

**Beyond Washington Heights: Identities, Language and  
Economic Outcomes of Dominicans in a New Destination**

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Support for this research was provided by Russell Sage Foundation Project # 88-04-01, "Context, Identities, and Economic Outcomes: A Pilot Study of Dominicans in Reading, Pennsylvania." Additional infrastructural support was provided by the Population Research Institute at The Pennsylvania State University, which has core funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (HD041025-03).

## **Dominicans in New Gateway Destinations: Identities, Language and Economic Outcomes in Reading, PA**

### Extended Abstract

Recent decades have witnessed substantial increases in the volume of immigration to the United States and a marked shift in the origins of immigrants to Asia and Latin America. While this latest wave has raised old questions about the social and economic impact of mass immigration from comparatively poor countries, the realities of the new immigration have also spawned important new theoretical advances and lines of inquiry. Importantly, immigration scholars have shown increasing interest in the geographic redistribution of the immigrant population away from traditional cities of destination and toward new gateway communities (Durand, et al. 2000).

This paper focuses on this issue through a case study of Dominican immigrants in their new destination of Reading, Pennsylvania. Dominicans are an interesting and important group to study in several respects. First, among all Latinos, they are a sizable and growing sub-population. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Dominicans are the fourth largest immigrant group from Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean (following Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans). Today, approximately one million Dominicans live in the U.S. (Logan 2002). Second, Dominicans are also noteworthy for their relatively high poverty rates, raising concerns about the ability of new destinations to provide needed economic opportunities and of the impact of Dominicans on these places. Third, often phenotypically black and Spanish speaking, Dominicans have an ambiguous status in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and thus stand to provide interesting insights into questions of self-identity and transnationalism (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991, Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002). Most important, Dominicans are moving to new settlement communities. In 1990, nearly 75% of the half million Dominicans in the United States lived in the traditional gateway destinations of New York, Bergen-Passaic

(New Jersey), and Miami. By 2000, the share of the one million Dominicans in the U.S. who lived in these traditional destinations shrank to approximately 63% (Logan 2002; Portes 1996).

The results presented in this paper are from a case study of Dominicans residing in Reading, Pennsylvania. Table 1 shows simple descriptive information for the six metropolitan areas with the fastest percentage increase in their Dominican population (among those with at least 400 Dominican residents in 2000) and, for comparative purposes, New York City. The results suggest that Reading, Pennsylvania is well suited for this case study. It had the third fastest growing Dominican population over the 1990's, and it represents an interesting test case. Dominicans are outnumbered by Blacks by only five to one, and they are residentially more intermingled with Blacks than in any of the other settings. The city's Hispanic population is otherwise dominated by Puerto Ricans who share a Caribbean heritage. This particular racial/ethnic context of reception may intensify the salience of self-identification and the identification of them by the wider community. And their concentration in this economically struggling and declining area represents a worst-case context in which to examine household economic survival strategies, and may magnify the various trajectories suggested by segmented assimilation.

The conceptual model guiding this research has assimilation outcomes (e.g., employment circumstances, economic status, school performance) as a cluster of dependent variables. We view these as affected by origin characteristics (e.g., community of origin in the D.R.), immigrant characteristics (e.g., human capital, demographic characteristics), linguistic patterns and self-identity (e.g., use of Spanish, racial identity), family characteristics (e.g., social capital, family networks), transnationalism (type and intensity), and community context (e.g., receptivity, residential segregation, labor demand). In this paper we focus on a limited part of this conceptual model by addressing the following questions. First, what is the race/ethnic identity of recent Dominican immigrants and recent internal migrants (largely from New York) compared with earlier Dominican residents of Reading? Second, how do Dominican immigrants

and internal migrants represent their identity in different contexts of daily life? Third, is race/ethnic identity related to linguistic (Spanish and English) abilities and preferences of Dominican immigrants and internal migrants? And fourth, what is the relationship between race/ethnic identity, linguistic patterns, and the economic circumstances and trajectories (e.g., employment) of Dominican immigrants and internal migrants?

To answer these questions, we are conducting a structured survey of householders (or other adult household members) in households who self-identify as being of Dominican origin. The instrument includes structured and open-ended items that yield rich ethnographic detail. Our survey includes modules on household and family demography, education, work history, entrepreneurship, migration history, language ability and use, ethnic and racial identity, community attachment and satisfaction, perceptions of community characteristics and health. Existing studies of Dominicans rely on snowball sampling techniques (Duany 1994; Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002; Levitt 2001; Levitt and Waters 2002). In addition to snowballing, we are experimenting with and evaluating a number of sampling techniques to achieve a total of at least sixty completed surveys.

Second, we also are collecting oral narratives among several community leaders drawn from inside and outside the Dominican and Hispanic communities. These key informants include bodega and other Dominican business owners, representatives from municipal government (police, city planning), representatives of the school system and other citizens with expert knowledge of the circumstances in Reading. The intent is to further detail our assessment of community organization, and to explore questions of local receptivity to growing Dominican enclaves.

Table 1. Characteristics of metropolitan areas with fastest Dominican population growth, 1990-2000\*

Dominican population	Raleigh NC	Grand Rapids MI	Reading PA	Charlotte NC	Harris- burg PA	Daytona FL	New York NY
1990	74	186	308	113	95	106	351K
2000	904	1912	2758	923	720	776	603K
% change	1,122	928	796	717	658	632	72
% of Hispanics	1.2	2.8	7.6	1.2	3.7	2.5	25.8
% of total population	.08	.18	.74	.06	.11	.16	6.5
Race/ethnic distribution of total population							
% non-Hispanic White	66.8	83.0	84.8	71.2	86.4	82.1	39.6
% non-Hispanic Black	23.0	7.7	3.7	20.7	8.2	9.4	23.7
% Hispanic	6.1	6.3	9.7	5.1	3.1	6.4	25.1
Following data are for central cities of these metropolitan areas							
Poverty rate (%)	13.6	15.7	26.1	11.0	20.4	23.6	21.2
Unemployment rate (%)	5.3	6.2	9.2	5.8	8.2	10.2	9.5
Employed in mfg. (%)	6.6	13.4	11.7	9.0	6.4	3.7	4.4
Economic status rank	17	148	321	38	289	303	221
City-suburb disparity rank	140	199	313	57	295	228	289
Spatial segregation (indexes of dissimilarity)							
White-Black	52.9	53.8	33.9	53.7	62.6	62.5	83.7
White-Hispanic	45.3	48.3	40.1	44.2	44.7	21.2	65.2
Hispanic-Black	31.4	59.1	17.2	39.2	49.8	53.9	57.2

Source: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, SUNY-Albany. Mumford point estimates based on data drawn from 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census.

\* All data are for 2000 except where indicated.

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