



The Latino Community in Multnomah County:
An Unsettling Profile

A partnership between



&



Portland State
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Executive Summary

Latinos have a long, rich history as residents of Multnomah county¹ that dates back to the 1500s, with the first wave of our immigration beginning in the early 1800s. Our heritage in this region predates White settler society. We are a resilient community who has survived a legacy of discrimination, marginalization and exploitation to become a critical, driving economic force in Multnomah county and the state of Oregon. Our labor has long been the backbone of U.S. agricultural productivity and the service industry from which elites and industry in the state and region have greatly benefitted.

Today we number 80,138 people, and officially comprise 10.9% of the population of Multnomah county. The largest of our communities of color, we are an impressive, dynamic presence in the urban landscape that has evolved into a multi-ethnic, multi-generational community, yet we continue to face institutional barriers that prevent proportional representation in government, private sector and educational advancement. We seek more full inclusion as civically and economically contributing citizens and residents entitled to the fundamental right of a better future and opportunity to advance our community. Our community organizations are well respected, our community leaders sought-after as advisors to many policy makers, and our cultures widely affirmed for their vibrancy and vitality.

While our growth continues to flourish, our community continues to experience systemic barriers to advancement: for example, intolerable levels of poverty, low income, occupational segregation, inadequate education, low homeownership rates, and specific health access and insurance challenges which continue to hinder our wealth, education and occupational advancement. Couple this with institutions that serve us poorly, target us based on perceived legal status, and over-administer discipline and loss of freedoms (such as juvenile and adult corrections, immigration and child welfare), and we have the “perfect storm” that continues to perpetuate systems of inequality which prevent us from participating fully in society.

Our report, *“The Latino Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile”* uncovers an array of racial inequities across the systems of income, employment, education, juvenile justice, corrections, child welfare, philanthropic giving, housing, immigration, research practices (particularly population measurement), wealth, health, health insurance coverage, racial harassment, public service and voter registration. These systems maintain our second-class status and serve to limit our current well being and the prospects for a bright future for our children.

Among our findings are the following:

- Our individual poverty levels are 77% higher than Whites and our family poverty levels are 152% higher.
- Our per capita income of \$14,627 is \$18,000/year less than that of Whites, and our seniors try to survive on just \$8,676/year.

- The incomes of full-time, year-round workers for Latinos shows we are only able to earn \$25,306 annually while Whites are paid \$44,701.
- While those earning below average incomes have stagnated among Whites (at 45%), numbers have risen dramatically for Latino households, from 56% in 1989 to 65% today.
- Latinos living in Multnomah county experience an economic “hit” compared with those living elsewhere in the USA, while Whites experience a corresponding “perk.”
- Our unemployment rate has more than doubled since 2007 while White unemployment has increased by 38%.
- Wealth best reflects our economic stature and is calculated by total assets minus total debts. Nationally, we hold only 5½ cents for every dollar held by Whites.
- 43.7% of us have not been able to complete high school, compared with only 6.3% for Whites. Numbers today are stagnant among high school students as only 44.8% graduate on time with a diploma. If we have not yet mastered English, our completion rate drops to 39.0%, with the lowest performance among local school districts in Portland at 33.5%.
- The number of our graduates moving into higher education is deteriorating, sliding from 60% in 2001 to 55% in 2005. Once there, less than half will graduate.
- Our teens give birth at rates six times higher than Whites – and single mothers raising children under 5 have poverty rates upwards of 90%.
- We are reported to child welfare officials at levels much higher than incidents warrant and our children are removed from our homes into short-term foster care at levels 66% higher than would be expected, based on our population size.
- Our youth face significant disparities among those criminally charged (97% higher rates) and are much more likely to be held in detention: Latinos have rates that are 34% higher than Whites.
- Latino homeownership rates are 31% as compared to 60% of Whites – a growing and worsening gap due to higher rates of recent foreclosures disproportionately affecting minorities in general. The homeownership rate for Latinos nationally is nearly 50%.
- 50% of Latinos pay 30% or more of household incomes on rent, making a high number vulnerable to losing these homes.

This is a distressing composite picture of the challenges facing us and our children’s future. In addition to these challenges, there are a few bright spots uncovered through our research, including:

- Solid improvements in poverty levels since 2000, with child poverty decreasing by 7% (from 30% to 28%) among our children.
- Narrowing of the achievement gap in academic benchmark testing in both Math (from 35% of Latino students meeting benchmarks in 2000 to 59% today) and Reading/Literature (from 41% success to 58% today), while White students have also improved but not at such significant levels, resulting in a substantial narrowing of the gap.

- Our short-term changes in disparities (from 2007 to 2009) have seen significant improvements in 14 of 28 measures – more than other communities of color explored to date. While disparities remain in every area reviewed in this section of the report, many gaps are narrowing.

On the policy front, we have also seen substantive initiatives that we want to affirm. To begin, numerous policy practitioners are heeding our call for the expansion of culturally-specific funding and culturally-sensitive research practices. The most advanced of these are the SUN Service System anti-poverty initiative in Multnomah County which has implemented culturally-specific funding since 2003. We also want to highlight the work of the Northwest Health Foundation for its advance of culturally-sensitive philanthropic practices.

Our children are benefiting from the statewide expansion of the Oregon Health Plan and the inclusion of health care for those who earn up to 300% of the poverty line. Greater supports in health care are able to be funded in part due to the passage of Measures 66 and 67 which has expanded the tax base for state revenues.

We thus stand in a complex space in the intersection of promise and of despondency. The current economic crisis is deep, and we are poised for significant spending cuts as all levels of government prepare for expansive cuts to adjust to revenue shortfalls from the recession's impact on our tax revenue. We stand as a people rooted in twin edges of vitality and vulnerability. It is time to move forward with ending institutional racism and dismantling the disparities and inequities in evidence in this report.

For much too long we have sustained ourselves at the margins of broader society. Our creativity to maintain our pride of place and culture and our integrity as a people continues. It is, simultaneously and without apology, time to improve our prospects for a viable future.

We make the following recommendations for addressing the needs of the Latino community and the plurality of all communities of color.

- 1. Reduce disparities with firm timelines, policy commitments and resources.** Disparity reduction across systems must occur and must ultimately ensure that one's racial and ethnic identity ceases to determine one's life chances. The Coalition urges State, County and City governments and school boards, to establish firm timelines with measurable outcomes to assess disparities each and every year. There must be zero-tolerance for racial and ethnic disparities. Accountability structures must be developed and implemented to ensure progress on disparity reduction. As a first step, plans for disparities reduction must be developed in every institution and be developed in partnership with communities of color. Targeted reductions with measurable outcomes must be a central feature of these plans.

2. **Expand funding for culturally-specific services.** Designated funds are required, and these funds must be adequate to address needs. Allocation must recognize the size of communities of color, must compensate for the undercounts that exist in population estimates, and must be sufficiently robust to address the complexity of need that are tied to communities of color.
3. **Implement needs-based funding for communities of color.** This report illuminates the complexity of needs facing communities of color, and highlights that Whites do not face such issues or the disparities that result from them. Accordingly, providing services for these communities is similarly more complex. We urge funding bodies to begin implementing an equity-based funding allocation that seeks to ameliorate some of the challenges that exist in resourcing these communities.
4. **Emphasize poverty reduction strategies.** Poverty reduction must be an integral element of meeting the needs of communities of color. A dialogue is needed immediately to kick-start economic development efforts that hold the needs of communities of color high in policy implementation. Improving the quality and quantity of jobs that are available to people of color will reduce poverty.
5. **Count communities of color.** Immediately, we demand that funding bodies universally use the most current data available and use the “alone or in combination with other races, with or without Hispanics” as the official measure of the size of our communities. The minor over-counting that this creates is more than offset by the pervasive undercounting that exists when outsiders measure the size of our communities. When “community-verified population counts” are available, we demand that these be used.
6. **Prioritize education and early childhood services.** The Coalition prioritizes education and early childhood services as a significant pathway out of poverty and social exclusion, and urges that disparities in achievement, dropout, post-secondary education and even early education must be prioritized.
7. **Expand the role for the Coalition of Communities of Color.** The Coalition of Communities of Color seeks an ongoing role in monitoring the outcomes of disparity reduction efforts and seeks appropriate funding to facilitate this task.
8. **Research practices that make the invisible visible.** Implement research practices across institutions that are transparent, easily accessible and accurate in the representation of communities of color. Draw from the expertise within the Coalition of Communities of Color to conceptualize such practices. This will result in the immediate reversal of invisibility and tokenistic understanding of the issues facing communities of color. Such practices will expand the visibility of communities of color.
9. **Fund community development.** Significantly expand community development funding for communities of color. Build line items into state, county and city budgets for communities of

color to self-organize, network our communities, develop pathways to greater social inclusion, build culturally-specific social capital and provide leadership within and outside our own communities.

10. *Disclose race and ethnicity data for mainstream service providers.* Mainstream service providers and government providers continue to have the largest role in service delivery. Accounting for the outcomes of these services for communities of color is essential. We expect each level of service provision to increasingly report on both service usage and service outcomes for communities of color.

11. *Name racism.* Before us are both the challenge and the opportunity to become engaged with issues of race, racism and whiteness. Racial experiences are a feature of daily life whether we are on the harmful end of such experience or on the beneficiary end of the spectrum. The first step is to stop pretending race and racism do not exist. The second is to know that race is always linked to experience. The third is to know that racial identity is strongly linked to experiences of marginalization, discrimination and powerlessness. We seek for those in the White community to end a prideful perception that Multnomah County is an enclave of progressivity. Communities of color face tremendous inequities and a significant narrowing of opportunity and advantage. This must become unacceptable for everyone.

These recommendations are highlighted in greater detail in the “Policy Recommendations” section of this report. As well, this section contains the top twelve priorities that have emerged from the Oregon Latino Agenda for Action (OLAA) summit of 2010.

Advancing racial equity depends on eliminating the multitudes of disparities profiled in this report. We aspire to catalyze an understanding of the challenges facing communities of color and to provide us all impetus to act, to act holistically, and to act under the leadership of communities of color who have the legitimacy and the urgency to remedy many of the shortcomings that besiege Multnomah county.