



Toward a More Perfect Union: Understanding Systemic Racism and Resulting Inequity in Latino Communities

Acknowledgments

This paper was co-authored by Viviana López Green, Senior Director, Racial Equity Initiative, and Samantha Vargas Poppe, consultant to UnidosUS. This paper reflects the ideas, input, and advice of numerous contributors, and the authors thank the following colleagues for providing detailed insight, feedback, corrections, and support throughout the writing process:

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Acknowledgments continued:

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The authors also wish to express special appreciation to Emily Mace, UnidosUS Consultant, for her expert editorial assistance and review, Stephanie Presch, Content Specialist, for her help in editing this publication, and Kelly Isaac, Design and Brand Manager, for formatting and designing the paper.

The authors acknowledge the guidance of Charles Kamasaki, Senior Cabinet Advisor, who assisted in every aspect of the paper's preparation and provided direction for its completion.

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The views and opinions reflected in this paper are those of the authors and UnidosUS and do not necessarily reflect the positions of any UnidosUS funders or any of the individuals who provided assistance.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests across the country have fueled an unprecedented national conversation on racial justice. Still, this national discourse often ignores how historical and institutional dynamics produce cumulative and persistent disparities for Latino* communities in this country.

This exclusion reflects a long history and set of experiences regarding Latinos in the United States that is often hidden and difficult to quantify. The idea of a “Hispanic” category did not officially exist until 1970, and then only in obscure government reports; it wasn’t until 1980 that Hispanics were fully counted in the census. Thus, to many Americans, the inequitable experiences of Latinos remained mostly invisible in government data sets and accountability efforts. Even today, it’s challenging to fully and accurately capture the rich diversity of Latino communities, with individuals from 22 countries who bring different racial identities and cultures to their communities.¹ But history and research show that one thing is clear: past policymakers’ actions—sometimes intentional and other times not—that exclude, suppress, and “otherize” people of color have shaped the Latino experience in this country. Even though the United States has abolished the most egregious, formal examples of structural racism, their legacy, as well as more subtle forms of exclusion, persist.

The effects of this history on Latinos are widespread; many Hispanics struggle with inequity across all aspects of daily life despite hard work. However, a root cause of this inequality—structural racism—and how it applies to Hispanics is not widely known, even by many Latinos. This paper offers a “primer,” the first of a series, detailing historical examples of systemic racism against Hispanics across selected areas and how this phenomenon persists and affects the well-being of Latinos today.[†] Examining this history can help policymakers, the public, racial justice advocates, and Latinos themselves better understand the structural factors influencing communities of color and why it is essential to fully include Latinos in a shared movement toward racial equity for all Americans.

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent. According to the technical definitions used by the census, Latinos may be of any race. This document uses the sociological construct of “race” whereby, at least historically, most Latinos were treated as a distinct racial group, regardless of ethnicity. UnidosUS also occasionally refers to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

† The examples presented in this report present only a fraction of the history, the many instances of structural racism, and the resulting disparities affecting the Latino community and is not an exhaustive account.

Key Definitions

Systemic racism² in the United States is defined as “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal—that routinely advantage Whites* while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by the preferential treatment, privilege, and power of White people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab/Muslim, and other racially oppressed people.”

Structural racism, according to some proponents, is diffused throughout and infused in all aspects of society, including our history, culture, politics, economics, and our entire social fabric; it is the most profound and pervasive form of racism—all other forms of racism (e.g., institutional, interpersonal, internalized, etc.) emerge from structural racism.

Structural racialization³ “connotes a process rather than a static event. It underscores that structures—macro-level systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another—are not neutral and can generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups. Structural racialization occurs when structures unevenly distribute opportunities or depress life chances along the axis of race.”

Manifestations of structural racialization⁴ are inequities in power, economic and social opportunities, treatment, and policy outcomes, whether they intentional or not.

Racial equity⁵ is achieved when a person is no more or less likely to experience society’s benefits or burdens based on their race or national origin, the proverbial “level playing field.” By contrast, the status quo is where people of color are more likely to live in poverty, be imprisoned, receive a low-quality education, be unemployed, and experience poor health outcomes due to their racial or ethnic origins.

Note: Although sociologists make distinctions between the various terms “structural racism,” “systemic racism,” “institutional racism,” and “structural racialization,” this primer may use them somewhat interchangeably. The characterization of a system or institution as racist does **not** necessarily mean that all or even any of the individuals engaged in that system or structure act with racial animus. In fact, the opposite is true: even when such individuals themselves act without regard to race, the systems, institutions, and structures in which they operate inevitably produce inequitable results.

Background

Latinos and the U.S. government have a complicated history that extends to the earliest days of the country. For example, the Monroe Doctrine, which declared the Western Hemisphere off-limits to European powers, was used to justify a modified form of American colonialism in Latin America.⁶ A similar sentiment, which assumed that indigenous people were inherently

inferior to Whites, also served as the rationale for “Manifest Destiny” in North America.⁷ Under the rubric of these twin doctrines, the United States has invaded, annexed, and interfered in government affairs across Latin America for most of the nation’s history. From the takeover of the Southwest from Mexico through the treatment of Puerto Ricans by the Trump administration, the U.S. government’s actions have exploited resources and

* In this document, the term “White” generally refers to those the Census Bureau labels “White, non-Hispanic.”

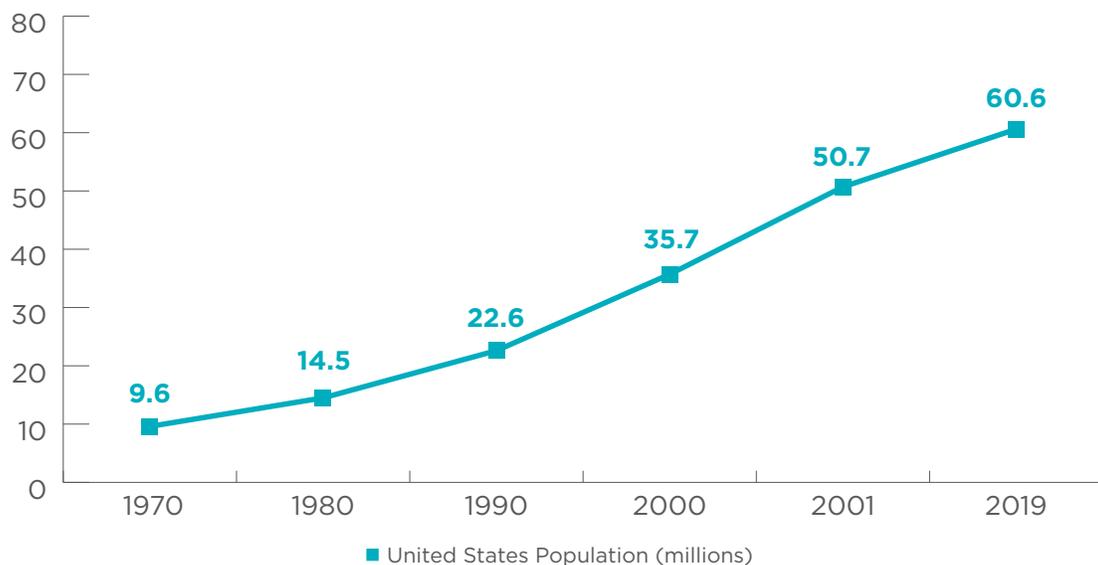
people in the Western Hemisphere.⁸ Many of these actions resulted in the people of these areas becoming subject to the jurisdiction of the United States; others later spurred migration waves to the United States. In both cases, Latinos—immigrants and citizens alike—faced structural racism that precluded them from being afforded opportunities equal to those available to their White counterparts.

Historical trends precisely documenting the status and well-being of Latinos over time are not easily captured or quantified. There was no government designation for descendants of Spanish-speaking countries until recently, and thus data on their status weren't widely available. (See Appendix A). In the 1970s, the U.S. government assigned

a label to designate Hispanic ethnicity;* individuals began to identify with the official terms; the population of Latinos steadily climbed; and the data started to show the diversity of the population:

- **There are about 60.6 million Hispanics in the United States, making up 18% of the total national population.⁹** However, in 1980, the term first appeared in the U.S. Census, and only 6.4% of the U.S. population identified as Latino. (See Figure 1). While demographic factors, including additional births and immigration, fueled this rise, Hispanic self-identity likely played a significant role in the increase of people self-reporting as “Hispanic,” especially after 1980 when the term was included in the long form of the census.

Figure 1: U.S. Hispanic Population Reached Nearly 61 Million in 2019



Note: Population estimates for 1990-2019 are as of July 1 for each year.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970-1980 estimates based on decennial censuses (see 2008 report “U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050”), U.S. intercensal population estimates for 1990-1999 and 2000-2009, and U.S. Census Bureau Vintage 2019 estimates for 2010-2019.

* The concepts of race and ethnicity are complex social constructs. The U.S. Census Bureau notes that “the racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically.” The Census designates five categories of race (White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander) and notes that “people who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race.” See <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html/>.

Latinos in the United States are a diverse group, and they have no majority preference for an identity label. (See Appendix 1). This may be due to the fact that they come from 22 Spanish-speaking countries and can be of any racial group including White, Black, Asian, Indigenous, Arab, or a combination. (See Appendix 2 for countries of origin, and Appendix 3 for more information on Afro-Latinos).

- **The vast majority of Latinos in the United States are American citizens.** About 79% of Latinos living in the country are U.S. citizens.¹⁰ This includes people born in the United States and its territories (including Puerto Rico), people born abroad to American parents, and immigrants who have naturalized. About 33% of Latinos in the United States are foreign born, the vast majority of whom are lawfully present.
- **The nation benefits from Latino contributions.** As a group, Hispanics earned more than \$1 trillion and paid more than \$250 billion in taxes in 2017 alone.¹¹ Additionally, they fill critical workforce gaps in labor-short industries, including agriculture, construction, and health care. Latinos, particularly immigrants, also continue to start and own businesses at higher rates than the rest of the population.¹² In the face of COVID-19, Latinos make up a significant share of the “essential” workforce, helping to fulfill needed work to keep our nation fed and essential businesses running.¹³
- **Despite their contributions, Latinos do not see equitable returns on their work.** Latino contributions boost the national economy, yet even in times of economic prosperity, Hispanics face disparities across the board.
- **Employment:** Latinos have one of the highest labor force participation rates (65.3%) of any racial or ethnic group but have one of the highest unemployment rates (9.3% v. 6.7% nationally).¹⁴
- **Income and Poverty:** In 2019, Latino household income was at an all-time high. Still, Latino households only earned \$0.74 to every \$1 earned by White households.¹⁵ Wage growth in 2019 led to declines in poverty rates, but 15.7% of Latinos still live in poverty compared to 7.3% of their White, non-Hispanic counterparts.¹⁶ Gaps in income persist for Latinos even after adjusting for education and experience, suggesting that “unexplained” factors, like ongoing discrimination or the legacy of bias, contribute to persistent differences.¹⁷
- **Education:** Despite record enrollment numbers in postsecondary institutions, Latino adults over the age of 25 are only half as likely as White adults to have a bachelor’s degree or higher (19% compared to 36% respectively).¹⁸
- **Homeownership:** The homeownership rate among Hispanics increased for the fifth consecutive year in 2019. Still, only 47.1% of Latinos own homes, compared to 73.3% of Whites, continuing a long-standing homeownership gap.¹⁹
- **Wealth:** Latino families saw increased levels of wealth in 2019, but even in the economic boom of 2019, Latino families only held about 16% of the wealth held by White families.²⁰ The wealth gap persists even for Latinos with higher education and those in professional positions, suggesting that other elements, like systemic and structural factors, influence the wealth gap.²¹
- **Health Coverage:** The Affordable Care Act (ACA) has reduced the number of uninsured Latinos, but millions remain uninsured. Nearly one out of every five (19%) Latinos remains uninsured under the ACA, representing the highest uninsured rate of any major racial or ethnic group.²²

Findings/Key Information

Although it's not the only cause of socioeconomic disparity, systemic racism is a key factor explaining the unequal social, political, and economic opportunities for the nation's 60 million Latinos. The dynamics of entrenched structures and practices throughout the nation's history have resulted in inequitable outcomes and harm to the well-being of children, families, and entire communities. Examples of structural racism embedded in policy and practice are wide-ranging, but clearly evident in the systems governing criminal justice, education, employment, health, housing, immigration, and voting, where disparities in Latino socioeconomic outcomes are significantly lower than those of their White counterparts. Together, these disparities continue to reinforce the separate and unequal status of Latinos in the United States by fueling a cycle of inequity where power—in terms of wealth or representation in government—remains out of reach for many Hispanics. The following sections present selected examples of systemic racism, citing history, relevant legal cases, examples of how these systems operate today, and the resulting inequity for Latinos. Examining the historical and ongoing ways in which structural racism produces disparate outcomes for Latinos and Whites can help guide policymakers, racial justice advocates, Hispanics themselves, and other stakeholders in their pursuit of effective strategies to achieve racial justice.

Criminal Justice

The U.S. criminal justice system is complex. It is made up of the agencies and processes by which federal, state, and local governments enact laws to promote public safety and welfare, investigate crime, bring charges against individuals, make arrests, adjudicate or try individuals, and impose sentences on convicted individuals.²³ Structural racism is embedded throughout the system, beginning with notable differences in the racial profiling of suspects, disproportionate

arrests, court experiences, detention, and sentencing that culminate in dramatically different incarceration rates by race. The life cycle of the justice system is also vast and omnipresent for communities of color, spanning the youth justice school-to-prison pipeline, targeted over-policing and violence fueled by racial profiling, the emergence of the carceral state, and continued criminalization coupled with racialized theories of recidivism well after release and re-entry. Furthermore, a severe lack of research and inadequate data collection on Latinos in the criminal justice systems fail to provide the necessary infrastructure to account for—and be accountable to—unequal treatment of the nation's largest non-White demographic. This unequal treatment is particularly striking, especially given that research shows that involvement with the criminal justice system deepens inequity along racial and ethnic lines.²⁴

Institutionalized police violence has affected Latino communities for decades. Between January 2013 and December 2020, and peaking in 2017, at least 1,500 Latinos nationwide were killed by police, although these numbers are likely highly undercounted.²⁵ History shows that Latinos have been subject to police brutality and state-sanctioned killings since Hispanics were first subject to U.S. jurisdiction. Just over 100 years ago, Texas Rangers, local law enforcement, and civilian vigilantes killed thousands of U.S. residents and drove many more out of the United States into Mexico, typically with no semblance of due process.²⁶ One of the most egregious examples was the “Porvenir Massacre.” On January 28, 1918, a group of White cattlemen, Texas Rangers, and United States Army cavalry soldiers entered the predominantly Mexican American village of Porvenir under cover of night. They seized 15 Mexican-origin men and boys and fatally shot them at close range.²⁷ The perpetrators burned the town to the ground, claiming without proof that the villagers had been thieves. Later investigations by the Army and the

State Department found that Porvenir's residents were unarmed when the Rangers and vigilantes killed them.²⁸ Similarly, beginning soon after Puerto Rico became subject to American jurisdiction after the Spanish-American War, the provisional U.S. government on the island was responsible for numerous examples of unwarranted violence against Puerto Ricans, such as the infamous Ponce Massacre.²⁹

This wanton violence against innocent Latinos by U.S. law enforcement, often with impunity, forms the backdrop against which the criminal justice system interacts with the Hispanic community. This pattern of violence continues today, with Latinos 1.7 times (170%) more likely to be killed by a police officer than their White counterparts.³⁰ These estimates are likely an undercount due to the lack of ethnicity data collected by most criminal justice databases and altogether ignored by federal bodies—a form of racism known as the Black/White Binary.³¹ It is this systematic erasure of Latinos that underscores the deep entrenchment of structural racism in law enforcement policies and practices today. The issue of aggregated ethnic data collection extends well beyond instances of police brutality: a 2016 survey by the Urban Institute found that Alaska is the only state that regularly includes data on Latinos in reports on arrest, prison, probation, and parole populations.³²

Several purportedly “color blind” policies have also embedded systemic racism into the U.S. criminal justice system. President Johnson's 1965 Commission launched what was coined the “War on Crime” and established “a direct role for the federal government in local police operations, court systems, and state prisons.”³³ Central to the endeavor was the rapid scaling and militarization of law enforcement, culminating in the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act that brought social and public safety policy within the purview of the Department of Justice by way of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.³⁴

Mandatory minimum sentencing and the “War on Drugs” followed in quick succession under President Nixon in 1971, which sanctioned disparate enforcement targeting urban areas, low-income communities, and communities of color, resulting in disproportionate incarceration rates of Blacks and Latinos.³⁵ By 1993, this rhetoric of “law and order” fueled widespread implementation of three-strikes laws, bringing mass incarceration to new heights and incentivizing—even justifying—excessive rates of police presence within low-income communities of color in order to obtain federal grants.³⁶ Research has demonstrated that the law's consequences fell disproportionately on minorities but appear to have had no effect on lowering crime.³⁷ Combined with over-policing and racial profiling, which leads to disproportionately high arrests of Black and Latino individuals, these systemic factors, as well as individual biases among police and other criminal justice actors, inevitably lead to more disparate rates of convictions and incarceration.³⁸

Finally, Latino immigrants have the stigma of “criminality” ascribed to them by an ever-evolving assortment of laws and immigration-enforcement mechanisms.³⁹ It should be noted that immigrants, on average, commit fewer crimes and are actually more frequently the victims of crimes than non-immigrants.⁴⁰ However, classes of “aggravated felonies,” many of which are misdemeanors when applied to U.S. citizens, have been created. According to expert researchers, “deportation has become a punishment for even minor offenses, and policies attempting to end unauthorized immigration have been made more punitive rather than more rational and practical.”⁴¹ Indeed, immigration enforcement is perhaps the only area of law where virtually all violators, no matter how trivial their offense, are subject to deportation—the maximum sentence available.⁴² As a result, Latinos are disproportionately subject to deportation, constituting roughly 57% of immigrants but well over 90% of deportations.⁴³

This ever-present systemic racism in the criminal justice system has had a severe effect on the Latino community that persists today. While the full effects remain unknown due to a lack of disaggregated ethnicity data, Hispanic men have at least a one-in-six chance of being incarcerated in their lifetime, versus the 1-in-17 chance for White men. In 2016, Latinos represented 16% of the adult population but accounted for 23% of prison inmates.⁴⁴ Troubling trends are also present at the school-age level, with Latino youth 65% more likely than similarly-situated White offenders to be held in youth facilities or detained in the youth justice system.⁴⁵ The effects of structural racism extend beyond the criminal justice system and deepen inequities in all facets of Latinos' lived experiences. Evidence indicates that between 60% and 75% of formerly incarcerated individuals remain unemployed for up to a year after their release due to barriers including discrimination and stigma.⁴⁶ Furthermore, a set of legal and regulatory restrictions—collectively called “collateral consequences”—limits individuals with criminal records from a wide range of activities that can vary by state, but which often include voting, receiving public benefits, taking certain jobs, and obtaining occupational licenses.⁴⁷ It is no surprise then that a history of incarceration results in lower wages and less economic mobility over time.⁴⁸

Education

In the United States, right from the start, people of color have had limited access to education. As recently as the 1960s, most Black, Latino, and Native American elementary and secondary school students were relegated to largely segregated schools, funded at much lower levels than those serving White children, and many were entirely excluded from some higher education institutions.⁴⁹ This unequal system is the result of the confluence of intentional law, policies, and cultural practices, including Jim Crow legislation in the South, state laws and practices ensuring segregation of Latinos in the Southwest, the rise of residential segregation in northern

states, and the limited role of the federal government in funding and overseeing public education.⁵⁰ While the end of legal segregation, efforts to arrive at more equitable funding, and school reform measures have all made a marked difference for Latino student achievement in recent decades, the legacy of systemic racism continues and drives disparate outcomes for Latino students who remain separate and unequal on many measures.

Latino children experienced segregation in schools in the early twentieth century, even before they had a census-designated identity, and the government generally considered them to be “White.” In the 1930s, more than 90% of south Texas schools were segregated; within the decade, 122 school districts in the state had strictly “Mexican” schools.⁵¹ Unlike California’s other racial minorities, state law never required school districts to segregate children of Mexican ancestry because the courts classified them as “White.” Even so, as a matter of practice, some districts began segregating children of Mexican descent after 1910. By the 1920s, many California communities had established “Mexican schools” along with segregated public swimming pools, movie theaters, and restaurants.⁵² Officials forced most “Mexican” children (85%) in California into segregated schools by the 1940s.⁵³ Advocates for segregation cited the precedent of separate schools for other minorities as well as special language needs to justify their stance.

The very first legal victories against school segregation in the United States came from Mexican American parents in California. In 1931, Mexican American parents in the Lemon Grove School District in San Diego County, California, successfully sued the school district for integration.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, that decision only applied to schools in that county, and segregation continued throughout the state. In 1945, another group of parents, led by Gonzalo Mendez, sued four school districts in Southern California. Mendez expected that his children would attend Westminster Main



School, the school closest to their residence. But officials informed him that his children would attend a school in a different district, with an exclusively Mexican or Mexican American student body.⁵⁵ This case showed that the need for civil rights protections were a national issue and crossed racial and ethnic groups.⁵⁶ By prohibiting segregation in California's public schools, the landmark ruling in *Mendez v. Westminster* paved the way for *Brown v. Board of Education*, which would eventually abolish racial segregation in the United States.⁵⁷

Even after legal segregation was abolished, Latinos were subject to additional isolation via restrictions based on language. For example, after World War II, many Puerto Ricans migrated from the island—where Spanish was and still is still an official language—to New York City. Puerto Rican children were allowed to enroll in schools but experienced challenges due, in part, to a lack of bilingual education or any other mechanism to promote equal educational opportunity.⁵⁸ Education officials in the city blamed these challenges on Puerto Ricans' presumably inferior culture, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵⁹ In 1972, ASPIRA, an advocacy group, and some Puerto Rican parents filed suit against the Board of Education of New York City in an attempt to institutionalize equal educational opportunities, including bilingual education, for Puerto Ricans and other language minorities. The suit resulted in a court-monitored consent decree, a binding legal agreement between ASPIRA and the Board

of Education that established a transitional bilingual education program in New York City's schools.⁶⁰ This legal agreement is considered to be a key precedent about how institutional structures should address the educational needs of disenfranchised communities. Still, a significant share of English learners (ELs) receives little or no educationally sound instruction to facilitate the acquisition of English without falling behind in academic subject matter.⁶¹

Immigration status has also subjected Latino children to separate educational experiences. In 1975, just as the nation's immigrant flow was evolving from predominantly European to majority Latino and Asian, for the first time in history Texas passed a law that allowed the withholding of funds to educate children who were not "legally admitted" into the United States and allowing school districts to deny them enrollment.⁶² Some school districts in Texas took action and kicked some students out of school, while others, including a district in Tyler, Texas, chose to charge these families tuition, immediately limiting access for Latino and EL students.⁶³ The Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) filed suit, and that case, which was consolidated with a similar lawsuit from Houston, ultimately went to the Supreme Court.⁶⁴ In the landmark ruling in *Plyler v. Doe*, the Supreme Court struck down the state law as it violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The Court recognized that education was crucial to preventing a permanent

underclass of undocumented immigrants in the United States and ensuring immigrants' future membership in society.⁶⁵ Still, Latino and immigrant children continue to face challenges to an equal education. For example, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos refused, during testimony in 2018, to acknowledge the continued rights of immigrant children to attend schools under *Plyler v. Doe*.⁶⁶

Latino students have made progress on various educational indicators in the past two decades, but their educational experiences often continue to be separate and unequal. Latino children remain more likely to be in schools with fewer resources and funding and are now the most segregated school children in the country.⁶⁷ While legal segregation has not existed for more than 60 years, *de facto* segregation is now driven by a system where a student's ZIP code often determines their educational outcomes. For example, in 2017, national assessments revealed that 78% of Latino fourth graders read below proficient levels and 92% of fourth grade EL students fall below proficient. Investments in education for Latino students are also lacking—schools with 90% or more students of color spend a full \$733 less per student per year than schools with 90% or more White students.⁶⁸ For ELs, the disparities are even more stark: nationally, 31% of EL students scored at basic or above in fourth-grade reading compared with 72% of non-EL students. Similarly, 31% of EL students scored at basic or above in eighth-grade math compared with 75% of non-EL students.⁶⁹ Gaps in academic performance perpetuated by structural racism persist throughout the K-12 education of EL students, culminating with a high school graduation rate for EL students that is 18% below the graduation rate of all non-EL students (67% versus 85%, respectively).⁷⁰

Employment

The U.S. labor market is a system built on partial segmentation of people of color. While the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow formed the foundation for this system, many other government policies and

institutional practices reinforced a two-tier employment system that devalued the work of people of color. Specifically, the New Deal—a series of programs and projects instituted during the Great Depression by President Franklin D. Roosevelt—aimed to provide relief for individuals, recover the economy, and reform the financial system. These programs included the vast majority of White Americans but excluded many of their Black and Brown counterparts—and thus established structural racialization that has become one of the biggest contributors to inequity in America.⁷¹ Even though Latinos are more likely to work than their White counterparts, the legacy of the New Deal and its intentional segmentation has kept them concentrated in low-wage occupations, exposing them to disparities in several areas, including wages, benefits, and financial security.

While New Deal programs did not always explicitly bar people of color or noncitizens from programs, policymakers used occupational status as a tool of distinction and exclusion.⁷² Specifically, the New Deal's Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) introduced protections that are still in place today, including a 40-hour workweek, a federal minimum wage, overtime requirements, and a ban on child labor. However, Black and Latino workers were disproportionately excluded from these benefits because of the exemption on many domestic, agricultural, and service occupations. Over time, lawmakers have amended the FLSA to cover some of these occupations;⁷³ however, agricultural and domestic workers—which have large concentrations of Latino workers—remain some of the least-regulated occupations in the United States.⁷⁴ Researchers point to pressure from Southern lawmakers concerned about the financial success of influential White farm owners who were reliant on cheap farm labor for this exclusion.⁷⁵

Additionally, the Social Security Act of 1935 and Unemployment Insurance programs were created as part of the New Deal to promote retirement security and protect

against lost wages in certain situations, but these programs largely excluded the same occupations as FLSA.⁷⁶ This decision disqualified many workers of color, including Latinos, from these critical benefits at a time of national economic crisis and forced them to rely disproportionately on means-tested welfare cash assistance programs at the time.⁷⁷ These New Deal policies established a “template” of sorts, whereby mainstream workers could expect labor law protections, health insurance, pensions, and the like while those in lower-tier occupations did not have the same access. It also reinforced a paradigm whereby workers of color who experienced adverse life events, such as a layoff or health condition, were pilloried for receiving welfare while similarly situated White workers received far larger public support through Unemployment Insurance and tax-deductible health insurance (see Health Subsection below).

These and many other subsequent policy decisions relegated many Latino workers to lower-status occupations without protections and perpetuated the exploitation

of workers of color.⁷⁸ The effects persist today. Latinos have the highest labor force participation rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States. They are the fastest-growing workforce segment, yet they are concentrated in low-wage jobs and are the least likely to have access to benefits, including paid leave.⁷⁹ More than 75% of all low-wage workers are concentrated in five occupations—retail sales workers, cooks and food preparation workers, building cleaning workers, food and beverage serving workers, and personal care and service workers (such as child care workers and patient care assistants).⁸⁰ These are also some of the occupations that were not included in New Deal legislation and in which Latinos remain overrepresented compared to their representation in approximately 17.5% of the total U.S. workforce, and in which they have persistent low wages.⁸¹ In part as a result, the median weekly earnings of workers across all races and occupations is \$994, compared to just \$785 for all Hispanic workers in all occupations.⁸² (See Table 2 for median hourly wage by occupations with large shares of Latino workers).

Table 1: Latinos Are Overrepresented in Low-Wage Occupations

Occupation	Share of Workers in Occupation that are Latino ⁸³	Median Hourly Wage of Occupation
Miscellaneous Agricultural	54%	\$12.41
Maids and Housekeeping Cleaner	49.2%	\$11.95
Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Workers	37.9%	\$11.64
Food Preparation	36.7%	\$11.92
Building Cleaning Workers	31.6%	\$11.02
Retail Sales	25.4%	\$11.84
Child Care	24.6%	\$11.65

Source: UnidosUS analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau

Latino workers also contend with other work-related disparities. For example, Latino workers are the least likely to have access to paid sick days, with an estimated 15 million people unable to earn such leave.⁸⁴ This forces workers to choose between their health (or their families’ health) and their economic security when they get sick or need to care for a sick family member.⁸⁵ Additionally, an estimated 1.2 million Latino workers remain ineligible for overtime protections due, in part, to the continued exclusion of agricultural workers from FLSA.⁸⁶

SPOTLIGHT ON SYSTEMIC RACISM:**Juan Crow**

“Juan Crow” is a recently coined term that describes “the matrix of laws, social customs, economic institutions and symbolic systems enabling the physical and psychic isolation needed to control and exploit undocumented immigrants.”⁸⁷ The term was initially used to describe current racially discriminatory immigration statutes in the United States. For example, as the Latino population grew in the U.S. Southeast, so too did reports of legislation targeting largely Latino immigrant populations with anti-immigrant measures that make it a crime for the undocumented to work, travel, or own or rent a home.⁸⁸

But the term aptly applies to the laws, policies, and practices modeled after the Jim Crow system in the Southern states, which codified and enforced the widespread racial discrimination practiced against Mexican Americans in the Southwestern United States in the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries.⁸⁹ For example, restaurants and businesses regularly denied service to African and Mexican Americans, and signs reading “No Mexicans Allowed” were widespread in the Juan Crow Southwest.⁹⁰ In addition to separate public accommodations like parks and recreational facilities, housing and schools were routinely segregated, employment discrimination was rampant, and racialized violence by law enforcement and private vigilantes was common; taken together and viewed as a “system,” scholars have noted that these conditions were remarkably similar to those of the Jim Crow South.⁹¹

Health

Lack of health coverage has been a persistent problem in the United States, especially for Latinos who have been and remain among the groups with the highest uninsurance rates. High uninsurance rates are driven, in large part, by the structural racism embedded in the employment-based insurance system, as employers in many of the lower-tier occupations in which Hispanics are concentrated rarely offer health insurance as a fringe benefit.⁹² While the ACA was intended to help provide coverage to more individuals, as the overall number of uninsured people in the United States fell, the Latino uninsured rate remained one of the highest in the country, and many gains made by the ACA for Latinos have been lost in recent years.⁹³

Systemic racism in how health coverage is obtained has a disproportionate effect on Latinos. For example, the Internal Revenue Service’s decision that health insurance premiums paid by employers were exempt from income taxation resulted in a \$260 billion tax subsidy for people who get insurance through their employers.⁹⁴

However, Latinos’ overrepresentation in occupations without insurance means they are among the least likely to get insurance through an employer—41% of Hispanics compared to 66% of Whites receive health insurance through their jobs—and thus are largely left out of this benefit.⁹⁵ State and federal policies exist to help fill these gaps, but policies driven by racial animus in the form of restrictions on eligibility for publicly-funded benefits, including limits on lawful permanent residents’ (LPR) eligibility for specific programs and the exclusion of those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status and the undocumented from federal programs or the ACA Marketplace, also have a disproportionate impact on Latino coverage rates.

Even when Latinos have coverage, other barriers can limit the quality of the care received. Until relatively recently, access to linguistically appropriate services in health care was not guaranteed, affecting the 16 million Latinos who speak English “less than very well.”⁹⁶ Language access can profoundly affect one’s health in myriad ways—from understanding enrollment and

eligibility procedures, accessing services, and ensuring high-quality and safe care. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided theoretical protections against discrimination in federal programs and allowed language as a proxy for national origin.⁹⁷ However, it was not until Executive Order 13166 was promulgated in 2000 that all federal agencies were required to provide guidance to recipients of their funds on how to comply with Title VI and produce a plan to provide language access to their services.⁹⁸ In addition, Section 1557 of the ACA prohibited discrimination in health care settings based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, and disability, though the Trump administration sought to undermine these provisions by weakening a number of provisions, including those that benefit individuals with limited English proficiency.

Barriers to health coverage and care lead to disparities for Latinos. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 19% of Latinos remained uninsured, compared to only 6.3% of non-Hispanic Whites.¹⁰⁰ Early data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows a rise in the Latino uninsured rate during the pandemic, from more than 18% in late April to 23% by July 2020.¹⁰¹ In addition to coverage, social determinants—where a person lives, works, socioeconomic status, and education—also affect their health. Cumulatively, disparities in each of these areas lead to Latinos being more likely than Whites to report being in “fair” or “poor” health status.¹⁰² They are more likely to suffer from certain chronic health conditions, including diabetes and obesity, and Latino children and youth are overweight or obese at a rate of 38.9%, compared to 28.5% for Whites.¹⁰³ Health consequences from being overweight or obese, like Type 2 diabetes, affect Hispanic youth at higher rates than their White counterparts.¹⁰⁴

Housing

Where one lives plays a major role in people’s access to equal educational opportunity, as seen earlier, but homeownership and affordable rental

housing are also critical pathways to financial well-being and wealth-building. However, intentional policy decisions and social practices have obstructed these pathways for people of color and stratified the housing market by race and ethnicity. Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. policymakers and institutions designed and implemented laws, programs, and policies to increase wealth building through property ownership and making rental housing affordable, but those efforts largely benefitted White households.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, communities of color, including Latinos, were routinely excluded, experiencing displacement and segregation. While the most insidious examples of structural racism in the housing system have been banned, the legacies and manifestations of these policies continue, and modern practices only compound those disparities.¹⁰⁶

Practices such as redlining and residential segregation are two pernicious hallmarks of racism and discrimination in our nation’s housing system.¹⁰⁷ Outright discrimination and a series of other practices, such as “steering” Latinos away from predominantly White neighborhoods, have resulted in difficulty accessing mortgages or homes close to good jobs and schools as well as difficulty in finding affordable, quality rental housing.¹⁰⁸ And while housing segregation against Hispanics wasn’t always as formal or systematic as for the Black community, Latinos have not been shielded completely from the effects of government-sponsored discrimination. Beginning in the 1930s, U.S. government policy explicitly supported redlining—meaning withholding home loans to individuals living in neighborhoods with larger populations of Black and Hispanic residents.¹⁰⁹ For example, the Federal Housing Administration’s (FHA) home lending guidelines ranked “Negroes and Mexicans” as riskiest and least worthy of credit, while directing investment to neighborhoods with larger populations of “Anglo-Saxons and Northern Europeans,” which were considered the “most desirable” and worthy of mortgage credit.¹¹⁰

All too often, the very systems designed to address unlawful housing discrimination have ignored the Hispanic community.¹¹¹ Early studies of housing discrimination typically did not include data on Latinos. Later studies, based on a standardized methodology using carefully matched, paired testers, increasingly showed that Hispanics and Blacks experienced similar degrees of housing discrimination in most housing markets. This adverse treatment included practices such as being quoted higher rents or higher fees than White testers, offered later availability dates or fewer available units than those offered to White testers, or told about additional application requirements—such as credit checks and/or providing a social security card.¹¹² Additionally, agents often offered incentives and specials to White testers, but not to Latinos.¹¹³

Decades after the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and the Community Reinvestment Act* in 1977, Latinos face unequal access to credit and continued legacies of past discrimination. In the financial crisis in the mid-2000s, home lenders disproportionately targeted subprime loans (with higher interest rates that could cost homeowners hundreds of thousands in additional interest payments) to Latino homebuyers, even when they qualified for less financially risky options.¹¹⁴ As a result, during the Great Recession of the mid-2000s, Latino households lost 66% of their housing wealth, in part due to these practices.¹¹⁵ More recently, there is evidence that discrimination is evolving alongside changing housing markets. For example, in 2019, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced charges against Facebook for violating the Fair Housing Act. The allegation was that Facebook’s advertising practices encouraged, enabled, and caused housing discrimination because they allowed

advertisers to exclude people in protected classes under the Fair Housing Act from viewing housing ads.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, a recent analysis of 2019 home lending data, Latino homebuyers continued to pay higher interest rates and fees at the closing table than White homebuyers, which reduces a homeowner’s ability to build wealth.¹¹⁷ In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated underlying racial inequality, as Latino renters face greater vulnerability to eviction and displacement than Whites.¹¹⁸

Taken together, government-sanctioned practices of denying credit to Latino neighborhoods and the lasting effects of continued, unremedied discrimination in the home mortgage and rental markets have created a “structure” that fuels the maintenance of segregated neighborhoods, as well as the accompanying harms of low levels of education, health disparities, and stunted economic opportunity. More than 50 years after the Fair Housing Act’s passage, the adverse effects of housing discrimination on Hispanics’ socioeconomic status continue, with economic and racial residential segregation patterns as well as displacement enduring in most U.S. cities.¹¹⁹ For instance, in 2019, only 48% of Latinos were homeowners, compared to 70% of Whites.¹²⁰ Latinos are denied a mortgage at a higher rate than White, wealthier homebuyers.¹²¹ Latino youth living in historically segregated neighborhoods attend schools that receive less funding and are less likely to graduate from college and have fewer pathways to good jobs.¹²² The ongoing discrimination that Latinos face will make it harder to find an affordable home and keep it, especially in the economic recession of the current pandemic.¹²³

Immigration

It might be surprising to many that for much of our history there were few formal limits

* According to the U.S. Federal Reserve, “the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), enacted in 1977, requires the Federal Reserve and other federal banking regulators to encourage financial institutions to help meet the credit needs of the communities in which they do business, including low- and moderate-income (LMI) neighborhoods.”

on migration to the United States from Latin America. Similarly, except for the overtly racist Chinese Exclusion Acts and related policies, there were no broad limits on immigration until 100 years ago. The very concept of “undocumented people” first arose in the 1920s when broad restrictions on entry and so-called “national origins” quotas that favored European immigrants over other prospective immigrants were enacted.¹²⁴ Immigration from Mexico was encouraged until the Great Depression, and during WWII, the United States and Mexico created the Bracero program to allow Mexican agricultural workers to enter the U.S. on a temporary cyclical basis. The program lasted until 1964 and employed millions of Mexicans.¹²⁵ In between, millions of people of Mexican descent, more than half of whom were American citizens, were expelled from the United States, most with no due process.¹²⁶ In 1965, amendments passed to the Immigration and Naturalization Act eliminated the discriminatory national origins quotas but also imposed new limits on immigration from Mexico and Latin America. These two government actions—the end of the Bracero program and cuts in legal immigration from Mexico—are typically credited with essentially creating unauthorized immigration from Mexico.¹²⁷

After 1965, when the discriminatory national origins quota system was ended, many observers believed that overt racism had been purged from our immigration policies. However, in the 1970s, as immigration patterns changed from largely European to people of color, including Latinos, immigration policy reflected new forms of structural racism.¹²⁸ The system is built on exclusionary policies sometimes specifically targeted at—and inevitably, disproportionately affecting—immigrants from Latin America and their often-U.S.-born family members, creating and perpetuating inequalities for generations to come.

A convergence of factors, both in the United States and abroad, led to a shift in migration demographics prior to the early 1970s, when about 80% of immigrants came from Europe, with the remaining

balance from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, proportions which roughly reversed afterwards. Increasingly tough enforcement actions soon followed.

As immigrant flows in the 1970s and 1980s grew “brownier,” enforcement increased both at the border and in the interior. Laws and policies increasingly seemed designed to systematically and adversely affect Latino immigrants and their families. For example, legal immigration from Mexico was cut in half, and the practice of *not* deporting parents of U.S.-born children was ended in 1976. In 1986, for the first time a law made it illegal to knowingly hire an undocumented immigrant, which resulted in a “widespread pattern” of employment discrimination against Hispanics and other “foreign-looking” people, according to official government reports.¹²⁹ In 1996, a law was passed that all but prevents undocumented immigrants who come across the southern border (largely Latino) from ever adjusting to lawful status, but allows others (largely non-Hispanic) who enter through airports or seaports this privilege.¹³⁰

Additionally, it is not widely known or appreciated that at the time Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and much of what we think of as the safety net were created—and when upwards of 80% of immigrants to the United States were White—there were *no* restrictions on eligibility for undocumented immigrants. It was not until the 1970s—when the immigrant stream was becoming increasingly Latino and Asian—that such restrictions began to be added, first via regulation and later by statute.¹³¹ In 1996, welfare reform legislation disqualified *lawfully present* immigrants from much of the safety net, although some of these benefits have been restored since. These are some of the myriad ways the U.S. government has subjected the post-1970s wave of predominantly Latino newcomers to harsh policies that were not applied to multiple waves of European immigrants.

The damaging effects of treating predominantly Hispanic immigrants

differently than their European predecessors has lingering socioeconomic effects: research shows that the single act of providing lawful immigration status to undocumented workers would increase wages, tax revenues, and economic output significantly.¹³²

These effects extend beyond immigrants themselves to impact their families, children, and entire communities. Today, an estimated six million children, the vast majority of whom are U.S. citizens, live under the constant threat of separation from a parent due to deportation. This threat in turn undermines child economic security, education and health outcomes, and housing stability. Some scholars refer to the negative spillover effects “multigenerational punishment.”¹³³ Hispanic families are more likely to experience this form of liminal legality because Latinos make up a large share of undocumented immigrants in the United States for historical reasons described above. The stigma, fear, and reduced means experienced in mixed-status families is often so pervasive that the impacts of a parent’s undocumented immigration status on children can range from reduced cognitive development to higher rates of anxiety and depression.¹³⁴

Millions of working immigrants pay taxes and contribute to Social Security and Medicare—programs which most are barred from participating in—through payroll deductions.¹³⁵ Immigrants also contribute to local city and state economies through sales taxes, and on average, undocumented immigrants pay more than \$11 billion in state and local taxes each year.¹³⁶ Restrictions on the social safety net keep a large portion of noncitizen immigrant taxpayers, including many legal immigrants, from receiving tax credits that support child health and well-being. The same restrictions left them out of financial supports included in the CARES COVID-19 relief legislation, and a considerable number were also left out of the December 2020 omnibus.¹³⁷ Compounding these financial exclusions, increased anti-immigrant rhetoric and

policies under the Trump administration, such as its collection of “public charge” policies and indiscriminate immigration enforcement, have led immigrants to disenroll from vital support programs for which they or their children are legally eligible.¹³⁸ Indeed, the most recent census data suggest that program disenrollment between 2016-2019 was most severe for low-income U.S. citizen children in mixed-status households, leaving these children doubly vulnerable to the economic and health effects of the pandemic in 2020.

Voting

The right to vote is central to the democratic ideals upon which the United States was founded. Yet, laws and policies have intentionally kept this right from millions of people of color, including Hispanics. The exclusion of certain groups from the democratic process results in a lack of political power to elect candidates with shared values who can enact public policy priorities important to diverse groups.¹³⁹ Despite significant increases in legal protections of the vote through the Voting Rights Act (VRA), discriminatory policies and barriers to voting continue to exist for people of color. Consequently, many people of color, including Latinos, who represent 13.2%¹⁴⁰ of all eligible voters in the United States, continue to be excluded and subject to discrimination in the electoral process, weakening their ability to fully exercise their right to vote and influence the political landscape.

Voting rights have applied selectively to certain races and classes for the greater part of our history. For example, the 15th Amendment, which prohibited states from denying male citizens the right to vote based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” was not ratified until 1870, after the Civil War. Deliberate legal barriers at the state and local levels—including poll taxes and English literacy tests—prevented large numbers of eligible Black and Latino individuals from voting. These barriers were exceptionally common throughout the American South, including in Texas, which

has historically had a large Latino population coupled with a lengthy history of using force, fraud, and coercion to keep voters of color out of the voting booth. In Texas, all-White primaries became typical conduits for voter suppression until the Supreme Court struck them down in 1944.¹⁴¹ However, new methods of voter suppression, this time more procedural in nature, continued to flourish as Texas officials continued to impose poll taxes until 1966 and literacy tests until 1970.¹⁴²

While the VRA of 1965 provided much-needed and hard-won protections for Black voters, it also excluded Latinos until the VRA expansion of 1975. Latino civil rights groups led activism to strengthen the VRA by expanding coverage to include Hispanic voters and adding protections for Latino and other language minority voters.¹⁴³ But the expanded law did much more than simply enfranchise huge swaths of Latino and language minority voters: an empowered U.S. Department of Justice stopped a massive voter purge in Texas and the law enabled more Hispanics to vote for the candidate of their choice. Consequently over the following decade, the number of Hispanic elected officials in Texas increased by more than 200; eight more Latino members of Congress from the Southwest were elected, and city councils in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago saw increases in their Latino members.¹⁴⁴

Despite some of these gains, important protections central to the VRA were virtually eliminated when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down various provisions of the VRA in the 2013 case *Shelby County v. Holder*. The court ruled that the formula used to determine which jurisdictions were subject to federal review of voting rule changes was outdated and therefore unconstitutional because of a history of voter discrimination. Despite the Court's recommendation that Congress update the coverage formula, Congress has thus far failed to act, threatening countless Americans' voting rights—especially voters

of color.¹⁴⁵ This change is significant to Latinos. The *Shelby v. Holder* decision has left seven million Latinos in previously protected jurisdictions vulnerable to large-scale and systemic disenfranchisement and has by extension stripped these communities—the largest non-White ethnic group in the United States—of their already-limited political power and influence.¹⁴⁶ For example, some states immediately took advantage of this ruling and implemented voting changes including restrictive voter I.D. laws, laws allowing for voter roll purging, unnotified polling place closures, and early voting reduction, while simultaneously turning a blind eye to voter intimidation and the challenging of voter eligibility by poll place workers.¹⁴⁷ These methods have each been shown to disproportionately target and impact voters of color, with Latinos bearing the brunt of voter intimidation tactics under the false guise of “illegal voting.”¹⁴⁸ Finally, chief among the gross outgrowths of our voting system's racialized origins is the continued disenfranchisement of Puerto Rican residents, a group of American citizens who number more than three million.¹⁴⁹ While voting rights are fundamental, they are not the only manifestation of political power. Some have argued that the electoral college and reapportionment process inherently favors rural areas with large White populations over urban areas with large Latino and Black populations.¹⁵⁰ In addition, Latinos are severely underrepresented in government positions. Latinos represent 18% of the U.S. population and make up just 8.9% of the federal civilian workforce, and that representation dwindles to almost nothing when looking at top government positions, including Cabinet appointments.¹⁵¹ The challenge here is not only a matter of representation, but a matter of effectiveness—policies are unlikely to be fully responsive to a community if knowledge and expertise with respect to that community is absent.



SPOTLIGHT ON STRUCTURAL RACISM:
Many Puerto Ricans Lack Full Voting Rights

Although Puerto Ricans have U.S. citizenship, residents of Puerto Rico do not have full voting representation in the U.S. Congress and are not entitled to electoral votes for president. Full voting rights in Congress and the Electoral College are denied to residents of territories acquired by the United States, who happen to be mostly non-White. Due to this practice, 3.4 million otherwise-eligible Americans living in U.S. territories—namely Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa—continue to lack full voting rights to this day.¹⁵² These individuals—a majority of whom are Latino but are all people of color—are excluded from our democracy and lack the opportunity to influence how the government handles critical issues affecting all aspects of their lives.

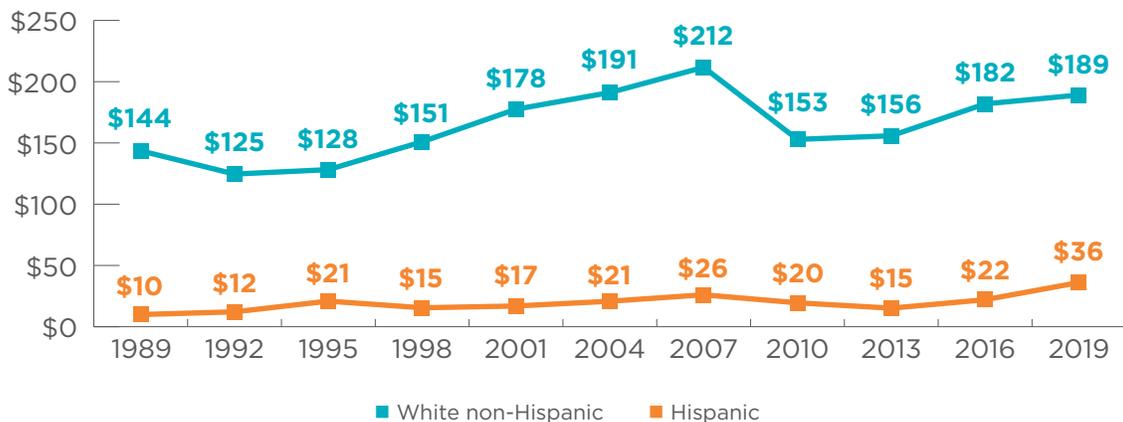
The Wealth Gap

While there are distinct forms of disparity evident in criminal justice, education, employment, health, housing, and voting, all together have combined to create a vast disparity in wealth—also known as the racial wealth gap. Wealth* is an essential indicator of long-term financial security and a measure of social status. Accumulated wealth allows people to weather adverse life events, achieve homeownership, start businesses, invest, prepare for retirement, and transfer opportunities onto their families for generations to come. American laws, policies, and practices have ensured that most White people in the United States benefit from governmental boosts to achieve the aforementioned opportunities with little to no barriers, while Latinos and other people of color are excluded, sometimes intentionally,

often due to historical factors baked into current systems and policies. Many factors fuel this gap, but employment, education, and housing—all systems with a legacy of structural racism—continue to reinforce the racial wealth gap. In 2019, Latino families held \$36,100 in wealth compared to \$188,200 held by White families.¹⁵³

The wealth gap persists even for Latino college graduates—with the typical Latino household headed by a college graduate holding just \$0.19 for every one dollar in wealth held by the typical White household led by a college graduate.¹⁵⁴ Research attributes this persistent wealth gap, even when taking education into account, to both pre-existing structural barriers and ongoing discrimination.¹⁵⁵ Without significant policy interventions, this gap will persist and likely grow, disadvantaging Latino communities for generations to come.

Figure 2: Racial Wealth Gap Between Latino and White non-Hispanic Families



Note, all figures are in thousands of 2019 dollars.

Source: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, “2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF)” September 28, 2020, ‘Excel Based on Public Data,’ ‘Estimates inflation-adjusted to 2019 dollars’

Without explicit acknowledgment and significant interventions, this gap will persist and likely grow, disadvantaging Latino communities for generations to come.

* According to the U.S. Federal Reserve Board, “wealth” is defined as the difference between a family’s gross assets and their liabilities and that measure is used in this document. See [The Fed - Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances \(federalreserve.gov\)](https://www.federalreserve.gov/press/pr20190928.html) for more information on their definition.



COVID-19 and Structural Racism's Impact on Latinos

As many observers have noted, the COVID-19 pandemic is an example that clearly illustrates the cumulative result of structural racism in the United States. As a group, Latinos encountered the pandemic disproportionately vulnerable to the virus and its harsh economic impacts. To summarize just a few of the pandemic's severe, disparate impacts on the Hispanics, who constitute 18.5% of the population, let us consider the following statistics:

- Latinos and Blacks have been three times as likely to become infected as their white counterparts.¹⁵⁶
- Hispanics are 4.2 times more likely than Whites to be hospitalized for COVID-19.¹⁵⁷
- Latinos have experienced 20.5% of all U.S. COVID-19 deaths, even though as the country's youngest demographic group, Hispanics should have a far lower death rate from the coronavirus, which otherwise more severely affects the elderly.¹⁵⁸
- More than 57% of Latinos reported losing work or wages as a result of the pandemic, compared to 41% of Whites.¹⁵⁹
- Latino unemployment remains high at 9.3% in December 2020, compared to a national rate of 6.7%.¹⁶⁰

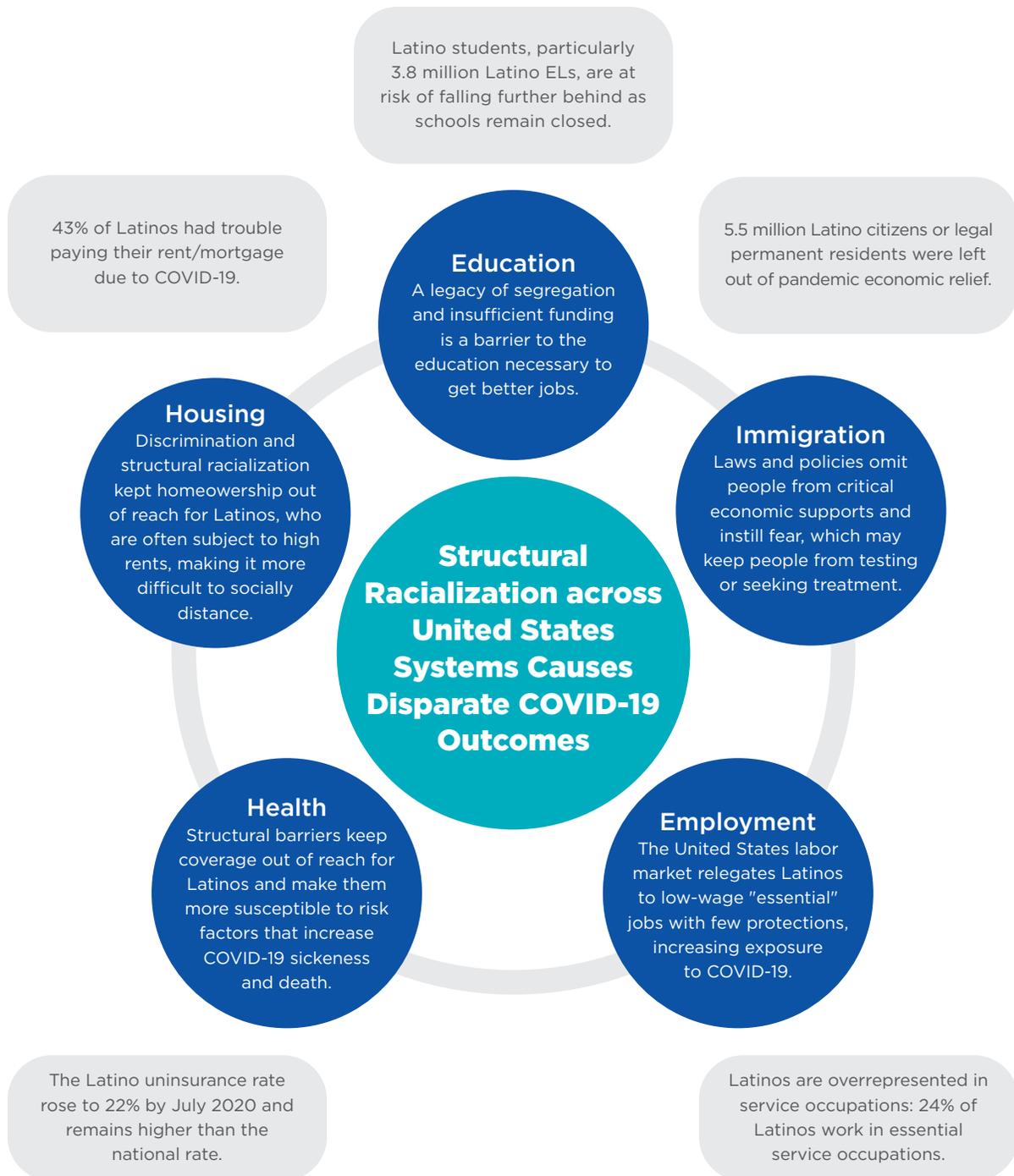
These data likely understate the real impact of COVID-19 on Latinos due to incomplete collection of data on Hispanics, particularly

at the state and local levels. Moreover, these disparities cannot be attributed to Hispanic behavior, since polls consistently show that Latinos are more likely than other groups to follow public health guidance, such as wearing a mask.¹⁶¹

While Hispanic, Black, and other people of color are more susceptible to both the coronavirus's health effects and resulting economic dislocations, Latinos (especially those in immigrant families) are thrice damaged as they also had a weakened safety net to fall back on, compounding pre-existing economic disparities. These factors have combined to create a self-reinforcing system:

- Because Latinos are concentrated in low-wage "essential" jobs and have a more limited safety net, they're more likely than others to have to work outside the home, thus increasing their risk of exposure.
- Once infected, their families, friends, and neighbors are far more likely than their non-Latino counterparts to be exposed to COVID-19, given overcrowded housing and segregated neighborhoods.
- More limited access to sick leave, combined with lower health insurance rates, deters, limits access to, and often deters prompt testing and treatment.
- The absence of trusted, culturally competent contact tracing systems retards efforts to limit the virus's spread, thus reinforcing a negative, vicious spiral of infection.

These data demonstrate that the disparate effects of the pandemic on Hispanics are not due to the community’s behavior, but instead result from the structures and systems of American society. Furthermore, beyond the horrific short-term effects, the pandemic’s legacy on the Hispanic community will almost certainly exacerbate existing inequalities in education, employment, health, and housing over the long term, as illustrated in the graphic below.



Source: Data points are from PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for UnidosUS, “By the Numbers: Latinos in the Time of Coronavirus.”

Conclusion

The weight of social science research demonstrates that, at a minimum, a significant portion of the socioeconomic disparities between Hispanics and other Americans is attributable to and/or has roots in the phenomenon known as systemic racism. To be sure, this is a contested conclusion. Some adherents of structural racism theory argue that if one starts with the proposition that all human beings are equal, then by definition significant and persistent racial inequality must be the result of the way social systems, structures, and institutions operate. At the other end of the spectrum, some libertarians would argue that factors such as race are less crucial to socioeconomic outcomes than individual life choices. And some go so far as to argue, in effect, that racial disparities in life outcomes, at least to some extent, reflect the purported, inherent inferiority of disadvantaged groups and the superiority of others.¹⁶²

UnidosUS rejects that view, believes all human beings are fundamentally equal, and that large and persistent inequalities are more likely to be attributable to societal structures than to a group's culture or behavior. Specifically, UnidosUS believes that, as this primer lays out, many disparities between Latinos and their White counterparts reflect, at least in part, a legacy of deep-seated systemic racism. Throughout U.S. history, systems and practices put in place and/or sanctioned by the government have systematically excluded Latinos from opportunities designed mainly for and accessible to their White counterparts. Time after time, on a broad range of issues, programs and policies intended to boost Americans' economic status, health, and well-being have benefitted large swaths of the White population and bypassed communities of color, contributing to different outcomes along racial and ethnic lines.

As public discourse about and national awareness of issues associated with

structural racism grows, policymakers, the public, and the Latino community itself should examine the totality of these systems and how they affect communities of color in both everyday life and as they accumulate and compound over time. Because the evidence is unequivocal that Hispanics almost invariably have been adversely affected by racism embedded in institutional structures and policy systems most salient to economic opportunity and upward mobility, it follows that policy interventions to dismantle systemic racism must fully include the Hispanic community. Wherever possible, racism deeply embedded in our society's core structures and institutions must be acknowledged, confronted, and dismantled—racial disparities inherent in policy systems cannot be ameliorated through minor reforms.

While policy responses to address structural racism must be intentionally inclusive of those historically excluded, it does not follow that they must always require group-specific or “race-conscious” approaches. Intentionally inclusive policy can both reduce racial disparities while also benefitting everyone; a strategy some scholars call “targeted universalism.”¹⁶³ For example, the ACA was a near-universal policy that supported all Americans through the Great Recession, and because Hispanics were over-represented among the ranks of the uninsured, the ACA disproportionately benefitted Latinos.¹⁶⁴ The ACA's tax credits and subsidies, paired with Medicaid expansion efforts, helped make health care more affordable and increased the number of Americans with health insurance amid the economic strain of the Great Recession. Still, the ACA's exclusion of families headed by an undocumented worker meant that Latinos have remained the most uninsured group in the United States. Investing in the creation of a truly universal health plan would not only cover the 10 million uninsured Latinos in the United States but would also offer coverage to the additional 17.5 million uninsured people in the country across all racial and ethnic groups. In another example, the effects of

lifting immigration restrictions on the safety net benefits would go beyond the Latino community and support all immigrant families, no matter where they are from or who their parents are, and stimulate the economies of the communities where they live. This approach also appears consistent with the Hispanic community's policy preferences; Latinos want to serve as agents of racial equity, not just for themselves, but for all Americans, because they know what it feels like to be systematically excluded.¹⁶⁵

An essential element of the growing national discourse on race is the intentional and full inclusion of the history, perspectives, and interests of Latinos. Toward that end, while a comprehensive response to combat structural racism affecting Latinos is beyond the scope of this primer, there are concrete objectives that journalists, educators, and advocates can and should pursue:

- **Public discourse should be more inclusive of how systemic racism has adversely affected the Latino community** throughout its 180-plus year history under American jurisdiction. Over the last year, many “reading lists” on racial justice have emerged; unfortunately, they almost always exclude any reference to the Latino community.¹⁶⁶ There is a large and rich body of scholarly knowledge, some cited in this paper, that can inform this discourse, but too often pundits, reporters, and even some racial justice advocates themselves often treat Latinos as if the entire community consists of immigrants that arrived only recently to the United States.
- **Educational institutions should more accurately reflect the Hispanic experience in the United States**, including coverage of how systemic racism has affected Latinos. For example, typical high school history or social studies texts ignore the massive expulsions of people of Mexican descent from the United States in the

1900s.¹⁶⁷ Even worse, some textbooks purportedly designed to fill these knowledge gaps, according to Latino scholars, are themselves “dripping with racism and intolerance.”¹⁶⁸ Exclusion or misinformation about Latinos aren't confined to the schools. For example, in 1994 a “blue ribbon” task force first observed that the Smithsonian Institution, the pre-eminent organization charged with telling America's story, had ignored Hispanics.¹⁶⁹ In December 2020, Congress finally authorized the establishment of a museum focused on Latinos—a process that will likely take years—but all educational institutions would do well to be more inclusive of the history of Hispanics in the United States starting today.

- **Latino advocates themselves should become better informed about systemic racism**, and more intentional about informing key audiences of the clear linkages between contemporary challenges faced by the Hispanic community and their roots in systemic racism. Toward that end, UnidosUS itself recognizes its responsibility to lead and has begun by: including a preamble about systemic racism to its major paper in June 2020 on the impact of the coronavirus on the Latino community,¹⁷⁰ compiling and publishing its first Hispanic Heritage Month reading list in October 2020,¹⁷¹ holding a major town hall on the subject that same month,¹⁷² and by publishing this primer, the first of a series designed to promote the inclusion of Latino perspectives in public discourse on racial justice and systemic racism.

Increased awareness of how racism has influenced our laws, policies, systems, and institutional structures is only the first step required to make our country's shared vision of equal opportunity for all a reality. That shared vision, however, simply cannot be achieved without the inclusion of Latinos, the nation's largest non-White demographic.



Appendix 1: Who is “Hispanic” or “Latino”?

In the context of systemic racism, the research demonstrates that much of the non-Hispanic community makes little differentiation among Latino subgroups and often treats most Latinos as a single racialized group.¹⁷³ However, mainly within the community itself there has always been a robust discussion about the nature of Latino identity. The issues are dynamic and complex, and “standard” terms are constantly evolving. Many people with Hispanic heritage principally identify with their national origin or the country of their forebears, while others see themselves principally as “American” who happen to have some Latino ancestry.

But because most Latinos, regardless of subgroup, have been racialized by non-Hispanics since they first became subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, visionary community leaders have long sought to promote a “pan-Hispanic” or common sense of identity, despite the problematic nature of trying to create a singular term to represent multiple nationalities, races, and cultures. The federal government’s classifications have a profound effect on shaping, describing, and some would say imposing identity on diverse communities.¹⁷⁴ The ongoing debate reflects both the core struggle of Hispanic identity in an America where race often viewed exclusively through a Black/White binary paradigm, and the difficulty of distilling the experiences of 60 million people to a single word. The following chronology identifies key milestones in the federal government’s attempt to identify, understand, and report on the status of the Latino community.

Before 1970:

The U.S. government collected data on various national origin groups (e.g., Italian, Irish) including those from south of the border, but classified the three largest Latin American groups in the United States at the time—Mexican American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican—as White.¹⁷⁵ This meant that virtually all government data for these groups were aggregated with “White” data, masking disparities that advocates knew existed.*

1976:

Concerned about the lack of data for Mexican Americans and other Latinos, activists including UnidosUS (formerly the National Council of La Raza) and other organizations, pressed Congress to pass the only law in this country’s history that mandated the collection and analysis of data for a specific ethnic group: “Americans of Spanish origin or descent.”¹⁷⁶ This legislation, spearheaded by Rep. Edward Roybal, defined that group as “Americans who identify themselves as being of Spanish-speaking background and trace their origin or descent from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish-speaking countries.”¹⁷⁷ This included 20 Spanish-speaking nations from Latin America and Spain itself, but not Portugal or Portuguese-speaking Brazil.¹⁷⁸

1977:

In response, the Office of Management and Budget first developed standards for collecting data on “Hispanics” (revised in 1997). These standards were supposed to be used by schools, public health facilities, and other government-funded entities and agencies to keep track of how many Hispanics they served, the primary goal of a 1976 law. However, compliance has been mixed at best.

1980:

For the first time, the decennial census asks all respondents to indicate their race and whether they were of “Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent.”¹⁷⁹

1970s–1980s:

“Latino” gained popularity as an alternative to “Hispanic,” as a term that purportedly did not highlight Spanish colonization and refers to those with origins in “Latin America.”

1993–1994:

Scholars, advocates, and Congress consider adding “Hispanic” as a racial category alongside White, Black, Asian, and Native American in the census, but the two-part question is maintained.

2000:

The term “Latino” appears for the first time on the U.S. Census along with “Hispanic.”¹⁸⁰

2017:

Federal officials considered major changes in how they ask Americans about their race and ethnicity—to separate Hispanic origin and race—after research showed many Hispanics did not identify with the current racial categories.¹⁸¹

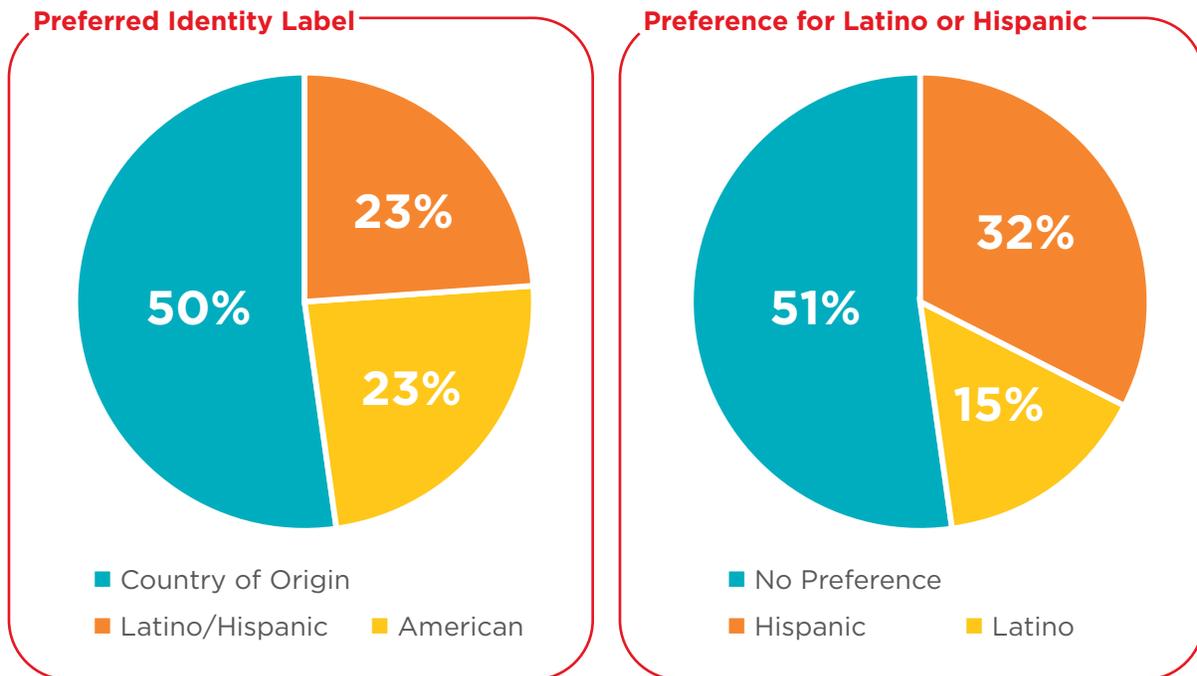
2020:

The Trump administration took several actions that likely led to a substantial undercount of Latinos on the 2020 census, including not using the streamlined question, threatening to add a confusing citizenship question, and shortening the period of time that people can respond to the census by one month, even amidst the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁸²

* Mexicans were listed as a race using that identifier in the 1930 census, but not before or after then. (See Clara Rodriguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census and the History of Ethnicity* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 42.

Appendix 2: No One Pan-Ethnic Term Is Preferred by the Majority of Latinos.

As long as there have been people in the United States who trace their roots to Spanish-speaking countries, they have used various terms to attempt to describe that segment of the population. While the U.S. government has defined the population as Hispanic/Latino, a person must self-identify to be included. Recent surveys show that preferences among specific terms vary, with none having a majority.



Notwithstanding the fact that a majority of people with Latino origins identify themselves principally by their or their forebears' national origin, over time there has been a marked acceptance of "pan-ethnic" terms such as Latino or Hispanic. In fact, it's almost become the universal default second choice for those who identify principally with country of origin.

More recently, a new, gender-neutral label Latinx, has emerged as an alternative embraced by certain groups, including universities, some media outlets, activists, and others. However, among people who identify as Hispanic or Latino, three out of four have never heard of the term. Of those who have heard of the term, only 3% use it to describe their identity.

Source: Luis Noe-Bustamante and Antonio Flores, "Facts on Latinos in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, September 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/latinos-in-the-u-s-fact-sheet/> (accessed November 16, 2020) and Mark Hugo Lopez, Jens Manuel Krogstad, and Jeffrey S. Passel, "Who is Hispanic?" Pew Research Center, September 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/15/who-is-hispanic/>.

Appendix 3: Latinos in the United States Have Origins from 22 Spanish-Speaking Countries.

The 15 largest U.S. Hispanic groups by origin (based on self-described race or ethnicity)

Flag	Country	Population in the U.S.
	Mexicans	36,634,000
	Puerto Ricans	5,614,000
	Salvadorans	2,307,000
	Cubans	2,298,000
	Dominicans	2,067,000
	Guatemalans	1,444,000
	Colombians	1,246,000
	Hondurans	940,000
	Spaniards	810,000
	Ecuadorians	738,000
	Peruvians	679,000
	Nicaraguans	464,000
	Venezuelans	421,000
	Argentines	278,000
	Panamanians	210,000

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2017 American Community Survey (1% IPUMS)



Appendix 4: Afro-Latinos in the United States

Afro-Latinos* are a significant portion of the Latino community and a vital part of the rich fabric of Latino culture. While these indicators are not a definitive measure of the Afro-Latino community, they help shed light on the community's current profile and the need for more substantive research and policy interventions.†

Population Size and Location:

- In 2017, there were more than three million Afro-Latinos in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. Other sources, including the Pew Trust and other private surveys, show higher proportions, as many as 24% of Hispanics reporting African heritage.¹⁸³
- Most Afro-Latinos reside in New York (23%), California (15%), and Florida (12%).

Age and Gender: Afro-Latinos—like the Latino population—is a young population, especially in comparison to Whites.

- In 2017, the median age of Afro-Latinos was 27, nearly the same median age of all Latinos—which was 29 years old.
- Afro-Latinos were 12 years younger than Whites, who had a median age of 39 in 2017.

Immigration Status: Afro-Latinos have higher rates of native-born citizenship status than Latinos overall, but lower rates than Whites.

- In 2017, 73% of Afro-Latinos were native-born citizens, compared to 65% of all Latinos and 87% of Whites.
- Only 10% of Afro-Latinos are naturalized citizens, while 16% of Afro-Latinos are noncitizen immigrants.

* “Afro-Latino” refers to an individual of African descent from Latin America or an individual who has one parent of African descent and another of Latino descent.

† Unless otherwise noted, this information is from UnidosUS’s publication “Afro-Latinos in 2017: A Demographic and Socio-Economic Snapshot” Available at: <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/1926>.

Education: Afro-Latinos have similar rates of educational attainment as Latinos generally, but at rates significantly less than Whites.

- Nearly 27% of Afro-Latinos did not complete high school in 2017, compared to 30% of all Latinos. This is more than double the rate of Whites who did not complete high school (12%).
- In 2017, 31% of Afro-Latinos and all Latinos only had high school diplomas, compared to 22% of Whites.
- In 2017, one-in-four (24%) Afro-Latinos had completed some college education—the same rate as Whites and 2% higher than all Latinos.
- Nearly 18% of Afro-Latinos have a bachelor’s degree or higher than 17% of all Latinos and 25% of Whites in 2017.

Workforce and Income: Afro-Latinos have similar workforce trends compared to Latinos overall.

- Afro-Latinos (79.5%) are nearly as likely as Latinos in general (81%) to work full-time.
- Afro-Latinos (28.3%) are more likely than Latinos in general (25.2%) to work in service occupations, which tend to pay lower wages.
- In 2016, Afro-Latino median household income was nearly the same as general Latino median household income (\$58,616 compared to \$59,402), but significantly less than White household income (\$73,810).

Poverty: Afro-Latinos experience higher rates of poverty than Latinos overall.

- With 23% of Afro-Latinos living in poverty, Afro-Latinos experience poverty at higher rates than the 18.3% of all Latinos who lived in poverty in 2017.
- In 2017, nearly 27% of Afro-Latinos received SNAP benefits in 2017 compared to 18.9% of Latinos overall.



UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger.

The UnidosUS Policy and Advocacy component is a leading think tank focusing on issues relevant to the Latino community. Through research, policy analysis, advocacy efforts, civic engagement, and campaigns, it defines a rigorous policy agenda that includes stances on immigration, education, health, employment and the economy, and housing. The component aligns federal work with state-level advocacy and provides support and expertise to state and local leaders in implementing Latino-focused policy.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit [unidosus.org](https://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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Printed in the United States of America.

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