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Latino poverty: Amid progress, some grim data; [All Edition]

M. Charles Bakst. *The Providence Journal*. Providence, R.I.: Oct 12, 2003. pg. D.01

People: Pichardo, Juan, Murillo, Luisa, Vera, Santiago
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Section: *Sunday Extra*
Publication title: *The Providence Journal*. Providence, R.I.: Oct 12, 2003. pg. D.01
Source type: Newspaper
ProQuest document ID: 424056101
Text Word Count 1357
Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=424056101&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=12317&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Abstract (Document Summary)

I found the poverty news jolting because I had been lulled, or distracted. In recent years there has been an explosion of articles - I've written a bunch myself - about the emergence of Latinos as a major Rhode Island constituency, whose votes politicians cultivate by sprinkling their speeches with Spanish, advertising in Hispanic media, and hiring Latino aides. [Juan Pichardo] and several other Latinos have been elected to public office. The state Hispanic American Chamber of Commerce dinner has become a major event, and Latino businesses proliferate in Providence and elsewhere.

She said, "The Latino community, like any other community, has its accomplishments, has its areas where there is an improvement from one generation to the next. Those are our assets - the business growth, the fact that we have a percentage of the Latino community that has been able, after many of years of trying, to succeed. But that's not the experience of the average Latino in this state and it's definitely not the experience of the newly arrived Latino immigrant."

Pichardo said election of Latino politicians like himself helps give Hispanics a voice at tables where decisions are made. He said Latino leaders must impress upon non-Latino pols the importance of addressing the problems pointed up in the data about Latino poverty.

Full Text (1357 words)

Copyright Providence Journal/Evening Bulletin Oct 12, 2003

I am at Pito's Restaurant on Broad Street, Providence, with Sen. Juan Pichardo. The Dominican fare includes goat, tripe, and yucca, and we are talking about the news that Rhode Island has the largest percentage of Latino children living in poverty in the United States.

The day before, Pichardo attended a downtown meeting of Hispanic and other community leaders where many took this and similar findings in stride. But the senator called the picture "startling" and "shocking."

Now, at the restaurant, he says he knew, of course, that the situation here was not rosy. But to see the hard statistic, to realize that Rhode Island actually ranks first in terms of Latino youngsters living in poverty, "really set me back." Let it be a wake-up call, he said. "We have to come up with a plan to address issues quickly."

I found the poverty news jolting because I had been lulled, or distracted. In recent years there has been an explosion of articles - I've written a bunch myself - about the emergence of Latinos as a major Rhode Island constituency, whose votes politicians cultivate by sprinkling their speeches with Spanish, advertising in Hispanic media, and hiring Latino aides. Pichardo and several other Latinos have been elected to public office. The state Hispanic American Chamber of Commerce dinner has become a major event, and Latino businesses proliferate in Providence and elsewhere.

It is an upbeat story. As far as it goes. But the burgeoning Latino population here is very new. It takes time for immigrants to climb, and there is some question as to how well geared Rhode Island is to meet their needs.

The meeting Pichardo attended - to discuss poverty figures compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation - was sponsored by Rhode Island Kids Count, the Urban League of Rhode Island, and the Center for Hispanic Policy and Advocacy (CHisPA). There was plenty of teeth-gnashing and brainstorming about schools, neighborhoods, and jobs, a lot of talk about data on Latinos and blacks, and about white attitudes. There were several references to the idea that society washes its hands of immigrants. Indeed, CHisPA director Luisa Murillo spoke of encountering a "They're not ours" posture even at the State

House.

Afterwards, I asked Murillo about the clash between the upbeat Latino news we so often see and the dark statistics that emerged about child poverty, single-parent families, unemployment, and school dropouts.

She said, "The Latino community, like any other community, has its accomplishments, has its areas where there is an improvement from one generation to the next. Those are our assets - the business growth, the fact that we have a percentage of the Latino community that has been able, after many of years of trying, to succeed. But that's not the experience of the average Latino in this state and it's definitely not the experience of the newly arrived Latino immigrant."

There is tremendous immigration - and there is the economy. Murillo said her parents arrived in Rhode Island from Bolivia some 30 years ago and wound up working at Speidel, her father in shipping, her mother in soldering:

"They, like many immigrants that immigrated here 30 years ago, or anybody who graduated from high school 30 years ago, could enter a company; if they were hard workers, they had a good job, more than likely they had benefits that were provided to them eventually. They could stay in that job 10, 15, 20 years. The economy doesn't allow that right now. So, newly arrived immigrants are entering the most unstable jobs and they're more likely to not have benefits."

I went with Pichardo to take a look around his Elmwood-South Providence-Washington Park District, which is 47 percent Hispanic.

Pichardo, who is 36 and was born in the Dominican Republic, is Rhode Island's first Hispanic senator. To win the distinction, he had to defeat incumbent Charles Walton, who was the only black solon, in a Democratic primary.

Pichardo was pleased to host me. In fact, he has started to invite his colleagues to tour the area. "I want them to feel it, see it," he said.

Of his constituents, 35 percent are under 18 years old. He asked, "Ten years, 15 years from now, where do you want this population that's going to school? Do you want them going to college, getting skills that could land them a job - or the Training School, eventually at the ACI?" Spending the money to do it right early on will save the public money in the long run, he said.

We saw dozens of small businesses - markets, hair salons, and the like - where families pitch in. Pichardo said they need economic development assistance. You can see that the businesses provide a living for the families who own them, but what of people whose families don't have businesses? They scratch around looking for a job, said Pichardo. In fact, he said, wherever he goes in the district, people ask him if he can help them find one.

He said his constituents are not looking for handouts. "They are asking for solutions, they're asking for jobs, they're asking for opportunities to go to school . . . Give people the opportunity to work and earn a decent living, send their kids to school, they'll work 40, 60, 80 hours."

The district has housing issues and crime issues. It's a nuanced story. You can see very nice spruced-up single-family dwellings. And you can see plenty of eyesore vacant lots where houses once stood.

Much of the district, especially the Broad Street commercial area, has a foreign feel to it. Places like Hernandez Liquor, which bears an ad for Coors Light. Busca la aqui. La bala de plata!! (Find it here. The silver bullet!!)

The markets and restaurants stock food that immigrants like. A new CVS has signs in Spanish. But what really brought home to me the newness of people here was a stop we made at Santiago Vera's Internet Cafe on Broad Street.

It has five phone booths people can use to call back home to the old country. They could use their own phones, of course, but some people don't have them, or they find long-distance service too expensive; Vera's rates are cheaper.

Customers here also can sit before a tiny camera at a computer so relatives sitting in similar centers in Latin America can see them.

Customers also can send money back home. Pichardo says people in Latin America rely on it. "It's part of their economy," the senator says.

Vera came from Peru three-plus years ago. He took computer science and English classes at CCRI. He used to be a teller at Foxwoods but wanted to have his own business. He told me, "It's like the American dream to do something on your own . . . I don't want to be working for somebody else all my life."

Vera said he opened up four months ago and puts in 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

He said business got off to good start. Then, he said, he started having problems with drug traffic in the neighborhood; his store's sign was broken, someone put a gun to his head.

But Vera's outlook now had brightened. Just the night before, police officers, pols, and community leaders gathered to open a community police station across the street. Neighbors thronged the ribbon-cutting.

Vera told me he was so happy to see the station open "I almost cried."

It was the fifth of nine community-police stations Mayor David Cicilline plans to open around the city. Cicilline, who speaks Spanish, won strong Latino support at the polls last year.

Pichardo said election of Latino politicians like himself helps give Hispanics a voice at tables where decisions are made. He said Latino leaders must impress upon non-Latino pols the importance of addressing the problems pointed up in the data about Latino poverty.

He said they need to be told, "You got elected, you spoke the language, now let's see the action."

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