

Study profiles the aging of Hispanic workers, the invisible boomers

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Jacob Lozada was 13 in San Jose, Puerto Rico, when a neighbor came knocking on his door to tell his father that his grandfather had fainted at work.

"My father said 'son, this is a blessing.' I didn't understand why," Lozada recalled.

When the most elder Lozada came home, Jacob's father told him it was time to retire.

"And what I did not understand, until later in my life, was why a 60-year-old man would want to get up at 5 in the morning to go work cutting sugar cane, which was one of the worst jobs anybody could have in the Tropics, especially in Puerto Rico," Jacob Lozada added.

Lozada, a board member at American Association of Retired Professionals, was a panelist in the "Older Hispanic American Workers: Current status and future prospects," a seminar among many other at "The Power of Inclusion," a symposium organized by AARP in Chicago last week.

According to the latest Census statistics, the Hispanic population grew from 6.5 percent, in 1980, to 15 percent of the U.S. today. Of the 45 million Hispanics, 6 million are 50 to 69-year-olds.

A survey presented by Richard W. Johnson, PhD, a senior fellow at the non-profit The Urban Institute showed that by 2030 1 in every 5 people between the ages of 50 and 69 in the U.S. will be of Hispanic origin.

Dr. Johnson called the Hispanic aging population "the invisible boomers." He combined numbers from the American Community Survey, from 2007, with the Health and Retirement survey, conducted by the University of Michigan, and self assessment by migrant workers living in the U.S.

Dr. Johnson might hold the explanation why Lozada's grandfather didn't seem to lose the grips of his job at age 60. As fewer foreign Latino workers had health benefits in their homeland (43 percent) than US-born (49 percent), is wider amongst Hispanics the margin of workers who said they "enjoy their jobs" (95 percent) than African Americans (86.3 percent) and whites (87 percent).

"We found the Latino health paradox. Healthier people migrates here, because workers overseas have better dieting and exercising habits, but as time progress in American, they acquire the local practices and their health is affected," said Dr. Johnson, who added said that equation is also true amongst Asians and other ethnic groups.

Another interesting point is that although racial groups responded almost equally when asked if health problems have limited you at work (Hispanic " 15 percent; Whites " 14.), Hispanic workers reported to miss fewer days (32 percent) at work at the last 12 months than whites (45).

"Yes, yes, yes. This is exactly what's going on. Many people have come from the construction industry and are losing their jobs, while they were dedicated to their employers," said Elba Aranda-Suh, executive director of National Latino Education Institute, a non-profit in Chicago.

Aranda-Suh also said that her organization has seen an increase in the number of foreign-born Latino workers come the US with college degrees.

"It's been a challenge helping older workers, with degrees from their homelands, assimilate at the US market," she said. Aranda-Suh pointed out that resources that were available to train older workers, such as the US Dept. of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Program, established in 1965, which have recently been cut because of the current economic downturn.

Although resources are scarce today, says Aranda-Suh, she recalls the day when there was a draught of information about the Latino workforce. Half jokingly, Jacob Lozada urges Latinos to leave differences aside and participate more in the political decision of their communities.

"How difficult it is sometimes to get anything done in your Latino community. We say, we are going to have dinner, than Mexicans want tortillas, Puerto Ricans want rice and beans, Venezuelans want something else. Look, you have to get involved. That's why I joined AARP," he said.

As more studies and surveys about Hispanics come about, Lozada said is easier to say that the federal government is not doing enough to help Latinos, "but what am I doing?" he asked.

The aging of all ethnic populations is a real problem foreign workers need to deal with. But as hopes are still high for a long and prosperous life in this country, Aranda-Suh says migrant leaders need to work closely with legislators and the private sector to address issues like, retirement, long term care and health insurances.

At his self-responded survey, Dr. Johnson asked workers at age 50 or above to rate their health status, Hispanics had the highest rates, with 18 percent of them admitting their health is fair or poor.

Despite those findings, Latinos are the most optimistic about their expectation of life. On average, Latinos said they expect to live up to 82 years old, as opposed to age 79, for whites, and 76, for African Americans.