

Issue Brief

Conference Series on Aging in the Americas (CAA)

Disability in Aging Latinos

by: Anna Kate Moen

Disability consists of an inability or limitation in performing socially defined activities and in fulfilling roles expected of individuals within a social and physical environment (Jette & Field, 2007). Despite declines in disability rates among the older population, the number of persons with disabilities stands to grow as the baby boom generation continues to age. While the significance of these trends is exacerbated by an aging population, disability affects individuals of all ages, genders, and ethnic groups. A lack of comparative research on Latino aging populations and a lack of research considering the unique social determinants of Latino disability remain as obstacles to attain a deeper understanding of disablement within Latino communities.

Today in the United States, the Latino population faces several unique risks to their health and well-being. One is that, while Latinos typically have a low socioeconomic status, their life expectancy is much higher than that of other ethnic groups within a similar socioeconomic context, such as African Americans. A second factor is that the large influx of Latinos within the past several years has been accompanied by a steadily growing anti-immigration

sentiment leading to stereotyping and racial profiling. Third, Latino communities hold strong traditional values in their families, and often many generations of a particular family will live in the same household, creating a potential dependency burden.

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These distinct characteristics are important to consider when assessing the physical and mental well-being of Latinos in a social context and their implications for

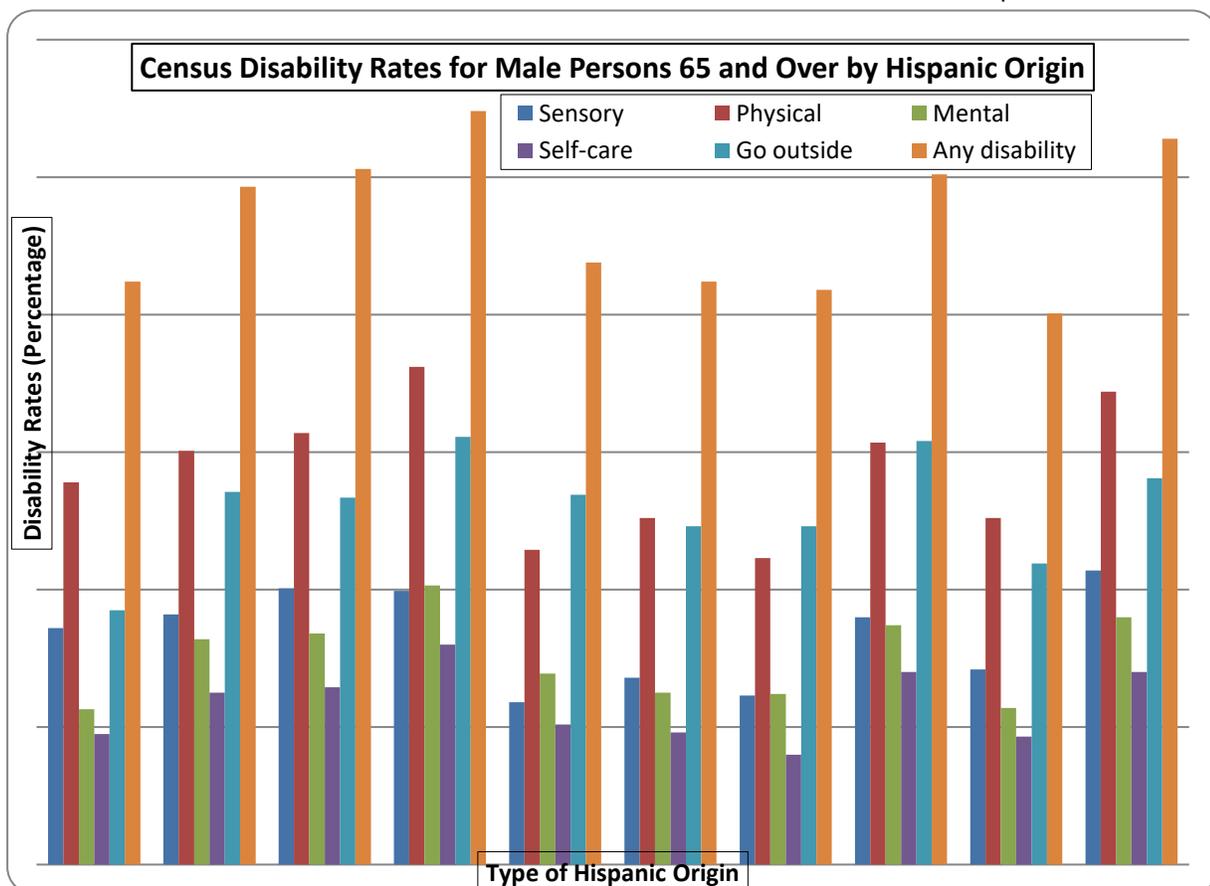


Figure 1. Census disability rates for males age 65 and over by Hispanic origin. Adapted from “The Health of Aging Hispanics: The Mexican-Origin Population,” by Jacqueline L. Angel & Keith Whitfield, 2007, p. 32. Copyright by Spring Science+Business Media, LLC).

disability related issues.

Although previous studies have examined Latinos as a monolithic group, more recent research on population aging is disaggregating Latinos by their respective nationalities. Data are now available to estimate ADL and I-ADL disability, and Markides and colleagues recently showed stark differences among Hispanic national origin groups (Markides, Eschbach, Ray, & Peek, 2007). Analysis of Latino subgroups from the U.S. Census data in 2000 reveals the prevalence rates for certain types of disabilities for both men (Figure 1) and women (Figure 2) aged 65 and over.

The overall disability rate is highest among Puerto Rican men (54.8 percent) and lowest among Spaniard men (40.1 percent). Puerto Rican men also report more physical, mental, self-care, and going outside disability than other male categories, and Spaniard men report lower rates of sensory, physical, mental, and self-care disability than non-Hispanic white men. Some of these categories show almost a 15 percent difference between some Hispanic subgroups, and it is clear that distinctive differences exist between all of these categories of Hispanic origin (Markides, Eschbach, Ray, & Peek, 2007).

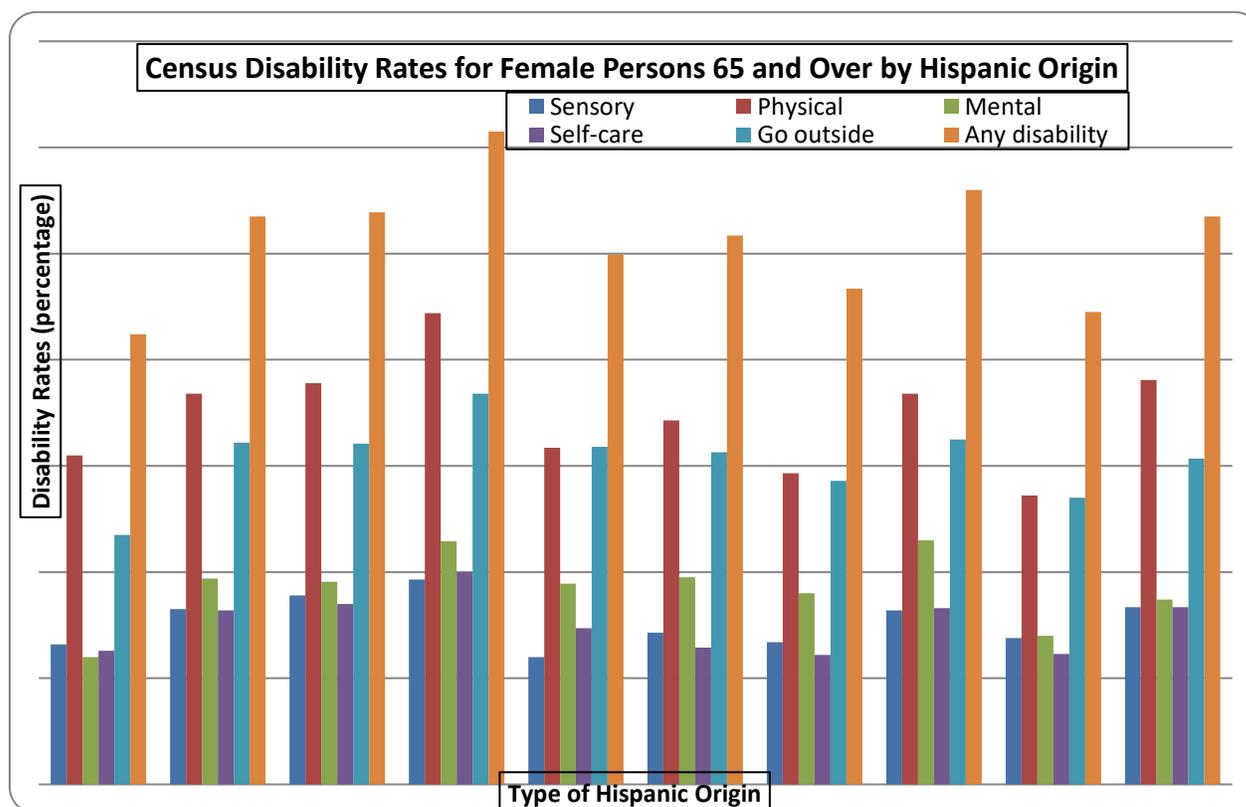


Figure 2. Census disability rates for females age 65 and over by Hispanic origin. Adapted from "The Health of Aging Hispanics: The Mexican-Origin Population," by Jacqueline L. Angel & Keith Whitfield, 2007, p. 32. Copyright by Spring Science+Business Media, LLC.

Figure 2 assesses these measures of disability within the elderly female population. As with the findings in the male subgroups, Puerto Rican women report the highest overall disability rate (61.5 percent), with Spaniard women reporting the lowest overall disability rate (44.5 percent). An interesting finding among women, however, is that for no group of women are overall disability rates lower than those of their non-Hispanic white counterparts, suggesting weaker migration selection effects for women (Markides et al., 2007).

Both of these categorical charts display different levels of ADL disabilities for these Hispanic subgroups. Currently, most studies on Latino aging cluster all of these subgroups under the umbrella term of "Latino." While the measures of disablement discussed earlier help to piece together the gaps in measurement for Latino populations and help to account for their unique social determinants, it is evident that deeper research on disaggregated Latino subgroups is necessary in order to obtain a full understanding of Latino disability. It is important to note that these data are based on self-

reported answers, and thus certain social factors, stereotypes, and even faulty language translation can lead to somewhat imprecise results.

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In summary, many Americans are affected by seriously disabling conditions as they grow older. Hispanic Americans experience different types and rates of disablement than other groups. In order to most effectively treat and prevent the increasing incidence of disablement, accurate and detailed data are paramount, and a comparative perspective is essential. Scientific research on late-life functioning will provide much needed information by refining empirical markers of disablement. While significant progress has been made in certain areas of disability, the analyses of Latino subgroups make it also clear that substantial disparities remain along race and ethnicity categories. All these important issues must be considered in the next generation of research.

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