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Student nurse practitioner Santiana Littman performs a well-check exam for 2-week-old Kimberly Jaimes on Nov. 7, 2014 at Clinica Tepeyac in Denver. The clinic primarily serves the Latino community. *Photo by Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post*

## Survey: Latino satisfaction tempered by concern for U.S. direction

By **Zahira Torres and Kevin Simpson**

*The Denver Post*

**F**rom recent immigrants to families who have been Americans for generations, Latinos express widespread satisfaction with life in the United States — but a new, far-reaching survey illustrates a complex population that shares deep concern about the direction of the country.

The survey, conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, explored attitudes within a demographic projected to make up nearly one-third of the U.S. population by 2060. Latinos currently account for 21 percent of Colorado's 5.3 million residents and could become one-third of the state's population by 2040.

Although the poll revealed upbeat attitudes on several fronts such as economic opportunities, health care and education, that satisfaction was tempered by nearly half of the respondents — 46 percent — saying the U.S. is moving on the "wrong track." Only 39 percent see things moving in the right direction.

In many instances, more educated, affluent and long-standing U.S. citizens voiced the greatest disappointment in the opportunities available to Latinos and the most skepticism about the future, while immigrants framed conditions in a more promising perspective.

Meshach Rhoades, an attorney and fifth-generation Coloradan who sits on Denver's mayoral Latino Advisory Council, doesn't see the more critical views of established Latinos as pessimistic so much as reflecting a hopefulness for what the country could achieve.

"As you get greater roots in the country, you understand the educational system," Rhoades said. "You understand the economics. You understand how health care plays out. You have higher standards about all those things because you see that the country has made some strides and where it needs to go to achieve parity for all races."

The State of the Latino Family survey interviewed 1,000 randomly-selected Latinos nationwide, in both English and Spanish, across a broad range of demographics and on a wide array of topics. The Kellogg Foundation conducted the survey as part of its "America Healing" project to promote racial equity. It had a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points.

The Denver Post and Univision worked in partnership with the Kellogg Foundation to report the survey results.

The poll identified economic issues as the leading single concern to Latinos, followed by immigration and crime. And while the responses reflect significant diversity in the larger community, they also underscore cultural ties like language — more than three-fourths of Latino households incorporate English and Spanish — and connections to the immigrant community.

Gail Christopher, vice president for policy and senior advisor to the Kellogg Foundation, said the poll offers the ability to home in on the foundation's goal of improving the lives of vulnerable children.

"We are getting at the heart of those things that allow children and their families to thrive," Christopher said. "It's very important to be reminded of the size and scope of the Latino population in this country, the level of resilience within this community — their optimism. It's not a naive optimism. It's an informed understanding of the barriers and the challenges they face. A sense of hope."

Euvaldo Valdez, a 73-year-old retiree from Niwot who was interviewed for the survey, sees the country moving in a positive direction in spite of political differences — an outlook that runs counter to the survey's finding of greater skepticism among Latinos entrenched in American culture for generations. He traces his family's roots to 17th-century New Mexico and feels Latinos have made significant "inroads toward self-determination."

"I think demographics prove that Hispanics have moved into the professional ranks at a considerable and important rate," said Valdez, a former educator with a graduate degree. "How can we say that we're suspect of institutions that brought us here?"



## **Inextricably linked**

More than half of Latinos surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the federal government's performance on immigration policy, an important contributor to overall discontent given that immigration and deportation ranked second behind only the economy in priorities for the community.

Parents of students in kindergarten through second grade ranked immigration and deportations the issues that most concern them, placing them above the economy.

That concern wasn't limited to Latinos directly affected by inaction on immigration reform and the recent wave of deportations. A majority of second- and third-generation citizens and Latinos for whom English is their primary language ranked among the dissatisfied.

Six out of every 10 Latinos know an undocumented immigrant and one out of every three knows someone who faced detention or deportation for immigration reasons — a sign that Latinos, whether citizens or undocumented immigrants, are inextricably linked, according to the poll.

But former Denver Mayor Federico Peña said that while some Latinos are linked by their connections to the immigrant community, a greater bond comes from the negative attitudes others have toward immigrants.

"All Latinos feel the attacks," said Peña, who served as U.S. Secretary of Transportation and U.S. Secretary of Energy under President Bill Clinton. "The overwhelming majority of Latinos do feel a bond when they see other Latinos being criticized or maligned because they're concluding that, in fact, the critics are talking about them."

A slim plurality (37 percent) of the population feels that anti-Latino and anti-immigrant attitudes have remained stagnant in the past five years, but among the others, far more see things getting worse than better, 36 to 22 percent.

Concerns remain over whether the country is making progress in how it treats minority communities. About 38 percent of African Americans polled in February as part of a Kellogg Foundation survey felt the country had seen no change in reducing racism and 31 percent believed it was losing ground.

Among Latinos, U.S. citizens, older respondents and those with higher levels education are more critical of the country's progress in reducing anti-Latino and anti-immigrant attitudes than are undocumented immigrants and legal permanent residents.

Rudy Gonzales, executive director of Servicios de la Raza in Denver, sees the survey reflecting what he has long held to be true regarding the correlation between education, awareness and activism.

"I think the more educated you become, the more you see, the more you can identify elements relevant to racism, marginalization and indifference," he said.

Gonzales sees engagement remaining high, even as income rises, when it comes to perceived anti-Latino sentiment framed in ways small and large.

Where do Latinos encounter racism or discrimination the most?

One out of every five people polled singled out Arizona as the place that Latinos encounter racism or discrimination the most, followed by the workplace at 18 percent.

Peña said Latinos no longer see the overt racism in restaurants and other public places that his generation experienced but they recognize states such as Arizona for their discriminatory postures. Arizona in recent years has passed some of the nation's toughest measures against illegal immigrants.

"The smart people know what is going on and they see how Latinos react to this kind of vitriol and they don't like it," Peña said. "It's been a wake-up call for a lot of people."



DPTV: DPTV: Molly Hughes talks with Zahira Torres about the Latino survey



## Education engagement

Although most Latinos like their community schools and more than a third see opportunities improving, education remains one of those areas where positive feelings, while abundant, tend to decline as Latinos get older, progress farther into the school system and become more affluent and assimilated.

A healthy majority — 66 percent — report that their local schools provide a good education but the numbers start slipping as Latinos enter college, get better paying jobs and establish themselves in the culture.

While more Latinos feel that public education is getting better (37 percent) than worse (27 percent) over the last five years, optimism is stronger among the undocumented or legal permanent residents than U.S. citizens.

Pat Sanchez, superintendent of the predominantly Latino Adams 14 School District, says the idea of trust in the education system can be a holdover from new residents' country of origin.

"In Latin America, to be an educator is to be held high in social status," Sanchez said. "There's a tremendous amount of trust in teachers — which is beautiful. So it doesn't surprise me in the sense that there's a lot of trust in community schools. Sometimes that trust is probably misguided, in fact. Look at the national dropout rates."

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the Latino dropout rate was 13 percent in 2012, compared with 4 percent for white students and 8 percent for African American students.

So why the decline in trust among the more educated, the higher earners and the most assimilated? The longer Latinos have been in the country, the more Americanized they become — and the greater the chances that they have experienced the shortcomings of the education system, Sanchez figures.

"They've gone to college and they had to suffer through not being prepared for college," he said. "As much as there is trust in schools, there's larger systemic things at the state and national level that become big barriers to kids, especially recent immigrants or undocumented kids. Historically, they've had to be successful in spite of the system."

Northern Colorado resident Marcelina Alvarado, who participated in the national poll, said her faith in the education system is unshakable. Alvarado grew up in a small Mexican town with only an elementary school, limiting her to a sixth-grade education.

Alvarado moved to Colorado from Mexico in 1981 seeking a better life for her family. She became a U.S. citizen and now works as a janitor at a school.

Alvarado's four grown children all went to public schools and graduated from college. She now walks the halls at the school where she works reminding kids of the tremendous opportunity available to them.

"We have to talk to our children about the importance of an education, even if they are not our own," she said of her efforts to keep Latino students engaged in their education.

Latinos seemed to take that philosophy to heart in the survey. Interviews with parents of younger students reflected a high level of engagement among Latinos with their children's schools. More than 63 percent said they had volunteered in the classroom or attended events ranging from teacher conferences to meetings with counselors or principals.

José Martínez, who teaches social studies and economics at Bear Creek High School in Jefferson County, said parents are increasingly engaged in their children's education, often bringing several family members, from siblings to grandparents, to parent-teacher conferences.

"It's not so much out of necessity," he said. "It speaks more to the feelings of, 'I want everyone to understand this is important and I want this kid to know that they have their family behind them and we've all heard what they need to do so we are going to hold them accountable.' "

## Moving forward

As the U.S. emerged from the Great Recession, more than half of Latinos felt that their personal finances improved at least somewhat over the past five years — a number that lagged behind the 60 percent of African Americans surveyed in a similar questionnaire earlier this year.

But Latinos see better times ahead.

Not only was a large majority optimistic about their future finances and opportunities, but those positive feelings were highest among the same two diverse demographics — the most affluent and the undocumented — who reported a personal economic uptick over the previous five years.

While overall, 73 percent of those surveyed were at least somewhat optimistic about their economic future, that number spiked to 81 percent among the highest earners — more than \$75,000 per year — and 86 percent among undocumented immigrants.

"There is an element of optimism, but also we can't deny the fact that some people, especially in the immigrant community, are struggling very much like our forefathers in the 19th century," said survey respondent Valdez. "There's a sharp division in the Hispanic community between immigrants and those of us who have been here for three, four or five generations."

In fact, older and more educated Latinos were more likely to see access to well-paying jobs getting worse, a view also most prevalent in U.S. citizens, U.S.-born Latinos and those who have been here for multiple generations. Latinos were almost evenly split on whether they're worried they could lose their jobs in the next year.

Overall, Latinos' improved economic standing and optimism combine to reveal rising fortunes reflected in the marketplace, notes Peña. Riding the wave of population growth, Latinos realize that they're gaining not only political clout, but economic clout as well.

"There are more of us, people are talking about us in a better, more constructive way," Peña said. "A lot of corporations are finally beginning to show Latinos on TV commercials. Why? Because large, sophisticated companies now know who the new consumer is."

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