‘Hispanics’ don’t
The fast-growing U.S. ethnic group isn't an ethnic group at all. It's a mishmash of many different groups. Herewith, a guide to the nation's 17 major Latino subcultures

BY LINDA ROBINSON

The growing proportion of Hispanics in the U.S. population constitutes one of the most dramatic demographic shifts in American history. The number of Hispanics is increasing almost four times as fast as the rest of the population, and they are expected to surpass African-Americans as the largest minority group by 2005. It's projected that nearly 1 of every 4 Americans will be Hispanic by the year 2050, up from 1 in 9 today. Yet other Americans often have no clear idea of just who these 29 million people are.

One reason is that the label Hispanic obscures the enormous diversity among people who come (or whose forebears came) from two dozen countries and whose ancestry ranges from pure Spanish to mixtures of Spanish blood with Native American, African, German, and Italian, to name a few hybrids. While most are bound by a common language, Spanish, many Hispanic-Americans speak only English. This diversity helps explain why Hispanics' political clout remains disproportionately slight. Hispanics even disagree on what they want to be called; some prefer the term Latino-Ameri­cans speak only English. This diversity helps explain why Hispanics' political clout remains disproportionately slight. Hispanics even disagree on what they want to be called; most identify themselves by original nationality, while others prefer the term Latino.

A common Latino subculture doesn't really exist in the United States. True, there are some pockets of pan-Hispanic melding in major cities, and occasional alliances are struck on specific issues; with time, the differences may merge into a shared Latino identity. But for the present, it makes more sense to speak of Hispanics not as one ethnic group but as many.

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How many Hispanic subcultures exist in the United States today? Ethnologists are bound to differ on this question, but U.S. News puts the number at 17. We have taken into account the largest communities as well as the smaller (yet, in our unscientific judgments, most culturally distinct) ones. What follows is an overview and taxonomy of the 17 major Latino subcultures in the United States, listed by geographic region.

CALIFORNIANS

Hispanics represent 30 percent of the population in California today and by 2020 are projected to outnumber non-Hispanic whites there. Many Latinos, of course, migrated to California back when it was still a part of Mexico. But more than 80 percent of Southern California's Hispanics came after 1970. In 1996, newly naturalized Latinos voted at higher rates than the general population. The galvanizing event was 1994's passage of Proposition 187, which sought to end school and health services for illegal immigrants. (A federal judge has blocked implementation of Prop. 187; the matter is expected to be appealed up to the Supreme Court.)

1. Immigrant Mexicans. Newcomers to Los Angeles traditionally settle in enclaves like East L.A., but in the past decade they've also poured into low-income black areas like South Central and Compton as well as Huntington Park, a formerly Anglo neighborhood that had become a ghost town. "Ahora es México," says a man standing with his son at the corner of Florence and Pacific while his wife buys tamales and chicken in mole from a huge takeout store. "None of this was here when I came 15 years ago," he says, nodding at the Spanish-named car dealer­ships, shoe stores, bridal shops, and super­markets stretching for blocks.

2. Middle-class Mexicans. Many Mexican-Americans in California have moved up the socioeconomic ladder, sometimes in a single generation. Overall, two thirds of Latinos in the United States live above the poverty line; half of Southern California's native Latino families, and one third of those from abroad, are middle class. New arrivals often hold two jobs, leveraging themselves or their children into such middle-income occupations as police officer, manager, and executive secretary. They have migrated from traditional ports of entry to more-prosperous neigh­
borhoods and suburbs like San Gabriel and Montebello. There, Mexican-Americans buy three- and four-bedroom tract houses next door to Asians. Farther east, in Hacienda Heights, Mexican-American families’ yards are bigger, the driveways than a sixth-grade education; their children who from u gh as life may be in the Mexican bar­

TEJANOS

Texas Mexicans argue with their Californ­

Pico United States.

5. South Texans. The most Mexican part

Barrio dwellers. Many Mexicans move

Central Americans of Pico Union. As tough

South Texans. The most Mexican part

Houston Mexicans. In Houston, Latinos are still a minority. Anglos make up 41 percent of the popula­

Texas Guatemalans. Houston’s urban sprawl could not be more foreign to the Mayan Indians of Guatemala, who grew up in the rural highlands speaking their native Indian language. Because they have little chance of upward

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Central Americans are the fastest growing segment of L.A.’s population. Nearby Korentown is also now predomin­

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upscale supermarket chain that ended up hiring 1,000 Mayas.

**CHICAGO LATINOS**

Latinos followed Irish, Polish, and other European immigrants to this city of ethnic neighborhoods. Only Los Angeles and New York have larger Hispanic populations than Chicago, which is projected to be 27 percent Hispanic in the year 2000. And Chicago’s mix of Hispanic subgroups is more diverse than that of L.A. or New York. Among U.S. cities, Chicago ranks second in the number of Puerto Ricans, fourth in the number of Mexicans, and third in the number of Ecuadorans. Guatemalans and Cubans are also here in force.

8. **Chicago Mexicans.** The first of Chicago’s nearly 600,000 Mexicans arrived to work on the railroad just after the turn of the century; more came to man steel mills during World War II. “Chicago’s weather is so harsh that the only reason Latinos come here is jobs,” says Rob Paral, research director of the Latino Institute. Chicago has absorbed the steady influx fairly well: Its manufacturing base remains strong and unemployment is low. Its Latinos mirror the national profile in that 80 percent are native-born and two thirds lack high school diplomas. But only one fourth are poor. (The national rate is 31 percent.) The commercial heart of Mexican Chicago, 26th Street, generates more tax revenue than any other retail strip except tony Michigan Avenue. It’s lined with hundreds of stores like La Villita Dry Cleaner, a pizzeria, Nuevo Leon restaurant—but has just one Walgreen’s.

9. **Chicago Puerto Ricans.** Two giant, steel Puerto Rican flags fly over Division Avenue by Roberto Clemente High School. They were erected to stake out the turf of Paseo Boricua, a strip of mom and pop businesses, and the Puerto Rican-owned Banco Popular, the largest Hispanic-owned bank in the United States. Sitting in his sister’s bakery across from the AIDS education center he founded, community leader Jose Lopez says that urban renewal plans are pushing Puerto Ricans into suburban ghettos instead of helping them prosper. He launched the flag project as part of his drive to bolster Puerto Rican pride and identity. One of the great paradoxes of Puerto Rico’s identity is that while they have the benefit of being born U.S. citizens, they have fared worse economically than any other Hispanic group. They have the highest rates of poverty (38 percent), unemployment (11.2 percent), and households headed by single females (41 percent).

**MIAMIANs**

Miami is the one major city in the United States where Hispanics dominate numerically, politically, and economically. They make up about 60 percent of the population, a meteoric rise from only 5 percent in 1960. Miami is seen as a Cuban city, but other immigrants who have poured in since 1980 now make up 40 percent of Hispanics living here.

10. **Cubans.** Success stories are not hard to find among Miami’s 1 million Cubans. Of the 80 Latinos in the United States worth $25 million or more (according to a recent survey in Hispanic Business magazine), 32 are of Cuban origin. Singer Gloria Estefan, the late exile leader Jorge Mas Canosa, and a handful of Miami builders made last year’s list. Roberto Goizueta, the late head of Coca-Cola, topped it. U.S.-born Cubans have the highest incomes of any Hispanic subgroup, and over two thirds of them live in Florida.

For this influx of talented and successful immigrants, America has Fidel Castro to thank. The first wave of Cuban immigrants in the 1960s, following Castro’s Communist takeover of Cuba, doubled their incomes in three years: Four thousand were doctors, and most had good educations. They started restaurants; clothing, furniture, and cigar businesses; and drive-up storefronts dispensing strong, sweet cafe cubano. They built subdivisions sprawling into the Everglades and provided jobs for tens of thousands of later, poorer Cuban immigrants. Alone among Hispanic subgroups, Cubans were warmly welcomed by the U.S. government throughout the cold war:

They received financial assistance and, until 1995, automatic legal residency. As of 1990, 55 percent of Cubans had graduated from high school, and 20 percent held white-collar jobs. But one third do not speak English well or at all; many of them are older Cubans with little incentive to learn the language in a Spanish-speaking city.

11. **Nicaraguans.** During the 1980s, U.S.-

Only Los Angeles and New York have more Latinos
backed rebel leaders plotted to overthrow Nicaragua's Communist government from offices near Miami's airport. As the war dragged on, young Nicaraguans came here to evade the military draft. After the Communists finally lost power in 1990, some 75,000 Nicaraguans remained in the United States. Congress recently granted them the right to stay, so many may eventually become U.S. citizens. Nicaraguan exiles were embraced by Cubans who sympathized with their flight from communism; they settled in Cuban areas like Hialeah and East Little Havana and found work in Cuban-owned businesses. Unlike Miami's Cubans, though, the Nicaraguan immigrants are mostly poor, rural folk, averaging 26 years of age and nine years of schooling. More than half don't speak English well or at all, and their median income of $9,000 in 1990 was the second lowest of all ethnic groups in Miami. (The lowest-ranked group was the 20,000 Hondurans who moved to Miami when the Nicaraguan war unsettled their country.)

12. South Americans. Miami's Hispanic upper crust is not just Cuban; it also includes Colombians, Peruvians, and other South Americans. These wealthy immigrants began coming to Miami when their countries' economies plunged into crisis in the 1980s. Business and professional people fled with their money, buying houses in Kendall, a Miami suburb, and condos in waterfront high-rises. They number well over 100,000.

13. Puerto Ricans. During the 1950s, the decade when West Side Story came to Broadway, New York was home to 80 percent of all Puerto Ricans in the United States. Cheap, frequent flights ferried the islanders back and forth. One million immigrated to New York after World War II, forming the backbone of the city's manufacturing work force. By the 1960s, Puerto Ricans also owned some 4,000 businesses. Many were in Spanish Harlem, which was dotted with restaurants serving chicken asopao and pastelés, the Puerto Rican version of tamales made with green bananas. In the 1970s Puerto Ricans' American experience turned sour: Newer immigrants began displacing them, and then the industrial base of New York withered away. Unemployed Puerto Ricans headed back home, only to return to New York when they couldn't find jobs there either. In New York, they saw their median family income drop below that of African-Americans, which was rising. "Compared to the black community, our resources are so much weaker," says Angelo Falcón, director of the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy. "We don't have their church leaders or their colleges. We don't have a solid middle class."

14. Dominicans. Washington Heights is the expatriate capital of Dominicans, who now represent almost 10 percent of all Latinos in the New York area. They came to this rundown tip of upper Manhattan, named it Quisqueya—the Native American name for the Dominican Republic—and immediately went into business. They opened neighborhood stores called bodegas all over the city, and drove cabs that competed with yellow taxis. Some Dominicans also tapped their location by the George Washington Bridge to set up a huge drug distribution network serving the Atlantic Coast. Despite all this entrepreneurial activity and Dominicans' comparatively high median income ($10,000 to $15,000), their unemployment rate is 83 percent; 14 percent are on welfare; and 42 percent don't speak English well. New York's Dominicans have fared nearly as badly as Puerto Ricans, in part because they are overwhelmingly first-generation immigrants without high school degrees. They too suffer from a revolving-door syndrome that has kept them from putting down roots. Community leaders have yet to solve Quisqueya's many problems: discrimination against the mostly black and mulatto Dominicans, poor police relations (the 1992 killing of a Dominican immigrant sparked riots), drug-fueled crime, and high rents.

15. Colombians. Colombians have won the economic success that has eluded most Hispanics, but they're dogged by a stereotype that all Colombians are drug traffickers. Most are in fact legitimate businesspeople and successful professionals; yet to avoid stigma, some say they are from another country. New York is their principal U.S. destination, followed by Miami. Only 40 percent are U.S. citizens, although the number is increasing because Colombia now allows dual citizenship. Two thirds of Colombians have jobs, and their median income is close to that of non-Hispanic whites. One fifth of...
Colombian families earn $50,000 or more, in keeping with their reputation as South America's best entrepreneurs. But arrests of major Colombian traffickers and grisly murders in their Queens enclave of Jackson Heights have cemented a negative image in the public's mind.

**ELSEWHERE IN THE U.S.**

**16. New Mexico's Hispanos.** Northern New Mexico is home to the nation's most unusual and least-known group of Hispanics. They are descendants of the original Spanish conquistadors and as such belong to the oldest European culture within U.S. borders. In the valleys of Rio Arriba they farm ribbonlike plots bequeathed to their ancestors by the Spanish crown; live in ancient adobe homes; and cook pork in red chile sauce in outdoor ovens. A proud, poor people, they call themselves Hispanos to emphasize that they are not immigrants from Latin America. The Spanish they speak is a dialect from the time of Coronado, and the holidays they celebrate are Spanish ones commemorating events like the 1692 reconquest of New Mexico and the conquest of the Moors. A dwindling Catholic sect called the Penitentes practices self-flagellation in their ancestors' moradas, or temples. Another subgroup are descendants of marranos, Spanish Jews who fled the Inquisition and continued to observe Jewish rites secretly. Centuries of subdividing their farmland have forced such to belong to the oldest European culture within U.S. borders. In the valleys of Rio Arriba they farm ribbonlike plots bequeathed to their ancestors by the Spanish crown; live in ancient adobe homes; and cook pork in red chile sauce in outdoor ovens. A proud, poor people, they call themselves Hispanos to emphasize that they are not immigrants from Latin America. The Spanish they speak is a dialect from the time of Coronado, and the holidays they celebrate are Spanish ones commemorating events like the 1692 reconquest of New Mexico and the conquest of the Moors. A dwindling Catholic sector called the Penitentes practices self-flagellation in their ancestors' moradas, or temples. Another subgroup are descendants of marranos, Spanish Jews who fled the Inquisition and continued to observe Jewish rites secretly. Centuries of subdividing their farmland have forced young Hispanos to seek seasonal work elsewhere or to move away entirely. Unemployment hovers around 20 percent and welfare dependence is high.

**17. Migrant workers.** For decades, the demand for temporary farmhands has sent Hispanics all over the United States. The migrant farmhands still travel from crop to crop, living in camps straight out of a Steinbeck novel, but farm mechanization has reduced their numbers to about 70,000 for the Midwest harvest. Meanwhile, a second stream of Mexicans is being drawn to work in chicken- and beef-packing plants in places like Dodge City, Kan., where 4,000 Hispanics have arrived since 1990. In Maine, hundreds of Mexicans work on egg farms in Turner (pop. 5,000), which now has a bilingual school program. Siler City, N.C., had 200 Hispanics in 1990. Today, half its 6,000 residents are Hispanic, and the town has three churches offering services in Spanish and four Latin American grocery stores.