English Language Proficiency Among Older Hispanics in the United States

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Like the population as a whole, the elderly population of the United States is becoming more diverse in terms of ethnic composition and national origin. Especially important in this regard is the rapid growth of the elderly Hispanic population, which is expected to constitute 17% of the elderly population of the United States by the year 2050 (Day, 1996). One of the most significant aspects of a large Hispanic population in the United States will be increased diversity in language use and levels of English language proficiency (Espenshade & Fu, 1997). Although these issues are commonly discussed with reference to the population at large, and perhaps particularly school and working age populations, much less attention has been directed to linguistic characteristics of elderly adults. Although practitioners who deal with elderly individuals have long cautioned that poor English skills may result in barriers to social service and health care delivery in the United States (Hart, Gallagher-Thomson, Davies, DiMinno, & Lessin, 1996; Johnson et al., 1995; Tanjasiri, Wallace, & Shibata, 1995), little research on levels of English proficiency has been conducted.

This article examines levels of English language proficiency among older Hispanics residing in the United States. Hispanic individuals aged 60 and older are profiled in terms of their use of English and their residence in households where no one speaks English proficiently. We then examine the determinants of English proficiency levels for older Hispanics, by considering the effects of immigration history and timing, educational and economic background, and residence in geographic areas with concentrated Hispanic populations. We conclude that a sizable minority of elderly Hispanics have limited proficiency in English, and that the inability to speak English well is strongly shaped by immigration history, socioeconomic status, geographic area of residence, and national origin group.

Background

Recent projections of the U.S. population highlight the growing importance of the Hispanic segments within the aging population. The share of the 65-and-older population that is White and non-Hispanic is projected to decline substantially in coming decades, from 87% in 1990 to 66% by 2050. In contrast, Hispanics have been identified as the group that will grow most rapidly over this same time period, replacing Blacks as the second largest racial/ethnic group within the older population by the year 2030. This growth will continue to have implications for social policy well into the next century (Treas, 1997; Treas & Torrecilha, 1995).

Although Hispanics—including persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latin American origin—are distinguished by considerable diversity in national origin, socioeconomic status, and regional concentration within the United States, they share the “common denominator” of affinity to the Spanish language (Bean & Tienda, 1987). As noted by Espenshade and Fu (1997), concerns about linguistic diversity may contribute to anti-immigrant sentiment within the United States, and poor English skills are frequently cited as contributing to poor adjustment, integration, and well-being on the part of immigrants. In terms of the implications for linguistic diversity, the growth of both the immigrant and native-born Hispanic segments is significant.
Through strengthening ethnic ties, retention of non-English “mother tongue” or ethnic language can yield benefits to the aging individual. By facilitating the formation of ethnically based communication systems, language use can contribute to the creation and maintenance of ethnic subcommunities within larger geographic areas (Lieberson, 1963; Stevens, 1985). Moreover, ability to communicate in one’s ethnic language is often regarded as an important means of retaining a strong sense of cultural identity. As a cultural marker, the ability to speak Spanish is important to Hispanics not only symbolically, but also functionally, providing access to a language network (Mirowsky & Ross, 1984). One’s sense of well-being, as well as one’s ethnically based social support system, may be enhanced when older Hispanics retain the use of Spanish (Sotomayor, 1971). Although benefits for older Hispanics may result from residence in ethnic communities, linguistic diversity may be a source of tension between ethnic and English-speaking groups, as is evident in the efforts on the part of some locales to enact “English-only” legislation (King, 1997). Language can therefore serve to tie an individual more closely to other members of a linguistic community, as well as to set him or her apart from individuals speaking a different language.

Implications of Poor English Language Proficiency.

The potential advantages of retaining the use of Spanish aside, it is likely that the inability to communicate effectively in English is problematic for many elderly Hispanics in the United States. Language use patterns may represent a significant source of division within ethnic and national origin groups, by forming an “internal language boundary” between segments of the same ethnic group (Stevens, 1985). Indeed, intergenerational differences in pace and level of acculturation may result in language boundaries occurring even among members of the same family, contributing to intergenerational cultural conflicts.

Research shows that poor English proficiency is a potential barrier to obtaining social and medical services (Hart et al., 1996; Johnson et al., 1995; Saldov, 1991; Tanjasiri et al., 1995), to employment, and to educational attainment (Stevens, 1992). Espino, Bedolla, Perez, and Baker (1996) show that the psychological assessment of depression among older Mexican Americans is compromised by language barriers and the lack of Spanish-language screening instruments. Legge and Cant (1995) suggest that linguistic barriers may be detrimental to well-being among elderly immigrants, by contributing to their sense of social isolation. Moreover, Markides and Black (1996) cite the low media exposure resulting from poor English proficiency, which may in turn limit health promotion activities among some elderly Hispanics.

The potential costs of poor English proficiency may not be as extreme if older individuals who are unable to communicate well in English are nonetheless able to access the English-speaking community “by proxy.” Older individuals are often embedded in familial networks that provide social, caregiving, and other support across generations. Many older Hispanics who do not speak English well have ready access to a bilingual family member who may assist when communication with English speakers is desirable. Yet costs to independence and self-esteem may be incurred—although the position of older Hispanic individuals within the extended family is described as “highly respected and secure” (Applewhite & Daley, 1988, p. 8), extensive reliance on children for communicating in English could prove problematic and may represent a challenge to an older individual’s autonomy.

Language use patterns within the elderly population have seldom been documented, much less examined in depth, yet it is clear that limited English proficiency among older Hispanics may have implications for their overall well-being, as well as their ability to interact with members of the English-speaking community. These implications will be shaped not only by individual and familial factors, but also by the level of Hispanic concentration within the community (Massey, 1995).

Determinants of English Language Proficiency.—

A high level of proficiency in English is common among Hispanics in the United States, yet poorer proficiency is observed among segments of the population. Although the determinants of English proficiency have not been examined within the older population, available literature suggests that several processes are likely at work. We examine three contributing processes in the current analysis.

First, individual immigration history is an important determinant of English language proficiency. Stevens (1985) finds that native-born members of ethnic groups commonly rely on English as their primary or sole language, a population-based process of mother-tongue "shift" that is facilitated by intermarriage and other assimilation-linked processes. Moreover, Veltman (1988) reports that most Hispanic immigrants quickly adopt English as their usual or only language. Recent arrivals to the United States are less likely to have shifted to English as their preferred language, and Hispanics who migrate to the United States at an older age also tend to retain their use of Spanish to a greater degree. We therefore expect that older Hispanics who were born in the United States will be more proficient in English, followed by older Hispanics who have resided in the United States for an extended period of time. Older Hispanics who migrated to the United States more recently are expected to have the lowest levels of English proficiency, all else equal.

Second, socioeconomic background shapes English proficiency among ethnic groups, in that the acquisition of higher levels of education and income is associated with more proficient use of English. English language proficiency is commonly identified as one indicator of cultural assimilation (Bean & Tienda, 1987; Burr & Mutchler, 1992; Gordon, 1964; Stevens, 1985; Stevens & Swicegood, 1987). Cultural assimilation in general, and English language proficiency in particular, are related to level of structural assimilation, including integration into the economic institutions of mainstream U.S. society. English language proficiency can therefore be seen as part of an overall process of
structural and cultural assimilation (Bean & Tienda, 1987).

It is to be expected that speaking English well facilitates the accumulation of educational and economic resources through providing access to better training and occupational opportunities. Yet, in addition, the literature suggests that these socioeconomic resources may themselves precipitate greater skill in speaking English. More substantial educational and economic resources are thought to provide greater exposure to English-speaking networks, which, in turn, results in better speaking English. For example, based on their investigation of Mexican Americans in El Paso, Texas, Mirowsky and Ross (1984) report that individuals who were embedded in largely Spanish-speaking networks had lower socioeconomic status. They conclude that the language shift process is facilitated by higher economic and educational resources. In a national study, Espenshade and Fu (1997) found a positive association between English-speaking proficiency of immigrants and their education (both schooling completed in the home country and in the United States following immigration), as well as other indicators of socioeconomic status, including home ownership and higher occupational status. Educational attainment was also found to be a significant predictor of language shift among Hispanics by Grenier (1984).

Third, geographic area of residence may shape an individual's use of and proficiency in English. Residence in communities where a language other than English is commonly spoken has been found to delay language shift to English (Espenshade & Fu, 1997; Lieberson, 1963; Lieberson & Curry, 1971; Stevens, 1992). Living in a spatially concentrated Hispanic community—that is, a community where a large share of the population is of Hispanic origin—may lower the "opportunity costs" of limited English language proficiency (Espenshade & Fu, 1997; Grenier, 1984), in part by promoting Spanish and bilingual environments and community resources. As an illustration, we might compare an older Cuban-born immigrant living in Miami with his sister living in Iowa City. The sister would have many more opportunities to become proficient in English, and might experience many more incentives to do so, than would her brother.

In the current analysis, indicators relating to each of these three processes are considered. In addition, interactions among immigrant status, socioeconomic status, and geographic concentration are examined, directed toward assessing the expectation that socioeconomic resources and residence in a Hispanic community may have differing implications for native-born individuals and immigrants. A number of demographic characteristics and indicators of national origin are also examined.

Methods

The primary data source used in this project is the 1990 Census of Population and Housing Public-Use Microdata Samples. These data include demographic, social, and economic information about individuals and their families as well as the households and housing units within which they live. We use the 5% Public-Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), representing a 5% sample of the population, combined with data from a 3% Public-Use Microdata Sample of individuals aged 60 and older (PUMS-O), resulting in an 8% sample of the Hispanics aged 60 and older in 1990. The PUMS-O is a special extract released by the Bureau of the Census under agreement with the Administration on Aging and includes only housing units with at least one person aged 60 or older and persons aged 60 and older living in group quarters (see Appendix, Note 1). The 5% PUMS and the PUMS-O share the same level of geographic detail, and each includes codes identifying the area of residence (see Appendix, Note 2). Inasmuch as the 1990 PUMS and PUMS-O are not self-weighting, Census Bureau-generated weights are applied. For the multivariate analyses, the weights are adjusted to replicate the original sample size.

The PUMS data offer several advantages for the current study. First, these data are nationally representative and do not suffer from idiosyncratic features of local area surveys. Second, sufficient sample sizes allow us to evaluate specific national origin groups within the Hispanic population. Respondents self-classify in the Census with regard to race, ethnicity (Hispanic/non-Hispanic), and national origin group. As noted by Angel and Hogan (1992), Census data provide virtually the only vehicle for detailed race and ethnic group comparisons, given the small size of some ethnic subgroups. Finally, acceptable indicators of the key variables for our analyses are included in these data.

Variables

The central variable of interest is based on an assessment of how well an individual speaks English. Respondents to the long-form of the 1990 Census of Population were asked if they speak a language other than English at home. People who responded that they always or sometimes speak a language other than English at home were also asked to indicate their ability to speak English. Respondents rated their ability as "very well," "well," "not well," or "not at all" (see Espenshade & Fu, 1997, for further discussion of an equivalent measure). We note that this indicator does not tap ability or proficiency in speaking Spanish, and therefore does not adequately reflect level of cultural attachment or Hispanic identity. Rather, this measure assesses functional ability to speak English, a skill offering many advantages in most communities throughout the United States. For most of our analysis, we collapse this variable into a dichotomous measure composed of (0) speaking English only, very well, or well, and (1) speaking English not well or not at all (see Appendix, Note 3). Individuals falling into the second category are considered to have poor English language proficiency.

A related variable considered in the descriptive portion of our analysis is a measure of linguistic isolation. As suggested earlier, it is important not only to assess an older individual's level of English proficiency, but also to assess the extent to which he or she may have
English proficiency is examined with reference to a number of individual and community-level characteristics. Each individual’s immigrant status and timing of entry is considered through use of dummy variables. Individuals born in the United States (or elsewhere to U.S. citizen parents) are contrasted with persons born elsewhere and entering the mainland United States to stay, either prior to 1965 or since 1965. Island-born Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth and therefore are not technically immigrants when moving to the mainland. Yet, given the dominance of Spanish as the spoken language in Puerto Rico, it is desirable for this study to treat only those Puerto Ricans born on the mainland as U.S.-born. For purposes of this study, island-born individuals are classified as immigrants, and timing of entry is based on when they arrived on the mainland. Key changes in the immigration preference system occurring in 1965, as well as critical changes in the global economy, resulted in large increases in the number of immigrants entering the United States during the past three decades from Latin America and Asia, making this a particularly important cutoff point in the timing of entry (Bean & Tienda, 1987; Massey, 1995).

Two indicators of socioeconomic status are considered. Educational attainment is measured in years of completed education. For the age groups considered here, many immigrants’ schooling would have been completed prior to arriving in the United States. Although education completed in Mexico or Cuba, for instance, may have included limited or no training in English, we would expect that even schooling obtained outside the United States would shape subsequent acquisition of English through resulting job opportunities and contact with broader social networks. Annual relative income is calculated based on personal income if the individual is not married, or the combination of own and spouse’s personal income if the individual is married. The income values are expressed relative to the poverty cutoff for an individual or couple, depending on marital status, and classified into three categories. Individuals with relative income values below 100% of the poverty cutoff are classified as being poor, whereas individuals with relative income values between 100% and 125% of the poverty cutoff are classified as “near poor.” Many observers have argued that the official poverty line is far below what may reasonably reflect economic hardship, and advocate using a higher cutoff in summarizing economic well-being. Indeed, rates of hardship reflected by incomes under 125% of the poverty cutoff are routinely reported in government statistics (e.g., in Current Population Reports). Individuals with values above 125% of the poverty cutoff are considered non-poor.

The ethnic concentration of the geographic area within which each individual lives is assessed using a location quotient (LQ) measure that establishes the concentration of Hispanics in a specified geographic area relative to the concentration of the population as a whole in the same geographic area (see Appendix, Note 5; Smaje, 1995). In this study, location quotients are generated for Hispanics as a group, rather than for each national origin group. Inasmuch as our focus is on English proficiency rather than attachment to one’s national origin, Hispanics are treated as a single linguistic group for purposes of this measure.

A number of demographic characteristics are also considered, including gender of the individual, age, and marital status (married vs not married). Given the potentially important differences among national origin groups in exposure to English, dummy variables are also examined specifying whether the person identifies him- or herself as of Mexican origin, Puerto Rican, of Cuban origin, or of other Hispanic origin.

Results

The first goal of this study is to document patterns of English language proficiency and rates of linguistic isolation among older Hispanics. Several conclusions are readily drawn based on Table 1. First, exclusive reliance on English is unusual for the older Hispanics considered here. Among Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans, 12% or fewer speak English only. Among “other Hispanics,” a residual category including those from Central America, South America, and other areas not specified, 23% communicate exclusively in English. Larger shares are proficient in English but nearly a third or more of each group speaks English poorly or not at all, ranging from 31% among “other” Hispanics to 63% of Cuban Americans. Puerto Ricans and Cubans are particularly likely to report speaking English poorly or not at all, possibly facilitated by the high level of geographic concentration among these groups.

Also evident in Table 1 are the high levels of linguistic isolation experienced by many older Hispanics. Readers are reminded that individuals who speak English proficiently are by definition not linguistically isolated. The second column for each national origin group indicates the share of each proficiency group that is linguistically isolated. For example, among Mexican Americans, the first column of figures indicates that 21% speak English “well.” Of these, 50% are lin-
these results suggest that half or more of older Hispanics who are at risk of linguistic isolation by virtue of their own limited proficiency levels are residing in households where no one speaks English proficiently. Moreover, the poorest speakers of English face the highest risk of linguistic isolation, suggesting that, as would be expected, an older individual, his/her spouse, and other family members often share roughly the same proficiency levels. Considering these two distributions together—the proficiency levels experienced by members of each group in combination with the differential risk of linguistic isolation—we find that overall, a quarter or more of the Hispanics aged 60 and older in the United States are linguistically isolated. Twenty-eight percent of the Mexican Americans, more than a third of the Puerto Ricans, and more than one half of the Cuban Americans neither communicate proficiently in English themselves nor live with an adult who could communicate in English proficiently on their behalf. Clearly, these patterns represent a challenge for many Hispanic individuals, as well as for the communities in which they live.

Table 2 provides a description of the sample used in this study, along with bivariate results for two categories of English proficiency—older Hispanics who speak English only, very well, or well versus those who speak English poorly or not at all. As reflected in Table 1, about one third of the older Hispanic individuals considered here are not proficient speakers of English. This translates to an estimated 578,662 Hispanics older than 60 who speak English poorly or not at all. More than 70% of the sample’s older Hispanics who immigrated since 1965 have difficulty communicating in English. As anticipated, individuals migrating to the United States before 1965 are more likely to speak English poorly than are their U.S.-born counterparts, but they are also substantially less likely to do so than more recent arrivals.

Socioeconomic status is also related to English proficiency. Older Hispanics who speak English proficiently report substantially higher educational attainments than do those who speak English poorly. In addition, a much higher rate of poor English proficiency is observed among older Hispanics who are poor and near poor than among their non-poor counterparts.

Older Hispanics who speak English poorly also live in substantially more concentrated Hispanic geographic areas, on average. A location quotient of 1.0 indicates that the geographic area of residence has a representation of Hispanics that is roughly proportional to that of the U.S. population as a whole, with values greater than 1.0 reflecting a greater share of Hispanics than would be expected. We note from Table 2 that, as a group, older Hispanics are concentrated in areas that have close to three times the representation of Hispanics expected, but that those who speak English poorly or not at all typically live in even more concentrated areas.

Demographic differences are evident in Table 2, but are much less striking than those already described. Women are more likely than men to speak English poorly or not at all, as are individuals who are not married relative to the married population. In addition, persons with poor English skills are slightly older, on average. Finally, although roughly a third of most national origin group members speak English poorly or not at all, nearly two thirds of the Cuban-origin older population has low proficiency in English.

In Table 3, results from the multivariate analysis are presented. Inasmuch as our English language proficiency measure is a dichotomous outcome, logistic regression
Table 2. Sample Characteristics, Hispanic Population Aged 60 and Older in the United States, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Characteristics*</th>
<th>Sample Distribution</th>
<th>Speaks English Only, Very Well, or Well</th>
<th>Speaks English Poorly or Not at All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics Aged 60+ (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in the U.S.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrated before 1965</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrated 1965–1990</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (median years completed)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit Income Relative to Poverty Cutoff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near poor</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not poor</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic concentration (LQ: median)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (median)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NationalOrigin Group (%)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban American</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hispanic</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of casesb</td>
<td>124,773</td>
<td>77,766</td>
<td>47,007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See text for definition of variables.

bUnweighted counts.

Source: 8% sample from the U.S. Census of Population. Percentage calculations are weighted. Sample excludes those living in group quarters.

techniques are used to estimate our models, using maximum likelihood estimation (Maddala, 1983). Coefficients reported in the first column represent log-likelihoods, with standard errors given in parentheses. A positive coefficient suggests that the probability of speaking English poorly or not at all is positively associated with that characteristic. In the second column, odds ratios are reported with their 95% confidence intervals.

These regression results suggest that virtually all of the variables included in the model significantly improve the model fit. Immigration status and history form particularly important parts of the model. Examining the odds ratios suggests that, relative to older Hispanics who are U.S.-born, immigrants arriving prior to 1965 are more than four times as likely to be limited in English proficiency. Recent arrivals to the United States are nearly 15 times as likely to speak English poorly, relative to their U.S.-born counterparts, all other characteristics held constant. Socioeconomic status is also an important influence. Older Hispanics with more education are significantly less likely to speak English poorly or not at all; those who are poor or near poor are significantly more likely to speak English poorly or not at all than are their non-poor counterparts. In addition, older Hispanics living in concentrated Hispanic communities are significantly more likely to lack good English skills.

Age, marital status, and gender are also associated with English language proficiency, although the magnitude of these effects is quite small relative to the others. The coefficients for national origin group suggest that, in comparison to the residual "other Hispanic" group, Puerto Ricans are significantly less likely and Cubans are significantly more likely to speak English poorly. No statistically significant difference between Mexican Americans and other Hispanics is observed.

In the final stage of the analysis a series of interaction models are estimated, the results of which are presented in Table 4 in the form of predicted probabilities. Given the diverse immigration histories of the older Hispanics considered here, and the overwhelming importance of this history on English language proficiency, we examined a series of interaction effects between immigration history, socioeconomic status, and ethnic concentration. Each of the three interaction effects results in a statistically significant improvement to model fit and, importantly, each supports a similar conclusion. Taken together, these effects suggest that socioeconomic status (education as well as income) and geographic concentration have more pronounced effects for U.S.-born Hispanics than for foreign-born Hispanics, especially recent immigrants.

For ease of interpretation, predicted probabilities are calculated and presented in Table 4. The formula
for calculating predicted probabilities from binomial logistic regression results is as follows (Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Lansdale, 1995): \( p = \frac{e^{b}}{1 + e^{b}} \). The estimates from the multivariate logistic regression models used to compute the predicted probabilities are available from the corresponding author upon request. These estimates reflected the predicted chances that an individual with the specified characteristics speaks English poorly or not at all. To facilitate comparisons, the probabilities are generated based on a consistent set of characteristics, which are outlined at the bottom of Table 4. The first cell of this table indicates that a poor, native-born Mexican American with other characteristics set as noted in the table (i.e., age 67, married, female, 10th grade education, living in an area with a concentration index of 2.9) has a .19 probability of speaking English poorly or not at all. Her similarly defined counterpart who is not poor has only a .07 chance. In contrast, a Mexican American who is also poor but immigrated to the United States since 1965 has a .73 chance of having poor English skills. Summarizing the results from Table 4 yields a number of conclusions. The overwhelming importance of immigration status and timing of entry is obvious. For each national origin group, native-born individuals are much more likely to speak English well, whereas persons who came to the United States most recently have high probabilities of speaking English poorly. Smaller but still sizable effects of income, education, and geographic concentration in Hispanic areas are noted. Regardless of national origin group or immigration status, older Hispanics in poorer economic circumstances, with less education, and in more highly concentrated areas have higher predicted probabilities of speaking English poorly. In addition to these effects, national origin continues to shape English proficiency. All else being equal, predicted probabilities of poor English skills for Mexican American and Puerto Rican groups are fairly similar, especially among the U.S.-born. However, persons of Cuban origin have substantially higher expected probabilities throughout.

The effects of the interactions can be seen by comparing predicted probabilities within each immigrant group, across levels of socioeconomic status and geographic concentration. The results suggest that the relative impacts of socioeconomic status and geographic concentration are more substantial among the native-born Hispanics than among their foreign-born counterparts, especially those who have immigrated since 1965. For example, poor Mexican Americans who immigrated recently are 22% more likely to speak English poorly or not at all than are their non-poor counterparts. In contrast, although their absolute probabilities of speaking English poorly are lower than among their immigrant counterparts, poor U.S.-born Mexican Americans are nearly three times more likely to lack English skills than are their non-poor U.S.-born counterparts. Similarly, poorly educated U.S.-born Cuban Americans who immigrated recently are 29% more likely to speak English poorly than are their well-educated counterparts, whereas poorly educated U.S.-born Cuban Americans are more than eight times as likely as to speak English poorly or not at all as their well-educated U.S.-born counterparts. Together, these results suggest that although U.S.-born older Hispanics have generally low probabilities of speaking English poorly or not at all, regardless of their other characteristics, substantial pockets of poor English proficiency are observed among older Hispanics who are in poor economic circumstances, who have very little education, and who live in highly concentrated Hispanic communities.

### Discussion

Hispanics will comprise an increasing share of the older population as we move into the 21st century. Results presented in this article, based on the 1990 U.S. Census of Population, suggest that substantial...
segments of the older Hispanic population speak English poorly or not at all. Many members of this group not only have poor English proficiency skills, but also either live alone or with others who also speak English poorly. These estimates suggest that issues surrounding language use and ability to speak and understand English may become more pressing as the Hispanic population expands and ages. Given the expected increase in the older Hispanic population, challenges experienced by schools and other organizations dealing with young Hispanics will increasingly be shared by organizations and programs serving the elderly population.

This study suggests that three processes contribute to limited English proficiency among some members of the older Hispanic population. First, and most importantly, immigrant status as well as timing of entry to the United States are powerful determinants of proficiency level. As would be expected, English proficiency is most limited among the most recent immigrants to the United States. Socioeconomic status, including education and income, is also strongly linked to English language proficiency. In addition, living in a community in which Hispanics constitute a relatively large share of the population is associated with an older Hispanic speaking English poorly or not at all. Of the several distinct national origin groups, Cuban Americans are most likely to have low proficiency in English, due in part, but not exclusively, to their high level of geographic concentration as well as their immigration history.

Although immigrant status is the most important determinant of limited English proficiency, segments of the U.S.-born population also experience difficulty speaking English well. Our analyses suggest that the marginal effects of poverty, low education, and geographic concentration are even more substantial for U.S.-born Hispanics than for their immigrant counterparts. Unless the socioeconomic disadvantages common within the Hispanic population are remedied, it is expected that many U.S.-born older Hispanics will continue to experience challenges communicating in English.

These results suggest that many older Hispanics cannot communicate well in an English-only environment. Dealing with practitioners and service providers in health care or social service settings would be difficult for them, and their formal care use may be limited as a result. Informal care providers, such as family members and neighbors, likely provide a particularly large share of support for these individuals. Moreover, as many of the older Hispanics with the poorest English skills are also linguistically isolated, when they must deal with formal organizations they must rely on friends or relatives outside the household or bilingual individuals within the service environments to make their needs and concerns known. Unless bilingual providers are available, such individuals in formal settings like hospitals or nursing homes are particularly disadvantaged in communicating their needs, and the quality of care provided to them may be compromised as a result.

Inasmuch as these results suggest that limited English proficiency is particularly prevalent among immigrants, the future of linguistic diversity among older Hispanics depends in large part on immigration policy. Elderly immigrants constitute a small but significant share of the older Hispanic population, due in part to the preference given to parents of adult U.S. citizens under current immigration policy (Wilmoth, Dejong, & Himes, 1997). Our results suggest that many of these older immigrants experience substantial difficulty.

### Table 4. Predicted Probabilities of Poor English Proficiency, Based on Interactive Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mexican American</th>
<th>Puerto Rican</th>
<th>Cuban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrated</td>
<td>Immigrated</td>
<td>Immigrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Born</td>
<td>Before 1965</td>
<td>Since 1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near poor</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not poor</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education = primary</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education = 10th grade</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education = High school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Concentration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LQ = 1.5</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LQ = 2.9</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LQ = 5.5</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Results are based on multivariate logistic regressions based on an 8% sample from the U.S. Census of Population (N = 124,757). Calculations are based on separate interactive models for immigration status by geographic concentration, educational attainment, and poverty status. All calculations are weighted. Sample excludes those living in group quarters. Predicted probabilities are generated assuming subject age of 67, married, and female. Unless otherwise specified, individual is assumed to be not poor, with 10 years of schooling, living in an area with concentration coefficient (LQ) of 2.9.
speaking English, and given their age as well as their other characteristics, they may never become proficient speakers. Although changes in the immigration preference system could result in fewer Hispanics entering old age with limited English skills, fundamental changes are unlikely in the short term. Overall, the projected increase in the number of Hispanics in the United States, the fact that the immigrant component of the Hispanic population is expected to continue to be sizable (Massey, 1995), and our results showing that even many U.S.-born Hispanics have poor English skills all suggest that the challenges posed by limited English proficiency will continue for the foreseeable future.

References

Appendix

Notes
1. The group quarters population—persons living in institutions or other group living situations—is excluded from this study because of its unique demographic, social, and economic characteristics. Despite these differences, the rate of poor English proficiency among the group quarters Hispanic population is similar to that reported here for the household population. Excluding older Hispanics in group quarters results in a loss of 2,451 cases, representing 2.4% of the total older Hispanic sample.
2. The smallest geographic unit identifiable using the PUMS data is the Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA). Codes on the microdata identify PUMAs that correspond to places, counties, or county groups including 100,000 or more persons. In this analysis, data on the size of the Hispanic population of an area is collected at the county level, drawn from the STF-3C files of the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. For PUMAs containing more than one county, these county data are aggregated and values are generated for the PUMA as a whole. For smaller PUMAs, covering only a portion of a county, the original county-level data are used for all component PUMAs. Due to unique features of the geographic detail available for Alaska and Hawaii, these two states are not included in the analysis.
3. Multivariate results using an alternative dichotomous coding of proficiency level (0 = speaks English only or very well, 1 = speaks English well, not well, or not at all) yield results consistent with those reported here.
4. Although the Census Bureau considers anyone speaking English “well” as eligible for linguistic isolation, these individuals in fact may face few obstacles to effective communication with English speakers. Readers should be aware of potentially substantial differences in isolation levels experienced across households defined by the Census Bureau as linguistically isolated.

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5. Location quotients are calculated according to the following equation:

\[
LQ = \frac{h}{H} \frac{P}{p}
\]

where \( h \) = number of Hispanics in the specified area
\( H \) = number of Hispanics in the United States
\( p \) = total population of the specified area
\( P \) = total population of the United States

LQs are interpreted as reflecting the relative geographic concentration of a given group in a specified area. A value of 1.0 occurs when the representation of Hispanics in a PUMA or county is roughly proportional to the U.S. population share. Although it does not indicate that Hispanics are “evenly” distributed over the geographic space, it does imply that Group 1 members (here, Hispanics) are distributed in the same way as the comparison members of Group 2 (here, the total population). Values less than one reflect an underrepresentation of a population, whereas values greater than one indicate overrepresentation or concentration. This measure is equivalent to calculating the value of a population that is Hispanic (e.g., \( h/p \)) and standardizing it for the Hispanic share of the U.S. population (\( H/P \)).

The Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine is seeking a full-time Assistant Professor (Research). This is a non-tenure track appointment and is coterminous with funding. The position will be based in the Aging Clinical Research Center at the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System. The successful candidate will be responsible for the development and conduct of a geriatric mental health research program focusing on the interaction of biological, genetic, psychosocial and cognitive factors in the progression of patients with dementias and other types of cognitive impairment. The candidate should have a documented interest in and experience with integrating biological and psychological approaches to cognitive decline in normal and pathological aging.

Additionally, the individual will be expected to take an active part in teaching of Stanford medical students and psychiatry residents in gerontological mental health research and consulting with University and VA-based investigators on gerontological mental health research projects. Finally, the individual in this position will provide patient and staff education. A demonstrated ability to attract extramural research support is required. Applicants must have demonstrated expertise in relevant clinical training, teaching, and/or research publications.

Applicants must hold a Ph.D. or equivalent degree in psychology. Stanford University is committed to increasing representation of women and members of minority groups on its faculty and particularly encourages applications from such candidates. Applicants should forward a curriculum vitae and the names of five referees to Dr. Jerome Yesavage, Chairman of the Search Committee, c/o Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford Medical Center, 401 Quarry Road, Stanford, CA 94305-5550.