

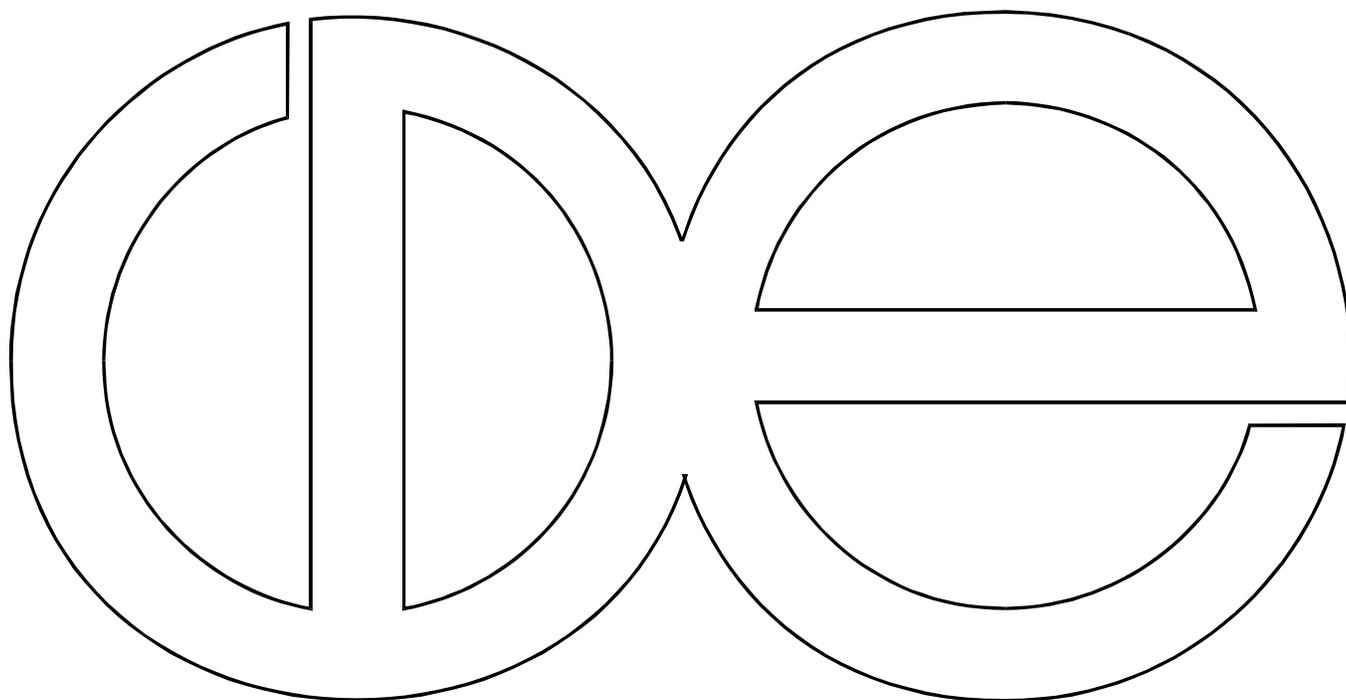
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**A First Look at Living Arrangements  
among Hispanic Elders 1970-2000  
with Special Emphasis on Living Alone  
among Unmarried Women**

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**A FIRST LOOK AT LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AMONG HISPANIC ELDERS  
1970-2000 WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON LIVING ALONE  
AMONG UNMARRIED WOMEN**

**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper we examine change in the living arrangements of Hispanic elders between 1970 and 2000 using Census and Current Population Survey data. First, we compare the living arrangements of Hispanic elders to those of the non-Hispanic population, including white, African American and other groups. Second, we examine more closely differences and similarities between the major Hispanic sub-groups: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. And, third, we explore in a limited way the conjecture that individual economic mobility is a leading factor behind the rise in solitary living among Hispanic during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Previous research suggests that Hispanic elders, as a group, have been much more likely to live with others, especially adult children, than have non-Hispanic white elders, and to a lesser extent, non-Hispanic African American elders. Furthermore, even as there has been an increase in solitary (and couple-only) living among those latter two groups since 1970, the living arrangements of Hispanic elders appears to not have changed much during the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Upon closer examination, however, this is due to counter-tendencies among Hispanic sub-groups.

Of possible reasons for the differentials (and non-differentials) we see in the prevalence of solitary living--demographic, economic, cultural, and social--the data best enable us to assess the role of changing personal income on changes in living arrangements over time. We focus on

unmarried elderly women age 65 and over because these women are most at risk of living alone, while also implicitly controlling for two demographic characteristics which are strongly related to living arrangement differentials: sex and marital status. Using the simple demographic technique of direct standardization, we find that income can only explain a portion of the observed increase in solitary living during the 1970-2000 period, leaving us to wonder both about 'cultural lag' and 'minority status' (social) explanations, and about the role of public policy.

### Demographic Background

The Hispanic population of the United States has been increasing dramatically, becoming by 2000 the largest minority population in the country. Estimated proportions before 2000 census figures came out were for it to increase from less than 5 percent of the total population in 1970 to just under 12 percent in 2000 (del Pinal and Singer, 1997). It was projected to grow to one quarter of the population by 2050. The Census Bureau now estimates that Hispanics comprised 12.5 percent of the population in 2000 (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001); and they may well comprise more than one quarter of the population by 2050.

As a group, Hispanics tend to be fairly young although the proportion of elders who are Hispanic is growing (see Figure 1.) (See also Angel and Hogan, 1992.) In 1970 for instance, little more than 2 percent of the elderly population of the U.S. was Hispanic (compared with 4.5% overall), and by 2000 this was still about 5 percent (compared to more than twice that for all ages). By 2050 however, this may be almost one in six (compared to one in four overall).

It can be useful to consider all Hispanics together in comparison to the non-Hispanic white or African American populations because these are all broad groups, but the term

“Hispanic” is in fact artificial. It was coined by the Census Bureau to refer to anyone of Spanish-speaking origin despite huge differences between various subgroups (Sullivan, 2000). The three largest “Hispanic” groups (Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban) are in fact quite different ethnically, demographically and economically, as are people from other Caribbean and Central and South American origins who are usually grouped together in an undefined “Hispanic other” category.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, people of Mexican origin, both natives and foreign-born people, comprise a majority of Hispanics (see Figure 2). Their proportion was half of all Hispanics in the U.S. in 1970, and two-thirds in 2000. Puerto Ricans comprise the second largest Hispanic group (at 9% in 2000) while Cubans comprise a smaller but still measurable group (about 4%). The remaining “Other Hispanics” group is fairly substantial, if amorphous--over a quarter of all Hispanics in 1970 and roughly a fifth in 2000. These figures change dramatically for the elderly population 65 years and more however. Among older Hispanic people, Mexicans were not quite a majority in 1970 and were still less than 54 percent of all elderly Hispanics by 2000 (compared with two thirds overall). The proportion of Puerto Rican elders remained at about 10 percent of the Hispanic elderly population between 1970 and 2000, while the proportion of Cuban elders increased from 8 to 16 percent during the same period. The proportion of Other Hispanic elders declined from 36 to 21 percent. These differentials are a result of different demographic characteristics, including different migration histories and different fertility patterns. The figures help to illustrate how divergent the groups really are.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1970 Census had a category for someone of Central or South American origin but subsequent censuses did not have that extra category. We also found it useful to follow Tienda (Appendix A: 402 in Bean and Tienda, 1987) by considering only those Mexican Americans residing in the Southwest in the 1980 data. Other Hispanics called Mexican American in 1980 (not many) were placed in the ‘other Hispanic’ category.

We can refine this grouping somewhat. Ideally, we would want to group people according to both nativity status and, for the foreign born, period of immigration (or length of residence in the United States) to accord with ideas about acculturation and/or age at migration (e.g. Angel and Angel, 1992). Unfortunately, we cannot. For one, we do not have enough cases for that level of refinement. Also, although the 1970 and 1980 Censuses asked about year of immigration, Puerto Ricans never technically immigrated when they came from the island to the mainland. As a result the query elicited responses from Mexicans and Cubans but not Puerto Ricans. We are able, however, to consider two groups of Mexican Americans by nativity status that help to provide important insights despite our otherwise broad grouping.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the groups' relative influence on overall figures changed: In 1970, native Mexican Americans comprised only 18 percent of the elderly Hispanic population while foreign-born Mexican Americans comprised 28 percent of Hispanic elders. By 1997-2000, native Mexican Americans had become over 24 percent, while foreign-born Mexican Americans had declined to 22 percent, of the Hispanic elderly population.

### The Data

This study uses United States census data for 1970, 1980 and 1990, and pooled March Current Population Survey (CPS) data for 1997 through 2000. Although sufficient for our purposes, the number of cases we have to work with is relatively small in both 1970 and 1997-2000 (even when pooled over four years). Dissatisfaction with census and CPS data among

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<sup>2</sup> Although we have seen native or foreign birthplace a variable in multivariate analyses (e.g. Burr and Mutchler, 1992), closer examination discloses that this is almost totally, although not exclusively, an issue for Mexican American elders.

gerontologists has spawned special studies such as the Health and Retirement Study (HRS/AHEAD). However, even with over sampling such specialized surveys fail to include many cases of Hispanic elders (especially non-Mexicans). A special survey of Hispanic elders, the “National Survey of Hispanic Elderly People,” that contained an adequately-sized sample and a wealth of information, *was* conducted in 1988, but the survey was never repeated..

Sample size affects the type and circumstance of the different methods available for studying change over time in Hispanic elders’ living arrangements. For instance in 1970, we use a 1 percent microsample of the Census for a sample size of 192,455 non-institutionalized elders 65 and older. Of these, a little over 2 percent (4,036) were Hispanic. Further dividing this into subgroups, we study 741 native Mexican, 1,147 foreign-born Mexican, 384 Puerto Rican and 327 Cuban elders. The March 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 surveys together had 63,351 non-institutionalized elders 65 and older, of which 4,509 were Hispanic. Of the latter, 1,313 were native Mexican, 841 foreign-born Mexican, 541 Puerto Rican, and 701 Cuban elders. (Numbers refer to the non-institutionalized population because the Current Population Survey (CPS) does not cover the institutionalized population although the Censuses do.<sup>3</sup>) Including the earlier or later period in the analysis offsets the fact that for both 1980 and 1990 we could use a 5 percent microsample of the Census: 1,275,835 non-institutionalized elders 65 and older of which 33,701 were Hispanic in 1980, and 1,569,638 non-institutionalized elders of which 51,911 were Hispanic in 1990.

Even if there were enough cases, the data would not permit us to indicate the period of

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<sup>3</sup> Institutionalization has not been an important factor for Hispanic elderly populations however, as even those who might benefit from institutionalization are still inclined to live in private households (Dietz, John and Roy, 1998).

immigration (or age at migration or length of residence in the United States) except to divide Mexican-origin elders by nativity. As discussed previously, only the 1990 Census asked a question about coming to the mainland rather than about immigration in order to capture information on the migration of Puerto Ricans. Similarly, a question about proficiency in English, found to be so important in both 1980 and 1990 (Burr and Mutchler, 1992; Mutchler and Brallier, 1999), was not asked in either the 1970 Census or the March Current Population Surveys.

Finally, we must wonder about the comparability of figures in different data sets. Fortunately, all four data sets use comparable measures of household, age, sex, marital status, household size, relationship to household head and total personal income. The definition of “household” is similar to a household-dwelling concept in all years:

*A household consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit. A house, an apartment or other group of rooms, or a single room, is regarded as a housing unit when it is occupied or intended for occupancy as separate living quarters; that is, when the occupants do not live and eat with any other persons in the structure and there is direct access from the outside or through a common hall*

and

*A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people, if any, such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees who share the housing unit. A person living alone in a housing unit, or a group of unrelated people sharing a housing unit such as partners or roomers, is also counted as a household. The count of households excludes group quarters*

Marital status has

*four major categories: never married, married, widowed, and divorced. These terms refer to the marital status at the time of the enumeration.*

(from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/cps/cpsdef.html>). Age is measured in single

completed years up to a number that varies from 90 and above to somewhere above one hundred. “Relationship to household head” varied in minor detail but was basically the same each year, always having such items as head (householder), spouse of head, child, parent, other relative and unrelated. Such variables were adjusted easily.

Regarding the variable “Hispanic Origin,” we use information on descent in 1970 because the 1980 Census focused on Hispanic origin (Spanish descent) and the 1990 Census followed suit (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992; Smith and Nogle, 1997). The Current Population Survey follows Census guidelines. There is thus reason to compare the various data sets although there are always questions about context and question interpretation (e.g. Grieco and Cassidy, 2001).<sup>4</sup> This enabled us to tentatively pool all the data sets for purposes of probability testing.

From the data on household size and relationship to household head we constructed a comparable variable for living arrangements designed after that discussed by Shanas and colleagues (1968) and later modified by Palmore (1975). The categories are 1) alone; 2) with spouse only; 3) with a child (or child-in-law or grandchild); 4) with another relative; and 5) only with unrelated people. The last three categories are hierarchical such that a person who lives with a child AND another relative is coded as 3 or living with a child, while a person who lives with other relatives AND an unrelated person is coded as 4 or living with another relative (see also De Vos and Holden, 1988).

Each data set also had information on a person’s total income. That information had to be adjusted to take inflation into account. Income was converted into constant dollars using the

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<sup>4</sup> For instance. The 2000 census question on Hispanic origin was very similar to that of the 1990 census but was asked before a question on race rather than after it (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). Also, a re-interview sample for the 1980 Census found that Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Cubans responded fairly consistently, although there were more problems with “other Hispanics” (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1986 cited by Smith and Nogle, 1997: 555).

Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index. Thus \$1.00 in 1970 was the same as \$2.12 in 1980, \$3.37 in 1990 and \$4.20 in 1998. Negative annual income was assigned a zero. The 1970 Census reported income in hundreds of dollars whereas the more recent data sets reported income in terms of single dollars. The 1980 Census had a maximum income of \$75,000 (in 1980 dollars) that became the ceiling for all the years (in comparable dollars).

### A First Look

The 1970 and 1997-2000 distributions of elders by living arrangement and broad ethnic groups are shown in Table 1.<sup>5</sup> Over the period there was a dramatic rise in the proportion of the elderly living alone or in couple-only households among non-Hispanic Whites, a smaller increase in the prevalence of living alone among non-Hispanic African Americans, and almost no change whatsoever in living alone among Hispanic elders (only marginally significant at  $p=.0181$ ) although there was a noticeable increase in couple-only living (at the expense of both living with children or living with another relative).

A closer examination, however, reveals that, while living alone was fairly stable among all the Hispanic subgroups, a rise in living in a couple-only arrangement was dampened in particular by no change among foreign-born Mexican elders. Figures in Table 2 represent distributions of living arrangements by Hispanic sub-group in 1970 and 1997-2000. There was a 10 percentage point increase in the proportion of Native Mexican American elders who lived in couple only households and conversely a 10 percentage point decline in the proportion who lived

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<sup>5</sup> The relatively large proportion of African Americans living alone and the rather small proportion of African Americans living with a spouse only appears to be a function of marital status (Himes, Hogan and Eggebeen, 1996 Table 2). When the figures are standardized for age, sex and marital status, it appears that a slightly greater proportion of Black elders lived alone or with a spouse only than Hispanics in 1990.

with other relatives between 1970 and 1997-2000. On the other hand, there was absolutely no change in the proportion of foreign-born Mexican American elders who lived in any type of living arrangement. At the other extreme is the situation presented by Cuban American elders (see Table 2). Between 1970 and 1997-2000 the proportion of Cuban elders who lived alone or in couple-only households increased from 29 percent to 61 percent, while the proportion who lived with children decreased from 54 percent to 21 percent. Although not as pronounced, Puerto Rican elders also exhibited an increase in living alone or only as a couple and a decrease in the proportion of elders living with children (from 40% in 1970 to 28% in 1997-2000).<sup>6</sup>

### What are We Seeing?

Even if there are substantial gaps between non-Hispanic White elders and elders of other groups at one point in time, those gaps represent constantly moving averages that are all increasing over time except for foreign-born Mexican Americans. So are we seeing gaps between groups that will narrow as time proceeds and as the proportion of non-Hispanic White elders living alone reaches some ceiling, perhaps at saturation, while solitary living (alone or only with a spouse) among other groups continues to increase? Are we seeing the result of demographic, economic, social or cultural forces?

A demographic explanation might emphasize changes in the composition of the elderly population in terms of age, sex, marital status and/or kin availability (Himes et al., 1996; also see Ruggles, 1987; Uhlenberg, 1980; Hammel, Wachter and McDaniel, 1981; Wolf, 1994). In

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<sup>6</sup> While change in solitary living was only significant among Cuban elders at  $p < .01$ , change in couple-only living was significant among native Mexican and Puerto Rican elders as well as among Cuban elders.

developed countries such as the United States, changes in fertility, mortality and nuptiality have altered the length of time people spend in certain family states such as before marriage, in between marriages, married with grown children, or widowed or divorced with grown children (see Watkins, Menken and Bongaarts, 1987). Among the Hispanic population, distinct patterns and compositional structures of immigration have had a direct effect on some of these processes, including fertility and nuptiality, as well as indirectly through kin availability. Mexican migration has been characterized by its youthful and male-dominated composition yet also by strong family networks on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (Palloni et al., 2001). During the first three decades of Cuban immigration, immigration was characterized by the transplantation of complete and extended family units and by a considerably older and female dominated population (Arias, 1998). Puerto Rican migration has been characterized mainly by its relatively unhindered mobility and youthfulness. These distinct processes seriously impinge on demographic characteristics and therefore living arrangements.

An economic explanation would be consistent with the findings of a recent study regarding living alone among elderly widows (McGarry and Schoeni, 2000:233):

Our results suggest that increases in Social Security coverage and benefits, and perhaps general increases in economic status, were the main forces governing the increase in the propensity to live alone: They explain 47% of the change between 1940 and 1990. These figures suggest that Social Security largely replaced or “crowded out” the family in providing for the elderly. If privacy is viewed as a normal good by both parents and their children, then this substantial crowding out implies that the benefits of Social Security reached across generations.

What about a cultural explanation? Many Hispanics describe American culture as “individualistic” as compared with their more “family-centered” outlook (see Applewhite, 1988; LeVine, 1993; Sotomayor, 1991; Zsembik, 1996). LeVine, for example, compares the care

giving behavior of American and Mexican mothers and Sotomayor emphasizes the importance of a group for Hispanics. Perhaps the best discussion of the “cultural” differences between elder parent-adult child coresidence actually pertains to Europe, in Reher’s comparison of what may be best described as the “weak” and “strong” family systems of northern and southern Europe (1998: 212):

Faced with the transition to old age, in one context individuals ... prolong ... independence as long as possible and ... would never give serious consideration to going to live with their children; nor would it enter the minds of their children to have their elderly parents at home with them. ... In sharp contrast to this pattern, in areas of strong families, maintaining independence as a matter of principle would seem like nonsense ... In both situations there is intergenerational reciprocity ... These are distinct modes of behavior, applied in each context with a maximum of good will.

He associates the situation in the United States with the northern European pattern, and speculates that what little elder parent-adult child coresidence as does exist in the United States is limited to minority ethnic groups.

As for the future, he suggests (p. 221):

The future promises to bring many changes, but weak-family and strong-family systems will continue to occupy clearly differentiated vital spheres.

Yet it would appear more helpful to combine economic and cultural reasons together than to consider them separately. For instance, the current penchant to live alone for non-Hispanic white elders in the United States did not always exist. Rather, most elders used to live with others, primarily but not exclusively adult children (Dahlin, 1980; Kramarow, 1995; Ruggles, 1996; see also Elman and Uhlenberg, 1995). Dahlin estimates that in 1900, only 29 percent of married elders lived only as a couple and only 11 percent of unmarried elders lived alone, but that by 1975 these figures had become 84 percent and 66 percent (1980: Table 1). Himes et al.

estimate that by 1990 among non-Hispanic whites, fully 73.7 percent of all non-institutionalized elders age 60+ either lived alone or only with a spouse (1996: Table 2).

According to Dahlin's historical view (1993), the traditional expectation may have been for old people to reside with others, usually their adult children, but that the expectation was developed at a time when the only alternative to coresidence for most older people was to live in some kind of Poor House. He nicely describes people's abhorrence to such a fate, and some of the difficulties working class families endured so as to maintain multigenerational coresidence even in cramped urban settings. And he notes that both immigrant (minority) and native (majority) families felt similar pressures. With the advent of such innovations as Social Security and other retirement schemes, he suggests that there may have been a lessened desire (or need) on the parts of both adult children and elders alike to coreside since many elders had come to have a reasonable alternative, at least for a time.

Perhaps the best term used to describe the idea that attitudes change after economic change is that of 'cultural lag' (Ogburn, 1957 [1964]). The traditional attitude may have been that family members help when one is in need, and that old people were in need. When such programs as Social Security or other pension schemes were enacted, many people probably still maintained the perception that solitary living among noninstitutionalized elderly people was not a viable or reasonable option. However, the changed reality eventually sank in. That is, one can expect an effect of time (Kramarow, 1995: 349):

Time, as measured by dummy variables for 1940, 1960, and 1990, in the models shown in Table 4, has a positive effect on the probability of living alone, independent of the effect of rising income over time.

And it is no surprise to read Kramarow's conclusion that (p.350):

The increase in living alone among elderly people in the United States cannot be attributed to one factor alone; rather, this change is embedded in broad social transformations.

Whether a change is ascribed to rising income, Social Security, ‘acculturation,’ or ‘assimilation,’ many of the same forces experienced by non-Hispanic Whites decades ago are being experienced by Hispanic elders today:

Various pressures have taken their toll on the Hispanic family in America, however, and have disrupted the balance, leaving the elderly without the natural system of support on which they have traditionally relied. (Gallegos, 1991: 180-181).

Thus it may be commonly agreed that “Hispanics from many ethnic backgrounds tend to be more family-oriented than other Americans” (del Pinal and Singer, 1997: 29) but Zsembik (1996:70) observes:

“...preferences are shaped not only by social norms embedded in ethnic heritage, the effect of which attenuates with acculturation, but are also outcomes of residential alternatives, and economic and noneconomic resources. Opportunities and resources directly affect actual living arrangements and indirectly through a preference structure. Preference is both an outcome of the other determinants and a determinant of behavior.”

Thus, she found that English proficiency had a negative effect on the preference for coresidence but factors associated with the “availability of kin” and “economic and noneconomic resources” had effects as well. (See also Mutchler and Brallier, 1999.)

Yet there is reason to hesitate when proposing a “cultural lag” argument that would lead to eventual convergence in the living arrangements of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white elders. And that is the minority status argument, what some refer to as a “double jeopardy” (being old and Hispanic) or, in the case of women, a “triple jeopardy” (being old, Hispanic and female).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “For our purposes, a minority group is an ethnic group that suffers discrimination and subordination within society” (Markides, Liang, and Jackson, 1990:113).

del Pinal and Singer ask: “Does maintaining a Latino identity mean remaining economically and socially marginalized and disadvantaged?” (1987: 6). Perhaps Sotomayor and Applewhite say it best (1988:122):

There is no question that for Hispanics the family has provided a significant amount of support during times of social and economic stress as well as emotional nurturing and protection from discrimination and racism suffered by most Hispanics in this country (...). ... It is believed that the elderly in particular provide most of the support since they have survived—whether well or not too well—despite the deleterious psychological, economic, and political effects of discrimination. ...”

And despite the importance of transmitting traditional values and attitudes that may have originated in a country of origin (Chahin et al., 1999) it is important to note that “what might be considered traditional cultural patterns traced to the country of origin may well be cultural patterns that have emerged in response to challenges faced in the host culture” (Markides et al., 1990:113).

Could it be in fact that certain kinds of discrimination and racism are suffered less by people with higher income? Alternately, might there be more cultural assimilation among people with higher income? Using the 1980 cross-section, Burr and Mutchler tested the speculation that economic status affected the impact of cultural factors (1993:176-177):

To summarize, unmarried older Hispanic females with a higher economic status than average are more likely to live alone, appearing to purchase independence in their living arrangements. In addition, women with poorer English-language skills seem to prefer coresidence. As to the nature of the interaction of income and English-language proficiency, the cultural convergence hypothesis is supported, especially among older Mexican-American and Puerto Rican females. As income increases, the chance of living in a complex household *decreases*, and the difference between those who are more and less culturally integrated narrows.

Since they found that the importance of a cultural variable on living alone decreased with increased income, they speculated that the data supported a “cultural convergence” hypothesis as

opposed to a “cultural manifestation” hypothesis. They did not find support for the idea that people with more money were more likely to act on a cultural preference (indicated by language ability) for coresidence. They found the opposite most strongly among Mexican American and Puerto Rican women. One could also interpret their finding as evidence of a decreased impact of ‘minority status’ among people of higher socioeconomic status, for instance that people with limited language skills need to depend on other family members, especially when they have little income.

### Living Alone Among Unmarried Elderly Women

To actually subject the data to analysis, we thought it best to focus on unmarried elderly women because that was a way to control for such demographic characteristics as gender and marital status while also being able to focus on a living arrangement of particular interest here, that of living alone. Only unmarried people are at risk of living alone of course. And of the various possible reasons discussed above for a rise in solitary living among elderly people, we thought that the one best suited for testing with Census data was the economic one, how elders’ changed economic situations may have contributed to their increased tendency to live alone since 1970. However, since there was reason not to treat the income of elderly men and elderly women equally; we decided to focus on women as women may be most at risk of living alone. Finally, rest assured that similar to the situation among all elders, unmarried elderly Hispanic women were much less likely to live alone than non-Hispanic white women but experienced an increase in the propensity to live alone over time. That increase was particularly striking among Cuban women but was statistically significant for all groups except foreign-born Mexican Americans

(see Figure 3.)

We use total income, not to endorse a simple measure (for instance, income does not help indicate such factors as additional coverage by a private health insurance plan) but to have a crude indicator of relative material well-being. To the extent that an increase in income cannot explain either time or group differences, we can suggest that something else (perhaps one of the other explanations) is at work.

We employ the basic demographic technique of standardization, a different standardization from that often discussed by statisticians (see Smith, 1992). (The demographic technique stems from mortality analysis whereas the statistical technique stems from the idea of a normal distribution.) The non-Hispanic African American population of unmarried elderly women in 1970 and in 1997-2000 served as the standards because we wanted to standardize with a low income distribution.<sup>8</sup> Since the income of different groups is so much higher in the later period compared to 1970 (at least when using the Consumer Price Index), it is necessary to perform standardization that only spans two rather than three decades, 1970-1990 and 1980-2000.

### Standardization Results

According to our simple, direct standardization, income may help explain some but not much of the differentials in solitary living that we see. Consider for example the results in Table 3, which are shown graphically in Figures 4 and 5. The income-standardized results for the

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<sup>8</sup> We also tried to use multivariate analysis as described by Althausser and Wigler, 1972 and Clogg and Eliason, 1988 but did not have enough cases with which to do so and consider the different Hispanic subgroups in 1970 or 1997-2000.

percentage of native non-Hispanic White unmarried elderly women living alone was 56, 53, and 70 in 1970, 1980 and 1990 respectively or 65, 73 and 73 in 1980, 1990 and 1997-2000 respectively.<sup>9</sup> (The actual figures are 56, 60, 73, 74.) Comparable standardized figures for native Mexican American unmarried elderly women are 39, 46 and 44 or 56, 47 and 48. Whether one prefers the earlier or the later figures, the same message is illustrated: that standardizing for income (with the low-income distribution) does not markedly narrow the gap between native non-Hispanic Whites and native Mexican Americans in the proportion of elders living alone. The estimated standardized differential between native non-Hispanic White and native Mexican American unmarried elderly women was 17 percentage points in 1970, compared to an observed differential of 22 percentage points. The standardized differential in 1997-2000 was 25 points, compared to the observed differential of 28 points. Likewise, the non-effect of standardization, particularly at the later time, on the gap between Puerto Rican and non-Hispanic White unmarried female elders was similar: in 1970 the standardized gap was 18 points, compared to an actual gap of 22 percentage points and in 1997-2000 the standardized gap was 21 percentage points, compared to an actual gap of 21 percentage points (.73-.52 vs. .74-.53). Standardization had more effect on the 1970 gap for Cubans, but by 1997-2000 that effect had waned from changing a 38 point gap to 20 points to bringing a 21 point gap down to 17 points.

Standardizing for income also did little to reduce the proportional differential in solitary living between 1970 and 1997-2000 among the native Mexican American women. The actual level was estimated at 34 percent in 1970 and 45 percent in 1997-2000, a gap of 11 percentage

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<sup>9</sup> Standardized figures for the non-Hispanic White populations may be suspect because we tried to use a distribution skewed toward the lower end. Choice of the standard can affect the outcome.

points. The standardized figure was 39 percent in 1970 and 48 percent in 1997-2000, a standardized gap of 9 percentage points.

On the other hand, income by itself seemed to help explain the rise in solitary living among Puerto Rican and Cuban unmarried elderly women. Standardized figures for the earlier period for Puerto Ricans showed a gap of 7 percentage points but no gap for the later period, compared to observed gaps of 13 and 12 percentage points. Also, in 1970, the standardized figure for Cuban women in 1970 was .36, compared to the observed figure of .18. And the actual gap for Cuban women between 1970 and 1997-2000 was 34 percentage points (51-18), while the standardized gap was only 20 points (56-36) (see Table 3.)

Differentials between the various Hispanic groups were fairly small to begin with but standardizing for income did little to alter those differences. That is not a valid reason for lumping all Hispanic groups together however, as the different trajectories over time amply shows. It is also important to note that foreign-born Mexican Americans tended to have a lower amount of solitary living than did women in the other Hispanic subgroups even if there was no significant change in living arrangement. That just brought home again the unfortunate fact that we could not pursue here the idea that length of time in the United States influenced those figures.

## CONCLUSION

Even as cross-sectional analyses consistently show that Hispanic elders are much less likely to live alone than are non-Hispanic White or African American elders, one is left to wonder why and whether the likelihood of living alone has increased or stayed the same over

time among the different Hispanic subgroups themselves, what roles economic and non-economic differentials may play in producing the observed differences, and what the future might be like. This study attempted to partly address the time issue and how much of any change might be attributable to changing economic status. This is especially important because Hispanics have grown from being a negligible minority in 1970 to being the largest minority group in the United States by 2000. By 2050, an estimated one in every six U.S. elders will be Hispanic.

The propensity to live alone or in a couple only household increased markedly between 1970 and 1997-2000 among non-Hispanic White elders, somewhat among African American elders, but barely among Hispanic elders. This was not due to a lack of change among Puerto Ricans, Cubans or to a lesser degree native Mexican Americans however, but to a lack of change among foreign-born Mexican Americans. If one dealt specifically with the major Hispanic subgroups instead of lumping them all together, the change or lack of change would be quite apparent. Since most of the Puerto Rican and Cuban elders were not born in the United States however, one cannot simply speculate that nativity is the key. But to what can one attribute the difference?

Of possible reasons—demographic, economic, cultural or social—we crudely asked “how much of any difference might be accounted for by economic status, measured through personal income?” The answers appear to be: “Some, but not an overwhelming amount in most cases.”

Figures can obviously be improved upon when 2000 Census data become available in a few years but we can still speculate about the future. If trends continue, we could see almost all non-Hispanic White elders outside institutions living independently as has occurred in many Western European countries (Iacovou, 2000). For both economic and cultural reasons we could

see trends in the same direction among elderly non-Hispanic African American elders and different groups of Hispanic elders but it is highly improbable that we would ever see a convergence. The persistence of a difference would probably not be because of cultural factors *per se* although such currently exist, but because of “minority group status.” After all, as Rendall and Speare (1995) so nicely demonstrated, poverty alleviation through coresidence is not simply abstract, especially when people face a double or triple “jeopardy,” and especially when people of all ages see family relations as a way to avoid poverty.

There are people who argue that the family represents a resource that should be both taken into account when formulating policy, and that the maintenance of family ties should be encouraged. After all, the extended family can be important for both old and young regarding the receipt and giving of significant amounts of ‘informal’ support. But what we so often see is that families get penalized, not encouraged. It is unfortunately all too common to read material such as (Garcia, 1993: 24):

*Secondly, government policies tend to discourage Hispanic familial support of their elderly; by reducing SSI assistance by one-third for those who live in others’ households, the government is thereby discouraging familial social and economic support. ...*

To paraphrase liberally from from Mutchler and Angel (2000), we could try to make Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare and similar public programs more “family-friendly.”

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**Table 1. Household Arrangements by Broad Ethnic Group Among Elders 65+ in the United States - Percent Distribution**

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Population Group	1970					1997-2000				
	Alone	Couple Only	With Child	With Other Relative	With Non-Relative	Alone	Couple Only	With Child	With Other Relative	With Non-Relative
Non-Hispanic White	26	42	19	9	3	31	50	13	4	2
Non-Hispanic African American	25	24	26	17	8	33	24	30	8	5
Non-Hispanic Other	21	25	37	11	7	16	34	37	11	3
Hispanic	20	26	37	13	3	21	31	34	11	3

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**Table 2. Household Arrangements Among Subgroups of Hispanic Elders 65+ in the United States, 1970 and 1997-2000**  
**Percent Distribution**

Population Group	1970					1997-2000				
	Alone	Couple Only	With Child	With Other Relative	With Non-Relative	Alone	Couple Only	With Child	With Other Relative	With Non-Relative
Native Mexican	20	26	35	16	3	19	36	35	6	3
Foreign-born Mexican	19	23	42	13	3	18	23	42	14	2
Puerto Rican	25	19	40	12	4	29	34	28	7	2
Cuban	10	19	54	14	3	24	37	21	16	3
Other Hispanic	23	33	30	11	3	22	24	38	12	4
<b>Total</b>	20	26	37	13	3	21	31	34	11	3

**Table 3. Standardized and Observed Proportion of Unmarried Elderly Women Living Alone by Ethnic Group**

Population	1970		A. 1980		1990	
	Stand	Actual	Stand	Actual	Stand	Actual
Native NH White	.56	.56	.53	.60	.70	.73
Foreign NH White	.50	.49	.46	.53	.58	.65
NH African American	.43	.40	.45	.46	.52	.51
Other Non-Hispanic	.44	.37	.28	.43	.33	.34
Native Mexican	.39	.34	.46	.47	.44	.45
Foreign Mexican	.40	.32	.36	.35	.34	.33
Puerto Rican	.38	.34	.39	.41	.45	.47
Cuban	.36	.18	.31	.30	.37	.39
Other Hispanic	.48	.45	.40	.41	.44	.46

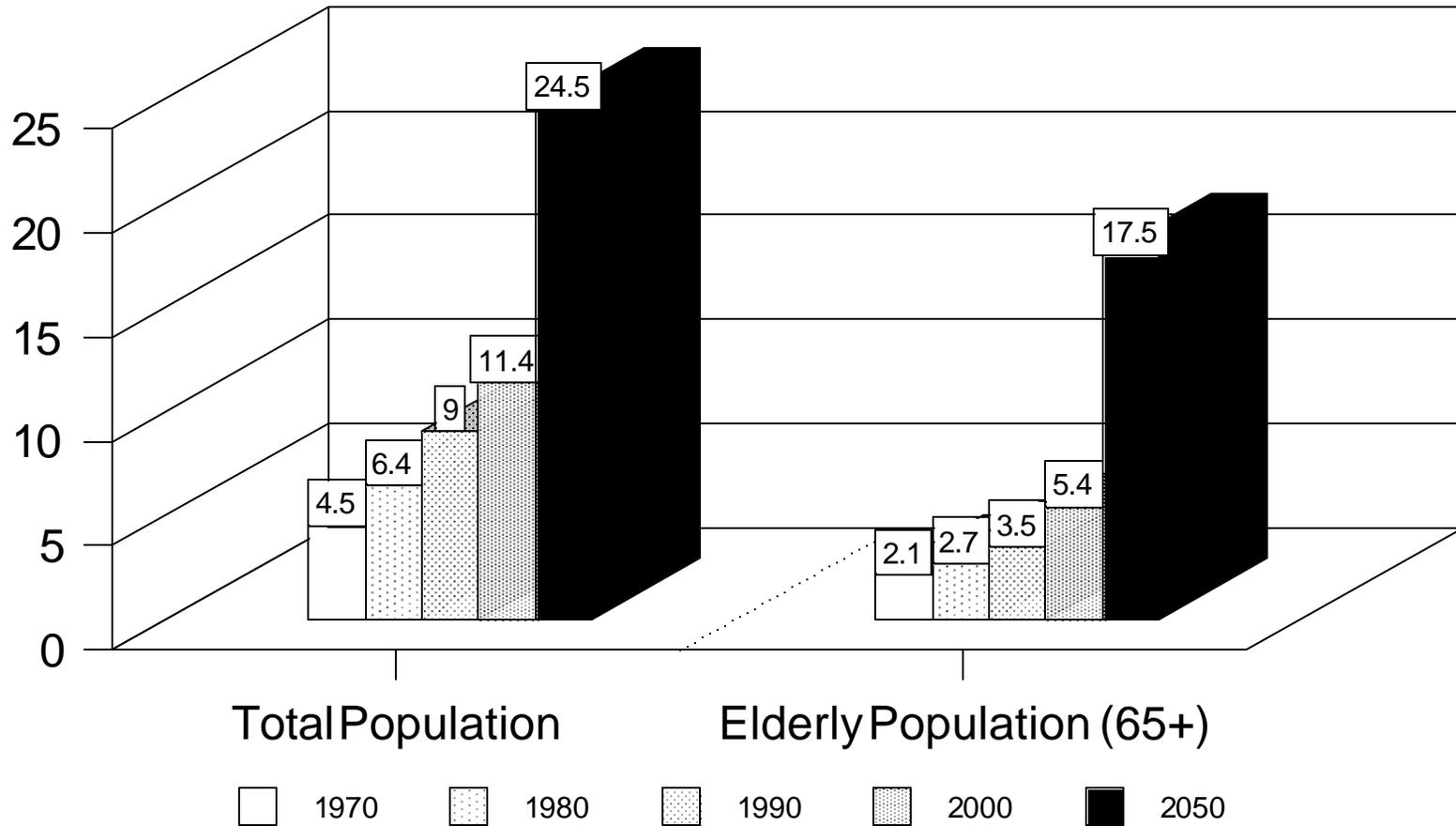
  

Population	1980		B. 1990		1997-2000	
	Stand	Actual	Stand	Actual	Stand	Actual
Native NH White	.65	.60	.73	.73	.73	.74
Foreign NH White	.60	.53	.66	.65	.67	.66
NH African American	.51	.46	.53	.51	.55	.52
Other Non-Hispanic	.55	.43	.44	.34	.47	.41
Native Mexican	.56	.47	.47	.45	.48	.45
Foreign Mexican	.43	.35	.41	.33	.44	.36
Puerto Rican	.52	.41	.50	.47	.52	.53
Cuban	.41	.30	.47	.39	.56	.51
Other Hispanic	.53	.41	.55	.46	.48	.40

Note: Standardization is based on the income distribution of non-Hispanic Black unmarried elderly women in 1970 (first panel) or 1997-2000. Income was calculated in constant dollars using the inflation factor of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. The distribution was used to make reasonable estimates based on a sufficient number of cases.

# Hispanic Population as Percent of Total and Elderly Populations

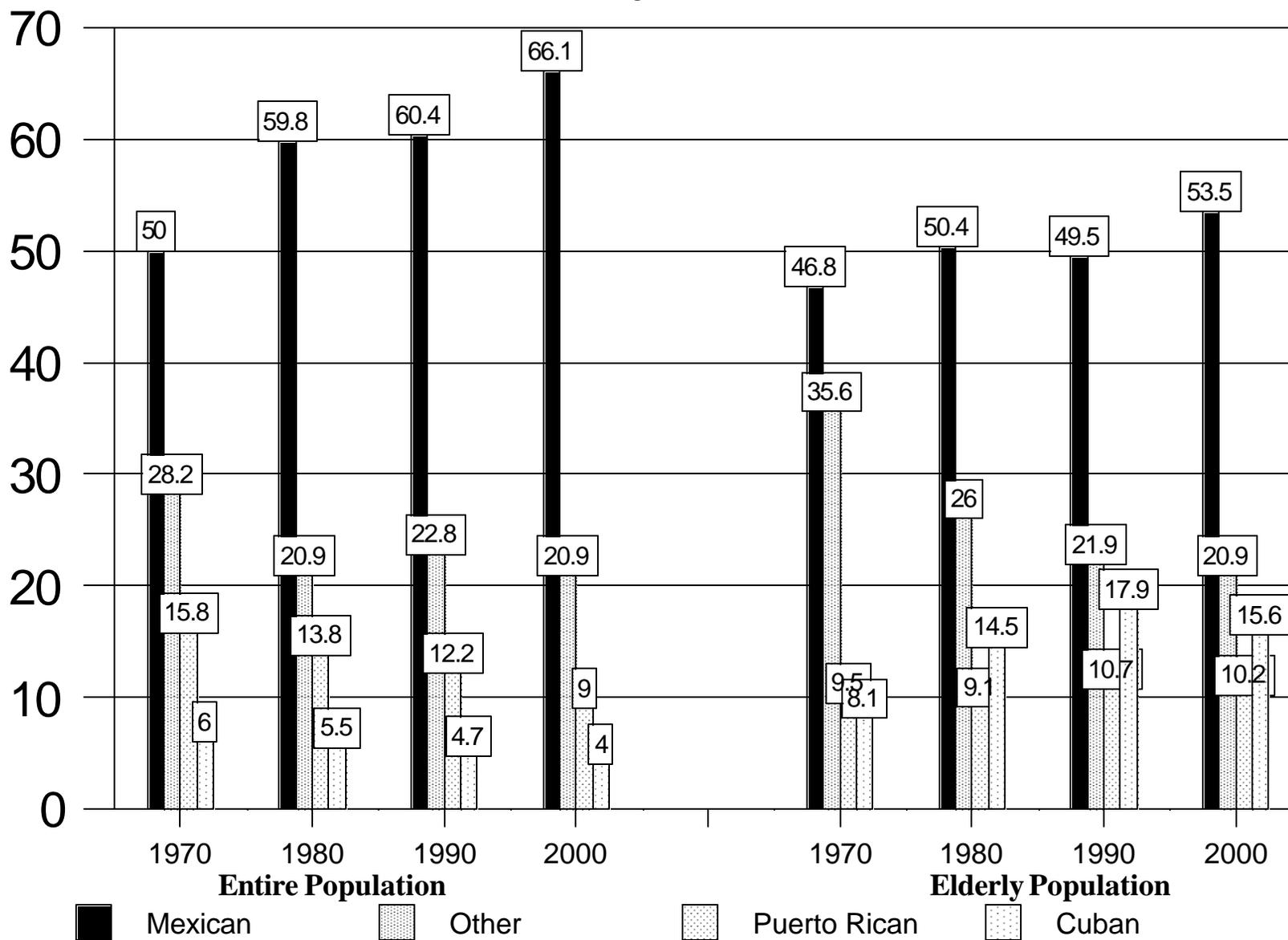
Figure 1



Sources: del Pinal and Singer, 1997 Table 3; Current Population Reports P25-1130; in-house calculations from United States censuses and Current Population Surveys.

# Composition of Entire and Elderly Hispanic Population

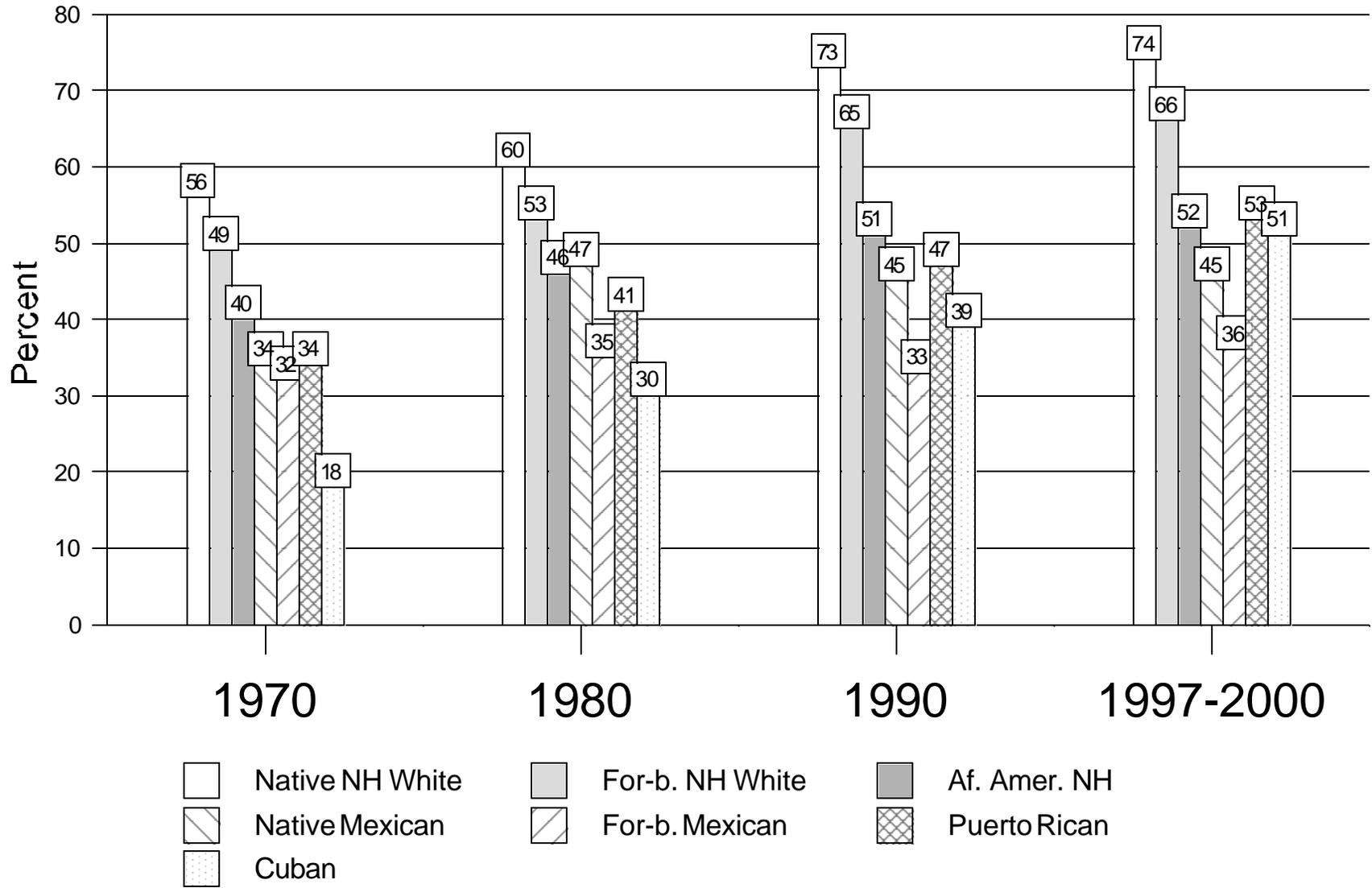
Figure 2



Sources: del Pinal and Singer, 1997 Table 3; in-house computations from censuses and the 2000 Current Population Survey

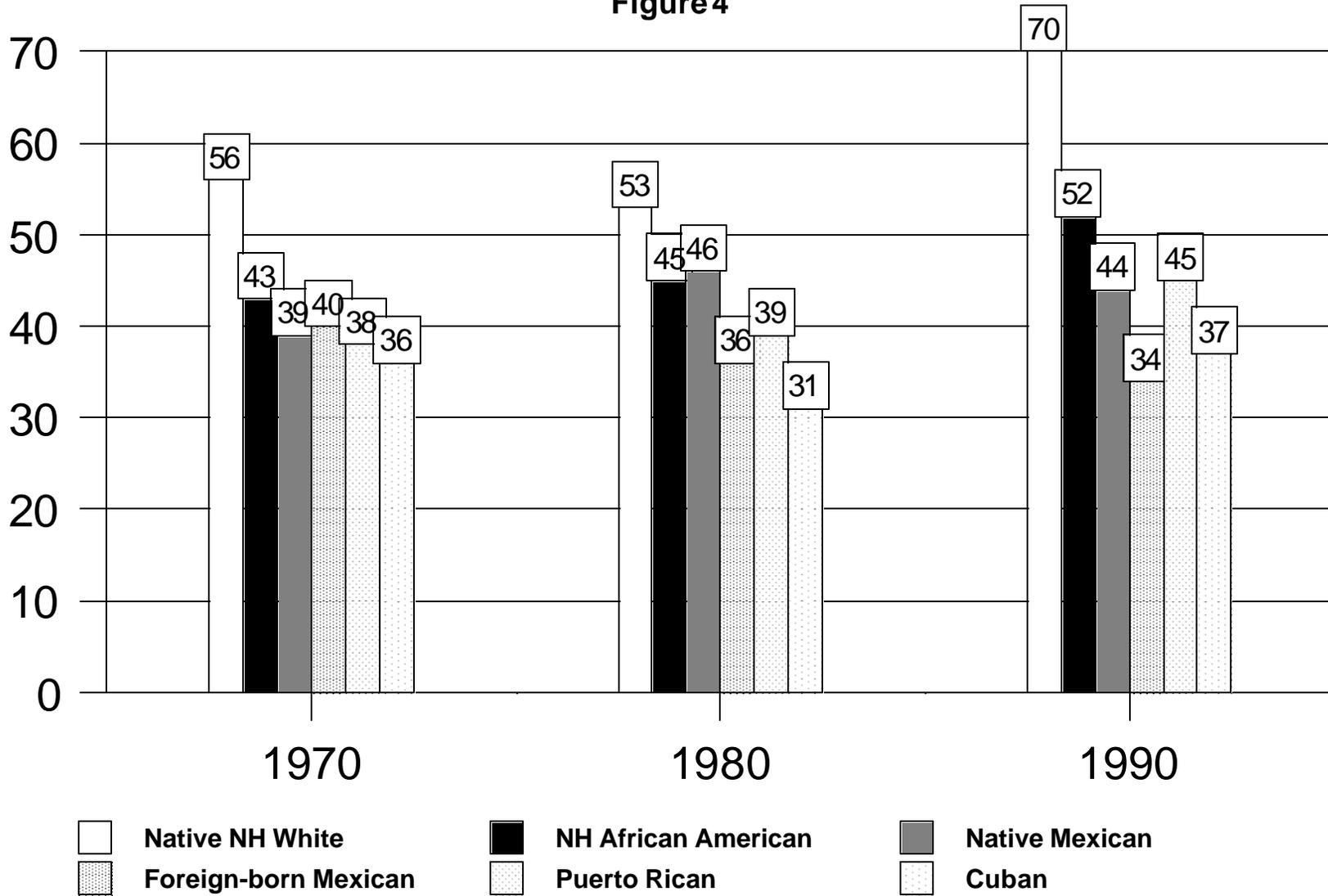
# Percent Unmarried Elderly Women Living Alone

Figure 3



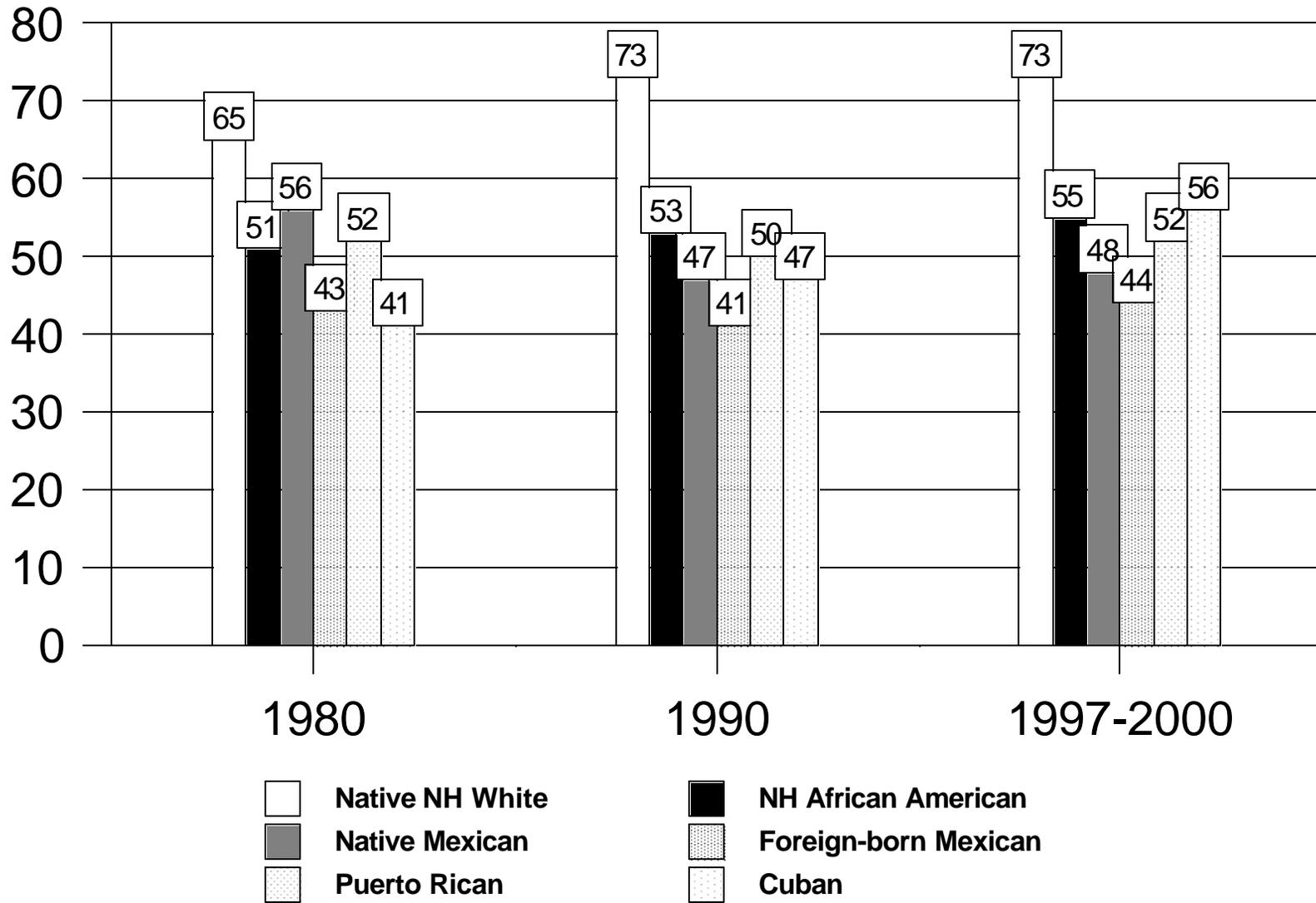
# Standardized Percent Unmarried Elderly Women Alone by Ethnicity, 1970-1990

Figure 4



### Standardized Percent Unmarried Elderly Women Alone by Ethnicity, 1980-2000

Figure 5



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