

Executive Summary

Hispanics constitute the fastest growing segment of the population in the country, and are becoming a major presence in Northwest Indiana. The number of Hispanics in Lake, LaPorte, Porter and Starke Counties has increased 39.3 percent—from 50,327 in 1990 to 70,123 in 2000. This study focuses on regional Hispanics, including a variety of demographic and socioeconomic factors.

Key findings:

- ▶ While Hispanics constitute 9.2 percent of the regional population, they are not equally distributed throughout the area. Most Hispanics (84.3%) live in Lake County, with Hammond and East Chicago having the largest numbers. Over half of the residents of East Chicago are Hispanic (51.6%).
- ▶ A larger percentage of local Hispanics identify themselves as white (51.9%) compared to Hispanics in the state (46.9%) and the United States (47.9%).
- ▶ Although the majority of Hispanics in the area are of Mexican origin (63.6%), there are also many Puerto Ricans in the area (24.0%), giving that group a larger presence than in either the state (11.0%) or the US (10.1%).
- ▶ Hispanics as a group are younger than either whites or blacks, primarily as a result of greater migration and higher birth rates.
- ▶ Hispanics lag behind both whites and blacks in educational achievement, with higher percentages not completing high school and lower percentages having a bachelor's degree.
- ▶ Unemployment rates are higher for Hispanics than they are for whites, but lower than those for blacks. These rates may increase, however, as the job structure begins to favor those with higher education.
- ▶ Overall, measures of income favor whites, as they have higher per capita incomes and lower poverty rates than either blacks or Hispanics. Hispanics have somewhat lower per capita incomes than blacks, and their poverty rates are also lower.
- ▶ Home ownership figures also favor whites, with over three-quarters of whites in the four counties living in owner-occupied housing. Comparable figures for Hispanics are around two-thirds living in owner-occupied housing, and for blacks just under half. Hispanic home ownership rates are higher locally, however, than the national rate of 48 percent.
- ▶ National opinion polls of Hispanics indicate that, despite problems with education and discrimination, Hispanics are also generally optimistic about life in America. This is likely due to the recent immigration of many Hispanics to the US, a move which would not have been made unless they felt that life would be better in this country.
- ▶ Hispanics are gaining political strength both nationally and locally as a result of their formation of coalitions, as well as governmental formation of commissions to deal with

Hispanic issues.

- ▶ Migrant workers are the worst off among Hispanics locally and in the state, with considerably lower levels of income and education, poorer health and housing. With a 2000 median family income of \$4400, 97 percent of migrant families live below the poverty line.

Conclusions:

While, in many ways, Hispanics in the region are better off than blacks, and also fare better than Hispanics nationally, there is much to be done to raise their quality of life. The political influence of coalitions will be helpful, but the biggest change must be in educational attainment. As long as local Hispanics trail other groups in this important measure they will be limited in terms of employment opportunities, which will impact income levels and housing choices. The primary focus of Hispanic coalitions, both national and regional, should be to promote higher education. ❖