



## Family Structure and Family Formation among Low-Income Hispanics in the U.S.

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### Overview

There have been dramatic changes in the structure of families in the U.S. over the past several decades. Fewer couples are getting married, while more are cohabiting and having children outside of marriage. Additionally, men are increasingly fathering children with more than one woman (“multiple-partner fertility”). Although patterns are not always well-documented, these changes have not impacted all race/ethnic groups in the same way. In particular, family structure among Hispanics—the largest and one of the fastest growing racial/ethnic minority groups in the U.S.<sup>i</sup>—is less understood than that of some other groups. This is a critical knowledge gap, as Hispanics currently make up 17 percent of the U.S. population<sup>ii</sup> and 25 percent of children under age 18.<sup>iii</sup>

This research brief provides a national portrait of low-income<sup>1</sup> Hispanic families in the U.S. Currently, two-thirds of Hispanic children live in low-income households,<sup>iv</sup> while roughly one-third of Hispanic children and one-fifth of Hispanics adults live in poverty.<sup>ii</sup> Having a better understanding of these families will help programs and policymakers in their efforts to assist these families. We use recent nationally-representative data to describe the relationship and childbearing histories of low-income Hispanic men and women aged 15 to 44. Importantly, we distinguish by nativity—i.e., born in the U.S. versus in some other country—as family formation patterns vary greatly by nativity, and these differences are obscured when Hispanics are examined as a whole. Currently, just under 50 percent of Hispanic adults are foreign-born.<sup>ii</sup> For comparison, we present findings for both low-income, non-Hispanic whites and blacks born in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> (For simplicity, non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black are hereafter referred to as white and black, respectively.)

### Key Findings

#### Relationships

- Low-income Hispanic women are married or cohabit (known as “co-residential unions”) early. Over half of low-income Hispanic women—both the foreign-born and the U.S.-born—have entered a marriage or cohabiting union by age 20; only three in ten Hispanic men have.
- However, more foreign-born low-income Hispanics report currently being married than do any other group. Marriage rates among U.S.-born low-income Hispanics are more similar to those of whites.

#### Childbearing

- Roughly half of low-income Hispanic women—both foreign-born and U.S.-born—report a birth by age 20. Among men, early childbearing is most common among U.S.-born Hispanic men and black men.
- Most births to low-income Hispanics occur in some type of co-residential union. This is particularly true for the foreign-born. Eight in ten births to foreign-born Hispanic women and nine in ten births to foreign-born Hispanic men occur in a marital or cohabiting union.
- There are large differences in multiple-partner fertility among low-income Hispanic men, depending on whether they were born in or outside of the U.S. More than 30 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic men (with two or more children) report having children with more than one woman, compared to one in ten foreign-born Hispanic men.

1 A household is identified as low-income when the household income is less than or equal to 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

2 Only eight percent of non-Hispanic blacks, and four percent of non-Hispanic whites, are foreign-born.<sup>v</sup>

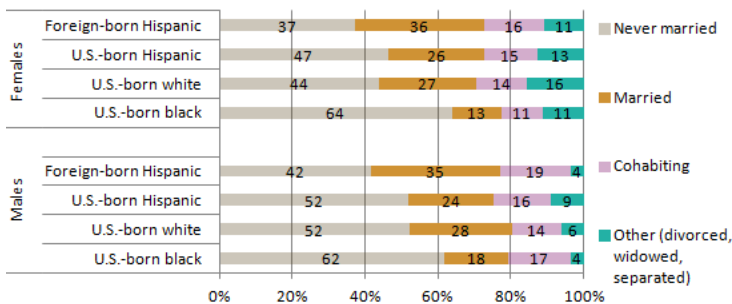
## Data

The analyses presented in this brief use data from the 2006-2010 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG),<sup>vi</sup> conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. The NSFG contains data from a nationally-representative sample of men and women in the U.S., aged 15 to 44. We focus on low-income (household income less than or equal to 150 percent of federal poverty level) men and women, and limit our sample to U.S.-born Hispanics (n=1,187), foreign-born Hispanics (n=1,444), U.S.-born blacks (n=1,912), and U.S.-born whites (n=2,833). We include only U.S.-born white and black respondents in order to make the direct comparisons between U.S.-born and foreign-born groups more consistent across all racial/ethnic categories. (Only eight percent of non-Hispanic blacks, and four percent of non-Hispanic whites, are foreign-born.)<sup>v</sup>

We conducted descriptive analyses across a range of family structure and family formation measures, including: current union status (never married, married, cohabiting, other), age at first union, age at first marriage, age at first birth, union status at first birth, and men's multiple partner fertility (not available for women). All analyses were conducted in Stata and weighted to be nationally representative. Additionally, standardization techniques were used to adjust for age differences across subgroups, allowing us to compare results across race/ethnicity and sex. All reported differences are significant at the <.05 level.

## Relationship Histories of Low-Income Men and Women

Figure 1. Current Union Status among Low-Income Females and Males, by Race/Ethnicity



**Low-income, foreign-born Hispanics are more likely to be married than any other group examined.** This is true for men and for women (see Figure 1).

- Thirty-six percent of foreign-born Hispanic women are currently married, compared with 26 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic women (similar to the rate among low-income white women); black men and women are the least likely to be currently married.
- Similarly, 35 percent of foreign-born Hispanic men are currently married, compared to 24 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic men.

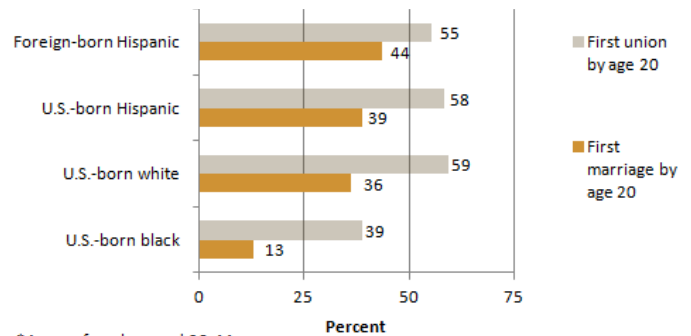
**Low-income, foreign-born Hispanic men and women are also the least likely to be never married.**

- Thirty-seven percent of foreign-born Hispanic women have never been married, compared with 47 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic women, 44 percent of white women, and 64 percent of black women.
- Forty-two percent of foreign-born Hispanic men have never been married, compared to over half of U.S.-born Hispanic and white men and over 60 percent of black men.

**Similar proportions of low-income Hispanics currently cohabit, regardless of nativity.**

Nineteen percent of low-income, foreign-born Hispanic men are currently in cohabiting unions, as are 16 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic men. Similarly, among low-income Hispanic women, 15 percent of the U.S.-born and 16 percent of the foreign-born currently cohabit. Among low-income men and women, there is little to moderate variation in cohabitation by racial/ethnic group (11 to 19 percent).

Figure 2. First Co-Residential Union and First Marriage by Age 20 among Low-Income Females,\* by Race/Ethnicity

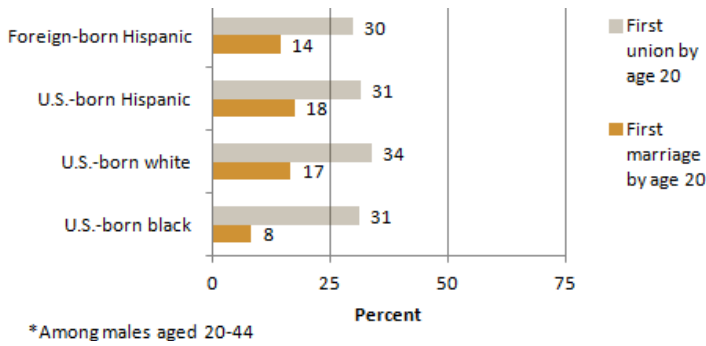


\*Among females aged 20-44

**Well over half of low-income Hispanic women, both foreign-born and U.S.-born, have formed some sort of co-residential union (marriage or cohabitation) by age 20.**

While some of these unions are cohabiting, 44 percent of foreign-born Hispanic women and 39 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic women were married by age 20. With the exception of black women, there is no significant variation in age at first marriage or first cohabitation among low-income women (see Figure 2).

Figure 3. First Co-Residential Union and First Marriage by Age 20 among Low-Income Males,\* by Race/Ethnicity

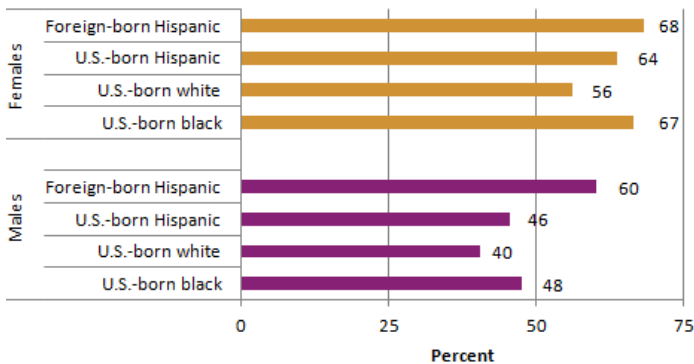


**Fewer low-income Hispanic men than women—regardless of nativity—enter a co-residential union prior to age 20.**

This is true for black and white men too. Roughly three in ten of all low-income men enter their first co-residential union (either cohabitation or marriage) prior to age 20; and less than two in ten marry by that age (see Figure 3).

## Childbearing Histories of Low-Income Men and Women

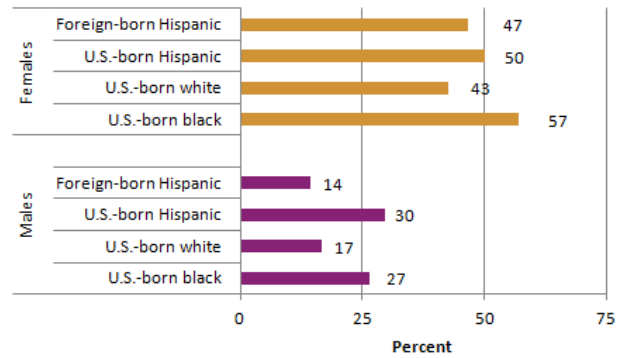
Figure 4. Ever Had a Biological Child among Low-Income Females and Males, by Race/Ethnicity



**Roughly two-thirds of low-income Hispanic women, regardless of nativity, have at least one child.** This is similar to levels among black women, and higher than levels among white women (see Figure 4).

**However, among the low-income, more foreign-born Hispanic men have had at least one child than have U.S.-born Hispanic men.** Sixty percent of foreign-born men report having at least one child, compared to less than half of all other low-income men, including U.S.-born Hispanic men.

Figure 5. First Birth by Age 20 among Low-Income Females and Males,\* by Race/Ethnicity

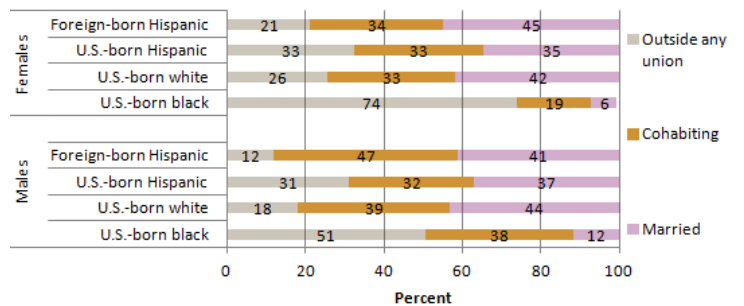


\*Among males and females aged 20-44

**Approximately half of low-income Hispanic women have had a first birth by age 20, regardless of nativity.** This falls between the proportions of low-income white (43 percent) and black (57 percent) women who have had a birth by age 20 (see Figure 5).

**However, among the low-income, U.S.-born Hispanic men are twice as likely as the foreign-born to have had a birth by age 20.** Three in ten U.S.-born Hispanic men have had a birth by age 20, compared to 14 percent of foreign-born men. Levels among the U.S.-born are more similar to those for low-income black men, while levels among the foreign-born are more similar to those for low-income white men.

Figure 6. Union Status at First Birth among Low-Income Females and Males, by Race/Ethnicity

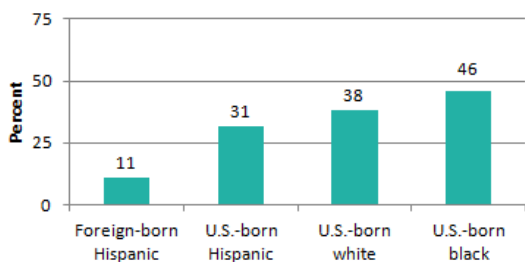


**Among the low-income, almost nine in ten foreign-born Hispanic men and eight in ten foreign-born Hispanic women were in some sort of co-residential union (married or cohabiting) at the birth of their first child.** Conversely, relatively few are outside of any union at the time of their first birth (see Figure 6).

- Among Hispanic women, levels of cohabitation were similar regardless of nativity. Roughly one-third of Hispanics were cohabiting at first birth, equal to the percentage among white women. However, more foreign-born Hispanic women were married at first birth (45 percent) than were U.S.-born Hispanic women (35 percent).

- Among men, levels of marriage were fairly similar regardless of nativity. Close to four in ten Hispanic men were married at their first birth. However, in this case, foreign-born Hispanic men were more likely to report being in a cohabiting union at birth (47 percent) than were U.S.-born men (32 percent).

Figure 7. Multiple Partner Fertility among Low-Income Males,\* by Race/Ethnicity



\*Among men with two or more biological children

**Low-income, foreign-born Hispanic men have the lowest levels of multiple-partner fertility.** The proportion of men having children with more than one partner has increased over time. Despite this, only one in ten low-income, foreign-born Hispanic men with two or more children report having children with more than one woman, compared to 31 percent of U.S.-born Hispanic men, 38 percent of white men, and 46 percent of black men (see Figure 7).

## Discussion and Implications

Research and popular culture have long documented the central role that families play in Hispanic cultures. The findings in this brief highlight the ways the families of low-income Hispanics continue to stand out in the U.S. In some cases, low-income Hispanics' families more closely resemble low-income blacks', in some cases they resemble low-income whites', and in some cases they do not resemble either group.

In general, low-income Hispanic women—both those born in the U.S. and those born elsewhere—start families early: they get married relatively young, though at levels similar to low-income white women, and they have children relatively early compared with their white counterparts.

Still, this only tells part of the story. There are important differences between U.S.- and foreign-born low-income Hispanic families. Low-income, foreign-born Hispanic women are more likely than the U.S.-born to be married at the birth of their first child and to still be married. Conversely, low-income, U.S.-born Hispanic women are more likely to have their first birth outside of any union than are the foreign-born. Among low-income Hispanic men, the foreign-born are also more likely to be married than the U.S.-born. They also tend

to have children at older ages compared with U.S.-born Hispanic males, and are much less likely to have children with multiple partners.

Taken together, these patterns have important implications for program providers who seek to effectively serve Hispanic families. First, it is important to know the nativity status of the population being served. As has been documented in other research among Hispanics,<sup>vii</sup> there are some important differences in the composition of low-income Hispanic families. This means that the resources—including parental time and potential income—available to low-income families will also differ, as will barriers to receiving services. For example, U.S.-born Hispanic families will likely have fewer language barriers or barriers related to legal status.

Second, the vast majority of low-income Hispanic children, particularly those born to foreign-born parents, are born into two-parent households. This means that fathers are often a presence in the lives of young, low-income Hispanic children, even if parents are not married. This is important for a number of reasons. It suggests that the birth of a child may be an ideal time to target low-income Hispanic couples with programs designed to strengthen relationships. It may also cause some programs to reevaluate their perception of low-income fathers as primarily living apart from their children.

## References

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## About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families is a hub of research to improve the lives of Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. It's comprised of a team of national experts in Hispanic issues, led by Child Trends and Abt Associates along with university partners (University of Maryland - College Park, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the Institute for Human Development and Social Change at New York University). The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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