

Who Is Hispanic? Definitions and Their Consequences

ABSTRACT

What is the appropriate method for classifying Spanish-speaking-origin inhabitants of the United States? This paper presents relevant data from the first wave of a longitudinal study of adolescents in the greater Miami area. As expected, the broadest definition—"up to third generation" Hispanic—identified the largest proportion of the sample as Hispanic, whereas parent self-report placed the smallest proportion into the Hispanic category. When policy-makers are concerned about enumerating the entire Hispanic population, a definition broader than self-identification should be used; in estimating prevalence rates, however, the use of self-identification may be adequate. (*Am J Public Health*. 1994;84:1985-1987)

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Introduction

During the past decade, a lively debate has emerged concerning both the appropriate term for Spanish-speaking-origin inhabitants of the United States and the appropriate methodology for applying the concept.¹⁻⁶ The purpose of this paper is to present some empirical data that enable us to assess the possible consequences of various operational definitions of this group. First, we view data concerning the number of generations of Latin American ancestry that should be counted before classifying an individual as Hispanic. As fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation Hispanic-Americans become more numerous in the United States, this question will become more, rather than less, complex. Second, we address the extent to which self-identification is an appropriate inclusionary or exclusionary criterion. If, for example, a Mexican-, Cuban-, or Puerto Rican-American woman does not consider herself to be Hispanic, is she? In the current study, we take answers to neither of these questions as given, but view data related to the questions empirically.

Methods

Study Design

The data presented are from the first wave of a longitudinal study that focuses on adolescent drug use in the multiethnic student population residing in the greater Miami area. (For a detailed description of sampling and data collection procedures, see Vega et al.⁷) From the overall sample of 7386 middle-school students (6760 boys and 626 girls), this analysis included all 3866 students who were identified as Hispanic by any of the definitions presented here. Of this group, many (39.4%) were of Cuban origin; 12.1% were Nicaraguan; 8.8% were Puerto Rican; 7.9% were Colombian; 3.1% were Dominican; 2.3% were Honduran; 1.7% were Mexican; and 24.7% were from other countries or of mixed national origin. The current sample contains approximately 9 times the proportion of Cuban-origin individuals as does the National 1990 Latino

Profile, 2.5 times the proportion of Central and South American-origin individuals, 85% the proportion of Puerto Rican-origin individuals, and 3% the proportion of Mexican-origin individuals as does the National Profile.

Measures

The students completed self-administered questionnaires in their classrooms in either Spanish or English. They made their responses either without assistance or with the aid of a proctor who read the questions and answers. Respondents were asked about their birthplace as well as about the birthplaces of their parents. They were also asked if they, either of their parents, or any of their grandparents were born in any of the following countries: Cuba, Nicaragua, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, or other country in South or Central America.

Our nomenclature concerning Hispanic generational history is similar to that presented by Marin and Marin.⁶ They suggest that the label "first-generation Hispanics" be used to identify those individuals born in Latin America; that "second-generation Hispanics" be used to describe those individuals born in the United States but whose parents were born in Latin America; and that "third-generation Hispanics" denote those individuals who were, along with their parents, born in the United States, but all of whose grandparents were born in Latin America. However, since our questionnaire did not directly assess grandparents' birthplaces but rather asked if the respondent or any of the respondent's parents or grandparents were born in Latin America,

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TABLE 1—Racial/Ethnic Distribution for Three Hispanic Definitions, Total Sample

Hispanic Definition	n	Hispanic, %	White Non-Hispanic, %	Black Non-Hispanic, %
1. Up to third generation (any grandparent, either parent, or self born in Spanish-speaking country)	5622	66.7	13.7	17.4
2. Up to second generation (either parent or self born in Spanish-speaking country)	5752	61.2
3. Parent self-report (parent identified adolescent as Hispanic rather than as White, Black, or Other)	5670	55.6	21.3	21.6

Note. Total numbers may vary slightly because of missing data. Also, all total numbers are significantly smaller than the original total sample size (7386) because of missing data on birthplace (students' or parents') and/or parental identification of students' race/ethnicity.

TABLE 2—Relationships among Hispanic Definitions

Definition A/ Definition B	% Classified as Hispanic by Both Definitions	% Classified as Hispanic by Definition A, Not Definition B	% Classified as Hispanic by Definition B, Not Definition A	% Classified as Hispanic by Neither Definition
1. Up to third generation/2. Up to second generation	91.1	8.2	0.0	0.8
2. Up to second generation/3. Parent self-report	80.2	11.9	3.2	6.4
1. Up to third generation/3. Parent self-report	82.0	17.3	0.9	0.0

our categories must deviate slightly from Marín and Marín's. Thus, this study classified as "up to third generation" Hispanic (i.e., first-, second-, or third-generation Hispanic) respondents who indicated that they or either of their parents or any of their grandparents were born in Latin America. This study also used a more restrictive definition, classifying students as "up to second generation" Hispanic if they indicated that either they or either of their parents was born in Latin America but excluding those whose grandparents only were born in Spanish-speaking countries.

The third definition of Hispanic ethnicity was taken from school records—that is, from parents' reports linked to the confidential questionnaires (which were not marked with identifiers but could be matched by demographic questions to school data). When parents registered their children in the school system, they had classified the children as White,

Hispanic, Black, Asian, or other. This parent self-report definition most closely resembles the census definition and is the one used (albeit unfortunately) by many behavioral scientists.

Seven other variables were also used as proxies of Hispanic cultural experiences: length of time living in the United States, language behavior, acculturation-related conflicts, perceived discrimination of Hispanics, respect for family, language-related conflicts, and the gap between the respondent's and his/her parents' perceived cultural orientation; each of these ranged from "all Hispanic" to "all American." Greater detail about the characteristics and development of these measures can be found in Vega et al.⁸

Results

Table 1 presents descriptions of the racial/ethnic composition of the total sample according to all three Hispanic

definitions. As expected, the up to third generation definition identifies the largest proportion of the sample (66.7%) as Hispanic, with the parent self-report placing the smallest proportion into the Hispanic category (55.6%). The up to second generation definition identifies an intermediate proportion as Hispanic (61.2%). Of those characterized as Hispanic in the up to third generation definition but not by parent self-report, two thirds were categorized as non-Hispanic White and one third were identified as non-Hispanic Black.

For the remainder of this paper, only those identified as Hispanic by any of these definitions are included in analyses. The relationships among the three definitions are presented in Table 2. The greatest discrepancy in classification occurred between the up to third generation and parent self-report definitions. Of those in the sample, 17.3% were classified as Hispanic by the former definition but not by the latter one. There were moderate discrepancies, however, between the other two pairs of definitions. Discrepancies were primarily unidirectional, with the narrower definitions not classifying as Hispanic some individuals who were so classified within the broader definitions.

One other definition of Hispanic could be applied to only a subsample of respondents. Those who completed a two-part version of the questionnaire were asked to categorize themselves (i.e., self-identify) as Hispanic, Black, White, Asian, or other. Among those who were classified as Hispanic by the up to third generation definition, 91% self-identified as Hispanic; by the up to second generation definition, 98%; and by their parents' report, 99%. Interestingly, of those whose parents said they were not Hispanic, 21% of the students themselves indicated that their racial/ethnic identity was Hispanic.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to compare individuals who were classified as Hispanic by the up to third generation definition but not by parent self-report. As seen in Table 3, results indicate that those with this discrepancy were more likely to have been born or have parents who were born in the United States or in another non-Hispanic country; to have a mother with a higher level of education; to use the Spanish language less in their everyday lives; to perceive a smaller gap in acculturation between themselves and their parents (i.e., to have more acculturated parents); and to have families with less traditional values. In other words, those whose parents

identified them as other than Hispanic had more acculturated parents, were more acculturated themselves, and were more likely to have members of their family born in non-Spanish-speaking countries.

Beyond the size of the Hispanic group enumerated, the definition of who is Hispanic may have other consequences. Those discrepantly identified as Hispanic by the most and least restrictive definitions were compared with those identified as Hispanic by both definitions concerning their substance use, delinquent behavior and attitudes, family pride, self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts. Differences were generally small and not significant. Individuals who were categorized discrepantly (i.e., as Hispanic by the up to third generation definition but not by parent self-report) did, however, evidence more depressive symptomatology as well as less family pride ($P < .001$).

Conclusions

Two issues prompted the current investigation: (1) the number of generations that should appropriately be included in decisions concerning who is Hispanic and (2) the extent to which self-identification is an appropriate method of classifying Hispanics. Generally speaking, the current findings are consistent with the literature in showing that the up to second generation definition contains the minimum number of generational steps that should be considered for identifying a respondent as Hispanic. Further research is required concerning the extent to which mixed third-generation Hispanics (i.e., those for whom only one or some grandparents were born in Latin America) are appropriately identified as Hispanic, because our data do not specifically allow us to assess individual grandparents' birthplaces. Our data do strongly show, however, that individuals identified as Hispanic in the up to third generation definition but not by a more restrictive definition are at least significantly more acculturated on a number of dimensions.

Self-identification (via parents' information) has been shown to possibly underestimate the number of Hispanics in our sample—at least as measured by the more conservative up to second generation definition—by a rather significant

TABLE 3—Logistic Regression for Discrepancies between Definitions 1 and 3

Variable	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	Significance
Language behavior	-0.22	0.05	< .0001
Value gap	-0.22	0.07	.0010
Family orientation	-0.11	0.03	< .0001
Mother's education	0.24	0.06	.0001
Parents' birthplaces	-1.63	0.15	< .0001
Student's birthplace	-0.94	0.17	< .0001

Note. Model chi-square = 557.18; $df = 6$; $P < .0001$; discrepant students correctly classified = 38.5%.

11.9%. Even the more direct self-identification measure provided by a subsample of the students themselves estimated the Hispanic proportion of the sample to be 2% lower than did the up to second generation definition.

In drawing our conclusions, we must be careful to add that the differences among measures as well as the impact of the use of the various measures may vary among Hispanic groups. The extent to which this sample is disproportionately Cuban-American and not Mexican-American, as compared with the National Latino Profile, requires that the results be generalized with great caution.

Interestingly, the choice of definition of Hispanic had little effect on a variety of possible dependent variables, including delinquent behaviors, substance use, and perceptions of peers and self. Thus, when policymakers and community leaders are concerned about enumerating the entire Hispanic population, it is important that they use a definition broader than self-identification; in estimating prevalence rates, however, the use of self-identification may be adequate. And when public health officials are considering the implications of findings about Hispanics, they should consider not only the manner in which the "Hispanic" identifier has been applied but also the appropriateness of an objective, demographic-based measure as compared with a more subjective one. □

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