

## ESTHER CEPEDA: Staying together can aid in moving forward

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CHICAGO — Thank you, US2010 Project, for stating the so-often misunderstood obvious: “Hispanic” is not synonymous with “Mexican.”

The project, based at Brown University and dedicated to researching changes in American society, has released a report titled “Hispanics in the United States: Not Only Mexicans.” For non-Mexican Hispanics who try not to seem anti-Mexican when they explain for the umpteenth time that they themselves are not Mexican, the report is a welcome acknowledgment of Hispanic diversity.

For the half of me that’s Ecuadorean, it’s a joy to see an independent organization confirm that “Hispanics come to the U.S. from many origins and there are real differences between them.”

My Mexican half, however, wasn’t terribly pleased that the good news about Latino diversity was overshadowed by the finding that every Hispanic group has become less segregated since 1990 — except Mexicans.

According to the research, Mexicans, who represent the largest portion (more than 60 percent) of Latinos, are still living heavily segregated from whites compared to, say, South Americans, who more often have integrated themselves into neighborhoods with larger shares of non-Hispanic whites.

Segregation as a societal construct is bad and enforced segregation is against the law.

But when it comes to Mexicans in the United States, I don’t think either applies. It would be fantastic if new arrivals could immediately settle into diverse middle-class neighborhoods. But this would only happen if they got here relatively wealthy, well-educated and bilingual.

For the majority of Mexican immigrants who come here without such resources, self-segregation can be a crucial first step in the assimilation process.

I hail from a city known for its diverse ethnic enclaves — Chicago boasts one of the largest Polish communities outside Warsaw — and we’ve always seen these as strengths and assets.

So iconic are our Mexican neighborhoods that whenever I mention I’m from Chicago, people automatically assume I grew up in one of the two major predominantly Mexican neighborhoods, Little Village or Pilsen. I didn’t — my family settled on the North Side in

an Irish neighborhood near a concentration of South Americans — but the strengths of those communities reach every corner of the city and suburbs because they serve as immigrants' first stop in America.

"It cuts both ways. We're anxious to involve Mexicans into the greater city community because the city benefits quite a bit when the segregation breaks down," said Dick Longworth, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs who studies the impact of globalization on Chicago and the Midwest.

"But a lot of immigrants wouldn't come here unless there was a group already present, with a common language — and oftentimes having arrived from the same hometown — who could help them settle, break them in, get them in housing, schools, jobs and teach them how this strange place called Chicago works."

He added: "One assumes that this breaks down after a while — the first generation is likely to stick together, but the second moves on. The neighborhood stays intact, though, because you might see the old folks stay put, but it's generally an ever-changing population because the kids move out and newcomers settle in."

Additionally, these highly concentrated neighborhoods are epicenters for cities to provide integration resources such as English as a second language and citizenship classes.

Segregated Mexican communities "help people get in touch with similar individuals who have gone through the process, it aids the assimilation process. I can't say it's a bad thing," said Nilda Esparza, the executive director of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce, which represents a 600-business corridor known as Chicago's second Magnificent Mile because it's the second-highest retail tax generator for the city.

"There's definitely a progression and, while not everyone moves forward, Little Village is a perfect example of a community that has created a space for so many families to live the American Dream of buying a home, starting a successful business and contributing to the economy."

Yes, assimilation should always be the goal. But sometimes, sticking together can be a community's greatest strength.



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