

Hispanics State's Fastest Growing Group

Yanyi K. Djamba

Montgomery Advertiser

October 22, 2009

From Auburn to Tuscaloosa and across all areas of the state, the rich Hispanic culture is mostly seen in the fast-growing number of Mexican restaurants and increasing number of churches offering worship services in Spanish. This trend results in large part from the fast-growing Hispanic population in the state.

In the past 10 years, the number of people who self-identify themselves as Hispanic has grown from 39,340 in 1997 to 119,415 in 2007, according to the Census Bureau estimates. This change represents a 200 percent increase in 10 years, or a 20 percent annual growth. During the same period, Alabama's non-Hispanic population increased only by 0.81 percent in 10 years, or 0.08 percent per year.

Even though the Hispanic population still represents only about 2.5 percent of the state's population, their rapid growth rate and their distinctive socio-demographic characteristics suggest that this population brings not only a rich cultural heritage but also a population rejuvenation that may boost Alabama's population.

A closer look at the socio-demographic characteristics shows that the Alabama Hispanic population is very diverse, widely spread across the state, and primarily composed of young adults with children. The majority of Hispanics living in Alabama (68 percent) are of Mexican origin. The rest are originally from a variety of countries ranging from Argentina to Venezuela. Additionally, some Hispanics are white, some are black.

Hispanic population is not made up exclusively of immigrants. Nearly half of the Hispanics living in Alabama were born in the United States. Hispanics live in all 67 counties, but there are variations in terms of the relative number to county population. For example, Franklin County has the highest percentage of Hispanics (12.5 percent of the county population), followed by DeKalb and Marshall (9.8 percent), Bullock (7.5 percent), and Blount (6.8 percent).

The lowest percentages of Hispanic population (less than 1 percent) are found in Butler, Choctaw, Clarke, Dallas, Monroe and Greene counties.

About half of the Hispanics in Alabama are U.S. citizens, but the English language remains a major obstacle to social integration for many of them. According to the 2007 American Community Survey, about half (52.2 percent) of Alabama Hispanics indicated that they speak English very well or well; the rest consider their English proficiency as not well (30.8 percent) or do not speak English at all (17 percent.)

Interestingly, there is no big difference in internal migration and marital status between Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations in Alabama. For example, eight in 10 Hispanic and non-Hispanic people interviewed in 2007 said they had lived in the same house for 12 months before the survey.

Both groups are also similar in terms of marriage; nearly half of all Hispanics and non-Hispanics were

married in 2007. In contrast, non-Hispanics were more likely to be divorced than Hispanics.

Due to the selectivity of migration, men are more prone to migrate than women; therefore, there are slightly more male than female Hispanics in Alabama. Still, the stability of marriage and the desire for larger families lead to higher birthrate among Hispanic women than non-Hispanic women. As such, the Hispanic population is younger (40 percent below age 20) than non-Hispanic population (26.9 percent below age 20).

The combination of higher birthrate with continuous immigration results in a very high growth rate of the Alabama Hispanic population. This rapid population growth indicates the need for more schooling and childhood services if we are to prepare all children for full socio-economic integration.

In addition to their cultural and demographic contributions, Hispanics are part of the Alabama labor force. In fact, 63.3 percent of Hispanics were working in paying jobs, compared to 50.8 percent of non-Hispanics in 2007. Certainly, differences in the age distribution and nature of employment must be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, for a predominantly immigrant group, such a higher labor force participation rate suggests that Hispanics contribute to the vitality of the Alabama economy.

Hispanic men and women also serve in the U.S. armed forces. According to data from the 2007 American Community Survey, about 7 percent of Hispanics have served in some capacities in the U.S. military, compared to 14 percent of non-Hispanics.

The Hispanic population is now the fastest growing minority group not only in the nation, but also in the state of Alabama. This group brings a cultural and demographic heritage that will transform our communities and our state, as we embrace the emergence of the multicultural world in the 21st century.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.
