



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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## The New Immigrant Hispanic Population: An Integrated Approach to Preventing Delinquency and Crime

*Summary of a Presentation  
by Orlando Rodriguez, Ph.D., Fordham University*

Hispanics are among the fastest growing of all ethnic groups in the Nation. Having increased 50 percent between 1980 and 1990, they now constitute about 9 percent of the population; this proportion is expected to double by the turn of the century. In addition, changes in the nature of the Hispanic population are creating new challenges in acculturation and the preservation of ethnic identity. For the criminal justice system and social service providers, these developments pose questions about the risks these immigrants face in becoming involved in crime and delinquency.

The phenomenon of the new immigrant Hispanic population was the impetus for the researcher's interest in studying the way Hispanics will be affected, particularly in adolescence, by social, economic, and psychosocial forces. The initial focus has been on school and work force problems of immigrant Puerto Rican adolescent males in New York City. Key preliminary findings from an initial study of delinquency in this group include the following:

- The traditional Hispanic family culture appears to deter delinquency.
- Absorption into mainstream culture is associated with more, not less, delinquency.
- Adolescents who are not in the labor force are *less* likely to become involved in criminal behavior than those who hold jobs.

### The focus on young Hispanics

Traditionally, Mexican immigrants have comprised the largest Hispanic group in the United States, followed by Cubans and Puerto Ricans. That is still the case: Census

data for 1990 indicate that of the country's 21 million Hispanics, some 13 million are Mexican. The notable change has been among those in the census category "other Hispanics": people from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. In the 1980's this group was the only one whose growth rate increased over the previous decade.

The relative youth of the U.S. Hispanic population is particularly important to the study. Some Hispanic groups have high rates of fertility, which accounts for part of their population growth, although it also is due to the influx of immigrants who manifest the same high fertility rates. Combined, they make the Hispanic population "pyramid" bottom-heavy, with a disproportionate concentration in the younger age groups. This factor accounts for the projection that by about 2010, minorities will be more heavily represented among adolescents in the United States than they are now.

How the large number of children who are now entering elementary, junior high, and high school will fare in mainstream culture is a major study focus. Will they become fully involved in the political process? To what extent will they join civic and other organizations? What problems will they face entering the labor force? Will they strive for upward mobility? Will they define themselves in terms of their ethnic identity or that of the mainstream culture?

### Toward a new analytical framework

Obtaining answers to these questions suggests the need for a new theoretical framework to understand how young Hispanics will fare in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Creating the framework requires first examin-

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ing how this transition has been conceptualized in three different social science models, integrating those streams of analysis, and then modifying them to reflect the Hispanic experience. The three methods of analysis, which were applied in the initial study of Puerto Rican adolescents, are:

■ **Socioeconomic:** examining the mechanism by which integration into economic and political structures takes place. Looking at these factors as they apply to minority adolescents, it becomes evident that the process of social integration is very different than for nonminorities. School and labor force decisions (e.g., dropping out of school, delaying entry into the labor force, job turnover) have more negative consequences in adulthood. The consequences are explained largely in terms of “human capital.” For example, a deficit of language “capital” may predict failure in the labor market.

Much of this knowledge was developed by studying African Americans. For Hispanics and other immigrant groups, the model needs to be modified to take such factors as immigration and discrimination into account. However, skills developed in the home country (e.g., educational credentials, business expertise) as well as social networks created by immigrants who arrived earlier may enhance economic and social integration.

■ **Psychosocial:** looking at how cognitive skills, affective balance, social capital, and a sense of identity develop. Again, deficits in these skills during the adolescent years can bring negative consequences in adulthood. Analysis of the Hispanic experience needs to take into account acculturation—the extent to which one’s ethnic identity is retained or subsumed within the larger culture—because it is a key area of development for new immigrants.

■ **Social science theories:** applying them to the Hispanic experience to examine how problem behaviors, including delinquency and substance abuse, as well as mental health problems, develop. Much of the research-based knowledge comes from studies of mainstream populations, although more Hispanic population studies have used this approach than have examined socioeconomic or psychosocial factors.

## Applying the integrated approach

The study of Puerto Rican boys in New York City revealed that some of the same factors associated with delinquency in the mainstream population—family, peers, and attitudes toward deviance—also can be used to analyze this group, with some of the same effects. One major difference is the role of the family. While in the mainstream population the peer group is the major predictor of behavior, the family plays as large a role as peers among Hispanics. This suggests that studies of Hispanics need to take this factor, as well as the broader variable of Hispanic culture, into account.

Analysis of psychosocial factors also needs to be modified to accommodate ethnic identity. Although an important issue for all adolescents, identity has a different dimension for Hispanics because of problems of acculturation and retention of their ethnic culture. Research in Hispanic mental health and delinquency has revealed that acculturation is positively correlated with delinquency. This finding—that absorption into mainstream culture brings about more, not less, problem behavior—has been found for drug use, though not for delinquency in general.

The explanation for this counterintuitive finding may be that Hispanic cultures, which can be described as more “traditional,” may inhibit problem behavior because they are better able to encompass adolescents within the context of the culture. In studying acculturation, the relatively new factor of frequent travel to the home country might also be included as part of the analysis.

The factor of labor force integration also needs to be analyzed through the medium of Hispanic culture. This factor is itself an outcome, but it is also a “predictor” of others. Again, the findings are counterintuitive: Among the Hispanic adolescents studied, being out of the labor force is associated with *not* being involved in crime.

The finding that adolescents who hold jobs are more likely to become delinquent than those who are unemployed challenges the conventional view of jobs as a way to prevent delinquency. On the other hand, being in school was not found to be associated with delinquency, creating a possible argument in favor of programs that focus on learning skills and convincing adolescents to stay in school.

This Research Preview is based on a presentation by Orlando Rodriguez, Ph.D., Director of the Hispanic Research Center at Fordham University. The recently completed first part of Dr. Rodriguez’s study was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

As part of the National Institute of Justice Research in Progress seminar series, Dr. Rodriguez discussed his research project with an audience of other researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, “The New Immigrant Hispanic Populations: Implications for Crime and Delinquency in the Next Decade,” is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Ask for NCJ 156923.

Use the order form on the next page to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

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