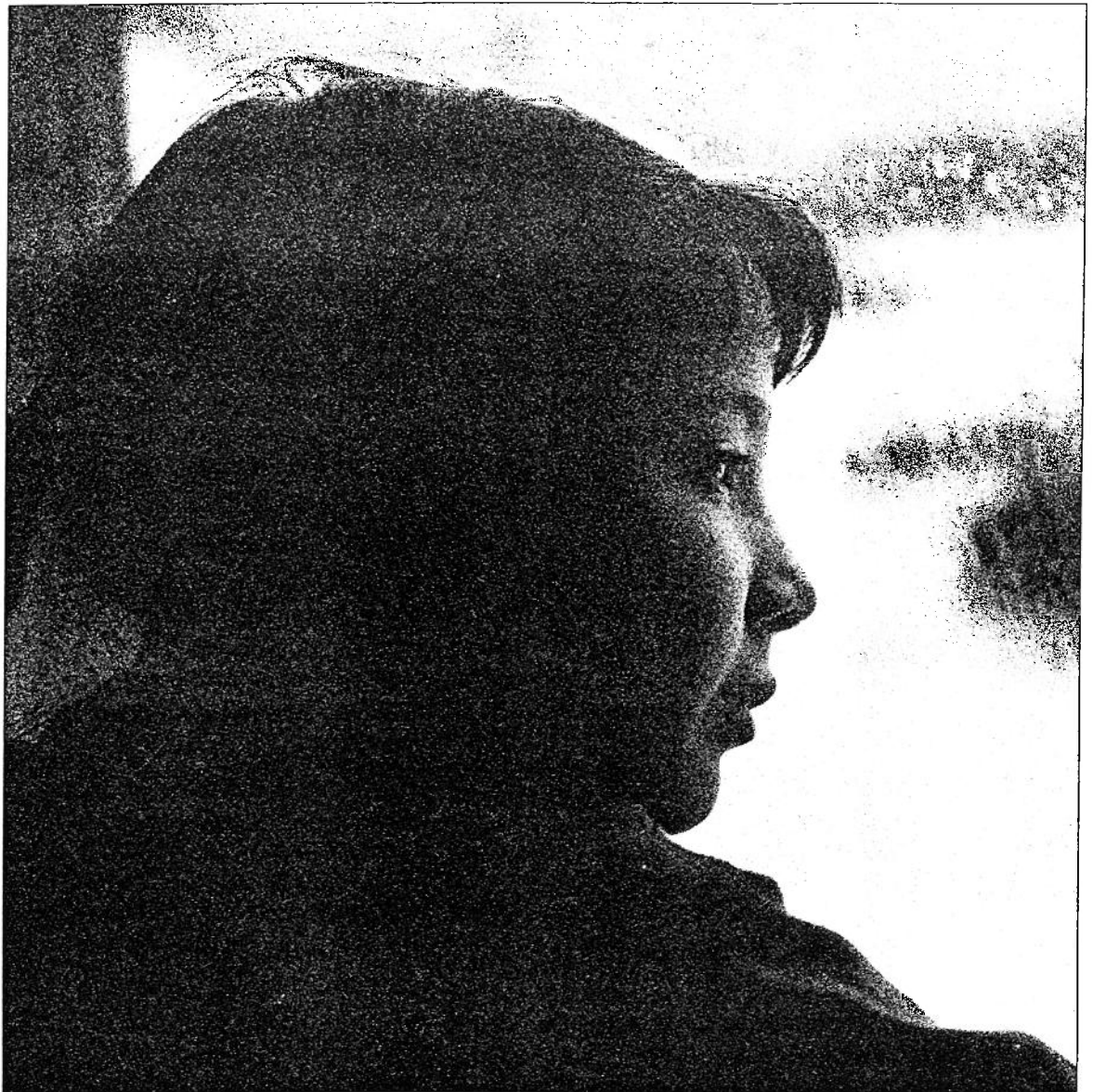


Protecting Children

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Children and Poverty: Improving Family Support Services

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AND MUCH MORE!

Hispanic Child Poverty: Signs of Distress, Signs of Hope

By Sonia M. Perez

The recent **Girl Scouts Survey on The Beliefs and Moral Values of America's Children** reveals that Hispanic and Black children express a greater tendency than white children to commit themselves to helping others and serving their country. The study found that 23 percent of Hispanic children, compared to 19 percent of whites and 14 percent of blacks, would volunteer their services for the country because "it was the right thing to do." Additionally, one-quarter of Hispanic children, compared to less than one-fifth of both white and black children, said they rely on their parents' "teachings" when seeking guidance.

Yet while the Hispanic children questioned in the survey above revealed both their family values and their willingness to contribute to this country's growth, the reality is that, if current trends continue, Hispanic children will be limited in their ability to become productive adults who will contribute to our nation's development.

Hispanic children represent an increasingly important part of the United States — and of its future economic and social growth and stability. Hispanic children, like all children, need both an enriching environment and basic supports if they are to flourish. Yet, socioeconomic indicators continue to show that children are our nation's poorest citizens. And, in many instances, children of color fare even worse than white children in socioeconomic status, education, and health.

Overview

Recent U.S. Census Bureau figures released in March 1991 indicate that, in the past decade, the Hispanic population grew by 53 percent to 22.4 million people — or 9 percent of the U.S. population. Almost two-thirds of the Hispanic population

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and diverse; indeed, larger socioeconomic differences are often noted among Hispanic subgroups than between Hispanics and whites. The five major Hispanic subgroups are Mexican Americans (62 percent of the total Hispanic population), Puerto Ricans (11.6 percent), Central and South Americans (12.7 percent), and Cubans (5.3 percent).

Two facts underscore the needs of Hispanic families and, in particular, of Hispanic children. First, Hispanics are a young population — their median age of 25 is seven years younger than that of non-Hispanics. Second, Hispanic children are three times as likely to be poor as non-Hispanic children. The

youthfulness of the Hispanic population and its current socioeconomic status portend dire consequences for an entire generation of young people — as well as for the nation in which they will play an increasingly important role. Between 1984 and the year 2000, Hispanics will comprise more than one-fifth of all new entrants into the labor force, a proportion that is projected to increase in the 21st century. Ensuring that these youths acquire literacy and numeracy skills will, therefore, be of importance not only to the Hispanic community, but also to government, businesses and future retirees since Hispanics represent a growing proportion of taxpayers supporting Social Security, Medicare, and other transfer payment systems needed to support an aging society.

Recent Trends

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Hispanic families provide an important context for understanding the needs of Hispanic children. As the National Council of La Raza's 1990 report, **The Decade of the Hispanic**, illustrated, the socioeconomic status of Hispanic families has grown progressively worse in the past ten years.

Hispanics are the only racial/ethnic group to have experienced no improvement in their socioeconomic status during this period. By 1988, Hispanic married-couple families were 23 percent more likely to be poor than they had been in 1979 and, although Hispanics have higher labor force participation rates than non-Hispanics, the median income of Hispanic married-couple families in 1989 was only two-thirds that of non-Hispanic families. Another dramatic trend for Hispanic families in the 1980's was the unequal benefits they received from education compared to white householders with similar education levels.

The incidence of poverty among Hispanic families with heads of households who had completed four years of high school increased 28 percent between 1978 and 1988; in 1988, Hispanics with four years of high school were about 2.3 times as likely than whites to be poor. Recent Census data illustrate a third trend of significance to Hispanic families and children: in the past decade, Hispanics had the fastest rate of increase in single-parent families compared to whites and blacks. Currently, almost one-third of Hispanic families are maintained by a woman — a factor that greatly increases a child's chances of growing up poor.

The escalation of Hispanic family poverty during the past ten years has had a significant impact on Hispanic children. The poverty rate of Hispanic children grew faster than that of white or black children or than that of Hispanic adults. By the end of the decade, almost half of all poor Hispanics were children under 18 years of age.

A Statistical Snapshot

As in other American families, poverty's most salient feature in Hispanic families is the particularly harsh way in which it strikes children. Because of their likelihood of living in a working poor or single-parent family, more than one out of every three Hispanic children in this country are poor — with an even higher proportion among single-parent families — compared to one in eight non-Hispanic white children. While Hispanic children comprised 11 percent of all children in the country, they accounted for 21 percent of all children living in poverty last year.

- **In 1989, Hispanic children under six were twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic children of that age.** According to researchers at Columbia University in New York, the poverty rates for children under six remained relatively stable during the 1970's, rose dramatically during the early 1980's, and fell slightly by the end of the decade. Yet, almost half of all Hispanic children under six and almost three-quarters of Hispanic children under six in female-maintained families were poor in 1989.
- **Hispanic children are especially likely to live in a working poor or single parent family.** According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 1988 nearly two-thirds of poor Hispanic families with children had at least one employed individual, yet were unable to escape poverty. In addition, as a result of the increase in female-headed households over the past decade, many Hispanic children now live with one parent, usually their mother. The poverty rate of these families is severe: half of these families lived in poverty in 1989.
- **Hispanic children in two-parent families are almost three times as likely to be poor than their white peers.** In 1989, more than one-quarter of Hispanic children living with both parents, or in a household that was headed by a male, were poor, in contrast with less than ten white children in the same household structure.
- **Almost two-thirds of Hispanic children in female-headed households were poor in 1989.** In 1989, 36.2 percent of non-Hispanic white children living in a family headed by a woman were poor. By contrast, 64.3 percent of comparable Hispanic children were poor — more than one-and-one-half times the rate for whites. Even more dramatically, almost three-quarters of Puerto Rican children living in a family maintained by a woman were poor.
- **Hispanic children in the Northeast are more likely to be poor than Hispanic children in others parts of the country.** Child poverty statistics by geographic area indicate that, in 1988, approximately one-third of all Hispanic children in the Midwest, South and West were poor. By contrast, 45.5 percent of all Hispanic children in the Northeast lived below the poverty level. Given the demographic data on Hispanic subgroup concentration, we can infer that the severe incidence of poverty among Puerto Rican children and families helps to explain the high rate of Hispanic child poverty in the Northeast.

The Implications of Hispanic Child Poverty

Poor Hispanic children are especially vulnerable to increased social and economic problems because of their likelihood of growing up without adequate supports. Data show that the early childhood experiences are crucially linked to adult socioeconomic stability: child poverty has been associated with unsuccessful school experiences, health problems, early child bearing, and adult poverty. In addition, the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse links several factors, including poverty and lack of medical care, to the increased rate in child abuse and neglect cases over the past decade.

Education Hispanic children who experience poverty at an early age are especially likely to experience educational difficulties and have negative school experiences. Studies suggest that factors such as living in a poor household or single-parent family, low parental education and income, and limited-English proficiency put many Hispanic students at high risk of dropping out of school. According to the Children's Defense Fund, among Hispanic youth who left school in 1988, there were six dropouts for every ten high school graduates. Moreover, half of Hispanic high school dropouts, ages 16-24 years old, have not completed the ninth grade.

Health Among the most pronounced and evident consequences of Hispanic child poverty are health risks. A recent report noted that Hispanic families are more likely to lack health insurance than any other racial/ethnic group in the United States; one-third of Hispanic youth, ages 10-18 years old, had no health insurance in 1987. Among Hispanic subgroups, Mexican Americans have the least access

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to health care. As a result of lack of access to quality health care, Hispanic children face greater health risks than their more advantaged peers. For example, fewer Hispanics are immunized against measles, and rates of lead poisoning are higher among Hispanics. In addition, recent data show that Hispanics account for more than one-fifth of all AIDS cases among children.

Early Childbearing Hispanics comprise 9 percent of the adolescent female population, but account for 14 percent of all teen births. Such early childbearing is both a contributing factor toward, and consequence of, dropping out of school, as well as of higher family poverty rates. Regardless of race/ethnicity, data suggest that young girls who grow up poor and with below-average academic skills are at a significantly greater risk of becoming teenage mothers than girls whose family income exceeds the poverty level and who have above-average skills. Moreover, poorly educated, low-income mothers who have received little or no prenatal care are especially likely to have low birthweight babies. Among Hispanic subgroups,

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Hispanic Child Poverty — continued

mainland Puerto Ricans have the highest prevalence of both low-birthweight babies and infant mortality.

Adult Poverty Although there exist limited longitudinal data on Hispanic family poverty, employment and earnings data indicate that young Hispanic adults are concentrated in low-wage employment with few benefits or opportunities for advancement. Moreover, both dropping out of school and early childbearing increase the probability of adult poverty.

Child Neglect Limited national data exist, particularly by race and ethnicity, on child abuse and neglect. Neglect cases, which involve parents not adequately caring for their children's physical, emotional, or educational needs, are a larger proportion of child abuse cases than actual maltreatment of children. According to the Children's Defense Fund, a disproportionate number of "neglected" children come from poor families who do not have the economic security to meet their children's needs and whose myriad of problems result in increased contact with service agencies. Indeed, one of the key findings of the second National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect was that family income emerges as an important factor in children's risk of experiencing maltreatment.

The issues outlined above highlight only some of the implications of Hispanic child poverty. The ramifications, however, extend beyond Hispanic families; as a rapidly increasing, young population, Hispanic children represent a growing proportion of our future adult labor force. Children who grow up without economic stability and adequate social supports will become adults with few resources to offer our highly skilled and service-oriented society. The consequences for the nation are serious: an unskilled, underemployed labor force will impede economic growth, as well as increase demand for public assistance and diminish the tax base necessary for the support of essential government services.

Signs of Hope

Hispanic child poverty cannot be denied or ignored; Hispanic poor children — and all children — deserve our attention and concern. There are signs of hope. The rate of growth of the Hispanic population, as well as their relative youth, points to an enormous pool of potential and talent — an extraordinary resource of people, skills and values to strengthen our nation.

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that Hispanic children have a solid moral foundation from which to fulfill their potential.

These values, such as a strong connection to family and willingness to help others, as evidenced by the survey cited in the opening paragraph of this article, suggest

Additionally, there are data from the Hispanic adult population to encourage our hope in Hispanic children. For example, education and employment statistics show that among young adult high school dropouts, Hispanic youth are more likely to be employed than either white or black youth.

Similar data show that, while most Hispanic women still have lower labor force participation rates than other women, this rate has increased faster than for any other group of women in the past decade — increasing economic benefits to both two-parent and single-parent families. Moreover, in the 1980's, there was improvement in the earnings of Hispanic women who are year-round, full-time workers. Finally, preliminary research on young Hispanic single mothers suggests that they have high aspirations for their own economic self-sufficiency and for the future of their children.

While the socioeconomic status of Hispanic children is important to understanding their needs, it does not determine or suggest their potential. Because of the impact of Hispanic children on our current reality and our near future, it is important that policy makers, human service practitioners, and public and private employers fully understand the implications of their socioeconomic status, as well as the opportunities they offer. The goal is not only to design programs to assist children whose social and economic circumstances impede their development, but also to provide them with experiences and supports that will promote their successful transition to adulthood.

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