



Key Takeaways from Listening Session: Hispanic and Latino Experiences in the Federal Reserve’s Fourth District

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Context

In fall 2021, the staff of the Program on Economic Inclusion hosted four listening sessions with various community stakeholder groups within the Federal Reserve’s Fourth District.¹ The goal of the sessions was to increase overall understanding of the conditions and challenges preventing specific communities from reaching economic inclusion – meaning the ability to fully participate in the economy to the best of one’s ability. This summary document provides an overview of the key points expressed by participants about their own experiences, and those of the communities they serve.

Participant insights

1. Cultural differences, including language barriers, reduce access to resources

“Entrepreneurship is in our blood, but the way our people learned to do business is different than the way the systems here [in the US] make you do business.”

Whether starting a small business, accessing higher education, or securing affordable housing, members of Hispanic and Latino communities often have difficulties navigating relevant US support systems. As a result, these populations can struggle to take full advantage of the resources available to them. This is true for both first- and second-generation people. For example, the process for starting a business can be more complicated in the United States than in other places, and thus discouraging to potential Hispanic and Latino entrepreneurs. These challenges are only worsened by language barriers. For those for whom English is a second language, having essential documents and resources available in only English can be problematic.

It is also important to note that not all Hispanic and Latino communities are the same just because they may share a common language (because of colonization). There are 21 different countries whose people may be considered Hispanic. Each country has its own economy, culture, food, music, history, and traditions. The challenges that each group faces may differ also by their current location. For example, due to economic conditions, neighborhood characteristics, and leadership structures, Puerto Ricans in Lorain may face drastically different conditions than Puerto Ricans located a mere 30 miles away in Cleveland.

¹ The Federal Reserve’s Fourth District, includes all of Ohio, western Pennsylvania, the northern panhandle of West Virginia, and eastern Kentucky.

The opinions expressed are those of the participants and the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, or its staff.

2. Participants urge organizations to focus on Hispanic and Latino issues beyond Hispanic Heritage Month

“The powers that be don’t know our [Hispanic and Latino] community... They don’t even know how to speak to or about our community.”

Organizations that serve and/or are led by Hispanics and Latinos find themselves in high demand between September 15 and October 15. But once Hispanic Heritage Month ends, the issues faced by the communities they serve tend to return to the back burner for the next 11 months. This practice of inconsistently engaging with Hispanic and Latino communities can have negative consequences. Regular interactions with community members are necessary to develop a real understanding of peoples’ experiences – both positive and negative. These interactions may require an ongoing investment of time and energy but are critical to earning trust, forming partnerships, and effectively serving these groups. For organizations lacking internal Hispanic and Latino leadership, the process of building partnerships can have added importance.

The good news is that Hispanic and Latino organizations are generally receptive to working with outreach organizations and participating in information-gathering efforts such as focus groups – which can provide valuable information. But these types of events should be seen as the start of outreach, not the end point. Many community groups would be more willing to leverage their resources to support larger efforts like surveys or new initiatives if outreach organizations first engage them in two-way communication. Such preliminary work emphasizes both listening and sharing and fosters learning for all involved. Yet many outreach organizations fail to pursue these conversations before engaging.

3. Participants see a need for more local research focused on Hispanics and Latinos

“In a recent conversation, someone pointed out that Cuyahoga County is only 4 to 5 percent Latino. What they fail to understand relates to concentration and the impact large numbers [of people] can have in a small area.”

There is not much local research focused on Latinos and Hispanics. As a result, community-based organizations are often forced to rely on larger, national studies that are not always applicable to the conditions happening on the ground in the communities they serve. The issue is complicated by many factors, including the relatively small percentage of the population within our region that is considered Hispanic or Latino.²

For more traditional forms of research, the number of local research institutions (academic and community-based) in our District offers potential opportunities; in Ohio alone, there are 14 four-year public universities and more than 50 four-year private colleges and universities. If even a small number of researchers at local research organizations, including the Cleveland Fed, began conducting research related to Hispanic and Latino issues, it could have a significant impact on building a foundation for local work in this space.

It may not be straightforward to measure how community members achieve economic mobility in traditional ways. One solution, which some nonprofits in our District have employed, is to conduct qualitative research – in the form of storytelling – about successes within the Hispanic and Latino communities. For example, the Mexican population in the city of Painesville is now more than 26 percent of the city: What lessons could be learned from the ways the broader community has (or has not) adapted to the rapid growth of this population over the past decade?

² According to the 2020 Census, Hispanic or Latino people represented 4.4 percent of the population in Ohio, 3.9 percent in Kentucky, and 1.7 percent in West Virginia. Pennsylvania has the highest percentage (7.8 percent) but the top 10 cities for Hispanic or Latino populations are all in the eastern side of the state – which is out of the Cleveland Fed’s District.

4. Participants see immigration policy as a major barrier/obstacle to participation in the economy

“Immigration policy exacerbates all of the entrenched disparities faced by our communities, such as poverty, education [disparities], and economic exclusion.”

The lack of a clear path to citizenship remains a significant concern for some Hispanic and Latino communities. In 2018, there were approximately 4.4 million US citizen Latino children living with at least one undocumented parent.³ Beyond the many negative outcomes for children of undocumented parents, research has shown that these families make less economic progress over time. The constant threat of deportation affects how the undocumented interact with our systems, many of which are critical to achieving economic inclusion. And for those who become engaged in legal proceedings, the financial burden can be crippling.

Why these issues matter to the Program on Economic Inclusion and to the economy

These issues matter because everyone who participates in the economy needs to be able to navigate its legal systems and institutions to work and prosper. Organizations and policymakers hoping to remove barriers need a clear view of what exactly they are and how they work, and our participants suggest deeper engagement to obtain that view.

Additionally, people do not become productive participants in an economy without first learning and growing into capable and skilled adults. Our schools, colleges, and communities are the settings in which this development occurs. Yet some young citizens remain reluctant or unable to fully participate in these opportunities because of their families’ undocumented status.

While Hispanic and Latino people are a small minority in our region, they are a large part of the US economy and one of the fastest growing groups. According to the 2020 Census, Hispanics and Latinos are the largest racial or ethnic minority group in the United States. Additionally, the group continues to display strong population growth; Hispanics and Latinos represented more than half of the total population growth in the US from 2010 to 2020.⁴ Persistent gaps exist for Hispanics and Latinos (versus non-Hispanic whites) in many economic outcomes. Considering all these factors, increasing economic inclusion for Hispanic and Latinos is important to efforts to strengthen the overall US economy.

Next steps for Program on Economic Inclusion staff

The Program on Economic Inclusion was created to increase the Cleveland Fed’s understanding of the obstacles to economic inclusion for communities in our District, as well as approaches to overcome those obstacles. These community listening sessions are a prime example of program staff working to better understand current challenges faced along racial, gender, and geographic lines. Staff will consider the appropriate next steps to help identify solutions. A list of commitments – ranging from changed organizational practices to new engagement efforts to expanded research projects – is under development, and we’ll announce these commitments on our [website](#).

³ According to American Immigration Council’s [US Citizen Children Impacted by Immigration Enforcement Fact Sheet](#)

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>