

## Working with Hispanic and Latino Elders

### Introduction

With offices in all 75 counties of Arkansas, the faculty and staff members of the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service provide educational programs and research-based information to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability, marital or veteran status, or any other legally protected status. **One group among those the Extension works with regularly is Hispanics or Latino Americans.**



Most of the Hispanics the Cooperative Extension Service works with are Mexican-Americans. There are generally three categories of Mexican-Americans: those born in Mexico who are not U.S. citizens, those born in Mexico who have become U.S. citizens, and those born in the United States.

The Extension also works with Latinos who are individuals or descendants from other Latin American countries. There are some cultural differences in terms of providing programs for Hispanic or Latino elders based on both their citizenship and acculturation level. The following information is a very brief overview of some population trends and traits for Hispanics.

### Demographic Trends

According to the U.S. Census, the nation's Hispanic population continued to grow at much faster rates than the population as a whole. The population of Hispanics (who may be of any race) reached 39.9 million on July 1, 2003, accounting for about one-half of the 9.4 million residents added to the nation's population since Census 2000. The Hispanic population growth rate of 13.0 percent over the 39-month period was almost four times the growth rate of the total population (3.3 percent).

In the total U.S. population, Hispanics have the highest percentage of preschoolers (under age five), accounting for just over 21% (or 4.2 million—the total number of preschoolers in the United States was estimated at 19.8 million). In contrast, Hispanics have the lowest percentage of senior adults (65 and older) at just over 5% in 2003 (white, non-Hispanics account for 15% of those over 65). However, it is estimated that by 2050, Hispanic elders will make up 16% of the total senior adult population; hence, there is a growing need for information on working with Hispanic elders.

### Population Traits

**Acculturation** is the process by which the attitudes or beliefs and behaviors of a person from one culture are modified as a result of contact with a different culture. In the U.S., acculturation is considered acquiring the beliefs and behaviors of the mainstream white culture. Whether or not becoming acculturated is a good or bad thing depends on what source one references as well as what issues are being discussed. The extent to which Hispanic individuals are acculturated will help determine whether a program needs to be modified to meet their needs.

Generally, Hispanic families rely heavily on an extended support system that is inter-generational and includes non-blood relatives. This system is called **compadrasgo**. In this system, decisions are family

based. Husbands and wives do not attend training individually, or even as a couple, but as a family. Therefore, **any training targeting a Hispanic audience must accommodate the entire family.**

When providing programming on family issues, it is important to understand who is considered family. Many recent immigrants have left their family elders in Mexico. Due to this, *compadres*—individuals who become extended family by means of a traditional religious ceremony—or non-blood relatives have taken on many of the responsibilities that are associated with relatives' roles.

**Personalismo** is the way individuals learn to trust a person by sharing personal information. It is in knowing the total person, not just the professional side, that Hispanic elders form trust in people and in programs. It is very important when working with Hispanics to self-disclose. When a Hispanic elder asks if you are married or have children, they are trying to develop a working relationship. **Don't be offended by personal questions Hispanic clientele may ask.** In fact, be willing to share some personal information up front. That may help your Hispanic clients feel more at ease. Ultimately, the goal is for the county agent to be trusted by the Hispanic elder and the family.

**Respect is extremely important to Hispanic elders.** Based on age and position in the family, Hispanic elders are to be greeted first. They expect to be called Mr. (Señor) or Mrs. (Señora). They also expect professionals to dress professionally when working with them. In short, Hispanic elders expect to have respect demonstrated to them by how individuals greet them, address them, treat them and their family, and dress when they are delivering programs. Respect is the most important aspect of having Hispanic elders participate in programs. They are more likely to trust you if you show respect to them.

## Marketing Tips

The following suggestions will assist you in making contacts with Hispanic elders:

- Contact the communities where Hispanics can be found, such as churches and social clubs.
- Place announcements in the Spanish newspapers.
- Advertise on Spanish-speaking radio and television stations—many Hispanic elders cannot read or write in English or Spanish.
- Go door-to-door leaving pamphlets written in both English and Spanish (very time consuming but most effective way to reach Hispanic elders).
- Ask Hispanic elders to help. Hispanic elders make good leaders, but instead of asking them to become leaders (many still feel that leaders are rich people) ask something like, “Would you like to help coordinate this program?”

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## References/Acknowledgements

U.S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov>

Aleman, Sara (2000) “Mexican-American Elders” in *Therapeutic Interventions with Ethnic Elders* by Aleman, Fitzpatrick, Tran, and Gonzalez. The Hawthorn Press, Binghamton, NY.

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