



FACT SHEET

Family and Consumer Sciences

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Understanding the Latino Culture

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Introduction

Latinos constitute the largest minority group residing in the United States since 2001. According to U.S. Census projections, Latinos comprised 15.1% (45.5 million) of the U.S. population in 2007 (12.5% in 2000). Mexicans are the largest ethnic segment of Latinos (64%), followed by Puerto Ricans (9%), Central and South Americans (7.7% and 5.5%), Cubans (3.5%), and others (10.3%).

Hispanics, another word for Latinos, is a term created by the federal government in the early 1970s as an attempt to provide a common denominator for a large and diverse population with connection to any Spanish-speaking country or culture. Thus, the U.S. Census Bureau includes in this category about 350,000 Spaniards. The term Latino reflects the Latin American origin of the population and is more commonly used by the Latino population; therefore, Hispanics or Latinos define an ethnicity and it may be of any race.

In Ohio, this population group has grown progressively for the last decade, becoming an important piece of its changing ethnic composition. From 2000 to 2002, the number of Latinos living in several Ohio counties experienced significant growth, especially in the following counties: Pickaway and Franklin (9% and 13% increase, respectively), Delaware and

Fairfield (22% and 23% increase), and Union (25% increase). In the last ten years, Delaware County's Latino population has quadrupled and in Columbus, it increased by 162%. The Latino community, the majority being of Mexican descent, is also a very young population group.

Family Values

Traditionally, the Hispanic family is close-knit and the single most important social unit. The term *familia* usually goes beyond the nuclear family. The Hispanic "family unit" includes not only parents and children but also extended family. In most Hispanic families, the father is the head of the family and the mother is responsible for the home. Individuals within a family have a moral responsibility to aid other members of the family experiencing financial problems, unemployment, poor health conditions, or other life issues.

Family ties are very strong: when someone travels to another town or city to study or for a short visit (e.g. vacation, business, or medical reasons), staying with relatives or even with friends of relatives is a common practice. Families often gather to celebrate holidays, birthdays, baptisms, first communions, graduations, and weddings. Latino families instill in their children the importance of honor, good manners, and respect

for authority and the elderly. Preserving the Spanish language within the family is a common practice in many Latino homes.

Etiquette

Spanish speakers tend toward formality in their treatment of one another. A firm handshake is common practice between people as greeting and for leave-taking. A hug and a light kiss on a cheek are also common greeting practices among women, and men and women who are close friends or family. The Spanish language provides forms of formal and non-formal address (different use of *usted* vs. *tu* for the pronoun you, polite and familiar commands, the use of titles of respect to preface individuals' first names such as *Don* or *Doña*). In non-formal settings, conversations between Spanish speakers are usually loud and rapid with animated gestures and body language to better convey points.

Hispanics usually recognize and value looks and appearance as a sense of honor, dignity, and pride. Formal attire is commonly worn by Hispanics to church, parties, social gatherings, and work. Gym shoes and jeans, however, are becoming more popular among Hispanic women, particularly in non-formal settings. Hispanics tend to be more relaxed and flexible about time and punctuality than U.S. natives. For example, Latinos who are invited for an 8 a.m. event may not begin to arrive until 8:30 a.m. or later. Within the Hispanic community, not being on time is a socially acceptable behavior. Hispanics tend to be reserved about public speaking because of their foreign accent.

Rituals and Religions

In the Hispanic world, religion has traditionally played a significant role in daily activity. Catholicism is still the most dominant religion. The church influences family life and community affairs, giving spiritual meaning to the Hispanic culture. Each local community celebrates its patron saint's day with greater importance and ceremony than individuals do for personal birthdays. As in other parts of the world, traces of the religions of the indigenous groups and African-Americans of Latin America are found in the Catholicism that Hispanics practice.

Celebrations and Holidays

Hispanic countries celebrate the more popular international holidays, notably Easter, Christmas Eve, Christmas, New Year Day, and Three Kings' Day. In addition, each country celebrates its *El Día de Independencia*. The term *fiesta nacional* refers to an official national holiday; *las fiestas* refer to festivals—local, regional, or national—that may be held only one day or may last several days. Most holidays are centered on or have their origins in religion. Many celebrations of the Catholic Church are officially designated by the government as holidays. National government offices may be closed or have limited hours for local or regional holidays.

Eating Habits

In Hispanic countries, a light meal is served for breakfast. Lunch, referred to as *el almuerzo* (*comida* in Mexico), usually is the main meal of the day for newly arrived Latinos. In some countries, it is customary for adult family members and children to come home from work or school for about two hours to be together for this meal. *La siesta*, which is a rest period taken after lunch, is known to be a common practice among adult Hispanics, but modern work and school schedules are influencing the disappearance of this practice, especially in the urban areas. In the early evening, *la merienda*, a light snack of coffee and rolls or sandwiches, is served. This meal is often very informal and may be just for children or for adults who are at home at that time of the day. In the evening, often as late as 9:00 p.m., *la cena*, a small supper, concludes the day's meals. Once settled in the United States, most Hispanics adopt the three-meal system. Mid-day and evening meals are important family or social events. Especially when guests are present, the meal may be followed by the *sobremesa*, a time to linger and talk over coffee or perhaps an after-dinner drink. Usually when food or additional servings are offered to Hispanics, they tend to accept only after it is offered a second or third time.

Teaching and Learning Implications

To fully engage Hispanic audiences in the learning process, particular attention should be given to gaining and maintaining trust. Greater acceptance of

educational efforts will occur by learners if Hispanic community leaders are involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of these educational efforts. Be aware that the physical distance between Hispanics when holding a conversation is much closer than in other cultures.

Exhibiting respect for learners is another important aspect of the Hispanic culture. Teachers need to pay individual attention to learners (e.g. greeting each learner, handing papers to each individual rather than passing them down the row, being sensitive to different cultures among Hispanics, writing educational materials at appropriate reading levels). Differences in educational levels, language skills, income levels, and cultural values among Hispanics need to be considered by Extension educators when planning educational programs. Even though Hispanics share the same language, their cultures (including their foods) may vary considerably. Acculturation also plays an important role in defining the dietary habits of Latino immigrants. Although less acculturated Latinos have a higher consumption of fruits and vegetables as well as a lower consumption of fat when compared to their more acculturated peers, that doesn't mean that all traditional Latino foods are "healthier." Some traditional Latino foods, although high in dietary fiber, are also high in fat (e.g. refried beans).

Churches, local libraries, and recreational centers (with child-care arrangements, if needed) may be appropriate places to hold educational programs with Hispanic audiences. Among Hispanics, information is passed mostly by word of mouth. Grocery stores and churches are the main places people meet, visit, and exchange information.

Latinos have emerged as an influential component of Ohio's economic sector. Employment opportunities have evolved into increased demand and support for local businesses that cater to Latinos' needs. Spanish-language services in schools, libraries, and health care facilities are frequently available for Ohio Latino families. It is anticipated that the surge in the number of Hispanic households in Ohio will continue to grow exponentially, presenting challenges within the labor market and the housing industry, in providing adequate social services, and in education. In addition, the growing demand for culturally specific food products poses a challenge to Ohio food producers, processors, and marketers.

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