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PERSPECTIVE

Ignored In Open-Borders Debate: Rising Cost Of Second Underclass

BY HEATHER MAC DONALD

Before immigration optimists issue another rosy prognosis for America's multicultural future, they need to confront reality: Hispanic youths, whether recent arrivals from Latin America or birthright American citizens, are developing an underclass culture.

Hispanic school dropout rates and teen birthrates are now the highest in the nation. Gang crime is exploding nationally — rising 50% from 1999 to 2002 — driven by the march of Hispanic immigration east and north across the country.

Most worrisome, underclass indicators like crime and single parenthood do not improve over successive generations of Hispanics. They worsen.

The pull to a culture of violence among Hispanic children begins early. In Chicago, gangs start recruiting kids at age 9, say criminologists. The Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium concluded that gangs have become fully integrated into Hispanic youth culture; even children not in gangs emulate their attitudes, dress and self-presentation.

Washington, D.C., reports the same “ever younger” phenomenon. “Recruitment is starting early in middle school,” said Lori Kaplan, head of D.C.'s Latin American Youth Center.

Unwritten Code Is Gone
Even as it reaches down to ever-younger recruits, gang culture is growing more lethal. In April, 16-year-old Valentino Arenas shot to death a California Highway Patrol officer in the hope of gaining entry to Pomona's 12th Street Gang.

Such assassinations don't surprise Dennis Farrell, a Nassau County, N.Y., homicide detective. “We're amazed at the openness of shootings,” he said. “When we do cases with Hispanic gangs, we often get full statements of admission, almost like they don't see what's the big deal.”

The unwritten code that moderated gang violence three decades ago has fallen away.

“When I grew up,” said Santa Ana, Calif., native and gang investigator Kevin Ruiz, “there were rules of engagement: no shooting at churches or at home. Now no one is immune.”

The constant invasion of illegal aliens is worsening gang violence as well. In

Phoenix and surrounding Maricopa County, illegal alien gangs, such as Brown Pride and Wetback Power, are growing more volatile and dangerous.

Disturbingly, upward mobility to the suburbs doesn't necessarily break the allure of gang culture. In the middle-class suburbs of southwest Miami, second- and third-generation Hispanic youths are perpetrating home invasions, robberies, battery, drug sales and rape. Many cops and youth workers blame the increase in gang appeal on the disintegration of the Hispanic family.

In California, 67% of children of U.S.-born Hispanic parents lived in an intact family in 1990. By 1999, that number had dropped to 56%. Nationally, single-parent households constituted 25% of all Hispanic households with minor children in 1980. By 2000, the proportion had jumped to 34%.

High Welfare Rate
Trends in teen parenthood — the marker of underclass behavior — will almost certainly affect the crime and gang rate.

Hispanics now outrank blacks for teen births. In 2002, there were 83.4 births per 1,000 Hispanic fe-

males between ages 15 and 19 compared with 66.6 among blacks, 28.5 among non-Hispanic whites and 18.3 among Asians.

In one respect, Central American immigrants break the mold of traditional American underclass behavior: They work. Even so, the Mexican welfare receipt is twice as high as that of natives, in large part because Mexican-American incomes are so low and remain low over successive generations.

Welfare use actually rises between the second and third generation — to 31% of all third-generation Mexican-American households. Illegal Hispanics make liberal use of welfare too by putting their American-born children on public assistance. In Orange County, Calif., nearly twice as many Hispanic welfare cases are for children of illegal aliens as for legal families.

On the final component of underclass behavior — school failure — Hispanics are in a class by themselves. No other group drops out in greater numbers.

In Los Angeles, only 48% of Hispanic ninth-graders graduate compared with a 56% citywide graduation rate and a nationwide rate of 70%. (Continued)

In 2000, nearly 30% of Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 were high school dropouts nationwide compared with 13% of blacks and 7% of whites.

Chicago provides a cautionary tale about high levels of Hispanic immigration combined with an ever more powerful underclass ethic.

During the 1990s, the Hispanic population in Chicago grew 38%, to 754,000, and became increasingly concentrated in the city's barrios. Education levels and English fluency plummeted. Serious crime, social disorder and physical decay grew in direct proportion to the number of Spanish-speaking Latinos. After a neighborhood became more than 60% Latino, physical decay — including graffiti and abandoned cars — jumped disproportionately. By 2001, social pathology

among Spanish-speaking Latinos was higher

than for any other racial or ethnic group.

Immigration optimists, ever ready to trumpet the benefits of today's immigration wave, have refused to acknowledge its costs. When pressed, they dismiss worries about the Hispanic future with their favorite comparison between Mexicans and Italians. The analogy goes like this:

A century ago, Italian immigration anticipated the Mexican influx, above all in Italians' disregard for education. They dropped out of school in high numbers — yet they eventually prospered and joined the mainstream. Therefore, Mexicans will too.

The analogy is flawed. To begin with, the magnitude of Mexican immigration renders all historical comparisons irrelevant, as Har-

vard historian Samuel Huntington argues. In 2000, Mexicans constituted nearly 30% of the foreign-born population in the U.S. In 1910, Italians made up barely a seventh of the immigrant population. There was no chance that Italian would become the dominant language in any part of the country. By contrast, half of today's immigrants speak Spanish.

No Pause To Assimilate

Equally important, the flow of newcomers came to an abrupt halt after World War I and did not resume until 1965. This long pause allowed the country ample opportunity to Americanize the foreign-born and their children.

Today, no end is in sight to the migration from Mexico and its neighbors, which continually reinforces Mexican culture in American Hispanic communities and seems likely to do so for decades.

Meanwhile, the Mexican government does everything it can to bind Mexican migrants psychologically to the home country in order to safeguard an annual \$12 billion flow of remittances.

To be sure, most Hispanics are hard-working, law-abiding residents; they have renewed squalid neighborhoods in South Central Los Angeles and elsewhere. But given the magnitude of present immigration levels, if only a portion of those from south of the border goes bad, the costs to society will be enormous.

Until the country figures out how to avoid importing a second underclass, maintaining the current open-borders regime is folly.

■ **Heather Mac Donald** is a contributing editor of *City Journal*. This article is adapted from its latest issue.