

# KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS: HISPANICS IN THE USA

**Please note:** There is **not** one "Hispanic culture." There are 22 Spanish-speaking countries each one with its own traditions, values, customs, and rules of accepted social behavior. Differences between countries and groups are many. For the sake of manageability, what we offer here are **simple generalizations** based on the predominant Hispanic group in our area: Mexicans. That means that the aspects of the Hispanic cultures discussed here **do not** necessarily apply to **all** Hispanic people. This information is offered only as a general guideline.

## Clarification of Terms

The term *culture* refers to the total way of life for a particular group of people—their ideas, customs, traditions, language, belief system, social structure and norms.

*Worldview* refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual interprets the world and interacts in it.

The term *Hispanic* refers to an ethnicity, not a race. Hispanics can be of any race: white, black, Asian, mixed, etc. The term *Hispanic* was adopted in the US in the 1970's to identify people and countries with a Spanish cultural heritage and language. Yet, do not confuse Spaniard or Spanish with Hispanic. Spaniards or Spanish are people from Spain; a Hispanic can be from any Spanish-speaking country, except Spain.

## Population

According to the 2010 US census numbers, Hispanics constitute about 16% of the total U.S. population or around 50 million people, forming the second largest ethnic group after Anglo-Americans (and making the US the third largest Spanish-speaking country in the world!) A continuous Hispanic presence in the territory of the United States has existed since the 16th century, earlier than any other group except the Native Americans. (Spaniards probed half of today's lower 48 states, beginning with Juan Ponce de León in 1513, long before the first English colonization attempt at Roanoke Island in 1585.)

## Coming to the USA

Immigration from Hispanic countries has usually followed adverse political and economic circumstances in such countries. For example: Cubans left to flee the rule of Castro in the 1960s, and the strongest waves of Mexican immigrants came between the late 1970s and mid 1990s when the value of the Mexican currency (the *peso*) dropped suddenly to half its value sending the country into an economic shock. Many of the Cubans that left Cuba were people who had privileged socioeconomic conditions, while many of the people who have come from Mexico have been from the lower classes and/or from the poorer parts of the country. (The crime related to Mexican immigration is thought to be directly related to their original impoverished condition.)

Beginning in the late 1990s a few of the Mexican professionals started to work between the two countries, and some of the lower middle class has also begun to immigrate. Mexicans presently constitute more than 60% of the Hispanic population in the US; Puerto Ricans are 10% (Puerto Rico is a territory of the US), Cubans are 3.5%, Salvadoran are 2.4%, Dominicans are 2.3%, Spanish are 1.8%, Guatemalan are 1.3%, and Colombians are .09%. The rest come from various other Hispanic countries.

## Language and Heritage

Popular culture varies widely from one Hispanic community to another but several features tend to unite Hispanics from diverse backgrounds. Preserving the Spanish

## Spanish-Speaking Countries by Population

Rank	Country	Population
1	 Mexico 2010	112,336,538
2	 <b>United States</b>	50,000,000 <i>Spanish speakers</i>
3	 Spain 2010	48,351,532
4	 Colombia 2010	45,656,937
5	 Argentina 2010	40,091,359
6	 Peru 2010	29,885,340
7	 Venezuela 2010	28,833,845
8	 Chile 2010	17,094,275
9	 Guatemala 2010	14,700,000
10	 Ecuador 2010	14,306,876
11	 Cuba 2009	11,242,628
12	 Bolivia 2010	10,027,643
13	 Dominican Republic 2010	9,378,819
14	 Honduras 2010	8,000,000
15	 Paraguay 2011	7,030,917
16	 El Salvador 2010	6,857,000
17	 Nicaragua 2009	5,891,199
18	 Costa Rica 2009	4,509,290
19	 Puerto Rico 2010 <i>Commonwealth of the USA</i>	3,725,789
20	 Panama 2010	3,504,483
21	 Uruguay 2010	3,424,595
22	 Belize 2010	372,000

language within the family is a common practice in most Hispanic homes.

The fact that a Hispanic family usually includes relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, makes it a natural and effective channel through which the language, traditions, customs, cultural ideas and values—the entire Hispanic worldview—are passed from one generation to the next. Language itself is one of the most important elements of the family heritage, and the one that is most important to preserve—Spanish is the language of the culture and the language in which the nuances are most clear. Culture cannot effectively be preserved apart from its language.

Most Hispanic adults (the first generation in the US) speak little or no English, and many times show little or no interest in learning it. However, the younger members of the family (or the second generation—children born in the US) who attend school regularly, will end up preferring to speak English everywhere, except when at home. This is the group that will have the hardest time and the greatest conflict trying to live in two cultures and languages at the same time.

### **Interpreters and Translators: WARNING!**

Please be aware that the fact that a person may be able to speak Spanish and English does not automatically make him/her a translator or interpreter. Many Hispanics who grow up in the US attending American schools never learn to read and write Spanish correctly. Many times their Spanish vocabulary is limited to words and concepts normally spoken of around the home and family—and that makes their Spanish vocabulary very limited. Unless you know that the person is well educated and can handle both languages with relative ease, it is better to be safe and seek the services of professional translators when in need of translating official forms and documents.

English words and sounds thrown together indiscriminately, almost making it a third language. When this situation starts to happen, the family's cultural heritage usually ends up losing to the new culture and language.

By the third generation, two things may happen: children may be completely “Americanized,” speaking only English and preferring American ways, neglecting or even rejecting their Hispanic heritage; or they may feel a greater interest and pride in their heritage and work at learning the Spanish language well and ‘reviving’ some Hispanic cultural ideas, while at the same time being fully American—they may become fully bilingual and fully bicultural.

### **Family Unity and Relationships**

Traditionally, the Hispanic family is a close-knit group and the most important social unit. The term *familia* (family) usually goes beyond the nuclear family. The Hispanic “family unit” includes not only parents and children but also extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. In most Hispanic families, the father is the head of the family, and the mother is responsible for the home. The family usually thinks and acts as a unit, and individualism is not appreciated. Elders are greatly respected and usually live with their adult children and their families.

Individuals within a family have a moral responsibility to aid other members of the family experiencing financial problems, unemployment, poor health conditions, and other life issues.

Family ties are very strong: when someone travels to another town or city to study or for a short visit (e.g., vacation, business, medical reasons), staying with relatives or even with friends of relatives is a common practice. Families often gather together to celebrate holidays, birthdays, baptisms, first communions, graduations, and weddings. Hispanic families instill in their children the importance of honor, good manners, and respect for authority and the elderly.

### **Children**

Children of first generation Hispanic families in the US usually experience a lot of stress. They are forced to live and to try to cope in two cultures and languages at the same time. Daily they face conflicting worldviews and expectations — Anglo world at school, Hispanic world at home—. They are often confused and frustrated with no one to whom they can turn. They are forced to grow up fast, and to act as adults, while trying to serve as interpreters, guides, and helpers to their parents, who are also lost in the new culture and world and are unable to understand their own children's dilemmas.

Second generation children sometimes feel like they don't belong anywhere—they are different from their parents and see the world in a different way, but at the same time they are different from the people in the new culture around them. These children will tend to drop out of school unless they find someone who cares and takes the time to help them in a personal manner, not only with homework but with life in the new culture—from accepted rules of behavior, to relationships, to expectations regarding roles, and everything in between.

In general, children in this generation tend to lack parental guidance, discipline, and affection, in part due to the fact that both parents have to work and leave the children alone or with strangers who take care of them. Emotional and spiritual guidance are neglected as well. Small children are often left to care for younger siblings and infants; they are often dirty, hungry, scared, and lonely.

### **Education**

Education levels vary widely from one Hispanic group to another. Going back to our previous sample groups, Cubans generally have more formal education than Mexicans do. In fact, according to census data, among all Hispanic

nationalities in the US, high school graduation rates are highest among Cubans and lowest among Mexicans. The same census says that Cubans and Central and South Americans had the highest college graduation rates while Mexicans, Puerto Ricans (in the mainland) and Dominicans had considerably lower college graduation rates.

Among Mexicans and some Central Americans coming to the US, the level of education of most adults is painfully low or simply non-existent. Many are completely illiterate or functionally illiterate in Spanish—some are barely able to write their own names. In Mexico and other countries, education is not free, except for the first 6 years of school, and even there parents must provide books, uniforms, and school supplies. That's why education is considered almost a luxury for some poor families.

This situation causes education not to be valued by some parents, who in turn do not support their children's efforts in school. Some first generation Hispanic adults living in the US feel threatened by the fact that their children are learning more than they ever had a chance to learn themselves, and in a foreign language. In some extreme cases, parents will prevent a successful student who has real possibilities of making it from continuing his/her education because they don't see the need of it—it is more convenient that they help the family financially by quitting school and going to work.

Even when parents do support their children's efforts and do want them to get a good education, their current situation makes it extremely difficult for the children to do well in school. Parents cannot help their children with homework or participate in school activities because of their own lack of education and lack of knowledge of the English language. Lacking necessary help and support at home, children are usually frustrated and discouraged with school and many will drop out as soon as they see the chance. (The situation is even more desperate for children of migrant workers who are unable to grow roots in any one place or make any meaningful friendships. Only a few migrant children remain in school beyond the sixth grade and are only rarely found in high school.)

### **Etiquette**

Spanish speakers tend toward formality in their treatment of one another. A firm handshake is a common practice between people as greeting and for leave-taking. A hug and a light kiss on a cheek are also common greeting practices between women, and men and women who are close friends or family. However, for some Hispanic groups, women and men do not socialize together; they may be attending the same party but women will sit with women and men with men.

The Spanish language provides forms of formal and informal address (different use of *usted* vs. *tú* for the pronoun *you*, polite and familiar commands, the use of titles of respect before people's first names such as *Don* for a man or *Doña* for a married woman). In informal settings, conversations between Spanish speakers are usually loud, fast, and adorned with animated gestures and body language to better convey points.

Hispanics usually give great importance to and place great value on looks and appearance as a sense of honor, dignity, and pride. Formal attire (or its equivalent) is commonly worn by Hispanics to church, parties, social gatherings, and work. Tennis shoes and jeans, however, are becoming more popular among Hispanics living in the US.

Hispanics tend to be more relaxed and flexible about time and punctuality than US people. For instance, people who are invited for an 8 a.m. event may not begin to arrive until 8:30 a.m. or later. Within the Hispanic community, not being on time is a socially acceptable behavior.

### **A 'Real' Marriage**

In Mexico, to be "really" married a couple must go through two separate ceremonies: one civil ceremony performed by a judge or other government official, and one religious ceremony performed by a priest (or pastor) at a church.

Couples that only go through the civil ceremony are *legally* married according to the law, however, before society they are usually not considered to be "really" married. In fact, many couples in this situation live with a guilty conscience, feeling that they are doing something wrong that is against the Catholic Church and God. Most Mexicans living in rural areas are usually poor people who cannot afford the expense of a religious ceremony and have to do with the civil ceremony only.

Couples that only go through the religious ceremony are *not legally* married according to the law, however, before the society this is a "real" marriage—it was a ceremony performed before God by one of his representatives, so this is the "real" thing.

All this, together with a lack of understanding that a marriage is valid in any country no matter where or how the ceremony was originally performed, causes many Mexicans who come to the US to think that their marriages are not valid in this country. When asked if they are married, many will say simply "no". When pressed, they may clarify that they are married "in Mexico" and "only by the judge."

When trying to find out if a person is married or not, make sure you ask the question in several different ways, and don't take the first answer as final. For example, you may ask:

Are you married? = ¿Está usted casado(a)?

Are you married in Mexico? = ¿Está casado(a) en México?

Are you married by a court? = ¿Está casado(a) por la corte?

Are you married by the Church? = ¿Está casado(a) por la iglesia?

### **Undesirable Social Traits**

As in any culture, some Hispanic groups exhibit questionable behavioral and social patterns. One well known cultural trait is that of "machismo." For people raised in such environment, to be a "real man" is to have the wife and children under complete subjection, to drink abundantly, and to be as promiscuous as possible. They believe that a man cannot take second seat to a woman, especially to his wife; a man's place is outside the home; he will not get involved in any type of house work or any work associated with child rearing. This is a characteristic "normal" to Mexicans. That is why most Mexican fathers tend to have a real hard time showing their feelings and consequently are usually cold and distant to their children.

In a “macho” society, the woman is expected to be faithful and submissive to her husband no matter what. However, most Hispanic women are usually warm and caring, and very approachable. They are taught that their place is at home, taking care of the house and the rearing of the children. They are usually poor disciplinarians. Both men and women will easily lie in an attempt to be polite and to please others. They are not afraid of hard work, and tend to handle the money well. In social gatherings, Mexican women congregate with women and men with men.

### ***Social Interactions***

These are some general characteristics very appreciated in Mexican culture:

- dignity of the individual**—All people, regardless of their position in life, deserve respect and consideration. (Many times this does not seem to apply to married women who are basically at the mercy of their husbands.)
- personalism**—This means something like ‘every man for himself’; it is hard to get men to fully cooperate with one another because they all want to be the boss. This is generally true among Mexicans who will tend to use people, put them down, even abuse others in order to get their way. (Other groups are different, such as Cubans who are especially good at helping and taking care of one another.)
- more emotional than rational**—Hispanics tend to think with the heart not with the head. Truth and hard facts are not as well received as a half-truth delivered with lots of emotion. This is also reflected in the individual’s ‘comfort zone’—when two people speak they tend to stand closer than most Americans would feel comfortable. Touching the other person is usually considered a sign of friendship. (Note: acceptable touching varies with the person’s country of origin and education, and if it is male or female.)
- event oriented**—There is no hurry to meet schedules of any kind—things get done when they get done. There is nothing wrong with starting late, and there is no hurry to finish on a set time, especially if you are enjoying what you are doing. (This is a cause of much anxiety and discomfort to time-oriented Americans!)
- improper to make generalizations**—It is considered improper to make generalizations about how others think or feel, and inappropriate to question the reasons behind a person’s actions. (Well, I HAVE to use generalization or we would never get this thing together!)
- emphasis on verbal communication**—Agreements are verbal rather than written—a man that keeps his word is highly respected.
- people oriented**—Talking about your family is more important than any business at hand—in fact, no business is done until one finds out about the other person’s family condition.
- hospitality**—Visitors are welcomed and offered something to eat and drink. They are expected to

spend some time talking and sharing with the family. To refuse an invitation to eat at someone’s home could be considered an insult to the host. In the same manner, visits to friends are usually unannounced, can last for several hours, and visitors expect to be received and treated with the same attention they have for those who visit them.

There are some negative characteristics that also need to be mentioned:

- drunkenness**—Parties, birthdays, weddings, funerals, baptisms, and any other ‘special’ occasion can become an excuse to justify drinking—drinking is a favorite pastime of ‘real men.’
- sexual immorality**—this is especially true for men, the ‘machos.’ This is a double standard in that society generally approves or at least condones that the husband have one or more mistresses on the side, but requires that the wife remain faithful to him (and put up with it). This is also a double standard regarding the dignity of the individual which many times does not seem to apply to women.
- lying**—The main reason for a person to lie is usually a desire to please and not to offend others. Most times there seems to be no apparent reason for a need to lie about anything, but it is still done. People many times justify themselves by labeling their stories as “white lies”—a lie said in order to help someone or to profit from a situation.
- disloyalty**—People learn that they can trust no one outside their own families, except maybe God. Real and loyal friendships are hard to come by because they are always suspicious of everyone else’s motives.
- illness as sign of inferiority**—Many will consider admitting that they are ill as a sign of inferiority—becoming ill will cause one to lose the respect of family and friends. Instead they suffer in pain and sickness until it is unbearable.
- focus on the present**—“The future will take care of itself”—have fun in the present and not worry about the future. Most Hispanics have a very short-sight when planning how to spend their hard earned money. They quickly spend their money on superfluous things: drinking, gambling, and women—and give little thought to the future. Many who come to this country dreaming of earning some money to help their families back home end up wasting their money, destroying their lives and their families.

### ***Housing***

There are striking differences in the living conditions of Hispanics but, in general, most live in poor housing due to their economic situation. While most Hispanic women pride themselves in keeping a clean house, they are sometimes prevented from this by the poor conditions of the structures they are many times forced to inhabit.

The living conditions of migrant workers are even worse, described by some government inspectors as grotesque, scandalous, far beneath acceptable, civilized standards—and this is the type of housing often provided by their employers. A common migrant camp may look like this: grossly overcrowded facilities, debris about the grounds, standing water, unsanitary and structurally unsound buildings, rough floors, uncleanable walls, leaky roofs, leaky walls, wet floors, broken screens, faulty doors, unsafe water supply, unclean and unsanitary bathing facilities, no heating system, inadequate lighting and ventilation, and inadequate laundry facilities, if any at all. Most migrant housing is located on private property, sometimes right by the fields they are supposed to harvest, and this makes it difficult for government officials to inspect the facilities. Such conditions are conducive to disproportionate cases of tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases, stomach disorders, accidents, children's diseases, as well as psychological problems, juvenile delinquency, and mortality.

### Religion

While Roman Catholicism is the overwhelmingly predominant religion for Hispanics, it is not the only. A small number of Hispanics are also Protestant or Evangelicals. There are also Hispanic Jews, mostly in Argentina, Peru, and Cuba.

The culture and tradition dictates that most Hispanics claim to be Roman Catholic even if they have never set foot in a Catholic church. Religion has become ingrained in the culture to the point that it is very difficult to separate the two—being human equals being Christian; being Hispanic equals being Catholic—. Every aspect of a person's life is incorporated, influenced, and in some way dominated and even dictated by the practices of the Catholic Church.

However, theirs is a religion of tradition, not knowledge. Only a very small fraction of them are truly loyal church goers. They pay lip service to the Church and contradict its teachings with their lives.

Some Hispanics syncretize Roman Catholicism and African or Native American rituals and beliefs. Such is the case of *Santería*, popular with Cuban Americans and which combines old African beliefs in the form of Roman Catholic saints and rituals. Other syncretistic beliefs include *Spiritism* and *Curanderismo*.

Hispanic men tend to consider religion as a “woman” thing. Women are usually the most active members in a church, and this is often perceived by some men as a challenge to their authority. However, reaching the men in the

family is the easiest and surest way to reach the entire family.

The Catholic Church has created, maybe indirectly, a problem of idolatry. Hispanics worship images, statues, pictures, holy objects and places, temples, altars, and other things. They are usually very superstitious, many visit the spiritualists, believe in amulets and in the spirits of the dead coming back. Mexicans are devoted believers and followers of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Virgen de Guadalupe—Virgin Mary as said to have appeared in Guadalupe, image below). They venerate her above any other saint or divine being—her image is the most commonly seen religious image on Mexican items of clothing, stickers, posters, etc.

Among the Hispanic Catholics, most communities celebrate their homeland's patron saint, their city or town's patron saint, and every other saint they can come up with by dedicating a day for this purpose with festivals and religious services. In most countries where Catholicism is the dominant religion, these celebrations are made official holidays by local governments.

Hispanics' view of the Bible is also dominated by Catholic teaching. Catholics are taught that the Scriptures are too difficult to understand so they have to depend on Catholic Church officials to interpret them and teach them to the people. They are also taught that the Scriptures are secondary to the Catholic Church's Tradition so, when there is a conflict between the Bible and what the Catholic Church teaches, the person is to set the Bible aside and trust the Church.

That is the reason that many Hispanics have never seen and much less read a Bible. They have little or no knowledge of Biblical characters and stories, and even less knowledge of the true gospel of salvation.

Catholicism teaches that salvation is earned, saints are our intermediaries before God, Mary is on equal basis with God the Father, and Jesus, as a good son, is obligated to be obedient to her. In many Catholic people's minds, Jesus is still hanging from a cross; the fact of the resurrection is largely ignored—and, in some cases, almost negated—by the Church's practices.

It is difficult to witness to Catholics because of their twisted view of the gospel. It takes a lot of patience, a good understanding of their beliefs, and good knowledge of the Scriptures. The best thing to do to reach them for the gospel is to lead them through long term Bible study where they can see for themselves the Truth of God's Word against the traditions and ideas they've been taught, until they come to the knowledge that salvation is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and nothing else.

