. Far from the separate cultures Huntington envisions, some experts contend that the Hispanic population's growth will bring it increasing irrelevance as a designation. "Hispanic" has always been a more amorphous characterization than other definitions of origin; the Census Bureau does not define it as a race. Research from the Pew Hispanic Center shows that Hispanics in later generations increasingly identify as "white." And America's definition of the majority group has historically proved elastic, expanding to include previous waves of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants.

Educational and economic disparities may narrow but will most likely persist long into the future. However, the most readily voiced fear—that the Spanish language will displace English—seems the least grounded. Last year, research on Spanish retention in heavily Mexican Southern California

found that Mexicans in the region retain proficiency in their native tongue longer than other immigrant groups, but English quickly dominates. Fewer than 30 percent of the children of Mexican immigrants reported preferring to speak Spanish at home. By generation three, only 17 percent of the Mexican-Americans spoke fluent Spanish.

"If there's not retention of the Spanish language in Southern California, it's not going to be retained anywhere," says Princeton Prof. Douglas Massey, one of the study's authors.

That includes Falls Church. As they watched the elaborate Good Friday procession, the adults were wistful. "Especially in a Spanish country, this happens every year," says Victor Doria, 47, an immigrant from El Salvador who was playing Pontius Pilate. And while the parents mostly talked among themselves in Spanish, their children joked and gossiped in English. By the time the occupants of the baby carriages have the chance to take the role of Pilate, the Spanish blaring from the ceremony's sound truck may sound very foreign.

This story appears in the April 23, 2007 print edition of U.S. News & World Report.