

# Involving Latino Families in Environmental Education

Dave Sutherland  
City of Boulder Open Space & Mtn Parks  
P.O. Box 791  
Boulder, CO 80306  
720-564-2057  
sutherlandd@bouldercolorado.gov  
www.osmp.org

## From 2000 Census Data

- **Latino is not a “racial” category.** It is a cultural category. Latinos can be of any race or combination of races (e.g. Mestizo, American Indian, European, African-American, Asian, Middle Eastern, or any mix thereof). Latino is generally used as an ethnic description, based on a framework of common culture and the Spanish language. There is a great deal of variety among Latinos, from those whose families have been here for many generations to the more newly arrived, from the highly educated to others who have not had the opportunity for high levels of educational attainment, from the prosperous to the impoverished.
- **Latino population has doubled:** Over the last ten years, the city of Boulder has experienced a dramatic demographic shift. Boulder’s Latino population doubled between 1990 and 2000, increasing from over 4% to over 8.2% of the total population in one decade (this mirrors a statewide trend in Colorado).
- **Recent Arrivals:** About one-half of Boulder’s Latinos are U.S. born, and one half were born outside the U.S. The majority, 85%, are from Mexico. Two-thirds of the foreign born Latino population has arrived since 1990.
- **Higher than Average Poverty:** Over one-quarter of Boulder’s Latinos had incomes below the poverty level (the highest percentage of Boulder’s various ethnic groups). The average annual household income of families living in public housing is \$12,322.
- **Youthful Population:** Over 26% of Boulder’s Latino population was under 18 years of age, compared to just under 20% of the general population.
- **Larger Households:** Latino households were larger than households for the population as a whole. In 2000, the average household size for Latino families was 3.6, compared to about 2.5 for the total city population excluding students.
- **Less Formal Education:** Educational attainment ranges widely among Latinos. Over 41% ages 25 or older have some college, Bachelor’s, graduate, or professional degrees. At the same time, *over 45% have less than a high school degree* (in the general population, under 5% have less than a high school degree and 86% have some college, Bachelor’s, graduate or professional degrees.)
- **Language Barriers:** About one-third of the Latino population reported speaking English either not well or not at all. While the majority of children five years and older are bi-lingual, the majority of Hispanic adults (and pre-school age children) are mono-lingual Spanish.

- **Political Clout:** About 10% of Colorado’s 2.8 million registered voters are Latino. Between 1994 and 2006, registration of Latino voters increased by 28%, possibly a result of registration drives.

### Anecdotal Generalizations

The following generalizations about our Latino population are not based on scientifically rigorous survey data, but reflect anecdotal evidence and experience.

- The Latino population is very diverse and consists of many groups that don’t identify with one another or form cohesive associations. It is impossible to generalize who Latinos “are.” Although most are Mexican immigrants, many are Mexican-Americans born in the US with limited or no Spanish skills, Central American immigrants, and South Americans. Although we might consider them all Latinos, an educated Argentine, a third-generation Mexican-American, and a Honduran construction worker have little affinity and will generally not socialize.
- The principal social unit for most Latinos is the extended family, as opposed to co-workers, friends or neighbors. Many immigrant families may be suspicious or fearful of contacts outside their extended family.
- For a variety of reasons, many Latino immigrants are suspicious of strangers, officialdom, personnel in uniforms, signing their name on forms, giving their address, etc.
- Latino parents are rarely willing to trust their children to the care of non-family members. Relatives provide all babysitting and day care services. They are unlikely to participate in camp or day camp activities or allow their children to accompany a ranger on a nature hike.
- Personal endorsement from a known, trusted individual is **essential** for assuring Latino participation in events and programs. To be successful, identify and build a relationship with a Latino community leader such as a teacher or parent liaison at a school, the staff of an ed center, a priest or social worker.
- Schedule outreach venues in “safe” locations where Latino families already congregate, such as parks, schools, ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and churches. **You must go where they are; don’t expect them to come to you.**
- Several surveys suggest that a main reason that very few Latino families visit land systems and nature centers is due to simple lack of awareness. Respondents express interest in visiting such places, but don’t know they exist.
- Many Latinos are unfamiliar with parks and outdoor recreation sites in the US model. For example, they may have no concept of a visitor center, information booth, or naturalist-led programs.
- Many Latino adults (1/3 in Boulder) speak very little English, and rely on their children to translate for them.
- The fact that Latino children speak English and understand “the system” in the USA gives them a powerful advantage over their parents, which may upset family dynamics and authority. Some parents feel their children respect them less, are moving beyond parental control, or may eventually desert the family.

- In addition, many Latino children quickly surpass their parents' education level in school. Parents are unable to help with or understand homework, and again may feel their children do not respect them. This may be a factor related to high Latino dropout rates as families move to re-establish control.
- Latino people are often shy and humble: they may be ashamed of their limited English, may come from a social class that had to keep its head down in their home country; may be embarrassed about their limited education, may feel off-balance in a predominantly Anglo culture; may have been frequently humiliated and put down by educated people in their country of origin.
- Latino families don't generally engage in many of the outdoor recreation activities common to Anglos, e.g. mountain biking, rock climbing, trail running or hiking. Family picnics and fishing are the most common outdoor activities. This may be due to a number of factors:
  - These activities do not fit cultural patterns for leisure time in Latin American countries, especially for people of the immigrants' social class; Latino people may lack knowledge of opportunities to participate, or to learn the necessary skills;
  - Fear of mountain lions, bears and snakes;
  - Lack of leisure time due to working multiple jobs;
  - Lack of disposable income to buy gear and equipment;
  - Lack of transportation to arrive at recreation sites;
  - Fear of standing out physically, or being ridiculed by others;
  - Wild places are not safe in their country of origin (guerillas, drug cartels);
  - Lack of facilities designed for large family groups (most US picnic and camping areas are designed for small groups and nuclear Anglo families);
- In general, Latinos are unlikely to participate in events led by strangers, that do not involve the extended family, that are presented by someone wearing a uniform that suggests law enforcement, or that require travel to unfamiliar locations.
- Many (but not all) Latino immigrants, particularly those with less education, may not understand or follow US outdoor low impact behavioral norms. For example, littering is more common among Latino families.
- Due to limited experience with outdoor recreation, Latino families may not know some safety basics such as safe camp fire management, checking for trees before sledding down a hill, not feeding wildlife, wearing appropriate shoes on hikes, carrying water and sun protection, etc.
- Many minorities – not just Latinos – may perceive public lands and national parks as resources for White people only.

### Recommendations

- For Latino people, their extended family is their core social network and support system. Structure your outreach venues to involve families, particularly with items to attract the attention of children (e.g. animal mounts, hands-on games, puppets). Latinos will arrive with little ones in tow.

- Make sure facilities such as picnic tables are designed with large Latino families in mind. A Latino family outing may include 15 people or more, while most picnic areas are designed with small sites and tables.
- Be very patient with Latino families who don't appear to know basic safety practices or behavioral norms for outdoor recreation. It may be their very first time and no one has shown them before – they probably feel self-conscious.
- Maintain different standards for Latino kids and Anglo kids on field trips. Many Anglo kids have experienced wild places for years with their families. For the Latino children, it may be their first time. They may be overwhelmed by new stimuli to the point where they are unable to focus on your class material. Allow for and accept this, and facilitate their first outdoor experience with love and patience. Help them get over any fear. Make them want to come back.
- Involve trusted members of the Latino community in the planning and promotion of activities. Use word-of-mouth advertising from trusted Latino sources to advertise activities. Be aware that word of mouth promotion is very slow, and you will only reach limited numbers of people. This is a reality of Latino outreach.
- Offer food at events. Even the humblest Latino families will serve refreshments to their guests. Kids love free items like coloring books and balloons.
- Avoid outreach contacts with staff in uniforms that suggest law enforcement. Train uniformed and law enforcement staff in Latino cultural realities so they can make more effective and less threatening contact with Latino recreationists. Look for safe opportunities for uniformed staff to interact with Latino visitors to model friendly, helpful, caring people in uniform.
- Try to break through the humbleness and shyness expressed by many Latino people, by presenting yourself on an equal level as fun, forgiving of language troubles, accepting. It may break the ice if you attempt to speak Spanish badly and have a sense of humor about yourself. Do not condescend!
- Use bilingual (Spanish / English) hosts and staff whenever possible, making it clear which staff speak Spanish. Latinos will respond best to people who look like themselves. At events, employ a friendly bilingual greeter to welcome and orient participants as they arrive.
- Provide signs and web page content in Spanish and English for activities that would interest Latino visitors, particularly fishing and availability of picnic facilities and places to cook outdoors.
- Maintain an archive of photographs of Latino recreationists for use in web sites and publications. This is far more effective than marketing opportunities for Latinos with pictures of Anglo visitors.
- Establish and nurture contacts with Spanish language mass media outlets, such as radio, TV and print. Work with your contacts to create programming with an environmental education message, inviting and welcoming Latinos to visit natural sites.
- Establish and maintain contacts with other land management agency professionals around the nation who are developing outreach programs for the Latino community. Learn from their successes and failures, and share your experiences.

- Introduce co-workers and contacts from other agencies to your Latino community leaders. Build a network of trusted EE program providers and program recipients who all know each other and work together.

### Key Messages for Latino Outreach

1. A healthy environment means healthy families.

*You and your children will be healthier.*

*There are many things your family can do that promote a healthy environment:*

*don't litter, don't dump oil down storm drains, recycle, enjoy the outdoors, etc.*

*Colorado's economy is linked to the environment. A healthy environment means more jobs for you and your family.*

2. Public land is (usually) a free community resource for you and your family's enjoyment.

*"This land is your land." You have as much right to enjoy it as anyone else.*

*If you pay taxes, you have helped pay for this land and its upkeep.*

*There are fun things you can do here that don't cost money.*

*Park staff, including uniformed rangers, are here to help you and will go out of their way to make sure you enjoy your time in nature.*

3. Wildlife (specifically mountain lions, bears and snakes) don't pose a significant threat to your family's safety.

*Know what to do if you meet one on the trail.*

4. The outdoors needs your help to stay clean and unspoiled.

*Rules exist to protect the plants, animals, and the experience of other visitors.*

*Litter and feeding kills wildlife.*