

Growth and Change in Arkansas' Hispanic Population



UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
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Like the rest of the nation, Arkansas is experiencing a dramatic shift in the ethnic composition of its citizens due largely to an increasing Hispanic population. The change is fueled primarily by international and domestic migration and is occurring in many regions of the state which historically have had little ethnic or racial diversity. This increasing diversity is a new phenomena for many regions of the state and is adding a new social vibrancy to some regions, is contributing to economic growth and is requiring additional resources to assist in-migrants to assimilate into the local community.

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Between 1990 and 2006, the Hispanic population in the state has increased by over 600 percent. In the Ozark District, the percentage increase is even more dramatic at over 1,000 percent. Of the estimated 121,177 increase in the Hispanic population statewide during this period, nearly 80,000 are in the Ozark District (Figure 1).

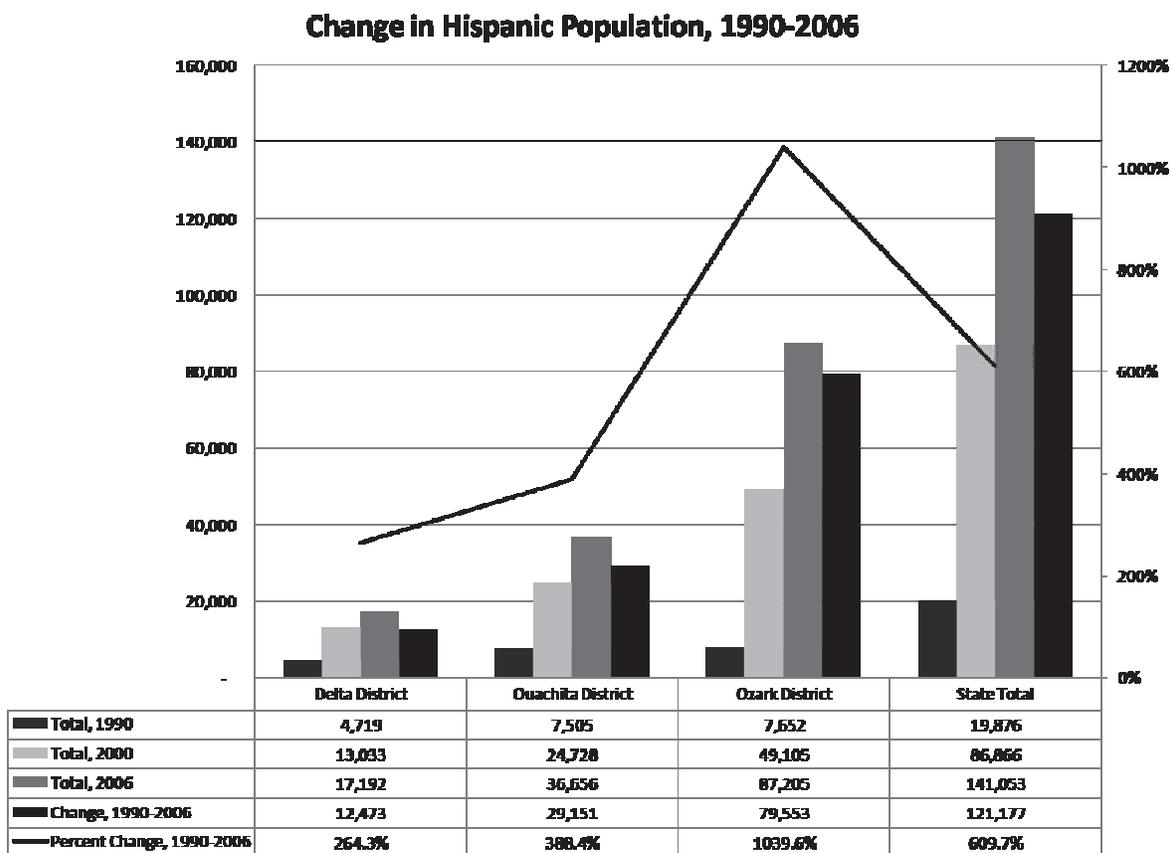


Figure 1. Change in Hispanic Population, 1990-2006

The impact of the increase of Hispanics in local communities cannot be overstated. Our new residents have added a level of diversity that many communities have not previously witnessed. Among other things, they have introduced new social customs, sports and wonderful new foods. However, while adding new vibrancy to many local areas, communities are faced with providing services to newcomers who often have less education and limited English skills but are integral parts of the local economy and community life. Local schools are charged with providing equitable educational opportunities to children with little or no English language. Local businesses must adapt to the Hispanic consumer or the business will lose valuable revenue to regional markets that will develop to serve this “specialty” market.

Age Structure Implications

The general population of Arkansas is aging. This “graying” of the state’s population is caused by so-called aging in place, that is, long-time residents simply getting older, and by in-migration of older people to retirement communities. The shape of the population pyramid for the state’s total population (Figure 2) shows this quite clearly.

However, the population pyramids for the Hispanic populations (Figures 3 through 6) around the state demonstrate a striking difference from the overall population. Like most migration streams that are driven by labor demands, the Hispanics in Arkansas are younger and have a larger proportion of young male adults than the general population.

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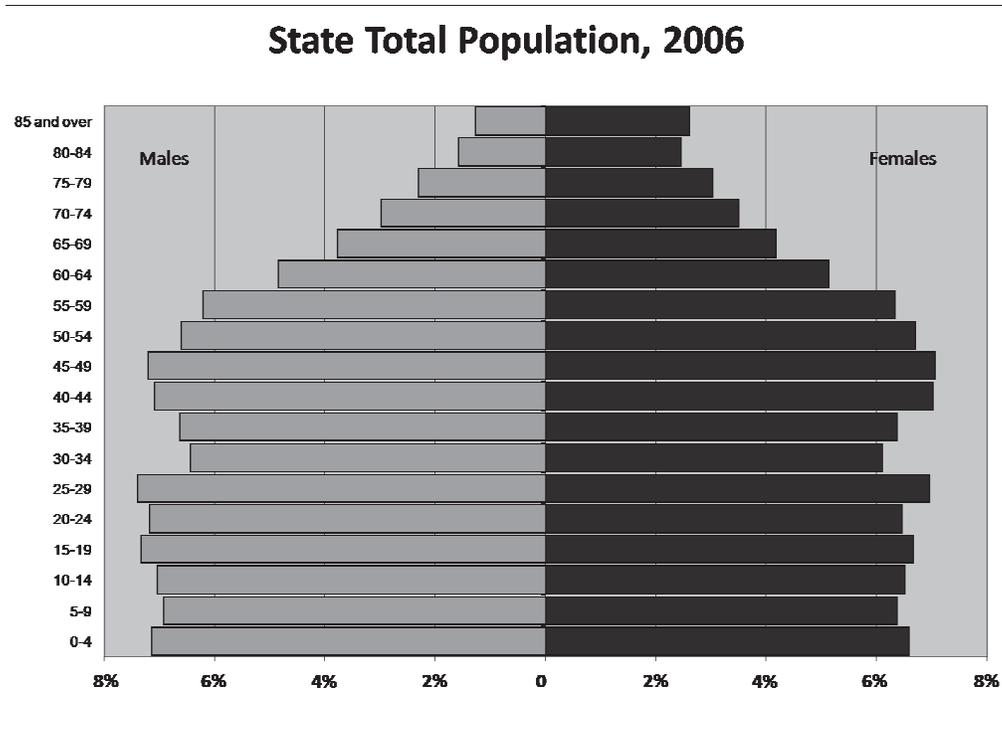


Figure 2. State Total Population, 2006

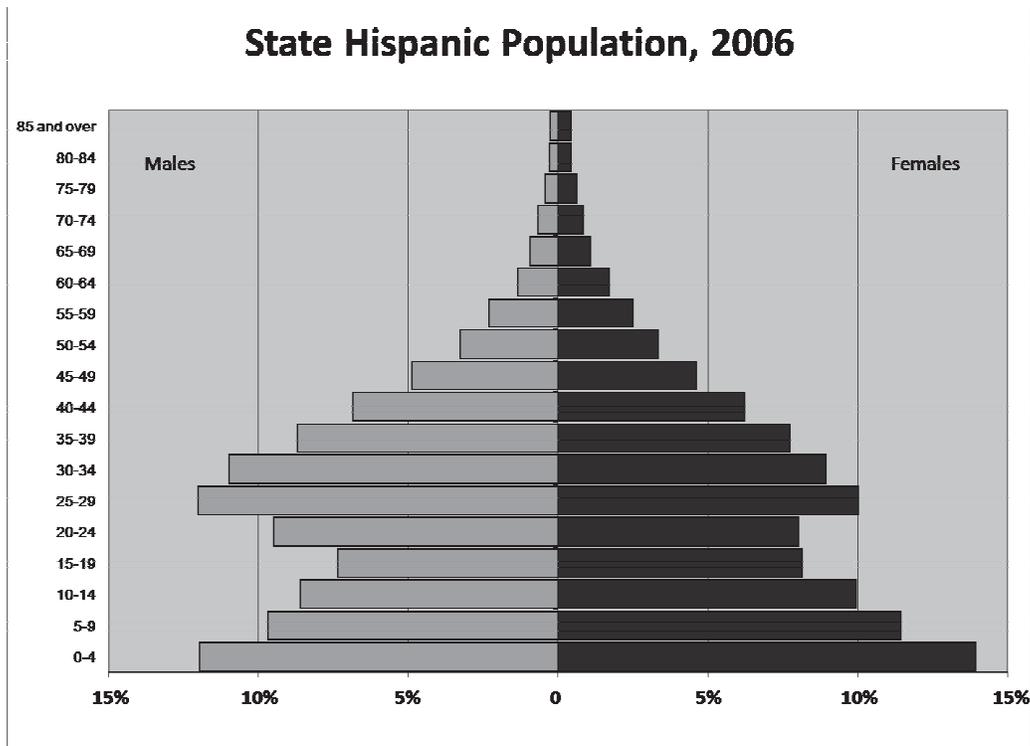


Figure 3. State Hispanic Population, 2006

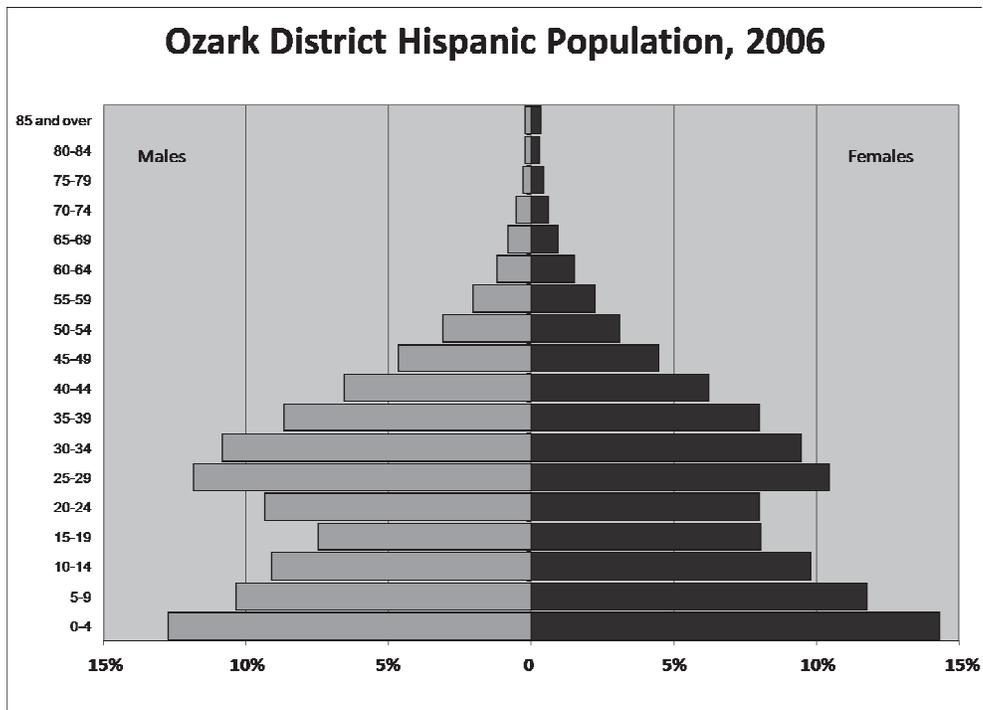


Figure 4. Ozark District Hispanic Population, 2006

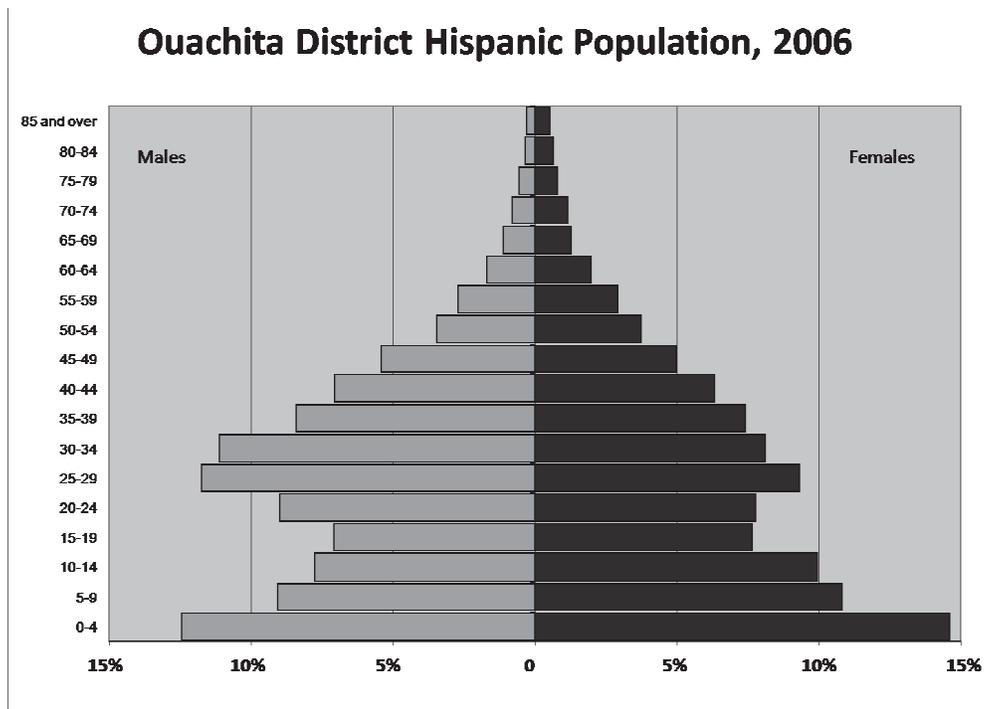


Figure 5. Ouachita District Hispanic Population, 2006

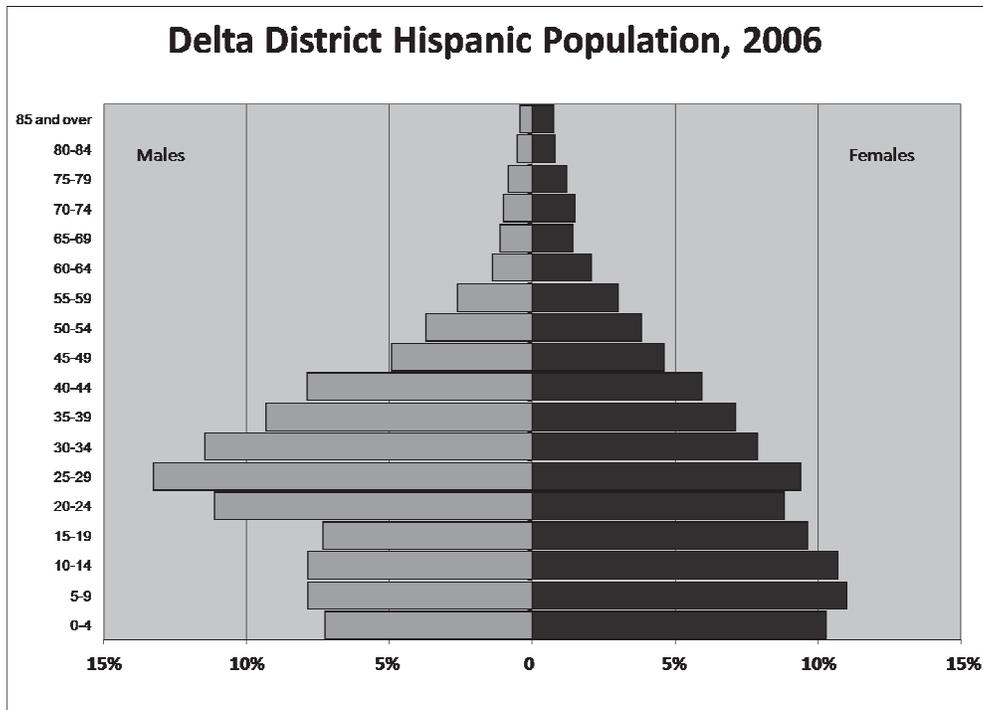


Figure 6. Delta District Hispanic Population, 2006

Of particular importance for communities is the high percentage of young children. This is especially evident in both the Ouachita and Ozark districts where approximately 13 percent of the Hispanics in those districts are in the 0-4 year-old age bracket. In the next five years, these children will be entering the public school system. The impact on school districts is obvious. Also, planners may anticipate continued need for services related to families with young children — like child care and medical services.

Also demonstrated in these population pyramids is the presence of young adults of working age. Other research (Farmer and Moon, 2007) has revealed that those migrants moving to rural areas in recent years are more likely to be pioneering migrants, that is, individuals who are among the first in their family to migrate to the United States. Consequently, these young adults may be more likely to require assistance in negotiating the systems and culture of their new residence.

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This same research indicates that migrants to rural areas are also likely to come from farm families, owning some land in their homeland and coming with agricultural work experience. In the Delta District, the population pyramid shows an abundance of young adult males and fewer young children than the other two districts. The link to the agricultural economy is a likely explanation. As has been true in the other regions of the state, however, this first wave of young adult males is likely to be followed by a second wave of women and children as family groups are established and reunited.

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Since 2000, the age structure has shifted. The bar graph (Figure 7) shows how many people have been added in each age category between 2000 and 2006. The dramatic difference between the districts underscores the features already noted.

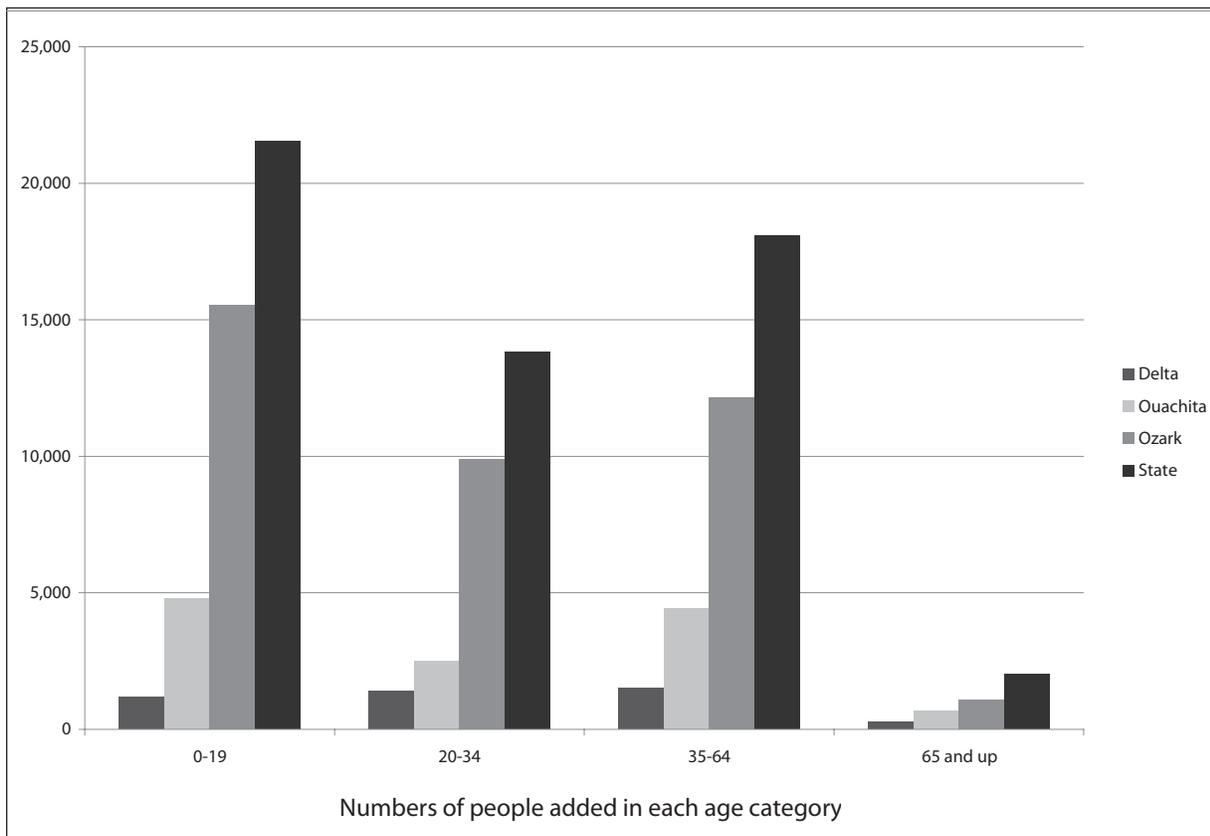


Figure 7. Numbers of People Added in Each Age Category, 2001-2006

The Delta District has added working-age males and school-aged children but relatively few very young children who will enter the school system in the next few years. Contrast this with changes for the Ouachita and Ozark districts where the continued expansion of the school-age population in the coming years must be anticipated by education planners. Although not shown in this graph, the difference between the number of working-age men and women is evening out, especially in the Ozark District. This is evidence of family formation and the rejoining of families from the initial wave of male migrants in earlier years. These patterns imply that the Delta District may expect a similar shift in the upcoming years with family members coming to join the men who have migrated to the district for permanent employment.

Of note, however, is that the population growth rate of Hispanics may be declining. The Census estimates show a decreasing rate of increase (**Figure 8**). These numbers suggest the trend in the next few years, while still increasing, may not increase at the same high rate as during the past 10 years. Additionally, recent economic slowdowns, especially in construction and housing industries, may contribute to a reduction in the “pull” for new migrants seeking employment in Arkansas.

Community Challenges and Opportunities

There are a number of communities in Arkansas that would have lost population were it not for the in-migration of workers and families from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and other Central American countries. They supply needed labor, have created demand for goods and services, pay substantial taxes and have generated needed economic activities in many small towns and rural areas of the state. New businesses are appearing in many small towns that are targeting the new arrivals and the long-time residents alike.

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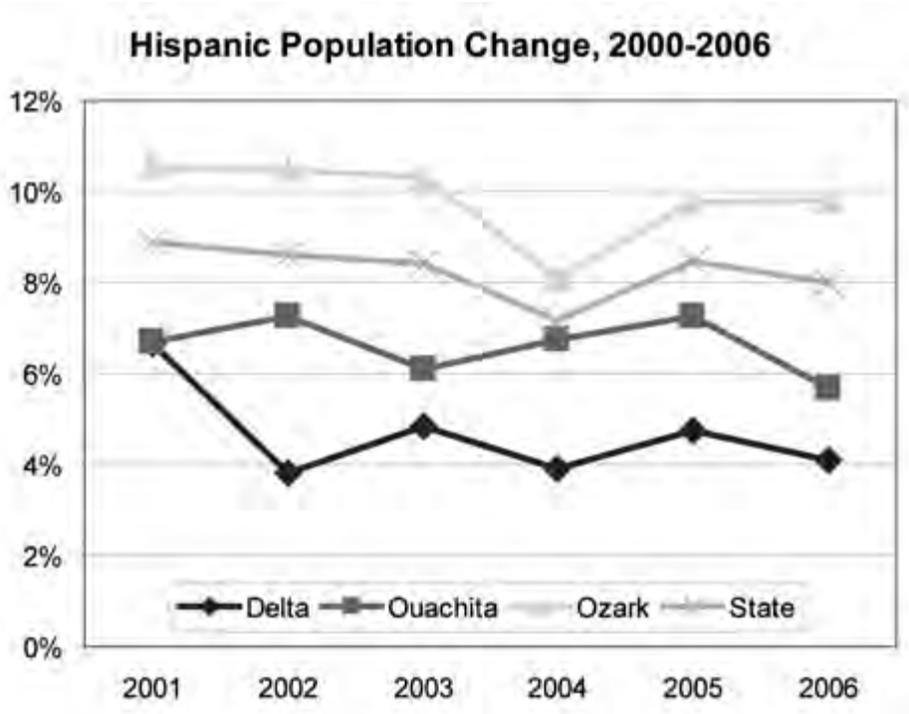


Figure 8. Percentage Change in Hispanic Population, 2000-2006

Beyond adding to the local economy, the in-migrants have added to the social and cultural mosaic of rural Arkansas. Clearly there has been growth in the younger age groups of the population, which in turn increases the overall vibrancy and tempo of Arkansas' small towns. The family-friendly culture of the in-migrants fits well with the values of rural Arkansas. The new residents occupy housing that may have been vacant. In short, for much of rural Arkansas, the recent wave of in-migration represents an opportunity for revitalization and growth.

However, those communities with large influxes of immigrants face a two-edged sword in that they have workers to grow their economy, but those workers may require language assistance, and their children will require additional educational resources. Assimilating immigrants with differing cultural practices and expectations presents opportunities as well as challenges to communities.

A significant challenge to communities is evident in closer examination of the population structures

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associated with the growing Hispanic population. Because this population group is largely young adults and children, educational services and services to families are being and will continue to be impacted in the near future. Particularly in the Ozark and Ouachita districts, schools must continue to prepare plans for expansion for increasing numbers as well as anticipate the language and cultural barriers and needs of the incoming students and their families. However, the slowing growth rate of Hispanics will require careful monitoring to ensure adequate but not overinvestment of resources to serve this growing population.

References

Farmer, Frank L., and Zola K. Moon. 2007. "The Rural Disadvantage and Characteristics of Mexican Migrants." Working Paper No. 5, School of Human Environmental Sciences. Also presented at the annual meetings of the Rural Sociological Society. Santa Clara, California.

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