

a report compiled by  
United Way's Latino Advisory  
Delegation

## Cuéntame: Latino Life in Dane County



Dane County's Latino population has grown dramatically, and projections indicate this strong growth will continue. This emergent population brings strengths and opportunities to our region. Latinos are boosting every sector of our local economy with their strong work ethic and purchasing power. They consist of a generally younger population in a region that is aging rapidly.

United Way convened a group of Latino community leaders to help us understand Latino life in Dane County. These leaders came together as our Latino Advisory Delegation, which guided our research and conducted extensive community outreach—in the framework of Cuéntame (“tell me” in Spanish) to make sure we captured the quality of life and aspirations of all Latinos in Dane County.

**In the course of our research, five areas emerged as important, for which the Delegation created recommendations:**

1. **Education and early childhood**
2. **Jobs, earnings, and poverty**
3. **Housing**
4. **Health care**
5. **Public safety**

*Through the process of compiling this report with new local data and hearing the voices and stories of hundreds of Latinos, we gain insight into what our community can become and how to address the issues of concern.*

--Salvador Carranza, Chair, United Way Latino Advisory Delegation

*These are members of our community, people whose lives represent the fabric of our community. They entrusted us with their personal stories, their fears and their dreams.....hardworking immigrants whose dreams are our dreams.*

--Fabiola Hamdan, Vice-Chair, United Way Latino Advisory Delegation

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[www.unitedwaydanecounty.org](http://www.unitedwaydanecounty.org)

## Latino community overview

In 2004, the US Census Bureau estimated Dane County's Latino population at 19,000, or 4.3% of the total population. Though the proportion of Latinos in the County (4.4%) is still low relative to the national level of 14%, the gap is closing due to recent Latino immigration.

However, when we consider the number of children in Dane County schools, we calculate the population to be closer to 40,000, or 8% of the population.

More than three-quarters of Latinos live within the city of Madison, the town of Madison and in rental neighborhoods on the northern edge of Fitchburg. Latinos have also settled in smaller communities in northeastern Dane County including Sun Prairie, Marshall and DeForest.

Our Latino population:

- Grew 34% in the last 5 years; between 1990 and 2000, the population grew 150%
- Traces their heritage to 40 different Latin American countries
- Longer-term residents tend to include those with higher education, stable careers, strong English proficiency and no immigration status problems
- 70% of new immigrants report Mexican heritage
- Recent immigrants tend to be younger and have more language and literacy barriers, lower education levels, and more likely to have problems with immigration status
- Includes a higher proportion of males (54.5%) than the rest of the population (49%)
- The population is younger—with a median age of 24 years old as compared to 33 for the rest of the population.

The length of time Latinos have been in the US is diverse.

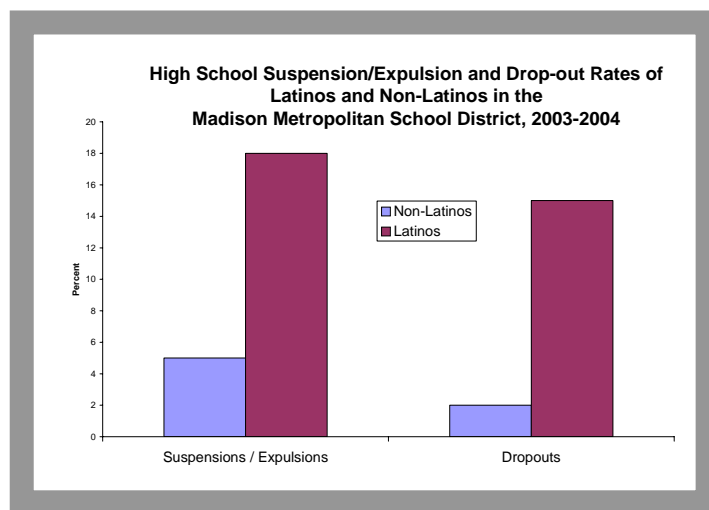
- Half of all Latinos were US born
- Most of those born abroad have been in the US less than 10 years
- Of the adults, two-thirds were foreign-born and half came to the US in the past 5 years.

## education matters.

The Latino Advisory Delegation rated this area the most important to the success of the Latino population.

The areas of greatest concern are:

1. Early childhood—only 24% of Latino children entering kindergarten have the skills necessary to succeed, compared to 47% for African American children and 81% of white children.
2. Attendance becomes a problem as students age. In elementary school, attendance for all children exceeds 94%. Beginning in middle school, attendance begins to slip for Latino students, and worsens in high school.
3. In the 2003-2004 school year, 18% of Latino students were suspended and expelled.
4. The drop out rate for Latino students is 15%, seven times the rate of white students.
5. Only one out of 5 students planned to enroll in four-year colleges after graduation, about one-third the rate of white students.



*"I'm looking for help. Yesterday I received semester grades for my son. He's low in reading and writing. I'm very frustrated because since about six months ago, I've been working in the afternoons and am not home to help him. What I'm looking for is a place where I can get help, where someone who speaks and reads English can read stories to my son and can teach him how to pronounce it well."*

--A Latino mother, sharing her experience at Cuéntame

## jobs matter.

During Cuéntame, most people told us this area was most important to their quality of life, and the area that most needs to be fixed.

- In 2000, the unemployment rate for Latinos was 9.9%, three times higher than non-Latinos.
- Only 63% of working-age Latinos had full-year jobs.
- Only 1.8% of unemployment claimants were Latino.
- Even when Latinos manage to get a job in a good industry, they get the lowest paying jobs.
- Overall, the median wage for Latinos is one-third less than non-Latinos.

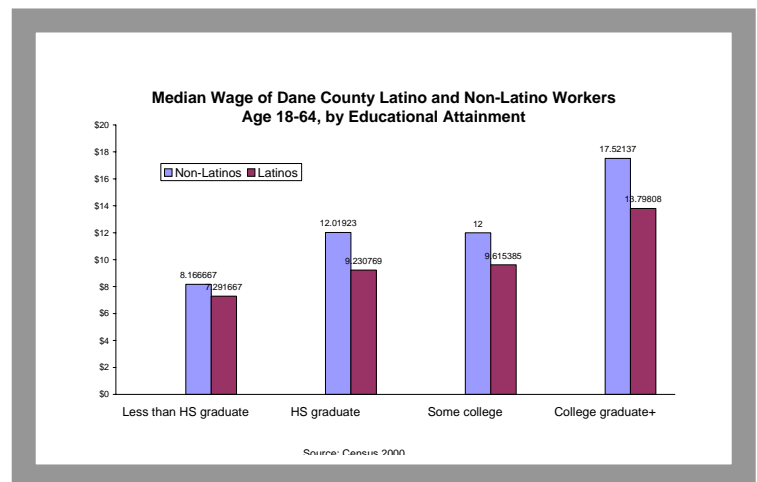
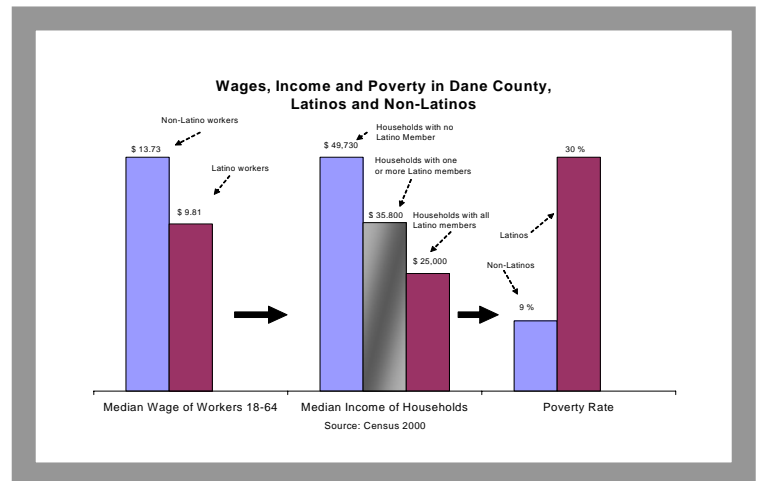
Three in ten Latino families in Dane County fell under the federal poverty line, a rate three times higher than non-Latinos. Latinos are most likely to be working in:

- Accommodation and Food Services
- Manufacturing
- Educational services

From 2002-2005, 80% of clients of the Works Center were Latinos. Complaints were most often about:

- Wages and work hours
- Unfair discharges
- Discrimination
- Health and safety
- Worker compensation

Immigrants are less familiar with workplace laws and practices, and are thus hesitant to access the government complaint process.



*My dad always gets paid late, and his checks don't show how many hours he worked so he doesn't know if he got paid less or more than he should. And he doesn't have vacation days...."*

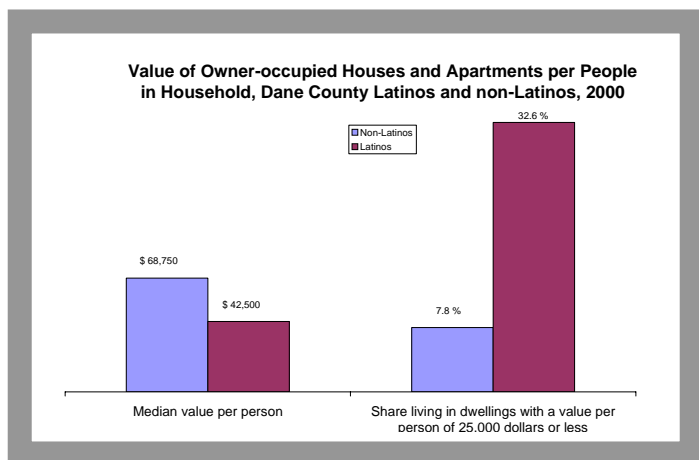
--Latino at Cuéntame sharing his father's experience

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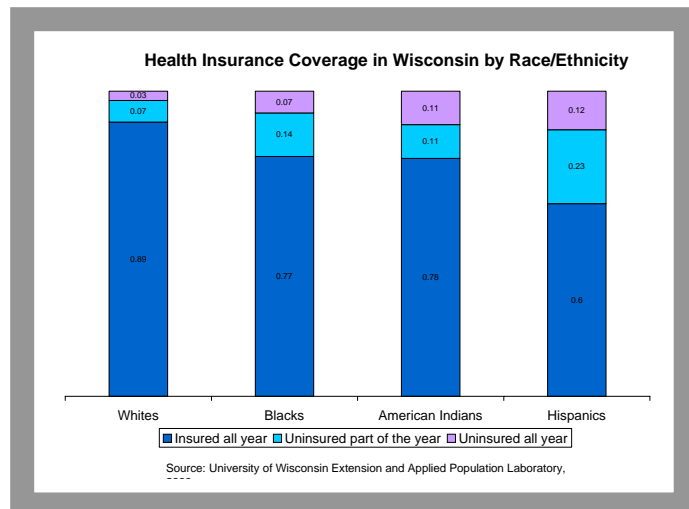
## housing matters.

The cost of housing in Dane County is the second highest in Wisconsin. Affordable housing and subsidies for low-income families is difficult for all populations to obtain. For Latinos, access to homeownership and quality housing is lower than for non-Latinos.

- Latinos are only half as likely to own their housing as non-Latinos
- 32.5% of Latinos live in dwellings with a value per person of \$25,000 or less, compared to 7.8% of non-Latinos
- In 2000, the median number of people per room in rental housing was 100% higher among Latinos
- 25% of Latinos have a monthly rent per person of \$125 or less
- 17% of households served in emergency shelters were Latino.



As tenants, Latinos also face rights violations. Through Cuéntame, we learned that too often abusive landlords take advantage of Latinos who don't know their rights, know them but cannot afford confronting their landlords, or are afraid of jeopardizing their immigration status.



## health matters.

Through Cuéntame we learned the most important issue is access to health care insurance. Factors include

- Health insurance is less likely to be offered in low-wage service and small business sectors where many Latinos work.
- Latinos often forgo the health care insurance offered by their employers because they cannot afford to pay the premium, or because they don't get adequate information
- Even for those who have access to health insurance, there are difficulties with navigating the bureaucracy of their insurance plan, and difficulty in understanding its benefits and processes.

*"I had insurance through work. I went to the doctor and asked if my insurance would cover tests. I was told it would, but it didn't. I ended up having to pay nearly \$3,000 ..."*

--Latino worker sharing her experience at Cuéntame

## safety matters.

Latinos tend to distrust law enforcement. Through Cuéntame, we heard Latinos say that they could not call 911 without fear, and that they feel uncomfortable interacting with the police in person. Some of this distrust stems from past experience with law enforcement in Latin American countries. Another source of fear is distrust for Latinos without full immigration status.

“I’m not sure I believe there’s no connection between the police and immigration.....”

--Latino worker sharing his experience at Cuéntame

It was apparent through Cuéntame that many Latinos do not understand traffic laws, nor do they always know the consequences of accumulating traffic violations.

Beyond their distrust of law enforcement and understanding traffic laws, Latinos are most concerned about:

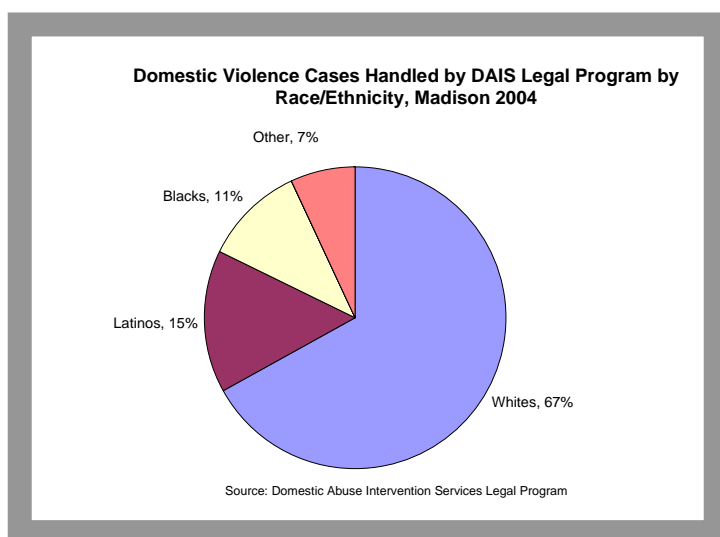
- School violence
- Gangs
- Domestic violence

## Recommendations

The Latino Advisory Delegation is making recommendations to the community to improve the quality of life for all Latinos as well as all residents in Dane County. Their recommendations include eliminating educational achievement gaps, reducing job barriers, ensuring housing, improving health care coverage, and building understanding with our public safety officers.

Five recommendations are of greatest importance:

1. Maximize the school success of Latino students, helping them to prepare for post-secondary education and professional careers.
2. Remove Latino-specific barriers to keeping or being successful on the job.
3. Increase Latino homeownership through education on the importance of credit histories and how to build wealth through home ownership.
4. Increase access to health insurance, particularly for those who work for employers that offer health coverage, and establish an ombudsman-type resource for health care coverage.
5. Increase understanding and responsiveness of police by creating a Dane County/Madison bilingual specialized internal call center to handle calls from Latinos, and provide interpreter backup to officers.



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