

PewResearch

Hispanic Trends Project

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Latinos and Education: Explaining the Attainment Gap

BY MARK HUGO LOPEZ

I. Overview

Nearly nine-in-ten (89%) Latino young adults¹ say that a college education is important for success in life, yet only about half that number—48%—say that they themselves plan to get a college degree, according to a new national survey of Latinos by the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of the Pew Research Center.

The biggest reason for the gap between the high value Latinos place on education and their more modest aspirations to finish college appears to come from financial pressure to support a family, the survey finds.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of all 16- to 25-year-old survey respondents who cut their education short during or right after high school say they did so because they had to support their family. Other reasons include poor English skills (cited by about half of respondents who cut short their education), a dislike of school and a feeling that they don't need more education for the careers they want (each cited by about four-in-ten respondents who cut their education short).

The Pew Hispanic Center survey finds that there actually are two different gaps in the educational aspirations of the young. One is between Hispanic young adults ages 18 to 25 and the general U.S. population of that age group. Some 48% of the former group expects to get a college degree or more, compared with 60% of the latter group.³

But a second gap is even bigger, and it largely explains the first gap. It is between young Latinos who are immigrants and those who are native born. Less than one-in-three (29%)

immigrant Latinos ages 18 to 25 say they plan to get a bachelor's degree or more, half the share (60%) of native-born young Latinos who say the same.

The foreign born make up 35% of all Latino youths, and they are much more likely than native-born Latino youths to be supporting or helping to support a family, either in the U.S. or in their native country. In 2007, 29% of all immigrant female Hispanics ages 16 to 25 were mothers, compared with 17% of native-born female Hispanics and 12% of white females (Fry, 2009).⁴ In addition, nearly two-thirds (64%) of all immigrant Hispanics ages 18 to 25 say they send remittances to family members in their country of origin, compared with just 21% of their U.S. born counterparts ([Lopez and Livingston, 2009](#)). In short, young immigrant Hispanics appear to have financial commitments that limit their ability to pursue more education, even though they see a college education as important for success in life.

When asked why Latinos on average do not do as well as other students in school, more respondents in the Pew Hispanic Center survey blame poor parenting and poor English skills than blame poor teachers. The explanation that Latino students don't work as hard as other students is cited by the fewest survey respondents; fewer than four-in-ten (38%) see that as a major reason for the achievement gap.

Among the key findings:

Hispanics say a college education is important for getting ahead in life:

- Nearly nine-in-ten (88%) Hispanics agree that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life, greater than the share (74%) of the general public that says the same ([Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2009](#)).
- Young Hispanics (89%) are more likely than all young people (84%) to agree that a college degree is important for getting ahead in life than all young people ages 16 to 25.

Educational aspirations of Hispanic youths do not match the level of importance Hispanics place on college, and trail those of all youth:

- Just under half (48%) of Latinos ages 18 to 25 say they plan to obtain a bachelor's degree or more. By contrast, 60% of all young adults ages 18 to 25 say they want to

obtain a bachelor's degree or more ([The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007](#)).

Latino adults (ages 26 and older) see a mix of reasons that Latinos students do not perform as well as other groups in school:

- More than six-in-ten (61%) say a major reason is that parents of Hispanic students do not play an active role in helping their children succeed.
- Nearly six-in-ten (58%) say the limited English skills of Hispanic students is a major reason.
- Almost half (47%) say the different cultural backgrounds of Hispanic students and their teachers is a major reason.
- More than four-in-ten (41%) say Hispanic students not working as hard as other students is a major reason.

Fewer Latino youths (ages 16 to 25) than Latino adults cite all of these reasons to explain why Hispanic students are not doing as well as other students in school:

- Less than half (47%) say parents of Hispanic students not playing an active role in helping their children succeed is a major reason.
- More than four-in-ten (44%) say the different cultural backgrounds of Hispanic students and their teachers is a major reason.
- More than four-in-ten (43%) say the limited English skills of Hispanic students is a major reason.
- Less than a third (31%) say Hispanic students not working as hard as other students is a major reason.

Among Latino youths who have a high school education or less and are not currently enrolled in school, the reasons they give for not continuing their education are:

- Nearly three-quarters (74%) say they need to help support their family.
- Half (49%) say their English skills are limited.
- More than four-in-ten (42%) say they didn't like school.
- Four-in-ten (40%) say they cannot afford to go to school.

- Almost four-in-ten (39%) say they don't need more education for the career they want.
- More than two-in-ten (21%) say their grades were not high enough.

About this Report

This report was prepared for the Latino Children, Families, and Schooling National Conference sponsored jointly by the Education Writers Association, Pew Hispanic Center and National Panel on Latino Children and Schooling. The conference was held on Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2009 at the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C.

The 2009 National Survey of Latinos asked Hispanics ages 16 and older about their educational goals, experiences with high schools and colleges, and their opinions about educational institutions. The survey was conducted from Aug. 5 through Sept. 16, 2009, among a randomly selected, nationally representative sample of 2,012 Hispanics ages 16 and older, with an oversample of 1,240 Hispanics ages 16 to 25. The survey was conducted in both English and Spanish. The margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus 3.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for respondents ages 16 to 25 is plus or minus 4.55 percentage points, and the margin of error for respondents ages 26 and older is plus or minus 4.76 percentage points.

A Note on Terminology

The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably in this report, as are the terms “foreign born” and “immigrant.”

“Foreign born” refers to people born outside of the United States, Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories to parents neither of whom was a U.S. citizen.

“Native born” refers to people who are U.S. citizens at birth, including those born in the United States, Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories and those born abroad to parents at least one of whom was a U.S. citizen.

1. In this report, the terms “young adults” and “youths” are used to describe those who are ages 16 to 25 unless otherwise indicated. [↪](#)
2. For more background see the Pew Hispanic Center report “The Changing Pathways of Hispanic Youths into Adulthood” by Richard Fry, 2009. [↪](#)

3. For more background on the general U.S. young adult population ages 18 to 25, see the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press report "[How Young People View Their Lives, Futures and Politics: A Portrait of Generation Next](#)" (2007). ↵
4. Fry (2009) defines foreign-born Latinos as Latinos born in another country, in the outlying U.S. territories, or on the island of Puerto Rico. In this report, only Hispanics born in another country are classified as foreign born; Hispanics born on the island of Puerto Rico or in outlying U.S. territories are classified as native born. However the gap in motherhood between foreign-born and native-born Latinos is not sensitive to the nativity classification of Hispanics born in Puerto Rico. ↵
5. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2005 among eighth-graders, a smaller share of Hispanic students (15%) than non-Hispanic white (39%) or Asian/Pacific Islander (40%) students scored at or above proficient on the reading assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On the 2005 mathematics assessment of the NAEP, among eighth-graders, a smaller percentage of Hispanic (13%) students than non-Hispanic white (39%) or Asian/Pacific Islander (47%) students scored at or above proficient ([Kewal Ramani, Gilbertson, Fox and Provasnik, 2007](#)). ↵

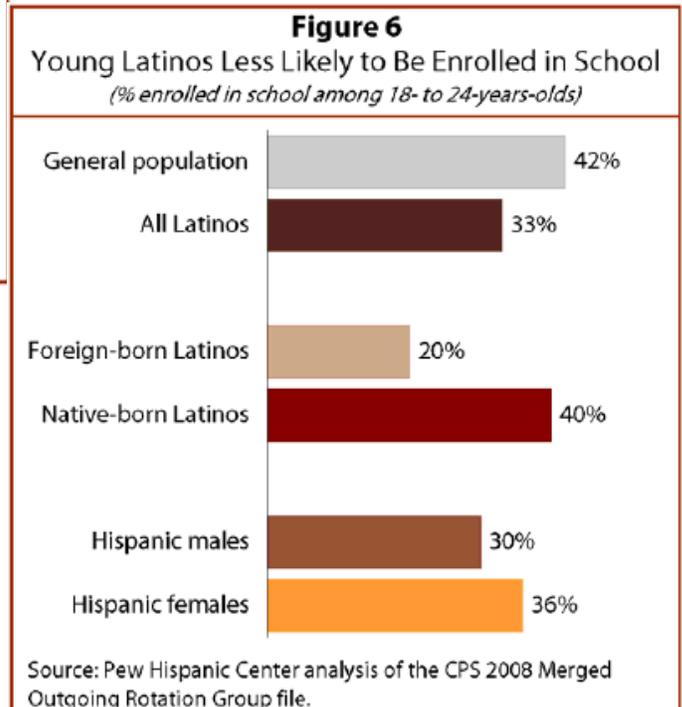
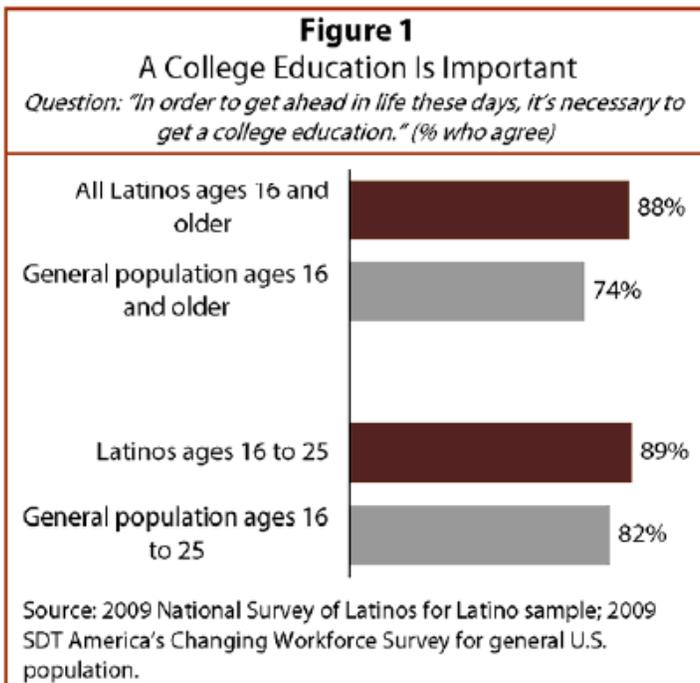
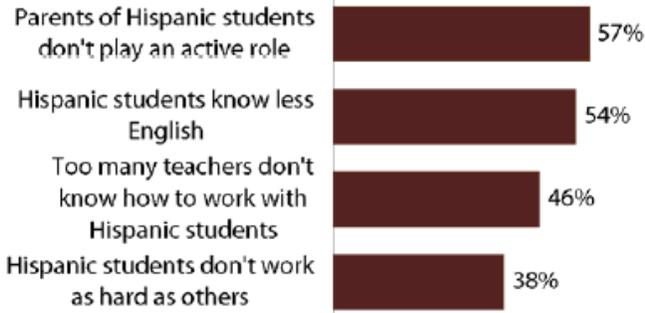


Figure 8

Why Don't Hispanic Students Do as Well as Others in School?

Question: Please tell me if you think each of the following is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason that Hispanic students are not doing as well as other students.

(% of all Latinos ages 16 and older who say "major reason")



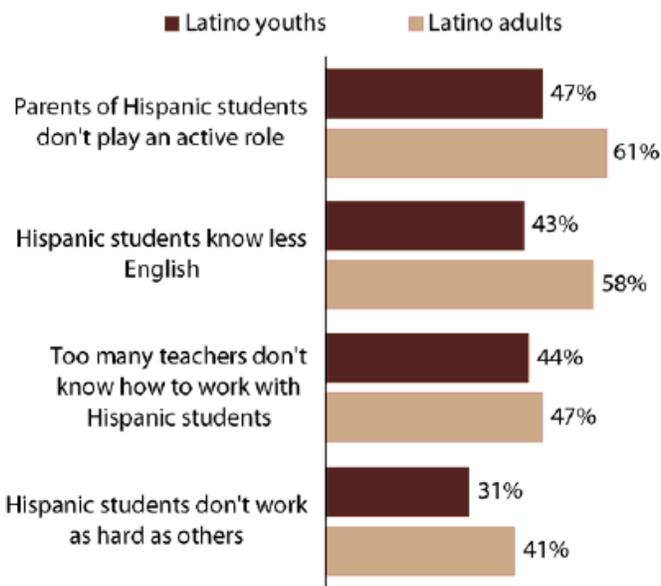
Source: 2009 National Survey of Latinos

Figure 9

Why Don't Hispanic Students Do as Well as Others in School?

Question: Please tell me if you think each of the following is a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason that Hispanic students are not doing as well as other students.

(% of 16 and older who say "major reason")

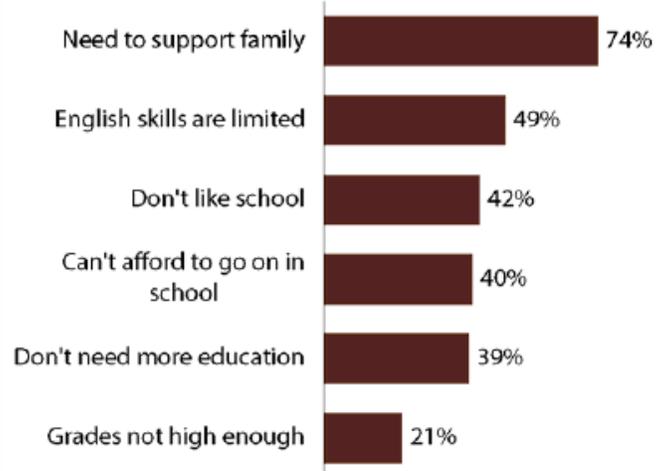


Source: 2009 National Survey of Latinos

Figure 10

Why Not Continue Your Education?

Question: Which of the following are reasons you have not continued your education? (% of Latino youth ages 16 to 25 with a high school degree or less, who are not enrolled and have no plans to return to school saying "Yes")



Source: 2009 National Survey of Latinos