Are Hispanics a Marginalized Group in Our Society?

(All views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of HOLA FDA group, and should not be attributed to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.)

By Manuel Bayona, MD, PhD
Carolina Alvarez-Garriga, MD, DrPH
Division of Epidemiology/OSB/CDRH

Hispanics are ethnically and racially diverse. They may be foreign born or American born. Hispanics constitute 16.7% of the total U.S. population, or 52 million people, (US Census Bureau, 2013), forming the second largest ethnic group, after non-Hispanic White Americans, that by the way, is a group composed of dozens of sub-groups, as are Hispanic and Latino Americans.

Spanish was the first European language spoken in what is today the U.S. which has the fifth largest Spanish speaking population in the world. The Hispanic population on the U.S. mainland is composed mostly of Mexican Americans (65%), Puerto Ricans (9%), Cubans (3.5%), Salvadorans (3.2%), and Dominicans (2.7%). The remainder consists of other Central and South American groups, or people of different Hispanic origins (15.4%) (NCLR, 2013).

Hispanics have been continuously present in the continental U.S. since the sixteenth century, including San Miguel de Gualdape, which was founded in Georgia in 1526, and St. Augustine, Florida founded in 1565; both, established by the Spanish (De Varona et al, 1996). Whereas in the U.S. Caribbean Territories, Spaniards arrived in 1493 to the Island of Boriquén, known today as Puerto Rico (De Varona, 1993).

Hispanics have made important financial, military, cultural, and scientific contributions through American history. There is evidence in published literature about each one of these contributions. There are many Hispanic organizations that provide information in this regard such as the National Council of la Raza (NCLR), and the Hispanic Contributions Foundation Inc. (2013). For example, according to the NCLR (2013) in the financial arena, the number of Hispanic-owned businesses is increasing exponentially.

Hispanic businesses are very diverse. About 30% of Hispanic-owned firms operate in construction and other services sectors. Retail trade, construction, and wholesale trade accounted for 50.7% of Hispanic-owned business receipts (NCLR, 2013). The number of Hispanic-owned firms (51% or more of the stock of equity of the business) grew by 44% from 2002 to 2007, compared to 15% growth in the number of firms owned by non-Hispanics. Approximately 2.3 million businesses—8% of all U.S. non-farm businesses—are owned by Hispanics. The revenue generated by these businesses was $345.2 billion in 2007, up 55.5% from 2002. In the U.S., Hispanics own approximately 29,168 firms with receipts of $1 million or more per year.
Hispanics have served with distinction in the U.S. military for generations. In fact, Hispanics have won our Nation’s highest award, the Congressional Medal of Honor, 43 times. This is far out of proportion to their numerical representation in the U.S. civilian population. Hispanics in the U.S. have served in the American Revolution, the War of 1812 against the British, and in every subsequent military conflict, including: World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, Iraq and Afghanistan. As of 2007, 1.1 million Hispanics were veterans of the U.S. armed forces. Approximately 16% of newly enlisted, active duty members of all branches of the military are Hispanic (Hispanics Contributions Foundation Inc., 2013).

Furthermore, Hispanics have been present in America’s scientific and technological advancements. Hispanics have contributed much in the fields of medicine and science, making discoveries that have generated new methods for understanding the scientific phenomena of the natural world. One of many important contributions is the discovery of RNA (ribonucleic acid) by Dr. Severo Ochoa. RNA is one of the most important chemical building blocks of life. For this discovery, Dr. Ochoa won the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology in 1959. In 1968, Luis Alvarez won the Nobel Prize for his work in subatomic particles. As a professor at UC Berkeley, he helped develop microwave beacons and a new theory on how the dinosaurs became extinct. In 1995, Mario Molina won the Nobel Prize for chemistry research that helped the world create a solution for the threat that chlorofluorocarbons pose to the earth’s protective ozone layer.

The Hispanic influence in American culture is not foreign or recent. It can be traced in American cuisine, arts, sports, beauty products, fashion, politics and much more. Hispanic media and culture is embedded in our society. It has always been, perhaps at different levels, in different historical periods and in different regions of our country.

Why then are Hispanics still considered by many a fringe sect with peripheral influence upon our society? A partial explanation might be that we are not aware that Hispanics have been entrenched in our country since the beginning, and are part of our country as much as non-Hispanics are.

Many Hispanics are not aware of their heritage and the contributions of their ancestors to our country. This lack of knowledge makes them vulnerable to historical discrimination and self-segregation. This, among other issues, contributes to Hispanics being perceived as a foreign or distant sector of our society. Many Hispanics work hard for integration, but the process of acquiring new trades is not easy because differences in language and life-style which pose obstacles for many of them.

All Americans are entitled to know about the contributions of Hispanic heritage to the U.S. This knowledge can serve to increase awareness of our cultural mosaic and give a better appreciation of our complete heritage. This will also increase our love, pride and recognition of our diverse culture which in many ways fosters the advancement of art, science, technology, sports, and healthy life styles in the U.S.

Reference:
US Census Bureau, 2013(http://www.census.gov/)
National Council of la Raza (NCLR) Website, 2013
Hispanics Contributions Foundation, Inc. (2013)
http://www.hispaniccontributions.org/pManager_E.asp?pid=home_E