

The Changing Face of the Rural West



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Rapid Growth of Hispanic Populations in Western States

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Hispanic Americans are now tied with the African American population as the nation's largest minority group. In the West, Hispanics are the largest ethnic minority, making up 24% of the total population. By comparison, African Americans make up 5%; Asian Americans, 8%; and American Indians, 2% of the total population (Figure 1). Non-Hispanics still make up the majority of the population in western states (76%), but rapid growth of the Hispanic population has had, and will have, an important influence on the economic, political, and social life of the West and the nation as a whole. Between 1990 to 2000, the West's Hispanic population increased by 54% compared to a 13% increase for the non-Hispanic population. As a result, the Hispanic population now represents 25% of the West's population, up from 19% in 1990.

The purposes of this report are to 1) describe the increase in Hispanic populations in the West from 1990 to 2000, and 2) describe the impacts of increasing diversity on 11 western states (Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, California, Washington, and Oregon). Information is derived from responses to a question on the 2000 U.S. Census (Figure 2). As the Census question implies, the U.S. Hispanic population is quite diverse and consists of people from various backgrounds.

In the West, the majority of respondents (82%) selected the category "Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano" (Figure 3). Although it would be more appropriate to describe each group separately, for brevity we will use the term Hispanic and describe the population as a group. Although this masks the diversity within the group, the purpose of this discussion is to describe how dramatic changes in ethnic composition may influence the West, not to describe particular characteristics of Hispanic groups.

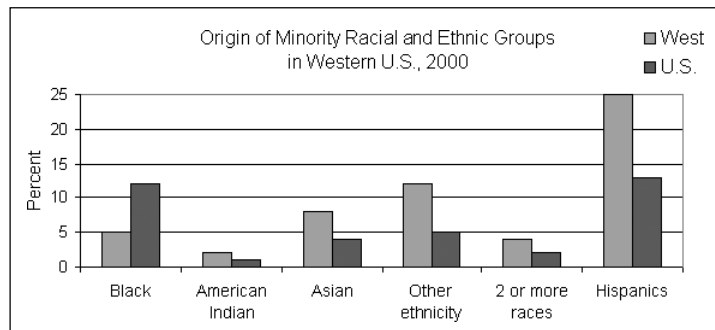


Figure 1. Origin of minority racial and ethnic groups in the Western U.S., 2000. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

Understanding the Changes

In the West, there is much variation in the proportion of Hispanics in each state. New Mexico has the largest proportion of Hispanic residents (42%), but California has the largest number—leading the nation with 11 million Hispanic residents (Table 1 and Figure 4). Even more variation exists at the county level. Since 1990, some counties experienced rapid growth in Hispanic populations, while other counties have been nearly untouched by this trend.

Much of the western United States was at one time part of Mexico, and referring to Hispanics as "newcomers" ignores this part of U.S. history. But the recent proportionate increase of this group has caught the attention of both the public and

7. Is Person 1 Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? Mark the "No" box if not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.

No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano Yes, Cuban

Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino — Print group.

Figure 2. Question No. 7 from 2000 U.S. Census.

policy makers. Although non-Hispanic Whites are still adding more people to the West (5.43 million new residents versus 5.38 million new residents for Hispanics), in many places the number of Hispanics has increased by 100, 200,

even 300%. In a few places that had almost no Hispanic representation in 1990, the influx of even a few people increased the Hispanic proportion dramatically (Figure 5). For example, Ouray County, Colorado, added only 50 people to its Hispanic population, but this amounted to a 49% increase over the previous census when 103 Hispanic residents were recorded. At the same time, in counties where the number of Hispanics was already large and their proportionate increase was relatively small, the Hispanic population increased faster than that of most other groups, including non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, Asians, and American Indians.

State	Total	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	% Hispanic	Numeric Change Since 1990	% Change Since 1990	% Change Non-Hispanics Since 1990
Arizona	5,130,632	1,295,617	3,835,015	25%	1,465,404	88%	29%
California	33,871,648	10,966,556	22,905,092	32%	4,111,627	43%	4%
Colorado	4,301,261	735,601	3,565,660	17%	1,006,867	0%	24%
Idaho	1,293,953	101,690	1,192,263	8%	287,204	92%	25%
Montana	902,195	18,081	884,114	2%	103,130	49%	12%
New Mexico	1,819,046	765,386	1,053,660	42%	303,977	32%	13%
Nevada	1,998,257	393,970	1,604,287	20%	796,424	217%	49%
Oregon	3,421,399	275,314	3,146,085	8%	579,078	144%	15%
Utah	2,233,169	201,559	2,031,610	9%	510,319	138%	24%
Washington	5,894,121	441,509	5,452,612	7%	1,027,429	106%	17%
Wyoming	493,782	31,669	462,113	6%	40,194	23%	8%
Total for West	61,359,463	15,226,952	46,132,511	25%	10,231,653	102%	12%

Table 1: Hispanic/non-Hispanic population by state. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

This rapid growth has been fueled both by international migration and by natural increase.

During the 1990s, the United States admitted nearly 800,000 legal immigrants yearly. It is estimated that around five million illegal immigrants resided in the United States during the decade.¹ Research on what propels immigration shows that immigrants move from areas with low incomes and poor job opportunities to those with better incomes and job opportunities.² In many cases the decision to move is a family one; households in which one or two people move while others stay behind are diversifying their resources and protecting against risk. This strategy is necessary because in many low-income countries, insurance and credit systems are rudimentary at best. In addition, the local subsistence economies of many countries have been disrupted by the entry of multinational corporations willing to pay cash for land, labor, and raw materials—but who employ only a fraction of the working-age population. The only way for the unemployed to participate in this newly emerging cash economy is to seek work outside of the area. Once migration begins, spending at least some time abroad may become part of the culture—a sign of adulthood, personal innovation, and success.

But why do immigrants choose certain destinations over others? In many instances, it is because of the need for unskilled jobs. Historically in the United States, immigrants have started in low wage entry-level jobs, and these jobs were most

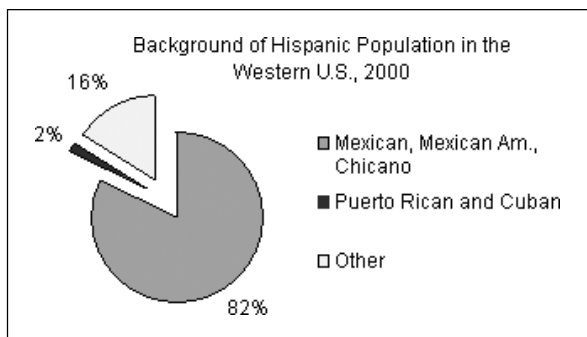


Figure 3. Background of Hispanic population in the western U.S. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

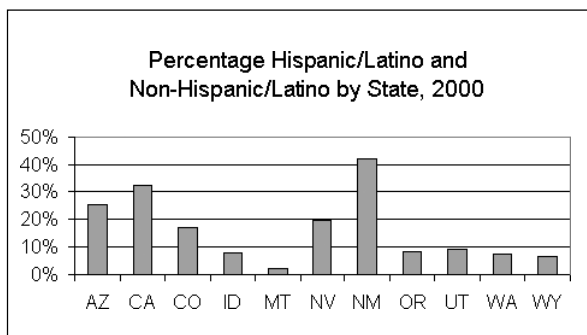


Figure 4. Percentage Hispanic/Latino and non-Hispanic/Latino by state, 2000. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

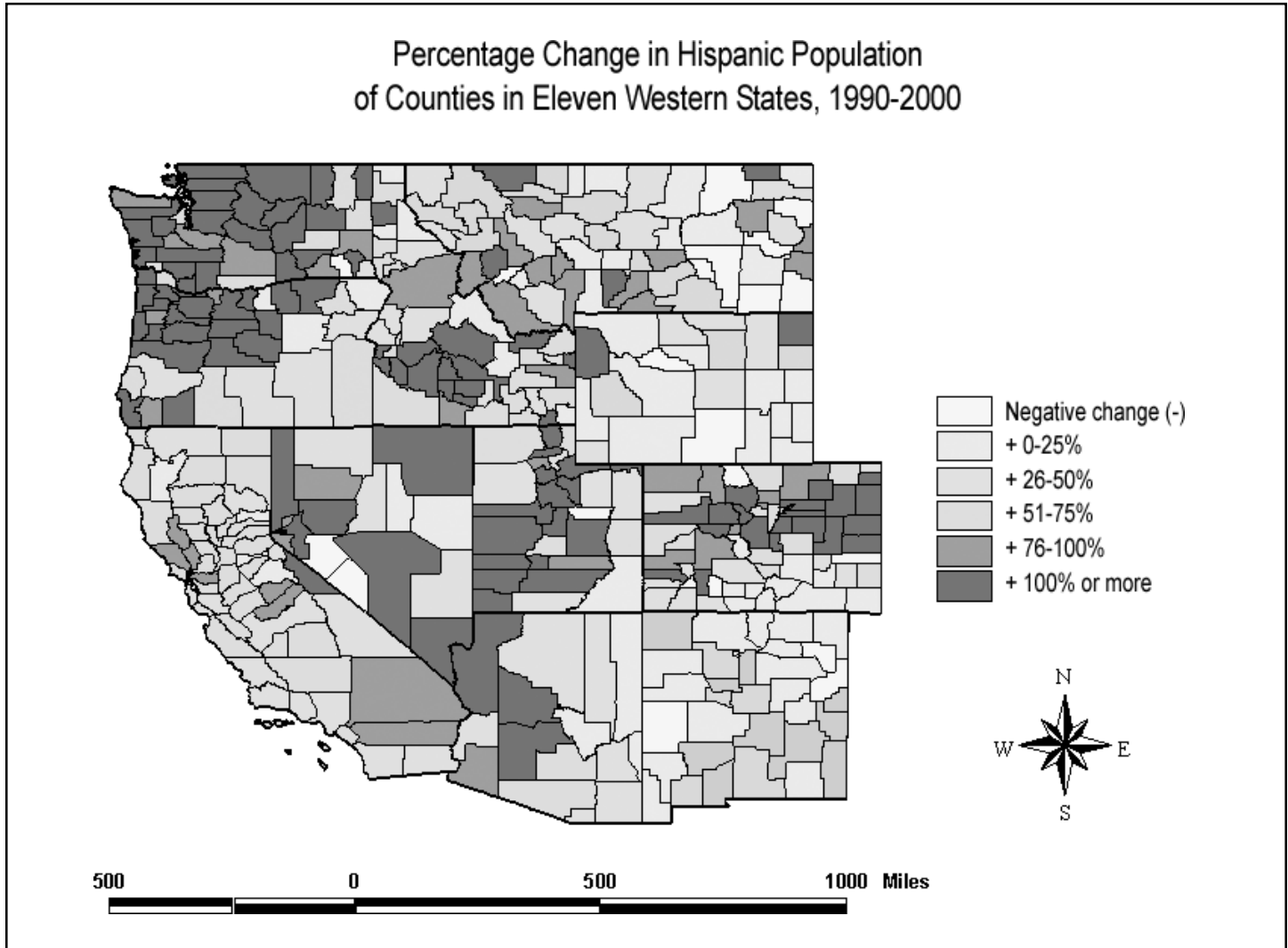


Figure 5. Percent change in Hispanic population of counties in eleven western states, 1990-2000. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

plentiful in large cities. Between WWII and the early 1970s, when immigration was low, native born women and teenagers also tended to fill low wage jobs—and to some extent they still do. However, as women's incomes have become more important to family well-being, women too seek stable, higher paying employment—and there are fewer native born teenagers with the passing of the baby boom.

Entry-level employment has shifted somewhat to rural areas. Food processing plants move to rural areas seeking lower land, construction, and labor costs, and to be closer to the agricultural products they use. Some rural areas continue to need low wage labor to plant and harvest many crops. Also important in the decision to immigrate is the presence of family and friends. These networks make it easier to find a job, housing, and social support. As these networks grow, they encourage more immigration.

Thus, rapid growth of the Hispanic population is changing the social fabric of both large and small counties throughout the West. But the Hispanic population has increased disproportionately in rural places, while the non-Hispanic population has increased more rapidly in urban places. Figures 5 and 6 show the proportions of Hispanics and non-Hispanics in western urban counties (defined as those with populations greater than 100,000), relative to rural counties (those with populations less than 100,000), and those counties that changed from rural to urban during the 1990s. It is apparent that the Hispanic population has changed most rapidly in rural places. There are still more Hispanics in urban counties, but the counties that experienced the most change in the 1990s were rural.

Growth has not been uniform across the age structure; in general, growth tends to be concentrated at the younger ages.

Figure 7 shows the percent of the population that was Hispanic in 1990 and 2000 in six geographically dispersed counties with rapidly growing Hispanic populations. In these six counties, the Hispanic population grew by between 140 and 336% during that time, and increased by around 5 to 12 percentage points of the total population. However, the percent of the population that was Hispanic grew much more rapidly in the under 18 and 18-34 age categories, but changed little in the 65 and over age group. For example, in Morrow County, Oregon, the percent of the population that was Hispanic grew from 11 to 24%. The percent under 18 years of age, and 18 to 34 years of age, increased from 16 and 19% to 36%, while the percent 65 and over grew from just 1 to 3%.³

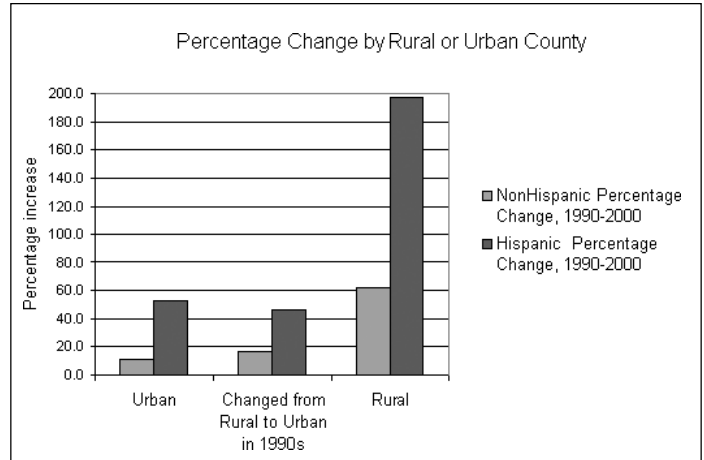


Figure 6. Percentage change by rural or urban county. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

Understanding the Impacts

We have seen that the western Hispanic population

- is becoming younger,
- is becoming more rural,
- is seeking entry-level jobs, and
- is unevenly distributed geographically.

Taken together, these changes will have long-lived impacts on the rural West.

The high mobility among young adults is not unique to the United States and Hispanic populations, but has characterized migration streams internationally and historically since at least the discovery of the New World. In migrating, young adults often bring their children with them, and/or are in the prime childbearing years. This pattern has important implications for service provision in areas where the Hispanic population is growing rapidly. Preschool and school-aged populations will shift more quickly than might be expected. The entry-level labor force will also be more diverse, and health care provision for pregnant women, new mothers, and children will need to reach a more diverse population. Since these changes are more dramatic in rural areas, there will be greater need in the counties with the smallest populations.

A more subtle issue is that of voting to fund local services. In the United States, commentators have long remarked on the generation gap

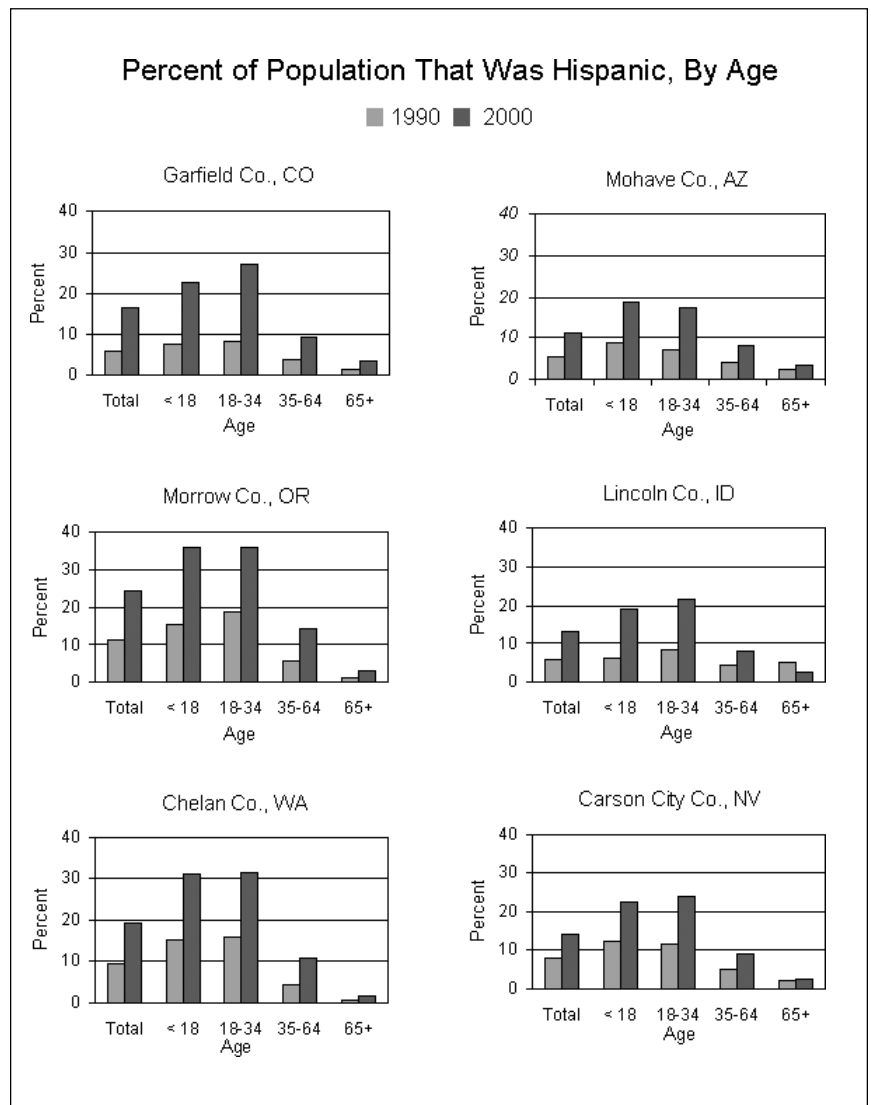


Figure 7. Percent Hispanic by age in western U.S. Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 2001.

that occurs between teenagers and older adults. With rapid increase in diversity, this age-based gap may be accompanied by a cultural gap as well. Many of the services needed by children and young adults are funded at the county or local level through bond initiatives. Will there be a tension between the needs of this younger population and a largely older, non-Hispanic voting-age population, and less willingness on the part of older adults to vote for bond issues because of this dual gap? Further, Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites vote in different proportions. In the 2000 elections, only 45% of Hispanics voted, while 62% of non-Hispanic Whites voted. Those citizens who are most likely to vote are also homeowners and people with more education and higher incomes.⁴ The heavily rural nature of the Hispanic increase could exacerbate ethnic and class divisions.

Are immigrants a drain on local budgets and the local economy? There is often a substantial amount of controversy surrounding this issue.⁵ On the positive side, while immigrants pay taxes, many are young and do not draw on social security or medical services to the extent that older adults do. Even illegal immigrants pay taxes, but they have no way to access social security or many health benefits. However, the immigrant population is younger and their children need schooling. In the long term, if their children receive good educations through the public school system, they will likely move into higher paying jobs and better housing, and increase their contribution to local and federal taxes. In the short term, making sure that children (and especially teenagers) are actively engaged in school makes it less likely that they will commit petty crimes and be a burden to the justice system.

The same is true of health care. Children who are poorly nourished and have poor housing (whether these are immigrant or native born children) do poorly in school. Limited basic health care, especially prenatal care and childhood vaccinations, may do more harm than good if it leads to the need for more expensive medical care and/or to the spread of communicable diseases. One study used Current Population Survey data from the mid-1990s to estimate the fiscal impact of immigrants and their descendants by educational level.⁶ Figure 8 shows that the long-term impact of immigrants depends greatly on the amount of schooling that they have. Immigrants who are not high school graduates have

substantial negative fiscal impact that is not offset by their descendants. The slight negative impact of immigrants who are just high school graduates is offset by their dependents, and immigrants with more than a high school education have a substantial positive fiscal impact.

Employers that offer predominantly entry-level positions (i.e., a food processing plant in a rural area) may attract only poorly educated immigrants, and these immigrant's taxes may not offset the costs of services they need. Thus, rural areas need to be very careful in working with such employers, encouraging them to contribute taxes to support schools and health care (as opposed to taking advantage of preferential tax treatment they are occasionally offered).

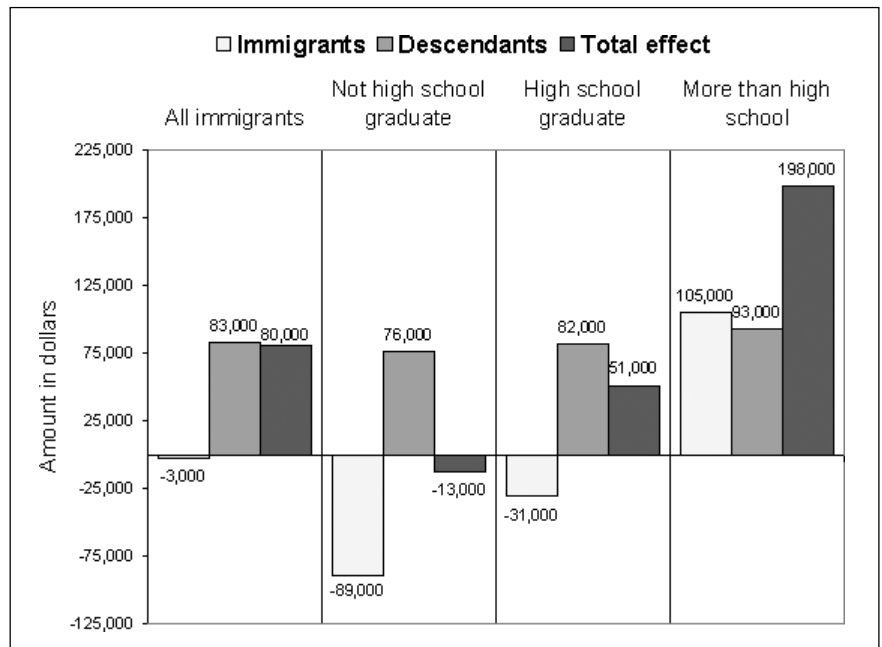


Figure 8. The long-term fiscal effect of one immigrant, by education level, 1996 dollars. Source: James P. Smith and Barry Edmonston, eds., *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration* (1997): Table 7-5.

Conclusion

The impact of the rapidly growing Hispanic population in the western states is, and will continue to be, many faceted. The youthfulness of the population will result in pressure on schools to accommodate a growing number of Spanish-speaking students and/or parents. The fact that population growth is proportionately more rapid in rural places means that schools trying to accommodate these students may already be cash-poor—and need additional resources in order to bring quality education to the students. The youthfulness of the population also means that there will be increased pressure on entry-level

jobs in many parts of the economy. While the current group of Hispanics, as a whole, may be less skilled than the non-Hispanic population, their children will be better educated than they, and will have a broader range of occupational interests and options. The Hispanic population will also affect the health care system, the western economy, and the political system. But the greatest impact may well be on the social fabric of the West. Many states that had been

quite ethnically homogeneous, including Montana, Idaho, Nevada, and Utah, are now experiencing an increase in diversity. Social science research indicates that it is possible to readily integrate newcomers with new characteristics into community structures. However, this requires that both long-established residents and new residents work toward it. Given the rate of rural Hispanic population growth, it will be interesting to see how the region changes in the next ten years. ■

Notes

- ¹ P. Martin and E. Midgley, 1999. "Immigration to the United States," *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 54, No. 2:6.
- ² For a good review of research in this area see D.S. Massey, "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19:9-93.
- ³ It is impossible to provide information for all counties in the West in this publication, but readers may go to the WRDC site at <http://extension.usu.edu/WRDC> to locate data on specific counties.
- ⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002. "Registered Voter Turnout Improved in 2000 Presidential Election, Census Bureau Reports," <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2002/cb02-31.html>.
- ⁵ For additional discussion, see P. Martin and E. Midgley, 1999. "Immigration to the United States," *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 54, No. 2:1-44.
- ⁶ James P. Smith and Barry Edmonston, eds., *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic and Fiscal Effects of Immigration* (1997). Table 7-5.

Credits

Special thanks to Tyrell Bailey for using the Arc View program to prepare the map shown in Figure 5, *Percent Change in Hispanic Population of Counties in Eleven Western States, 1990-2000*. Thanks, also, to Carey Dufner and Theresa Selfa for editorial assistance. Cover photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

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About the WRDC

The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) is one of four USDA-sponsored regional rural development centers in the country. The WRDC participates in rural development research and extension (outreach) projects cooperatively with universities in the West, working closely with university personnel, policy makers, elected officials, community leaders, and citizens to

- identify key issues shaping the future of rural regions in the West, and
- organize projects that respond to those issues.

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