

# Immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean: A Socioeconomic Profile

Rubén G. Rumbaut

Statistical Brief CIFRAS-06

April 1995

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary immigration to the United States and the formation of new ethnic groups are the complex and unintended social consequences of the expansion of the nation to its post-World War II position of global hegemony. Immigrant communities in the United States today are related to a history of American military, political, economic, and cultural involvement and intervention in the sending countries, and to the linkages that are formed in the process that open a variety of legal and illegal migration pathways. Of the 249 million people counted by the 1990 U.S. Census, Hispanics accounted for 22.4 million, or 9% of the total population, up 53% from the 14.6 million counted in 1980. The sharp increase in the Hispanic population has been largely due to recent and rapidly growing immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean, making Latinos the largest immigrant population in the country. If current trends continue, Hispanics will surpass African-Americans in population size sometime in the next decade.

The 19.8 million foreign-born persons counted in the 1990 U.S. census formed the largest immigrant population in the world, though in relative terms, only 7.9% of the U.S. population was foreign-born, a lower proportion than earlier in this century. Today's immigrants are extraordinarily diverse, a reflection of polar-opposite types of migrations embedded in very different historical and structural contexts. Since the 1970s new immigrants have entered an "hourglass" economy with reduced opportunities for social mobility, particularly among the less educated, and new waves of refugees have entered a welfare state with expanded opportunities for public assistance.