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# ¡Vivan los Suburbios!

*by William H. Frey and William P. O'Hare*

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*by William H. Frey  
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**L**ike many people who grew up in big cities, Silvia Perel and her husband moved to the suburbs 12 years ago to find better schools for their children. "In Marin County [California], they can go to public schools. It's a nice

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place to raise your children," she says.

The Perels own a business, have a nice house in a quiet, scenic neighborhood, celebrate Thanksgiving, and enjoy the cultural attractions of San Francisco just by crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. There is one difference between the Perels and most of their neighbors, however. The Perels spent their childhoods in Buenos Aires.

Only their closest friends know that the Perels are Argentinians. Silvia says that this is partly because her family's ancestors were Russian Jews who emigrated to Argentina from Europe shortly after 1900; consequently, the Perels don't "look" His-

panic. Another reason is that she doesn't fit the stereotype of a Latino immigrant. She isn't a gardener or a housekeeper living in a crowded inner-city apartment.

It is well known that Hispanics of different national origins have different attitudes and values. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans tend to be Democrats, for example, while Cubans tend to be Republicans, according to the Latino National Political Survey. But the enormous diversity among Hispanics also extends to the neighborhood level. Suburban Hispanics, like their Anglo neighbors, tend to be better educated and more affluent than their peers who live in central cities.

The median income of suburban Hispanic households was \$26,811 in 1991, 32 percent higher than that of Hispanic households in central cities (\$20,387), according to the Census Bureau's March 1992 Current Population Survey. This gap is even wider in metropolitan areas with populations of 1 million or more. In the largest metros, suburban Hispanic incomes are 40 percent higher than in central cities.

## **ALMOST HALF OF HISPANICS**

About 43 percent of U.S. Hispanics live in suburbs of the nation's metropolitan ar-

eas, according to the 1990 census. This is a slight increase from 40 percent in 1980. The number of Hispanic suburbanites grew 69 percent over the decade, from 5.1 million to 8.7 million. The suburbs gained 15.3 million people during the 1980s, and Hispanics accounted for 23 percent of the total gain.

To examine suburban Hispanics in more detail, we analyzed 1990 census data for the 38 metropolitan areas with at least 50,000 Hispanic suburbanites. These areas account for 77 percent of the total Hispanic suburban population.

The eight metropolitan areas with the largest Hispanic suburbs are all in the Sunbelt. Five are in California, two are in Texas, and one is in Florida. Los Angeles-Long Beach has a suburban Hispanic population (1.7 million) greater than the entire Milwaukee metropolitan area. Second-ranked and neighboring Riverside-San Bernardino has 563,000 Hispanics in its suburbs. Miami-Hialeah ranks third, with 521,000. Only 7 of the top 38 metros for Hispanic suburbanites are in the Northeast or Midwest, and 4 of these have

\* See the March 1993 issue of *American Demographics*, page 9, for an overview of the updated metropolitan classification system. The metropolitan areas used in this article were defined prior to December 1992.

now merged into the New York-Newark area.\*

Hispanic subgroups in different suburbs mirror the general geographic distribution of U.S. Hispanics. For example, Mexican Americans account for 81 percent of the Hispanic suburban population of Los Angeles, while Cubans comprise 54 percent of the Hispanic suburban population of Miami. Puerto Ricans are the majority of suburban Hispanics in Philadelphia and Orlando, and they're more than one-quarter of those in New York, Bergen-Passaic, Newark, Boston, Tampa-St. Petersburg, and Fort Lauderdale.

Northern and eastern suburbs are home to a variety of Caribbean and Central and South American immigrants. Dominicans cluster in New York suburbs, and Salvadorans are found in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. Chicago is the only large northern or midwestern metro that has a large number of Mexican Americans in its suburbs—131,840.

Metros with large Hispanic populations also had the greatest gains in the number of Hispanic suburbanites in the 1980s. Nearly 600,000 Hispanics moved to the suburbs of Los Angeles, more than the total Hispanic suburban population of any

other area. Riverside ranked second in both numbers and gain of Hispanics in suburbs, and Miami ranked third on both counts.

#### **GROWING FASTEST IN FLORIDA**

Florida has the fastest-growing Hispanic suburbs. The number of Hispanics doubled in the suburbs of 11 large metros, 5 of which are in Florida: Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Tampa, and Miami. The others are scattered throughout the nation, from Boston to Riverside.

Size and growth are not the only important aspects of a market. Riverside has more than half a million suburban Hispanics, but they account for just over one-fourth of the metro's total suburban population. In contrast, nearly nine in ten people who live in the suburbs of McAllen-Edinburg, Texas, are Hispanics. The other metros with the highest share of Hispanic suburbanites are also in Texas—Brownsville (79 percent), El Paso (73 percent), and Corpus Christi (56 percent).

Many Mexican Americans have lived in southwestern Texas since it was part of Mexico, and Texas's modern cities and suburbs have grown up around them. Because they come from a rural agricultural background, these Hispanics are not typi-

## ► THE MOST SUBURBAN HISPANICS

Los Angeles-Long Beach leads the nation in the number of suburban Hispanics, with three times as many as second-ranked Riverside-San Bernardino.

(metropolitan areas ranked by the number of Hispanic residents living in suburban areas, 1990)

| rank | metropolitan area                          | Hispanic residents in suburban areas |
|------|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1    | Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA                 | 1,733,796                            |
| 2    | Riverside-San Bernardino, CA               | 563,011                              |
| 3    | Miami-Mialeah, FL                          | 521,449                              |
| 4    | Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA                      | 289,690                              |
| 5    | San Diego, CA                              | 255,882                              |
| 6    | Houston, TX                                | 242,269                              |
| 7    | Oakland, CA                                | 207,200                              |
| 8    | McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX               | 184,576                              |
| 9    | Chicago, IL                                | 174,996                              |
| 10   | Washington, DC-MD-VA                       | 168,140                              |
| 11   | San Francisco, CA                          | 132,557                              |
| 12   | Fresno, CA                                 | 130,847                              |
| 13   | Dallas, TX                                 | 127,469                              |
| 14   | Jersey City, NJ                            | 118,034                              |
| 15   | Bakersfield, CA                            | 116,141                              |
| 16   | Denver, CO                                 | 103,623                              |
| 17   | San Jose, CA                               | 103,384                              |
| 18   | San Antonio, TX                            | 100,008                              |
| 19   | New York, NY                               | 99,251                               |
| 20   | Phoenix, AZ                                | 95,405                               |
| 21   | Sacramento, CA                             | 93,704                               |
| 22   | Bergen-Passaic, NJ                         | 90,157                               |
| 23   | Brownsville-Harlingen, TX                  | 89,176                               |
| 24   | Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL        | 88,098                               |
| 25   | Oxnard-Ventura, CA                         | 83,381                               |
| 26   | Orlando, FL                                | 82,017                               |
| 27   | Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, CA             | 80,339                               |
| 28   | Fl. Lauderdale-Hollywood-Pompano Beach, FL | 79,450                               |
| 29   | Newark, NJ                                 | 73,488                               |
| 30   | Philadelphia, PA-NJ                        | 56,686                               |
| 31   | El Paso, TX                                | 55,950                               |
| 32   | Salinas-Seaside-Monterey, CA               | 55,204                               |
| 33   | Austin, TX                                 | 53,074                               |
| 34   | Corpus Christi, TX                         | 52,152                               |
| 35   | Stockton, CA                               | 51,254                               |
| 36   | Boston, MA                                 | 51,099                               |
| 37   | West Palm Beach-Boca Raton-Del Ray, FL     | 50,730                               |
| 38   | Las Vegas, NV                              | 50,535                               |

Note: Metropolitan areas are based on definitions prior to December 1992. Only metropolitan areas with 50,000 or more Hispanic residents in suburban areas are included.

Source: 1990 census

cal suburban residents. For one thing, they are much poorer than average.

In most metropolitan areas, incomes are higher in the suburbs than in the central cities, because people typically live in cities until they have enough money to move out to the suburbs. This is not the pattern in southern Texas, however. Hispanic suburban incomes are lower than central-city incomes in McAllen, Brownsville, El Paso, and Corpus Christi. The

**Mexicans and Puerto Ricans tend to be Democrats, while Cubans tend to be Republicans.**

same is true in several California metros—Fresno, Bakersfield, and Visalia-Tulare-Porterville—as well as in Tampa, Orlando, West Palm Beach, and Phoenix.

Hidalgo County, Texas, which comprises the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission metropolitan area, grew rapidly during the 1980s. But growth in this border county does not equal prosperity, as unemployment rates hover between 16 and 20 percent. The influx of Mexican immigrants that accounts for much of the growth has resulted from “maquiladoras,” or U.S. factories built in Mexican border towns. “The maquiladoras have drawn a lot of people from the interior of Mexico,” says Noe Calvillo, program director of the state’s Adult Education Programs in McAllen. When they don’t find jobs there, they cross the Rio Grande, often illegally, in search of work in the United States.

Many find work as migrant laborers and live in unincorporated “colonias” that dot the region. Some colonias have only five to ten homes; others have as many as 300 and are seeking incorporation. Much of the area’s suburban growth is in “communities strung in pearl-like fashion on the major highway (I-83) from Mission about 50 miles to Harlingen,” says Calvillo.

“We are an interesting area in terms of socioeconomic strata,” he says. “There

are some well-educated people and a lot of professionals. But quite frankly, we also have some third-world conditions." In the seven-county region Calvillo manages, 94 percent of residents have Hispanic surnames, and 76 percent have low incomes.

#### MIDDLE-CLASS HISPANICS

Suburban Hispanics who live in heavy concentrations tend to have low incomes. But Hispanics who live in suburbs with small shares of Latinos tend to be better off. The most affluent suburban Hispanics live in older, elite neighborhoods along the east coast. The most affluent of them all live in the suburbs of Newark, New Jersey, where the 1989 per capita income of Hispanics averaged \$13,673. Since the average Hispanic household has 3.45 people, this equates to an approximate average household income of \$47,172 for Newark's suburban Hispanics. The suburbs of Washington, D.C., rank second in per capita Hispanic income, at \$13,365. Those of Bergen-Passaic, New Jersey, rank third, at \$13,218.

Many affluent Hispanics live in large metropolitan areas where there are sharp class divisions between central cities and suburbs. In Philadelphia, for example, the per capita income of Hispanics in the suburbs is nearly twice that in the central city

**Mexican Americans  
account for 81 percent  
of the Hispanic  
suburban population  
of Los Angeles.**

(\$11,984 versus \$6,066). Washington, D.C. is a notable exception. In that metro, both suburban and central-city Hispanic incomes exceed \$12,000.

Affluent Hispanics are redefining Latino roles in America. "The images that people have of Latinos are driven by high concentration, high-poverty areas," says Rodolfo de la Garza, a professor of community affairs in the government department at the University of Texas in Austin. But

## ▶ THE MOST HISPANIC SUBURBS

Texas has the top four metros with the highest concentrations of suburban Hispanics.

(metropolitan areas ranked by percent of suburban residents who are Hispanic, 1990)

| rank | metropolitan area                                | percent of suburban residents who are Hispanic |
|------|--|--|
| 1    | McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX .....               | 88.7%  |
| 2    | Brownsville-Harlingen, TX .....                  | 79.3   |
| 3    | El Paso, TX .....                                | 73.4   |
| 4    | Corpus Christi, TX .....                         | 56.4   |
| 5    | Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, CA .....             | 46.3   |
| 6    | Fresno, CA .....                                 | 41.8   |
| 7    | Jersey City, NJ .....                            | 40.5   |
| 8    | Miami-Hialeah, FL .....                          | 40.2   |
| 9    | Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA .....                 | 37.8   |
| 10   | Bakersfield, CA .....                            | 31.5   |
| 11   | Salinas-Seaside-Monterey, CA .....               | 31.4   |
| 12   | San Antonio, TX .....                            | 27.3   |
| 13   | Riverside-San Bernardino, CA .....               | 26.1   |
| 14   | Stockton, CA .....                               | 23.5   |
| 15   | San Diego, CA .....                              | 20.0   |
| 16   | Oxnard-Ventura, CA .....                         | 19.2   |
| 17   | Austin, TX .....                                 | 16.8   |
| 18   | Phoenix, AZ .....                                | 16.5   |
| 19   | Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA .....                      | 15.7   |
| 20   | San Jose, CA .....                               | 15.7   |
| 21   | Houston, TX .....                                | 15.1   |
| 22   | San Francisco, CA .....                          | 15.1   |
| 23   | Oakland, CA .....                                | 13.4   |
| 24   | Las Vegas, NV .....                              | 10.5   |
| 25   | Dallas, TX .....                                 | 9.6  |
| 26   | Sacramento, CA .....                             | 9.6  |
| 27   | Denver, CO .....                                 | 9.0  |
| 28   | Orlando, FL .....                                | 9.0  |
| 29   | Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood-Pompano Beach, FL ..... | 8.7  |
| 30   | New York, NY .....                               | 8.4  |
| 31   | Bergen-Passaic, NJ .....                         | 7.9  |
| 32   | West Palm Beach-Boca Raton-Del Ray, FL .....     | 7.4  |
| 33   | Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL .....        | 6.1  |
| 34   | Chicago, IL .....                                | 5.6  |
| 35   | Washington, DC-MD-VA .....                       | 5.4  |
| 36   | Newark, NJ .....                                 | 5.1  |
| 37   | Boston, MA .....                                 | 2.0  |
| 38   | Philadelphia, PA-NJ .....                        | 1.8  |

Note: Metropolitan areas are based on definitions prior to December 1992. Only metropolitan areas with 50,000 or more Hispanic residents in suburban areas are included.

Source: 1990 census

## ► THE FASTEST-GROWING HISPANIC SUBURBS

Orlando ranks 26th for number of suburban Hispanics, but 1st for suburban Hispanic growth during the 1980s.

(metropolitan areas ranked by percent growth of Hispanic suburban population, 1980-90)

| rank | metropolitan area                               | percent growth of Hispanic suburban population |
|------|---|--|
| 1    | Orlando, FL .....                               | 291.5%   |
| 2    | Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood-Pompano Beach, FL..... | 201.2  |
| 3    | West Palm Beach-Boca Raton-Del Ray, FL .....    | 157.3  |
| 4    | Washington, DC-MD-VA .....                      | 146.8  |
| 5    | Riverside-San Bernardino, CA .....              | 144.9  |
| 6    | Dallas, TX .....                                | 135.5  |
| 7    | Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL .....       | 127.7  |
| 8    | Las Vegas, NV .....                             | 126.6  |
| 9    | Houston, TX.....                                | 117.2  |
| 10   | Boston, MA .....                                | 110.3  |
| 11   | Miami-Hialeah, FL .....                         | 102.4  |
| 12   | Chicago, IL .....                               | 93.9   |
| 13   | San Diego, CA .....                             | 89.3   |
| 14   | Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA .....                     | 83.3   |
| 15   | Newark, NJ .....                                | 81.5   |
| 16   | El Paso, TX .....                               | 79.4   |
| 17   | Austin, TX .....                                | 79.3   |
| 18   | New York, NY .....                              | 79.0   |
| 19   | Bergen-Passaic, NJ .....                        | 76.8   |
| 20   | Sacramento, CA .....                            | 71.6   |
| 21   | Stockton, CA .....                              | 70.9   |
| 22   | San Antonio, TX .....                           | 67.9   |
| 23   | Phoenix, AZ .....                               | 67.7   |
| 24   | Bakersfield, CA .....                           | 63.3   |
| 25   | San Francisco, CA .....                         | 60.6   |
| 26   | Philadelphia, PA-NJ .....                       | 57.6   |
| 27   | Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA .....                | 52.7   |
| 28   | Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, CA .....            | 52.7   |
| 29   | Oxnard-Ventura, CA .....                        | 48.4   |
| 30   | Brownsville-Harlingen, TX.....                  | 46.9   |
| 31   | Denver, CO .....                                | 45.9   |
| 32   | McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX .....              | 45.7   |
| 33   | Oakland, CA .....                               | 43.7   |
| 34   | Salinas-Seaside-Monterey, CA .....              | 41.0   |
| 35   | Jersey City, NJ .....                           | 36.6   |
| 36   | Fresno, CA .....                                | 31.8   |
| 37   | San Jose, CA .....                              | 23.1   |
| 38   | Corpus Christi, TX .....                        | 4.4  |

Note: Metropolitan areas are based on definitions prior to December 1992. Only metropolitan areas with 50,000 or more Hispanic residents in suburban areas are included.

Source: 1990 and 1980 censuses

affluent suburbs are home to different kinds of Hispanics, some of whom are not very visible. "You don't see the Puerto Ricans who are married to Anglos," says de la Garza. "You don't recognize them as Puerto Ricans. A man has gone to college and married an Anglo woman. He's successful, and you don't think of him as Puerto Rican, even though his last name is Diaz."

In a recent report by the Latino Na-

**The most affluent suburban Hispanics live in older, elite neighborhoods along the east coast.**

tional Political Survey, de la Garza and other researchers find that 40 percent of native-born Americans of Puerto Rican ancestry are married to Anglos. Other Hispanic groups also show high rates of intermarriage. "The implications are of a population that has close relations with Anglos, a population that is socially dynamic," he says.

Jesus Campo sees this dynamic in his own family. He is a 39-year-old high school teacher who fled El Salvador during the war of the early 1980s with his wife and three children. Until recently, they lived in San Rafael's low-income Canal neighborhood in Marin County.

Jesus Campo and his wife want to return to El Salvador someday. He is proud and happy that his 17-year-old daughter plans to move back to her native country when she graduates from high school this year. He is sad, but understanding, that his twin 14-year-old sons will probably stay in the U.S. "I expect that my boys will marry American-born girls," he says. "In

that household, they will speak English only. My children are somewhat in touch with [Salvadoran] culture. Their children are going to lose contact totally. They will not speak any Spanish at all."

The Hispanic suburban market is difficult to pinpoint, because Latino immigration and acculturation are works in progress. Campo thinks that diversity is a good thing, even within an ethnic culture. "For a Latino to live in the Canal neighborhood is as natural as for an elephant to be in his herd," he says. "To me, it's like a walk down the barrio in El Salvador. The only difference is that the accents are not only Salvadoran, but also Guatemalan, Mexican, and others. That makes it more interesting."

—Additional reporting by Dan Fost

**Behind the Numbers** The analysis in this article is based on 1990 census data for 38 metropolitan areas with at least 50,000 Hispanics in their suburban balances. Constant metropolitan area boundaries are used for 1980 and 1990 to examine changes over time, and do not reflect recent changes in the metropolitan area classification system released by the Office of Management and Budget. Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) are used rather than Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSAs) to provide more geographic detail.

For more information about minorities and suburbs in general, see William H. Frey, "Minority Suburbanization and Continued 'White Flight' in U.S. Metropolitan Areas: Assessing Findings from the 1990 Census," *Research Report* 92-247, available from the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, 1225 S. University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48104; (313) 998-7275. "Latino Voices," a report on the Latino National Political Survey, is published by Westview Press, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, CO 80301-2877; telephone (303) 444-3541. *American Demographics* and *The Numbers News* have published numerous articles on Hispanics, recently compiled into a reprint package called "Hispanic Americans." To order, call (800) 828-1133.

## ► SUBURBAN HISPANIC INCOMES

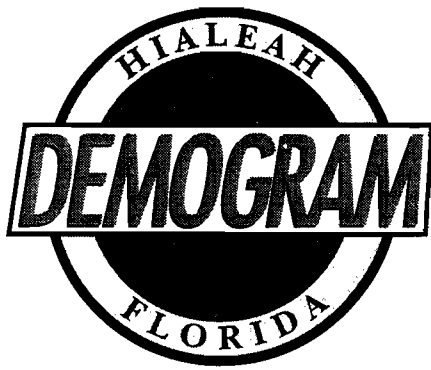
Suburban Hispanics usually have higher per capita incomes than central-city Hispanics, but there are important exceptions.

(metropolitan areas ranked by 1989 per capita income for Hispanics in suburbs, and per capita income for Hispanics in central cities and metrowide)

| rank | metropolitan area                                | per capita income for Hispanic suburban residents | per capita income for Hispanic central-city residents | per capita income for all Hispanic metro residents |
|------|--|---|---|--|
| 1    | Newark, NJ .....                                 | \$13,673  | \$8,821   | \$10,691   |
| 2    | Washington, DC-MD-VA .....                       | 13,365  | 12,038  | 13,032   |
| 3    | Bergen-Passaic, NJ .....                         | 13,218  | 8,362   | 11,309   |
| 4    | Oakland, CA .....                                | 12,636  | 9,059   | 11,791   |
| 5    | San Jose, CA .....                               | 12,525  | 10,138  | 10,917   |
| 6    | FL. Lauderdale-Hollywood-Pompano Beach, FL ..... | 12,443  | 11,235  | 12,118   |
| 7    | Miami-Hialeah, FL .....                          | 12,441  | 8,910   | 10,839   |
| 8    | New York, NY .....                               | 12,084  | 8,430   | 8,624  |
| 9    | Philadelphia, PA-NJ .....                        | 11,984  | 6,066   | 8,019  |
| 10   | San Francisco, CA .....                          | 11,719  | 11,400  | 11,583   |
| 11   | Anaheim-Santa Ana, CA .....                      | 11,347  | 7,075   | 9,258  |
| 12   | Jersey City, NJ .....                            | 11,293  | 8,939   | 10,460   |
| 13   | Boston, MA .....                                 | 11,127  | 7,602   | 8,555  |
| 14   | West Palm Beach-Boca Raton-Del Ray, FL .....     | 10,988  | 11,616  | 11,136   |
| 15   | Chicago, IL .....                                | 10,817  | 7,464   | 8,264  |
| 16   | Denver, CO .....                                 | 10,730  | 7,778   | 9,219  |
| 17   | Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL .....        | 10,381  | 11,016  | 10,613   |
| 18   | Oxnard-Ventura, CA .....                         | 10,270  | 8,214   | 9,182  |
| 19   | Sacramento, CA .....                             | 10,195  | 9,691   | 9,963  |
| 20   | Las Vegas, NV .....                              | 9,730   | 8,879   | 9,401  |
| 21   | Orlando, FL .....                                | 9,442   | 9,528   | 9,455  |
| 22   | Dallas, TX .....                                 | 9,012   | 7,214   | 7,834  |
| 23   | Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA .....                 | 8,832   | 7,241   | 8,066  |
| 24   | San Diego, CA .....                              | 8,786   | 8,159   | 8,474  |
| 25   | Salinas-Seaside-Monterey, CA .....               | 8,785   | 7,094   | 7,870  |
| 26   | Houston, TX .....                                | 8,603   | 7,011   | 7,557  |
| 27   | Stockton, CA .....                               | 8,555   | 7,900   | 8,200  |
| 28   | Riverside-San Bernardino, CA .....               | 8,540   | 7,810   | 8,409  |
| 29   | San Antonio, TX .....                            | 8,496   | 7,032   | 7,266  |
| 30   | Austin, TX .....                                 | 8,016   | 8,034   | 8,028  |
| 31   | Phoenix, AZ .....                                | 7,311   | 7,721   | 7,608  |
| 32   | Fresno, CA .....                                 | 6,232   | 7,044   | 6,593  |
| 33   | Bakersfield, CA .....                            | 6,213   | 8,548   | 6,757  |
| 34   | Corpus Christi, TX .....                         | 5,475   | 7,562   | 6,963  |
| 35   | Visalia-Tulare-Porterville, CA .....             | 5,145   | 6,381   | 5,554  |
| 36   | Brownsville-Harlingen, TX .....                  | 4,666   | 5,575   | 5,195  |
| 37   | El Paso, TX .....                                | 4,429   | 6,538   | 6,251  |
| 38   | McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX .....               | 4,353   | 5,855   | 5,007  |

Note: Metropolitan areas are based on definitions prior to December 1992. Only metropolitan areas with 50,000 or more Hispanic residents in suburban areas are included.

Source: 1990 census



José Caragol, 61, lives with his wife, daughter, and mother-in-law in a small, neat house in Hialeah, Florida. José is a highly animated suburbanite. When he speaks, he gestures and leans back and forth like a mime who never gave up talking. It's all part of his job: José is a professional translator who uses his body to express himself. I've always thought that translators are people who sit bolt upright and speak in monotonous syllables with no expression. This would not work for José.

"I think my father must have sat on a Vivarin tablet," says his daughter Vivien, a sophomore in college. "He is never still, and he is obsessed with how people communicate. When he translates for someone, it's almost like he becomes that person. If the person is wild and animated and hurling profanities, my father does exactly the same thing—curse words and all. On the other hand, he never seems to get personally upset about anything. He has taken the Florida Bar exam 20 times! He makes that sound like the greatest thing in the world."

Trained as a lawyer, Caragol fled Castro's Cuba in 1960. Unable to practice law in this country, he landed work as an interpreter for the U.S. State Department. Caragol is proud of his interpreting experience. He has translated for Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, as well as Malcolm X and David Duke. "For 16 years, I did nothing but travel the country," he says. "When people asked me for my nationality, I used to say I was a Samsonite."

Now he uses this experience to help his suburban hometown, the city of Hialeah. The city records everything in English, but its population is 85 percent Hispanic. José's theatrical style at city council meetings has made him something of a local celebrity. "In Hialeah, many people work three or four jobs to make ends meet," he says. "If a man drives a truck on the weekends to make extra money, he will park it in front of his house for the rest of the week. That causes a problem with zoning regulations, and the next thing you know, he's standing before the zoning commission. Building code and zoning conflicts are quite common here because people are always starting businesses and looking for new ways to make money."

José says Hialeahans hustle for good reason. "Most Americans have what I call a secret structure beneath them. It is a network of relatives and family ties that goes back for many years. But the people in my neighborhood gave up those ties when they came to this country. So they live together in small houses and work like crazy, and they are always wheeling and dealing. If they have any extra time, they get an extra job. It's a way of making a new network in this country, and it can make life very complicated."

Caragol's unusual interpreting style is probably a product of his home life. "In Hispanic suburbs, it is very common to have several generations living in one small house," he says. "Often, the grandparents speak nothing but Spanish and the children speak nothing but English. My in-laws have always been a part of my home. When we first came to Hialeah, there were very few Spanish-speaking programs on television, and the older people distrusted the Spanish newscasts. So we would watch the U.S. network news, and I would sit there and translate for my wife's parents. Pretty soon, I was translating soap operas, game shows, and even the cartoons! The kids, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with our native tongue. To them, Spanish represented our years of sadness and pain. So the English-speaking kids get up and leave for school, then our Spanish-speaking parents come out and go to the markets and do their own work. We end up with two worlds in the same house. My generation is stuck in the middle."

"That's when I learned that words alone mean nothing at all. In a family, it is the feelings and emotions that count. If you cannot translate a person's feelings, you cannot help them communicate. This is especially true in my culture, where feelings are more important than words. Do you want to know why? In the United States, some people believe in letting a baby cry so it will eventually give up and go to sleep. We believe in holding the baby as long as it takes to make it feel better. If one person gets tired of holding the baby, there is always someone else in the family to take over. This way, the baby feels safe and loved. A child that is raised in a home like this will always love its family, even when it grows up."

It occurs to me that Caragol provides this same nurturing service for the city of Hialeah. Instead of leaving people to cry words at a municipal head on a post, he gives them a way to get their feelings out on the table. Hopefully, that makes them feel safe and involved in their community. As for me, I'm going to rethink my ideas about crying babies and a house full of relatives. And this might even be a good test to see how close you are with your own family. Imagine sitting in your living room after a busy day at work, happily translating Donald Duck for the in-laws.