



A note on the living arrangements of elders 1970–2000, with special emphasis on hispanic subgroup differentials

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Abstract. Previous research suggests that Hispanic elders, as a group, have been much more likely to live with others, especially adult children, than have other, especially non-Hispanic White, elders. It has also tracked an increase in solitary and couple-only living among the latter group since the turn of the century. However, it has not tracked changed living arrangements among Hispanic elders. When we do so, we find little aggregate change since 1970, but noteworthy change in different directions among different Hispanic subgroups. Thus aggregate figures for a diverse minority group may be masking very real changes and makes it all the more imperative that we consider different Latino groups separately and try to better understand issues of immigration and acculturation.

Keywords: Aging, Ethnicity, Family, Hispanic, Living arrangements

Introduction

It is commonly believed that Hispanics tend to be more family-oriented than other ethnic groups in the United States and that there is something “cultural” (unspecified) about that. Of various possible ways to illustrate the point, one can show that Hispanic elders are more likely to live with kin other than a spouse than are either non-Hispanic White or Black elders. For instance, Himes et al. (1996: S45) used 1990 Census data to show that 56 percent of Hispanic elders 60+ lived with kin compared with 44 percent of Black elders and 21 percent of White elders. It appears, however, that each time such a comparison is made, it is limited to one cross-section. Actually, the figures shown for Hispanics in 1990 are similar to ones for non-Hispanic Whites historically, the cause for change in those latter figures being of major concern. Whether the cause of that change is attributed to economic, cultural or social forces, it is not unreasonable to speculate that many of the same social forces are also being experienced by Hispanics, with potentially similar results. Although there is a large gap between the living arrangements of non-

Hispanic White or Black elders and Hispanic elders at any particular time, what does a view of the last 30 years show us?

“Hispanic” (or Latino) is, in fact, a rather artificial term for distinct ethnic groups whose main commonality is that Spanish is the main language (Sullivan 2000). Although additional groups may be quite prevalent in certain areas, the Census has tended to identify the major Hispanic subgroups as of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or some Other Hispanic (including people from other Caribbean, Central American and South American) origin. It is quite possible that the situation is sufficiently different among the subgroups that what appears as little difference actually masks significant differences. What might appear to be little change over time for a composite group might mask significant changes of different kinds among different subgroups.

The purpose of this note is to show ethnic differences in the living arrangements of elders over time, with special emphasis on the major Hispanic subgroups of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Other Hispanic descent.

Background

Today, most American elders in private households either live alone (if unmarried) or only with their spouse (if married). Few live with children, other relatives or nonrelatives. This is quite different from the situation at the turn of the century (Dahlin 1980; Ruggles 1996). Dahlin estimates that in 1900, only 29 percent of married elders lived only as a couple and only 11 percent of unmarried elders lived alone but that by 1975 these figures had become 84 percent and 66 percent (1980, Table 1). The debate now is why this is true, not whether it is true. Some people tend to place most weight on such economic factors as income and pensions whereas others consider income AND attitudes important (e.g., Kramarow 1995; McGarry & Schoeni 2000). According to Dahlin’s (1993) historical view, the traditional expectation was for old people to reside with others, usually their adult children, but that the expectation was developed at a time when the only alternative to coresidence for most older people was to live in some kind of Poor House. He nicely describes people’s abhorrence to such a fate, and some of the difficulties working class families endured so as to maintain multigenerational coresidence even in cramped urban settings. He notes that both immigrant (minority) and native (majority) families felt similar pressures. With the advent of such innovations as Social Security and other retirement schemes, he suggests that there may have been a lessened desire (or need) on the parts of both adult children and elders alike to coreside since many elders had come to have a reasonable alternative, at least for a time. Is there reason to expect that in

Table 1. Percent distribution of elder living arrangements by broad ethnic group, 1970–1997/2000, actual and standardized by age, sex and marital status of the 1980 Hispanic population

	Actual				Standardized			
	Alone	Couple only	With child	Other	Alone	Couple only	With child	Other
1970								
White	26	42	19	12	28	41	19	12
Black	25	24	26	25	21	30	26	23
Other	21	25	37	17	19	26	39	15
Hispanic	20	26	37	16	19	28	37	15
1980								
White	29	47	16	8	33	42	16	9
Black	29	25	30	15	25	31	30	14
Other	21	29	38	11	21	29	38	11
Hispanic	22	28	41	9	22	28	41	9
1990								
White	30	49	15	6	35	42	15	7
Black	32	23	32	13	26	29	33	11
Other	16	27	47	10	19	24	47	10
Hispanic	21	28	39	12	21	27	39	13
1997–2000								
White	30	50	13	6	36	43	14	7
Black	32	25	30	13	26	33	30	11
Other	15	33	37	15	19	27	37	16
Hispanic	21	31	34	13	22	30	35	14

The total may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Direct standardization by age (65–69, 70–79, 80+), sex and marital status (unmarried, married) of 1980 Hispanic population.

Source: 1970, 1980, and 1990 census PUMS sample microfiles; 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 March current population survey microfiles.

time, Hispanic families would not experience a similar fate if confronted with a similar situation?

Until recently, examination of Hispanic elders was of little more than academic interest. In 1970, for instance, Hispanics may have comprised all of 2 percent of America's elderly (65+) population, even less than the 4.5 percent of the overall population. This is changing rapidly however. The 2000 Census suggests that Hispanics may have become more numerous than

African Americans, to form the largest minority group in the United States (Grieco & Cassidy 2001), and that by 2050 one in six Americans aged 65 or older may be Hispanic (Angel & Hogan 1992).

Census and Current Population Survey figures since 1970 put the composition of the Hispanic population in general as different from that of the Hispanic elderly population (del Pinal & Singer 1997; in-house computations). For the general population for instance, Cubans comprised 6 percent of Hispanics in 1970 and 4 percent in 2000. But they comprised 8 percent of Hispanic elders in 1970 and almost 16 percent in 2000. Puerto Ricans comprised 16 percent of the overall Hispanic population in 1970 but only 9 percent in 2000. They comprised only 9 percent of the Hispanic elderly population in 1970 and 10 percent in 2000. Finally, Mexicans comprised half of the overall Hispanic population in 1970 but two thirds in 2000. However, the Mexican proportion of Hispanic elders only increased from 47 to 54 percent. That is, since many Hispanics immigrated to this country as young people, we are seeing an effect of past migration waves along with the aging of native-born Hispanic-Americans. The future will be different again but is difficult to predict.

Data and methods

The study uses microdata samples of the United States Census for 1970, 1980 and 1990, and pooled March Current Population Survey (CPS) data for 1997 through 2000. As the latter are only for private households, we use data for the household population for all years. Sufficient here, the number of cases after disaggregating elder Hispanics into subgroups is relatively small in both 1970 and 1997–2000 (even when pooled over four years). We use the CPS data here because the necessary 2000 Census microdata for Hispanic subgroups will not be available for processing until 2003, and CPS figures are a reasonable substitute for preliminary purposes.

Of the different Hispanic subgroups, only people of Mexican descent constitute a large enough sample of mainland-born people to be considered separately. Among Puerto Ricans in 2000 for example, the latest period available, the March Current Population Survey estimated that only 14 percent of the people 65+ were born on the Mainland of the United States compared with 39 percent of the Mexican-descent elders. As Puerto Rican elders comprise only a small proportion of Hispanic elders to begin with, it would be impossible to further subdivide this group into native and foreign-born (non-mainland-born that is) and still derive significant estimates. This is a loss, as immigrants of any ethnicity often have different living arrangements than native-born Americans (see e.g., Wilmoth et al. 1997).

Information on household size and relationship to household head enabled us to construct a comparable variable for living arrangements designed after that discussed by Shanas and colleagues (1968) and later modified by Palmore (1975). The categories are (1) alone, (2) with spouse only, (3) with a child (or child-in-law or grandchild), and (4) with others. The third category is hierarchical such that a person who lives with a child AND someone else (another relative or an unrelated person) is coded as 3 or living with a child. The fourth category combines what were originally two different categories— with other relatives, and only with unrelated people—principally because of a statistical need to enlarge what could otherwise be minute categories (see also De Vos & Holden 1988).

A major consideration when trying to compare a situation over time is whether the data are comparable. Fortunately, all four data sets use comparable measures of household, age, sex, marital status, household size, relationship to household head and “Hispanic origin”. For instance, a similar “household-dwelling” concept was always used; age was always in single completed years up to at least 90; “relationship to household head” always had such items as head (householder), spouse of head, child, parent, other relative, and unrelated; marital status was always what people said, categorized as never married, married, widowed, and divorced (from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/cps/cpsdef.html>); and ‘Hispanic Origin’, was always based on descent (see US Bureau of the Census 1992; Smith & Nogle 1997). Despite apparent comparability, questions always remain about context and question interpretation (e.g., Grieco & Cassidy 2001) but that is an issue that should not dramatically affect our findings.

For the most part, we only look at simple percentile distributions. The only exception is that such demographic characteristics as age, sex and marital status are known to affect living arrangements, perhaps the most obvious example being that an unmarried person cannot live as a couple. Hence we show actual (sometimes weighted) figures and also figures standardized by the age, sex and marital status distribution of the 1980 Hispanic population. The standardization is quite crude but still performs its purpose. It is the directly standardized figures that help us evaluate change over time in the propensity to live in one or another arrangement (see also Himes et al. 1996).

Results

The proportion of non-Hispanic White American elders living alone increased from 28 percent in 1970 to 36 percent in 1997–2000 (using standardized figures) (Table 1). Among non-Hispanic Black elders, this was still

noticeable at 21 to 26 percent. Among Hispanics, this was only from 19 to 22 percent. It is quite understandable that the gap between non-Hispanic White elders and Hispanic elders in 1997–2000 itself would be more noticeable as it was 36 vs. 22 percent or a gap of 14 percentage points.

However, the story is quite different when one looks at Hispanic sub-groups. Although an increase in living alone or in a couple-only household was quite modest among Hispanic elders in general between 1970 and 1997–2000, the figures really reflected the case among US-born Mexican Americans (see Table 2). Among foreign-born Mexican Americans and Other Hispanics there were actually small decreases. And among Cubans and Puerto Ricans there were actually substantial increases.

Standardizing actually had little impact by 1990; the major effect was on 1970 figures for Puerto Ricans, in which the figures for living alone and in a couple only household were almost reversed. More notably, there not only persisted a gap, but it actually grew, between native and foreign-born Mexican American elders. According to our figures the standardized gap in 1997–2000 in the percentages living alone or as a couple only was 7 percentage points each, for a combined gap of 14 percentage points. Many assessments would consider such a gap noteworthy even if the similar non-Hispanic White-Hispanic gap was 23 percentage points.

Discussion

This note is meant to fill a gap. As is so often the case, we originally began our inquiry hoping to gain insight into some rather complicated family relations of Hispanic elders, only to find that even the basics for that inquiry were not yet known. We found analyses among elders of different ethnic groups based on living arrangements at one point in time (1980, 1988 or 1990 mainly) or analyses of elderly ethnic-group demographic trends that did not include consideration of living arrangements. But we could not find even a simple description of what elderly Hispanic living arrangements might have been over the last 30 years or so. We found it impossible to assess the idea that “Hispanics from many ethnic backgrounds tend to be more family-oriented than other Americans” (del Pinal & Singer 1997: 29) even in the limited fashion of viewing living arrangement trends. Recent figures for Hispanics appear similar to those exhibited by White Americans near the turn of the century, and the reason for the decline in figures for White elders is being hotly debated. Could it be due to economic change? What about cultural preferences?

We indeed found that general figures for all “Hispanics”, showed only modest change since 1970, and that the gap between the household arrange-

Table 2. Percent distribution of elder living arrangements by Hispanic subgroup, 1970–1997/2000, actual and standardized by age, sex and marital status of the 1980 Hispanic population

	Actual				Standardized			
	Alone only	Couple	With child	Other	Alone only	Couple	With child	Other
1970								
All	20	26	37	16	19	28	37	15
Native Mexican	20	26	35	19	18	28	35	19
Foreign-born Mexican	19	23	42	16	17	25	42	16
Puerto Rican	25	19	40	17	18	27	39	16
Cuban	10	19	54	17	10	19	53	17
Other	23	33	30	14	23	34	29	14
1980								
All	21	29	38	11	22	28	41	9
Native Mexican	22	31	38	10	23	29	38	10
Foreign-born Mexican	20	25	44	11	20	25	44	11
Puerto Rican	26	25	40	9	22	30	40	9
Cuban	15	31	39	16	16	28	39	16
Other Hispanic	24	32	34	10	23	32	34	10
1990								
All	21	28	39	13	21	27	39	13
Native Mexican	21	31	38	10	23	29	38	10
Foreign-born Mexican	17	21	49	12	17	21	49	12
Puerto Rican	28	25	35	12	24	29	37	11
Cuban	21	31	30	17	22	29	30	18
Other Hispanic	21	27	39	13	20	28	39	13
1997–2000								
All	21	31	34	13	22	30	35	14
Native Mexican	20	36	35	9	23	31	36	10
Foreign-born Mexican	17	23	44	16	16	24	45	15
Puerto Rican	29	34	28	9	28	35	28	9
Cuban	24	37	21	18	26	35	21	18
Other Hispanic	22	25	36	17	20	28	36	17

The total may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Direct standardization by age (65–69, 70–79, 80+), sex and marital status (unmarried, married) of 1980 Hispanic population.

Source: 1970, 1980, and 1990 census PUMS sample microfiles; 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 March current population survey microfiles.

ments of non-Hispanic White elders and Hispanic elders at any given time was by far more noticeable. But the relatively small change among Hispanic elders in general masked some pronounced changes among certain subgroups, notably Cubans and Puerto Ricans. It is quite possible that a similar finding would emerge from a closer examination of US-born vs. foreign-born Whites or African-Americans or from a disaggregation of the Other ethnic group.

Since controlling for demographic factors in the standardization did not erase differences, it might seem reasonable to conclude that cultural preferences are at the root of those differences (e.g., Himes et al. 1996). However, there was change *within* subgroups over time, differentially for the different subgroups who were most likely parts of radically different waves of immigration. All this begs us to consider issues of immigration and acculturation (see Kritz et al. 2000). Ideas of “minority group status” in which a group suffers discrimination and subordination just for being who it is might help explain the situation as well (see Markides et al. 1990). It is important to note that cultural preferences themselves do not embody a straightforward concept and are themselves both causes and effects of change. As nicely articulated by Barbara Zsembik (1996: 70):

... preferences are shaped not only by social norms embedded in ethnic heritage, the effect of which attenuates with acculturation, but are also outcomes of residential alternatives, and economic and noneconomic resources. Opportunities and resources directly affect actual living arrangements and indirectly through a preference structure. Preference is both an outcome of the other determinants and a determinant of behavior.

More in-depth analysis must await the availability of relevant data from the 2000 Census, but that should not preclude us from presenting the figures contained herein. The figures tell an important story that needs to be told and would not be told much differently with other figures. One facet of that story is that proximate family ties among different Hispanic elderly peoples may be attenuating over time even if at one point in time Hispanic elders are more likely to live with other relatives than is the case among non-Hispanic Whites.

A diminution of strong family ties may be contrary to the idea that policy should be encouraging familial assistance of an informal nature that is complementary to that of formal services (see Litwak 1985; Shanas & Sussman 1977). Yet current policy often seems to penalize family support. For instance, regarding Social Security it is unfortunately all too common to read material such as (Garcia 1993: 24):

Secondly, government policies tend to discourage Hispanic familial support of their elderly; by reducing SSI assistance by one-third for those who live in others' households, the government is thereby discouraging familial social and economic support

Regarding medical assistance, Mutchler and Angel (2000: 184) recently observed that Medicaid legislation could be

. . . penalizing poor elderly Mexican Americans and others with large and involved families, such as those who have nearby adult offspring who would like to participate in the care of their frail parents

That is, one problem with current health policy is the fact that Latino elders tend to be less likely than non-Hispanic White elders to seek institutionalized care when they really need it, relying instead on what the family and community can offer (e.g., Angel et al. 1992; Baxter et al. 2001). Yet current public policy is not geared toward supporting this type of assistance. It could do much better in encouraging (Mutchler & Angel 2000):

. . . the family as an adjunct in the care of the elderly . . . by the selective use of targeted formal assistance, such as adult day care financed through mechanisms like Medicaid home and community-based service waivers.

Sometimes good public policy involves modifying or even abolishing policies that may result in negative (often unintended) side effects rather than creating new policy.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to the University of Wisconsin's Center for the Demography of Health and Aging funded by P-30 AG17266 of the National Institute of Aging.

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