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FACTORS AFFECTING THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF ELDERLY CHICANOS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and discusses factors affecting the economic status of elderly chicanos. These factors include historical factors, labor force participation, familial support systems, and human services utilization. Implications for policy are addressed.

Introduction

Recent national popular magazines and other publications have started to recognize the growth of Chicanos** as the largest disadvantaged minority group in this country. However, in spite of this new attention to this group, their economic plight remains a serious one. For example, the 1970 United States Decennial Census showed that almost one-fourth of all Chicano families in this country were living in poverty, twice the national rate.

Chicanos have been labeled an invisible minority or a forgotten minority due to the lack of government attention and intervention on their behalf. A major effect of this neglect is that Chicanos have received little special attention in the development or implementation of antipoverty programs designed to reach the poor. Contributing to the problem of non-recognition is the fact that over 85 percent of all Chicanos reside in the Southwest (California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado), constituting a regional minority, in contrast to a national minority such as Blacks (Grebler, et al., 1970; Briggs, et al., 1977). Bullock concurs, noting that

An appalling and almost universal indifference to the problems of this group has been reinforced, until recently by the general

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**The word "Chicano" is used for United States Citizens and permanent residents of Mexican origin.

inaccessibility of data on employment, educational and cultural patterns of Americans of Mexican descent. Only in 1950 did the Bureau of the Census initiate a consistent series of reports on the "Spanish Surname" populations, a category which approximates the Mexican-American totals for the five southwestern states (Bullock 1964:37).

The relatively low economic status of the Chicano is of major concern. According to the 1970 United States Decennial Census, 24 percent of "all Mexican American families in this country are in poverty, a proportion twice as great as in the total population" (Urban Associates 1974:vii). For the total United States population, family income was determined to be \$9590, but for Chicanos, family income was only \$6962, making Chicano income only 73 percent that of the total population. For the total United States population, per capita income was \$4716, compared to \$3139 for Chicanos (Urban Associates 1974:vi).

Age-specific research on elderly Chicanos is even more limited than is that on the general Chicano population. As can be noted in the proceedings of the Special Senate Committee on the Aged Hearings (held in Los Angeles, El Paso, San Antonio, and Washington, D. C. in 1968 and 1969), the federal government depended on individual subjective opinions interspersed with only a few limited research studies for policy analysis and development in regard to this group. The individual opinions expressed in the proceedings are, for the most part, untested and, at times, contradict testimony presented by other parties testifying before the same committee (Senate Hearings, 1968-69).

Gilfix addresses the issue of white/minority elderly differences:

To a disconcerting extent, we have lost sight that minority elders have special needs; they are poorer than Anglo elders, they are more dependent on public benefits, and yet may be least able to obtain those benefits, they are more susceptible to consumer abuses and most significantly, suffer from a legacy of racial discrimination that is typically exacerbated by entering elder status (Gilfix, 1977:7).

The limited data available support Gilfix's observations, that the Chicano elderly have been ignored. Of all elderly Chicanos (ages 65 and over), 37 percent are poor, a proportion 11 percentage points above the national rate for all older people (Urban Associates, 1974:vii). Perhaps the fact that elderly Chicanos account for only 4 percent of the total Chicano population, compared to all percent elderly in the total population (Grebler et al., 1970:123), contributes to policy makers ignoring their plight.

Twenty-four percent of all elderly Chicano males are still in the labor market (U.S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1973:75). Yet, income differentials are striking between Chicanos, Blacks and Whites. Some 84 percent of the elderly Chicanos had incomes under \$3999, compared with 65 percent Whites and 87 percent of

Blacks. On the other hand, there were less than 13 percent Blacks whose incomes were above \$4000 (U. S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1973:75 and U. S. Census: Population Characteristics, 1973:836-837). With respect to income Chicanos tend to fall between whites and Blacks, their rates more often being closer to those experienced by Blacks.

Out of the large number of Chicano elderly who work, 43 percent still work full-time, with an additional 28 percent working between 27 and 49 weeks annually (U.S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1973:95). It also appears that the workload of Chicano elderly does not lighten with age: those who work are concentrated in unskilled worker positions (U.S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1973:95). Non-farm laborers account for 19 percent, while farm workers account for an additional 20 percent of Chicano elderly who work. Sixteen percent are service workers while only 5 percent are managers and administrators (U. S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origin, 1973:95).

Focus of Paper

What are the factors that have contributed to the economic status of elderly Chicanos? Very little is known in this specific area, especially about historical factors, labor force participation, work history, familial support systems, and human services utilization, especially of the Social Security System in this country.

The areas of education, the administration of justice, migratory patterns, and communication problems have been studied to a greater degree, and together with the knowledge in the above areas, they combine to present a multifaceted portrait of a subgroup whose age-related problems are compounded by a multitude of other factors.

The purpose of this paper is to explore several propositions regarding the economic status of elderly Chicanos:

1. Internal colonial attitudes and actions toward Chicanos have prevailed since the United States victory over Mexico in the United States War with Mexico which ended in 1848.
2. Negative experiences with U. S. Immigration and Naturalization service agents, the U. S. Border Patrol, the Texas Rangers, and welfare departments during the Great Depression and later during the economic recession of the 1950's have made elderly Chicanos hesitant to apply for human services to which they are entitled.
3. The proximity of the Mexican border has been convenient to the American agribusiness and related concerns interested in manipulating Mexican and Chicano labor. In essence, there has been an elastic labor supply in existence for the United States industry.

4. Educational opportunities for the elderly Chicano cohort have been unequal and have contributed significantly to the Chicano's low socio-economic status.
5. For a majority of the elderly Chicano cohort, Spanish is the language of choice, and lack of fluency in English by this group has contributed to the non-utilization of services offered by human services agencies.
6. The Chicano elderly's work experience and movement from rural to urban has minimized their eligibility for maximum Social Security benefits.
7. The Chicano family is committed to helping its elderly, but such contributions, in kind or cash, are small due to the Chicano family's low socio-economic status and low income. In addition, there is concern that the extended family does not exist as it once did for Chicanos.
8. Anxiety about their legal status in the United States and an attitude of deference has limited the elderly Chicano's participation in politics in the United States.

Discussion of Factors

The lasting effect of the United States War with Mexico (1846-48) was that Chicanos would be treated as "a conquered people." (Acuna 1972:19). Briggs adds that "A stamp of social inferiority was imposed throughout the Southwest that operationally was similar to a system of overt segregation." (Briggs *et al.*, 1977:4). The beliefs of Anglos* that they were superior (and having proven it in their minds in the war with Mexico), and the reluctance of Chicanos to abandon their culture and language contributed to the continued colonization and exploitation of the Chicano in the United States.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 broke the system of peonage in Mexico, and the massive exodus of poor people (which included the present elderly Chicano cohort) began. The rationale for this exodus was obvious: higher pay in the United States for unskilled work. However, the United States has always been able to maintain control over this group through tactics which have kept the Chicanos in a tenuous state with regard to the legality of their status in the United States.

A particular event which impacted on the presently elderly cohort was the forced repatriations during the Great Depression. It has been documented by several historians that whenever Chicanos applied for public assistance in Los Angeles and

*"Anglos" is used for all white persons who are not of Mexican origin.

elsewhere, they were deported in favor of saving welfare monies for "deserving citizens." (Hoffman, 1974; McWilliams, 1933; Bogardus, 1970.) It is suggested that the mental scars from that particular incident remain and have impacted negatively on elderly Chicanos' hesitation in applying for human services benefits to which they may be entitled.

It should also be noted that the proximity of Mexico to the United States has, in the past, provided an alternative to unemployment compensation or other services for unemployed Chicano workers during times of economic recessions in the United States. This pattern of increased deportation during these periods has continued with regard to undocumented workers.

Discrimination has followed the elderly Chicano into the educational arena. The elderly Chicano may have been denied any kind of education were he in the United States in his childhood years. In an extensive report on de jure segregation of Chicanos in Texas schools, it was found that many parts of the state of Texas did not originally admit Chicanos to public educational institutions. When Chicanos were first admitted to public schools in Texas around 1902, school authorities relied on the 1876 Texas Constitution which stated that "separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored children and impartial provision shall be made for both," and established separate schools for Chicanos commonly known as "Mexican Schools." (Rangel and Alcalá, 1972.)

Even after that, the levels of public education available to Chicano children were not the same as those of Anglo children. For example, an onsite review team from the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare found that the Pecos (Texas) Independent School District had a policy of not permitting Chicanos to go beyond the 6th grade before 1938 (Rangel and Alcalá, 1972). In another case, the exclusion of Chicanos from the high school was a finding of fact in Perez V. Sonora Independent School District, Civil No. 6-224. (N. D. Tex., Nov. 5, 1970.)

There should be no question but that discriminatory practices against the present elderly Chicano cohort in public schools are responsible for the statistical finding that shows that 65 percent of this Chicano cohort has less than five years of schooling, therefore, making this group functionally illiterate. (U. S. Census: Persons of Spanish Origins, 1973:55.) In contrast, there were only 13 percent of elderly white males who were functionally illiterate. (U. S. Census: Population Characteristics, Vol. 1, 1973:627.)

The correlation between educational attainment level and level of labor force participation has been strongly established. It is further suggested that, in the case of elderly Chicanos, the effect of the rather low educational attainment level on employment has been compounded by lack of written and verbal English language fluency, lack of skills, cultural differences, and discrimination in the workplace.

Differentials in wages between Anglos and Chicanos have been found in the labor market which were neither due to either educational level or occupation, but merely to the fact that Chicanos were of a different ethnic or national origin than their

Anglo counterparts. In a study on full-time male workers, ages 20 to 40, in a predominantly urban setting, Chicanos were found to earn about \$900 less than Anglos, when educational and occupational levels were controlled. "Mexican Americans earn less because they are Mexican Americans, not Anglos." (Poston and Alvarez, 1973:703.)

Beyond this discrimination in the labor market, culture also played a part in the family income differentials. Not only were Chicano women not likely to be working if they were married, but even if they did, they contributed little to family income because of the similar factors to those previously discussed that influenced their male counterparts. (Briggs et al., 1977:31-32.)

The transition of the elderly Chicano cohort from farm work to living and working in the cities has also impacted their economic status. It should be noted that in 1930, 45 percent of Chicano males were employed as either farmers or farm laborers. (Fogel, 1968:23.) By 1970, the percentage of Chicanos in these categories had been reduced to 9 percent. (Briggs 1977:71.)

Influencing the present economic status of the elderly Chicano is the fact that the initial Social Security Act of 1935 did not include coverage of farmers or farmworkers. Coverage of these categories of workers did not come about until the 1950's. As a consequence of this initial failure to cover farmers and farmworkers, elderly Chicanos have been receiving disproportionately lower benefits than their Anglo counterparts. Stepanovich (1976) found that the Spanish surnamed beneficiaries in the five Southwestern States were receiving cash benefits averaging \$86 per month, compared with \$116 per month for the non-Spanish surnamed group. In other words, the Spanish surnamed were receiving 26 percent lower benefits than the non-Spanish group. (Stepanovich 1976:48-53.) Some 82 percent of the Spanish surnames were OASDI beneficiaries, while 89 percent of the others were in this category.

Contributing to the fact that there were fewer Chicanos receiving social security benefits are several factors: failure to meet the minimum number of quarters required, irregular work patterns, failure of some employers to report social security earnings to the Social Security Administration, lack of knowledge about securing benefits, and possible fear about applying for such benefits. An additional problem has been that some elderly Chicanos have held several social security numbers, and tracing of these has been difficult, if not impossible. (Senate Hearings, 1968-69:56, 57, 125, 258.)

Given what is known about the economic status of this group, it appears that persons who are going to be receiving minimal or no social security benefits feel that they have to continue in the job market to meet minimal shelter, clothing and nutritional needs. It is believed that many poor Chicano elderly who were not eligible or receiving minimal social security benefits are being helped by the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. However, indepth information on the impact of SSI on this group is not available at this point.

The area of elderly Chicanos and private pensions is nonexistent in terms of research. It is speculated that Chicanos occupy the kinds of low level, common laborer jobs that generally do not have private pension plans. This particular area requires extensive research in relation to Chicanos because the lack of any kind of private pension program during their labor force participation history would almost insure inadequate income levels during retirement years for elderly Chicanos.

Beyond social security, SSI, and private pensions, continuing research must be performed on human services in general. Human services are available for the elderly Chicano throughout the Southwest, although at varying levels. Policy developers will have to examine the nonutilization or underutilization of existing services, taking into consideration cultural differences, language problems, immigration fears, illiteracy, geographical location of services and other considerations.

Beyond traditional forms of economic support, e.g., work, pensions, the question of family support for the elderly Chicano is an outstanding one. The extended family concept is generally applied to the Chicano family as an important aspect in determining sources of emotional and financial support for elderly Chicanos. However, according to the 1970 decennial census, only 9 percent of Chicano families were extended families which included grandchildren or parents of the head of household, with a concentration of these in Texas and the rural areas of the Southwest. (Urban Associates, 1974:42-3.)

Pechman, Taussig and Aaron point to the shift from a rural economic and social base to an urban one as a major reason for the disintegration of the extended family (Pechman, Taussig and Aaron 1968:30). If there is an inverse correlation between increased urban settings and decreased numbers of extended families within the Chicano community, then the Chicano extended family, as traditionally perceived, is now a thing of the past.

The major point to be made in the relation to this subject is the changing nature of the Chicano family. "As families become smaller, as family ties loosen, the aged Chicano undergoes increasingly severe psychological and economic problems." (Henry Santiestevan in Senate Hearings, 1968:69:590.)

Conclusion

The composite portrait of the elderly Chicano which has been presented is of a person whose socio-economic status is compounded by the multiple effects of age. It would be erroneous to make assumptions about situations which may no longer exist for the Chicano elderly. For example, it cannot be assumed that the Chicano family can care for its elderly without appropriate support systems. Variations in Chicano lifestyles, particularly between urban and rural areas, must also be noted. Assumptions cannot be made that because elderly Chicanos are almost nonexistent in extended long-term care facilities, that this is due to culture. An assessment has to be made about the interaction of cultural values with the economic situation of the family unit.

The whole area of human services provision has to be addressed in extensive research. The degree to which services are available versus the degree to which they are perceived to be accessible by the potential client group is a major question which must be addressed.

Beyond this, the whole issue of the appropriateness of existing services to elderly Chicanos must be assessed. Of particular import to the economic status of the elderly Chicano is his experience with the social security system, both as contributor into the system and as beneficiary. The interaction of life expectancy, years of covered employment and survivor benefit variables in relation to this group require exploration. The paucity of empirical studies, with the exception of those by Schmulowitz (1973) and Stepanovich (1976), invite further research into the economic situation of the present elderly Chicano cohort and future cohorts of Chicano elderly.

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