

CHICANO YOUTH OVERVIEW

This overview provides youth workers a broad generalization of Mexican culture. It is essential to understand the background of the culture when working with youth of that heritage.

Remember that this overview is not indicative of all Mexican American families—it is only a general analysis.

For related information, also see the topic, Hispanic American Youth.

FAMILY

The family is the most important facet of the Mexican American existence. Family is central, and the unit is cohesive. Family-centered activity perpetuates in the parents' home. The Mexican family traditionally extends to aunts, uncles, grandparents, and godparents. Reverence for the elders of the home prevails.

Within the family unit, the mother—not the father—is the core. In this matriarchal establishment, everything revolves around her. Often, the mother's maiden name follows a person's last name. While the father is a public figure of the family, he is generally reclusive at home. The mother, alternatively, is not a public figure; yet, at home she is the primary authority.

When comparing divorce rates with other ethnic groups, Mexican families experience less marital dissolution. In the Mexican culture, women marry very young, usually by age twenty.

THREATS TO MEXICAN FAMILY

When people assimilate instead of acculturate into a new society, one's heritage may be lost. The new value system prevails. For Mexicans settling in America, many implications emerge. English becomes more important Spanish. The prominence of family declines. Respect for elders decreases. The age of women at marriage increases. Careers and education take precedence. New paradigms jeopardize the sanctity of the Mexican family and culture.

FINANCES

Financial adjustments stress the Mexican family. American urban life is a big threat. Mexicans in America soon realize that usually at least two people must work in order to pay rent and own cars. This takes the family leaders away from the home; the Mexican family loses their needed cohesion. While trying to make ends meet, the family often rips apart.

EDUCATION

Educational pressures also fracture the Mexican family. As strong education is the key to success in America, students leave home to learn. Leaving home for college creates friction within the Mexican American home. Tradition encourages family members to stay at or close to home. Leaving home is considered betrayal. In urban America, one must go to school and strive for success. These individualistic values compete with the rural Mexican background. Also, while at school, young Mexicans adopt the English language and reduce or eliminate using Spanish. This further disrupts family ties.

Recent studies indicate that sixty-seven percent of Hispanics drop out of high school, representing the largest dropout percentage among American ethnic groups. While the group "Hispanics" comprises multiple ethnic groups, Mexican Americans comprise the vast majority of Hispanics in most parts of the U.S. Subtle forms of educational discrimination may challenge the Hispanic student's ability to reach his or her goals. Hispanic teens are often enrolled in the "shop" or "horticultural" track at school. They may be counseled into choices that may interfere with or eliminate their dreams. For example, a student may hope and believe that he or she will attend a highly respected college institution, but acceptance in such schools is rare for one whose high school transcript is filled with courses such as ceramics or wood shop. The population needs schooling and fairness in selecting the path of their education.

American education (especially in college institutions) emphasizes relativism, tolerance, and secularism. These teachings often discourage Mexican American students from following their traditionally important faith. The values of the university counter the Mexican American student's cultural values—but one must accept and participate in the college experience in order to succeed in America. If a Mexican American holds steadfast to Mexican values, he or she probably will not be able to achieve American success. Compromise and sacrifice are demanded.

RELIGION

While religion is important in America, it does not maintain the stronghold on the American family that it holds on the Mexican family. Therefore, many Mexican Americans become less religious and spiritual; they often lose touch with the Church. Additionally, the Catholic Church dominates Mexican religious life. However, in America, Protestantism boasts a strong following. In the U.S., people become upwardly mobile through the Protestant Church. It is respected in America to attend a Protestant church. Because success is an American axiom and since Mexican Americans attempt to "fit in" to the new culture, many may be lured away from Catholicism. The "old country" Catholic values become nonexistent. To retain Mexican Americans within the Catholic Church, Catholic churches in America are creating more welcoming, comfortable environments to help the Mexican American "feel at home."

Protestant churches offer quicker leadership opportunities for upward mobility than the Roman Catholic Church. In America, leadership symbolizes success. In America and in Mexico, there are very few Mexican priests—the cultural emphasis on family discourages Mexican men from the celibacy vow. In Protestant churches, however, people can relatively easily become pastors, directors, and lay members. Since Mexican men rarely become priests, and there are only limited forms of female influence within the Catholic Church, Catholic leadership is difficult for Mexican Americans. Therefore, Protestant churches often appeal to Mexican Americans striving for acceptance in the U.S.

The interest in Protestantism can cause additional problems within the Mexican American family. In the Catholic Mexican tradition, the female is the spiritual authority, a view epitomized by the Virgin Mary. Mexican men, in fact, rarely attend church. In Protestant America, however, men are encouraged and assumed to provide the spiritual leadership of the home. The role expectations of the male and female reverse when comparing Mexican and American traditions.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The revelation of domestic abuse and violence shatters some Mexican American families. Such abuses are common in the Mexican culture, but the topics are not discussed. To admit domestic violence would shame the family, and family is the icon of Mexican society. In America, exposing and facing abuse and violence are encouraged. This new perspective toward domestic unrest threatens the honor of the Mexican family.

VALUES

The order of values for a Mexican family changes the longer they reside in America. For those born in Mexico and venture to America (first generation Mexican Americans), values are as follows (in order): God, family, honor (especially avoiding shame to the family), work/survival, self, church, culture, peer social relations, and education. However, for those Mexican Americans born in America whose families have been in America for several decades (third and fourth generation Mexican Americans), the order of traditional values changes: God, education, vocation, self, family, church, peer social relations, and culture. Among other preferences of later-generation Mexican Americans, the importance of family declines while the focus on education rises. Through these differences, it becomes difficult for the young and the old in a Mexican family to identify with each other.

WORLD VIEW

A comparison of American and Mexican societal perspectives is intriguing and helpful for anyone working with Mexican American youth and their families:

American	Mexican
Many friends, surface relationships.	One or two deep friends.
Lots of resources.	Not enough resources.
Logical thought.	Cyclical storytelling.
Independent.	Group-oriented.
Publicly denounce others.	Do not vilify others publicly (save face).
Competitive.	Cooperative (or compete in group games).
Refer to people on informal, first-name basis.	Give title before saying one's first name (more formal, respecting); age and rank are important.
Youthfulness.	Elders.
Oriented to future.	Oriented to history.
Masters of fate.	Life predetermined.
Optimistic.	Tragic.
"Fix it now."	"Let's have a party." (Relaxed attitude toward overcoming challenge.)
Open sexuality.	Do not discuss sexuality.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

Through this overview, several opportunities for working with Mexican American kids emerge. The youth and family of this particular culture need the following:

- * Deeper personal spirituality.
- * Economic justice and training in finances.
- * Support of the young person's education.
- * Immigration transition.
- * General help for the family.
- * Dissolution of gang activity.

Special people who offer the U.S. their values of family, loyalty, and joy, Mexican Americans need encouragement to meet the challenges of a new culture, reason to hope, and knowledge to gain empowerment.

Editor's note: Much of this discussion is based on an October 1994 class presentation of Mexicans in America given by Dr. Isaac Canales, psychology professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does this overview compare with the Mexican American kids with whom you work?
2. How can you help new Mexican American youth interact with others who have been in the U.S. most or all of their lives? How can you help later-generation Mexican American youth better interact with their elders?
3. How can you help bridge relationships between Mexican American children and their families?
4. What can you do to strengthen the education provided to Mexican American kids?
5. Do you think that it is necessary to be Mexican or speak Spanish in order to work with Mexican American kids? Their families? Why or why not?

IMPLICATION

Cultural adjustment is a difficult experience for the lives of youth. Attempting to honor one's heritage while striving for acceptance in a new world often shatters young people's lives and the lives of their family. Youth workers have a great challenge and opportunity to smooth the rough transition. Help youth and their families learn to compromise. One example is to encourage young people who go away to school to return and serve their community. When working with Mexicans, the youth worker must realize that he or she does not serve one individual, but an entire family. Behind the person is always the family.

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