Rural Metro Hispanics; a Neglected Population

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have followed the growth of the U.S. Hispanic population since the early 1970s, but recent studies of both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas in the past decade have documented exceptional rates of population dispersion and growth and new patterns of residential settlement affecting virtually all regions of the country (McHugh 1989; Durand et al 2000). In metropolitan counties, Hispanics are settling increasingly in suburbs and in new cities outside of the traditional hierarchy of urban destinations (Frey 2001; Alba et al 1999; Suro and Singer 2002).

In nonmetropolitan counties, which comprise roughly 80 percent of the country's land mass and 17 percent of its total population, similar, if not more profound social transformations are occurring (Allensworth and Rochín 1998; Fennelly and Leitner 2002; Kandel and Cromartie, forthcoming; Salamon 2003). Hispanic population growth has occurred in many rural regions unaccustomed to large numbers of foreign born in recent times, a trend some consider a harbinger of social and cultural change within "rural and small town America" (Gouveia and Stull 1995; Gray 1995; Griffith 1995; Guthey 2001; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000). Although the number of Hispanics trails that of Blacks in nonmetropolitan counties, their population growth rate - almost ten times higher than Blacks – ensures they will shortly assume the mantle of the largest minority group in nonmetro counties as they have done recently in the nation as a whole.

Despite recent scholarly attention on new destinations of Latinos and immigrants in urban and rural areas, few studies have analyzed populations that intersect the two predominant geographic classification systems used by researchers, namely, the OMB-defined metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties, and the Census-defined urban and rural areas. Most rural demographic analyses follow a widely accepted convention of using nonmetropolitan counties as a proxy for "rural and small town" America rather than employing the more geographically precise rural area definition. Our analysis examines the demographic juncture of these two geographic demarcations.

County-level data has its advantages, hence its widespread application. Using nonmetro counties is an accepted convention and effective strategy for analyzing rural and small town trends at the national and state levels that benefits from the annual generation of federal agency statistics for certain demographic and economic characteristics. In contrast, data on the characteristics of rural and urban areas are available only from decennial censuses. Moreover, county boundaries remain far more stable that those of smaller rural areas, facilitating longitudinal analyses.

However, this analytic convention excludes large numbers of rural residents who live in metropolitan counties. Data in Table 1 indicate over 26 million persons – a group equivalent to half all nonmetro county residents – live in Census-defined rural areas situated within OMB-defined metropolitan counties. Many of these residents are appropriately excluded from rural demographic analyses, because they live in relatively sparsely populated "exurbs" or because other characteristics besides geographic density would place them among their urban area counterparts. Large county size, especially in the Southwest where Hispanic population growth

has skyrocketed, means that some truly "rural" populations remain hidden from research and policy debates. In addition, analysis of this demographic subgroup may inform the emerging body of scholarship on new immigrant destinations, particularly as it relates to ever-evolving land use patterns found on the urban-rural fringe.

Table 1: Characteristics of metropolitan counties and their rural populations, 2000

Region/State	Average Square miles of Metro counties	Total rural metro population	Total rural metro Hispanics	Hispanic share of rural metro Population
Southwest	**1,831**	**4,051,032**	**797,213**	**20%**
Texas	846	1,947,115	354,906	18%
California	2,658	1,427,888	305,357	21%
Arizona	8,283	284,023	64,738	23%
New Mexico	1,890	127,824	50,782	40%
Colorado	1,468	264,182	21,430	8%
Outside Southwest	**629**	**22,147,505**	**440,032**	**2%**
Florida	935	1,105,445	81,428	7%
North Carolina	457	1,494,474	42,169	3%
Washington	1,550	583,172	39,037	7%
Michigan	728	1,296,864	33,089	3%
New York	647	1,441,154	26,803	2%
All Other States	597	16,226,396	217,506	1%
All 50 States	**791**	**26,198,537**	**1,237,245**	**5%**

Source: Census 2000, SF3 file.

In this analysis, we analyze the 1.2 million rural metropolitan Hispanics, a population group equal in size to between 20 and 30 percent of the entire nonmetro Hispanic population, depending on the definition. The existence of this relatively large rural Hispanic population occurs because large swaths of rural Southwest territory, a traditional destination of Hispanic migrants, are located in metro counties. Many of these counties are typified by the location of a city of 50,000 or more – the defining threshold of metro counties – within a very large county, often containing thousands of square miles of desert and/or farm land. Two prime examples include California's San Bernardino County, which contains not only part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area but also hundreds of square miles of agricultural production, and Arizona's Coconino County which contains both the city of Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon. If rural metro Hispanics were included in studies of the nonmetro population, they could change the perspective we currently possess of Hispanics in rural and small town America.

Many of these rural metro settings, particularly in the Southwest and Florida, are highly agricultural, and Hispanics provide crucial labor input to large, industrialized operations found throughout these counties. For instance, in California metro counties with 1,000 or more rural Hispanics, the proportion of the total rural population employed in the agricultural sector (10 percent) is double that of rural residents of other metropolitan counties (5 percent) and five times

the proportion for the total U.S. population (2 percent). The percentage of rural metro Hispanics working in agriculture in California is undoubtedly higher than 10 percent, but industry data broken down by race and ethnicity are not available.

Census data shown in Table 1 also illustrate that, while rural metro Hispanics are dispersed throughout the country, just over half lived in Texas or California in 2000. The overwhelming majority lived in about 200 metropolitan counties in which they numbered at least 1,000. Almost 100 of these counties are in the five southwestern States, including most of those with very large rural Hispanic populations[1]. In addition, metro counties in the Southwest average over 1,800 square miles, compared with the national average for metro counties of 791 square miles.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we address two research questions.

1. How does inclusion of rural metro Hispanics within the nonmetro Hispanic population alter social and economic profile of Hispanics living in "rural and small town" America?

2. How has the rural metro population changed over the past decade in terms of spatial concentration, social and economic well being, industrial sector employment, and integration into metro counties?

To address the first research question, we will analyze 2000 census data using the 2000 Census definition of rural. To address the second question involving the measurement of change over time, we will overcome the disjuncture between the 1990 and 2000 definitions of rural by recreating the 2000 rural definition for 1990. When geographies do not correspond, we will apply GIS techniques using the smallest unit of geographic analysis, block group data.

To provide historical context for this analysis, we will briefly review changes in settlement patterns of Hispanics and immigrants in rural areas at the state and county levels since the 1970s, emphasizing the acceleration of Hispanic settlement during the past decade. Moreover, the accuracy of our analysis will be facilitated by recent changes in the long-standing Census definitions of urban and rural areas that now correspond to actual population agglomerations rather than politically imposed place boundaries. The result is a far more precise measure of what constitutes urban and rural.

ANTICIPATED FINDINGS

This study fits within a broader research agenda on the meaning of "rural" in contemporary U.S. society, one that benefits from cross-disciplinary perspectives and multiple methodologies. A large proportion of rural metro Hispanics is more "rural" than "metro" and therefore essentially hidden from most policy studies that rely on metro/nonmetro analyses. We expect that rural metro Hispanics have become more diverse in their occupational distribution, commuting patterns, and housing tenure. Our study will consider movement by rural metro Latinos out of the agricultural sector and into services, particularly service sector employment catering to suburban residents. Rural metro Hispanics are likely to face many of the same challenges of Hispanics

[1] We do not include the map supporting this statistic in our abstract because of the size of the document.

living in new nonmetro destinations – relatively high poverty and social isolation, for example – yet differ noticeably in their levels of U.S. experience and occupational distribution (Kandel and Cromartie, forthcoming). Given these differences, especially their importance to agricultural labor markets, rural metro Hispanics merit separate, in-depth demographic research.

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