



Executive Summary

July 26, 2005

The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth

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A Pew Research Center Project
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The Hispanic population is growing faster in much of the South than anywhere else in the United States. Across a broad swath of the region stretching westward from North Carolina on the Atlantic seaboard to Arkansas across the Mississippi River and south to Alabama on the Gulf of Mexico, sizeable Hispanic populations have emerged suddenly in communities where Latinos were a sparse presence just a decade or two ago. Examined both individually and collectively, these communities display attributes that set them apart from the nation as a whole and from areas of the country where Latinos have traditionally settled.¹

In the South, the white and black populations are also increasing and the local economies are growing robustly, even as some undergo dramatic restructuring. Such conditions have acted as a magnet to young, male, foreign-born Latinos migrating in search of economic opportunities. While these trends are not unique to the South, they are playing out in that region with a greater intensity and across a larger variety of communities—rural, small towns, suburbs and big cities—than in any other part of the country. Understanding the interplay of Hispanic population growth and the conditions that attended it helps illuminate a broad process of demographic and economic change in the South and in other new settlement areas as well. To varying degrees, communities scattered from New England to the Pacific Northwest are also seeing surging Hispanic populations. The South, different in so many ways for so much of its history, now offers lessons to the rest of the country.

Most of the Latinos added to the population of the new settlement areas of the South are foreign born, and their migration is the product of a great many different policies and circumstances in the United States and their home countries. But there is a local context as well, and it is different in the new settlement areas of the South than it is in states such as California and New York, where migrants join large, well-established Latino communities. Given its distinctive character, Hispanic population growth in these parts of the South will also have distinctive impacts on public policy, and those impacts have only just begun to be felt.

This report focuses on six Southern states—Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee—that registered very fast rates of Hispanic population growth between the censuses of 1990 and 2000 and continue to outpace the national average in the most recent census estimates. In order to examine the diversity of demographic and economic experiences at the local level, this report also examines 36 counties in the South that are experiencing especially rapid Hispanic growth. Some of these counties contain metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Ga., Birmingham, Ala., and Charlotte, N.C., that registered huge increases in their Hispanic populations— for example, Mecklenburg County, N.C., which includes Charlotte, was up 500 percent. But other counties are predominately rural or contain smaller cities. Their total population in 2000 ranged from fewer than 37,000 (Murray County, a carpet-manufacturing

¹ The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably throughout this report. The terms “white” and “black” refer to non-Hispanics in those racial categories.

community in northwest Georgia) to almost 900,000 (Shelby County, Tenn., home to Memphis). Thirty-six of these counties, all with an increase in their Hispanic population of 200 percent or more, had enough statistical information available to be studied in detail for this report. And in every case, the Hispanic population was relatively small before it surged. Fewer than 7,000 Hispanics were counted in Mecklenburg in 1990, but by 2000 there were nearly 45,000. Gordon County, Ga. had just 200 Latinos in 1990 and saw its Hispanic population soar to more than 3,200 by the 2000 census.

Underlying the growth of the Latino population in the new settlement areas of the South between 1990 and 2000 was an unusually robust economy. The Southeast was one of the fastest-growing regions in the country during the 1990s, and economic progress was spread across a variety of industries. Some counties bucked the national trend and added manufacturing jobs; others shed manufacturing jobs but saw other sectors such as services emerge as a leading source of income and employment. A third group of counties, many of them part of, or centered near, large metropolitan areas, enjoyed a diverse economic base that held up well during the decade.

It is important to note that the region added jobs for both Hispanic and non-Hispanic workers at rates well in excess of the national average. In this respect, the economic context to the growth of the new settlement areas of the South mirrors the demographic context, since Hispanic population growth in the six-state region was accompanied by continued growth in the black and white populations. By contrast, in some states where Hispanics had traditionally settled, such as New York and California, the non-Hispanic white population actually declined.

The prospect of work has attracted large numbers of young Hispanics, often unmarried and mobile enough to pick up and move where the jobs are. Because the Hispanic population in the new settlement areas of the South had been so small prior to the recent surge, the region has seen less immigration due to family reunification than is common in areas of long-established Hispanic settlement. As a result, Latinos in the new settlements of the South are much more likely than those in areas of traditional settlement to have been born abroad, to have arrived recently (particularly from Mexico), to be male, to be unmarried, and to be young. Most have relatively little education, and many do not speak English well.

Because the large growth in the Hispanic region is so recent, much of the impact of the new wave of immigration is only beginning to make itself felt on the infrastructure of the host communities. But it is already clear that the impact will be dramatic, particularly on the schools. For now, employers in the region are happy to have a dependable source of low-cost labor available to them. As the new immigrants grow older and utilize more health services, and as more wives join their husbands, evening out the current gender imbalance and leading to more children, the demands they make on public services will increase but so too may their contributions to the tax bases supporting those services.

This report looks at the demographic characteristics of the new settlement areas of the South on both state and county levels, examining the economic factors that have led to the increase in Hispanic migration to the area and some of the policy implications for the region.

Some of the major findings in this report include:

- North Carolina (394%), Arkansas (337%), Georgia (300%), Tennessee (278%), South Carolina (211%) and Alabama (208%) registered the highest rate of increase in their Hispanic populations of any states in the U.S. between 1990 and 2000, except for Nevada (217%).
- The rapid growth in the Hispanic population occurred not in isolation but in the context of strong population growth among blacks (21%) and whites (11%) in the new South states.
- The same basic trends have remained in place since 2000 with the growth of both the Hispanic population and the population overall outpacing the national average, according to the most recent Census Bureau estimates.
- The growth in the Latino population was even more dramatic at the county level, exceeding 1,000% in some counties and 500% in many others. The dramatic increases occurred across a range of county types, from small, non-metro manufacturing counties throughout North Carolina and north of Atlanta to counties in the heart of large metropolitan areas such as Nashville, Tenn.
- Hispanics in the new settlement areas of the South states are predominantly foreign-born (57%). The immigrants are mostly men (63%) and young (median age 27). Most of these immigrants (62%) lack even a high school diploma, and 57% do not speak English well or do not speak it at all. More than half of these immigrants entered the U.S. between 1995 and 2000, and most lack legal status.
- Rapid and widespread growth in income and employment in the region provided the economic incentives for Hispanics to migrate to new settlement states in the 1990s. Unemployment rates in the new South states and key metropolitan areas within those states were consistently lower than the nationwide rate between 1990 and 2000.
- Economic growth in the new settlement states created jobs for an additional 410,000 Hispanic workers and 1.9 million non-Hispanic workers in the 1990s.
- Several counties in the new settlement areas not only retained a manufacturing base but added manufacturing jobs in the 1990s. Hispanic workers in these counties accounted for 41% of the total increase in employment. Moreover, 57% of Latino workers in these counties were employed in manufacturing in 2000.

- Another group of counties in the new settlement areas retained strong ties to manufacturing but also made transitions into other sectors during the 1990s. Nearly 43% of Hispanic workers in those counties were engaged in manufacturing in 2000.
- Larger counties with more diverse economic bases provided fewer job opportunities in manufacturing but 30 percent of Hispanic workers found employment in the construction industry alone.
- The median annual income of Hispanic workers in the new South was about \$16,000. In manufacturing counties this was about 60% of the earnings of white workers. However, in the larger counties with diverse economies the earnings of Latino workers were only 47% of the earnings of white workers.
- The Hispanic school-age population (ages 5 through 17) in the new settlement areas of the South grew by 322% between 1990 and 2000. Over the same period, the corresponding white population grew by just 10% and the black population by 18%.
- The Hispanic population of preschool age (4 or younger) increased by 382 percent between 1990 and 2000, and the number of Hispanics added was far larger than the number of whites (110,000 vs. 43,000).
- By the 2001-2002 school year, Hispanics accounted for 4 percent of school enrollment, but by 2007-2008 the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education projects they will make up 10 percent of the primary and secondary school students in the six new settlement states of the South.
- The number of Spanish-speaking children in the region with limited proficiency in English in 1990 was 18,000. By 2000 that number had increased to 64,000.
- The poverty rate among Latinos in the six Southern new settlement states jumped from 19.7% to 25.5% between 1990 and 2000—a 30% increase compared with a 4% drop for Latinos nationwide. Meanwhile the overall poverty rate in these states dropped by 7% over the decade.
- In the six Southern states, 65% of Latinos are renters compared with 52 percent of Latinos nationwide and 21% of whites and 44% of blacks in the new settlement states.
- The impact of an influx of Latino immigrants on the region's housing is notable because Latinos have more children on average than non-Hispanics and Latino households frequently include members of an extended family or nonrelatives. The average number of people in Hispanic households in the South (3.8) was significantly larger than in either white (2.4) or black (2.7) households in the region.