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THE ELDERLY OF HISPANIC ORIGIN:
POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS FOR 1980

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Among the most significant trends of the twentieth century has been the continued growth of elderly populations, both in absolute numbers and in relation to other segments of American society. Population projections for the United States suggest that the number of elderly will continue to increase relative to other age groups. These projections also suggest that there will be an increase in the number of minority older persons 65 years of age or older. Presently, members of national minority groups make up a small proportion of the aged population. In 1980 about 11.7 percent of the 65 and over population were Black, 3 percent were Hispanic, 1.5 percent were Asians and less than 0.6 percent were Native American. Minority populations tend to be younger with much smaller percentages of older persons than Whites. For example, about 7.9 percent of the Black population is 65 years of age or older, compared to about 4.9 percent of Hispanics, somewhat over 5.3 percent of Asian Americans and a little more than 5.3 percent of the Native American population.

It must be noted, however, that some subgroups within the Hispanic cluster are not consistent with the broad pattern presented above. It is important to recognize that life experiences, broad demographic factors and structural conditions suggest considerable variations between them that is not easily gleaned from aggregated data. This paper, therefore, focuses on salient demographic trends regarding each subgroup within the Hispanic cluster (i.e., Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban) and examines dissimilarities in life expectancy, educational achievement, economic status and regional distribution which are attributable to within cluster structural deprivation and not to cultural disparities. An underlying assumption of this paper is that inequalities in American society have generated many of the observed socio-demographic variations among subgroups of older Hispanics. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics exhibited by either the cluster, the subgroup, or both primarily reflect the minority status of this population within the larger structure of American society and as such are independent of cultural influences. Lastly, it is the author's view that the "double jeopardy" hypothesis, about which much has been written

in the last decade, directly impinges on the observed demographic dissimilarities that have been noted between minority and majority elderly and therefore for the Hispanic elderly. However, it is suggested that caution must be exercised in extending the effect of the double jeopardy situation to primary group experiences (e.g., the family) and to intrapersonal subjective states (e.g., life satisfaction), for in these two situations cultural variables appear to impact upon the life experiences of older Hispanics and may lessen the negative impact of the socio-economic variables associated with minority status.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF HISPANIC AMERICAN AGING

Socioeconomic Status

The Hispanic elderly comprise 4.9 percent of the total Hispanic population (Valle, 1983). There are approximately 708,880 Hispanics who are 65 years of age or older. Of these, Mexican Americans comprise over half of the total with approximately 367,476 elderly. As noted by Valle (1983) these estimates are very conservative because this cohort includes large numbers of undocumented persons. The U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates the elderly Cuban population to number around 97,000 persons in 1980 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981a). The rest of the elderly Hispanic population is made up of approximately 70,000 Puerto Ricans and 74,900 members of other Spanish-speaking groups. Table 1 provides a breakdown by age and subpopulation.

Table 1

	Hispanics Sub-cluster 60 Years of Age and Older			
	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 and over
Total	320,967	263,683	193,463	251,734
Mexicans	164,343	134,569	100,360	132,547
Puerto Ricans	38,206	29,265	18,614	21,546
Cubans	40,756	36,436	28,045	32,586
Other	77,664	63,413	46,444	65,045
Total Hispanic population 60 years of age and older				1,029,849
Total Mexican population 60 years of age and older				531,819
Total Puerto Rican population 60 years of age and older				107,631
Total Cuban Population 60 years of age and older				136,823
Total other Spanish speaking population 60 years of age and older				252,576

Cubans constitute the third largest Hispanic group in the United States; but, as indicated above, they have the second largest Hispanic elderly population. This is because the Cuban population age structure is more mature with an estimated median age of 33.5 years. This median age is older than the other Spanish origin populations or the total U.S. population. In 1980 it was estimated that 9.7 percent of all Cuban origin persons in the U.S. were 65 years of age or older, compared to 3.7 percent of the Mexicans and 2.7 percent of the Puerto Ricans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981b). Older Cuban origin females are overrepresented. In fact, in 1979 the percentage of the elderly among Cuban females was 13.7 percent, far exceeding that of all other groups, including non-Hispanics (Queralt, 1983). There is also a sizeable number of very old persons. In 1979, 3.7 percent of the Cuban population were 75 years of age or older, compared to 1.4 percent of Mexicans and 0.6 percent of Puerto Ricans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Among elderly Hispanics, Cubans are the most educated. In 1979, 26.9 percent of the Cuban aged had completed four years of high school or more, compared to 19.5 percent of Puerto Rican and 7.1 percent of Mexican elders (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). Elderly Hispanics are twice as likely to be below the poverty line. In 1979, of all Hispanics 65 years of age or older, 26.1 percent were poor, compared to only 13.2 percent of all the White non-Hispanic population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981c). While exact percentages living below the poverty level have not been determined, it is known from another source¹ that the average family income for older Mexicans has been reported to be \$3,967; for elderly Puerto Ricans, \$3,625; and for older Cubans, \$4,079 (ANPPM, 1980). Thus, no significant differences in annual family income are observed among the subpopulations of older Hispanics.

With regard to labor force participation, when compared to Mexicans and Puerto Ricans as well as to the total U.S. population in 1979, elderly Cubans showed the highest labor force participation rate and the lowest rate of unemployment (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). However, as noted by Queralt (1983), their occupational status was not as advantaged as their educational attainment or employment record. Except for a somewhat higher proportion of professionals and managers, the Cuban occupational pattern, with its peak concentration in the operative category, closely resembled that of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. Cuban origin females appeared to be more disadvantaged occupationally than their Mexican and Puerto Rican counterparts; in

1979 they had the smallest percentage of professional, technical and managerial workers and the greatest percentage of operatives of all three groups of females. Fully 40 percent of Mexican origin women were in the service worker category (U.S. Human Resources Corporation, 1976). Factory work was the second most prevalent occupational category for elderly women of Mexican origin. About 26 percent were in this designation (U.S. Human Resources Corporation, 1976).

It may be suggested, based on the facts above, that many of the elderly under discussion are unlikely to have adequate health coverage because of their current or prior occupations (Valle, 1983). This is supported by field studies (Cuellar and Weeks, 1980) which indicated that the combined economic, educational and prior occupational experience of Hispanics may act as barriers to adequate health care.

Among major groups of elderly Hispanics, Mexicans have the highest number of children; a median of 3.64 compared to 3.16 for Puerto Ricans and 1.94 for Cubans. The ANPPM (1980) report tells us that elderly Hispanics of all groups maintain close ties with their children. Cubans indicate the lowest percentage of individuals living alone (15.3%) followed by Mexicans (24.1%) and Puerto Ricans (38%). Older Mexicans report the highest number of those elderly living with spouse and children (24.3%) while Puerto Ricans report the lowest (10.7%) with Cubans closer to older Mexicans in this type of living arrangement (20.6%). Cubans are more likely to live with a spouse only, since 39.2 percent of the Cubans surveyed reported this pattern of living arrangement, Mexicans followed with 27.5 percent in this category and Puerto Ricans were the least likely to be found in this type of arrangement with only 23.9 percent in this category. Of interest is the considerable number of elderly Hispanics who live with others. For this type of arrangement, the ANPPM (1980) reports that 13.4 percent of the Mexicans, 13.9 percent of the Cubans and 15.4 percent of the Puerto Ricans surveyed in their study indicated this type of arrangement. Table 2 offers a more comprehensive description of living arrangements for all three groups.

Slightly more than half of older Mexicans own their homes in contrast to approximately 22 percent of Puerto Ricans and only 15 percent of Cubans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979). In general, elderly Hispanics have unique and expanding housing needs for which no adequate response has been found in public programs. For example, in 1982 there were thousands of elderly Cubans on waiting lists to obtain low cost public housing. Many had been waiting for years (Queralt, 1983).

Table 2
Living Arrangement by Percentage
By Sub-Groups

Living Arrangement	Mexicans	Cubans	Puerto Ricans
Live Alone	24.1%	15.3%	38.0%
Live With Spouse Only	27.5%	39.2%	23.9%
Live With Spouse and Children	24.3%	20.6%	10.7%
Live With Children	10.7%	11.0%	12.0%
Live with Others	13.4%	13.9%	15.4%
Total N =	(1162)	(209)	(234)

(Table adapted from Table 5:9 p. 85, *A National Study to Assess the Service Needs of the Hispanic Elderly*, ANPPM, 1980.)

Health, Mental Health and Related Indices

When asked to name their most serious problems, all elderly Hispanic groups surveyed by the ANPPM ranked physical health first (1980). Cubans, in particular, suffered high levels of illness and disability (Queralt, 1983). They reported the lowest incidence of wellness and the highest incidence of multiple illness and disability.

Recent research studies lend further support to the findings above (Valle and Mendoza, 1978; Vega, 1980; Cuellar, 1981) since these indicate that the Hispanic elderly in general and Mexicans in particular have extensive health and mental health related problems. Vega (1980) and Meinhart and Vega (1982), utilizing four measures of psychiatric distress, identified certain subgroups of Hispanics as especially vulnerable. These subgroups include the more monolingual (Spanish-speaking only) Mexican middle aged women (40-57 years) and older males (60-69). Many analysts, Valle (1983) observes, have suggested that the Mexican origin population may be subject to greater health and mental health dysfunctions due to tension and stressors related to their underclass status within the society (Karno and Edgerton, 1969; Torres-Gil, 1982; Roberts, 1980; Roberts and Lee, 1980).

SUMMARY

As a group, the Hispanic elderly have less formal education, lower lifelong income and have been concentrated in lower occupational categories compared to their Anglo counterparts. They tend to be distributed in areas of high sub-ethnic concentrations. For example,

most elderly Mexicans are found in the Southwest with a few high density areas in the Midwest (i.e., Chicago, Detroit), most elderly Puerto Ricans are found in the Northeast and most Cubans are found in Dade County, Florida, or the State of New York. While the data are not firm, their life expectancy appears to be improving. These older individuals, regardless of their subgroup identity, maintain strong family ties and loyalty to Spanish as their language of communication. In conclusion, the author would like to reiterate the position stated at the beginning of this paper that many of the observed variations in socioeconomic and health related factors are directly associated to their minority status within the larger structure of American society and not to cultural differences.

FOOTNOTE

1. This source, which is rapidly becoming a major source of information on Hispanic elderly, is the first nationwide survey of older Hispanics in the U.S. conducted by the Asociacion Nacional Pro Personas Mayores (ANPPM). This study employed a probability sample of 1,803 persons (ANPPM, 1980).

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