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**From the Journals: Interview with Peter Cunningham on  
Hispanic Immigrants  
Kaiser Family Foundation Broadcast Studio  
September 19, 2006**

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**JACKIE JUDD:** Dr. Cunningham, thank you for joining us.

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Thank you, Jackie.

**JACKIE JUDD:** What did you set out to find in this study?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Well, basically, we know that as the Hispanic population in the United States has been increasing, it is also becoming more dispersed geographically. Primarily, the Hispanic population has been concentrated in places like the West, the Southwest, and in some large cities like Miami, New York City and Chicago, but the most rapid growth has been occurring in places that traditionally have had relatively few Hispanics, including a lot of places in the South and the Midwest and also a lot of small cities and even non-metro areas. So basically, what we are trying to find is given this recent growth in the Hispanic population, are they more likely to encounter barriers in their ability to get medical care compared to the major Hispanic centers?

**JACKIE JUDD:** And you did find disparities, to what degree?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Yeah, what we did find, that if we compare the Hispanics in these new growth areas - that

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is, the areas that have a small but very rapidly growing population with the major Hispanic centers - we find that in new growth centers, there are much fewer coverage programs that are targeting immigrants. We find that safety net providers, including community health centers, are much less available and these are places that low-income Hispanics traditionally use a lot. Physicians report greater language barriers and we also find that there is greater use and reliance on hospital EDs.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And when you say coverage programs, what are you speaking of specifically?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Well, these are state-funded immigrant coverage programs that target recent immigrants. The 1996 welfare reform legislation largely restricted Medicaid eligibility for recent immigrants and, as a result, a lot of states or really some states have passed legislation that enacted some coverage for recent immigrants to try to fill this gap. But most of the states that have done this have been in the states that have traditionally had a large Hispanic population. We are finding that in a lot of these new growth areas, the states that have these new growth areas are much less likely to have these programs and so that is going to place Hispanics there, at least the recent

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immigrants, at much higher risk of being without health insurance coverage.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And as you mentioned a moment ago, the place of - the last resource they go to are emergency rooms. Do you know if they get the kind of care that they need there and second, what kind of pressure that is creating on the local community hospitals?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Right, well, we don't know exactly what kind of care they get there, but traditionally ERs are not places where you go to get routine or primary care. A lot of people do that, but health care providers try to discourage that because there is less continuity. And I think, obviously, it is going to be creating some pressures on hospitals in those communities, especially because these tend to be smaller communities, smaller cities and even non-rural areas and so the capacity, the hospital capacity in those communities are likely to be somewhat less than in the larger cities.

**JACKIE JUDD:** And you also mentioned that when these immigrants in the new growth centers do find doctors, that there are communications problems.

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Right, we do find that physicians report that there are greater language barriers with their Hispanic patients in these communities and we

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think that that's because physicians have much less experience because the Hispanic population has been so small and they are much less likely to have the kind of support staff there that would facilitate translation.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Did you find any bright spots at all when you looked at their experience in these new growth communities?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Well, we did find that levels of overall physician use were similar to the major Hispanic population centers, so even though they tend to use the ER more, their overall levels of use are comparable. So that suggests that they are getting some access to care, but there could be a tendency for some inefficient utilization or over-utilization because of the ER use.

**JACKIE JUDD:** One question I am struck by is this: How are the decisions made by these Hispanic immigrants to go to these new communities, even when all the services that they might need in their lives - and I am thinking really beyond medical care but schools for their children, et cetera - what drives them to these new areas?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Well, the study didn't really address that specifically but I think it is pretty clear that work opportunities is going to be driving a lot of the decisions to move there. We do find that in a lot of these

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new growth communities, they are experiencing general population increase, that the populations tend to be expanding. We see increases in Hispanic employment in the construction industry and that is kind of a bellwether for when a community is expanding, that it is attracting a lot of people into the construction work force.

**JACKIE JUDD:** If these new growth communities remain as you have found them during this study, what do you fear the consequences may be?

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Well, there is a big federal effort to try to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in health care and Hispanics have especially been a concern, because they do have by far the highest rates of lacking health insurance coverage as well as other access problems. And so, I think what these findings suggest is that as this geographic dispersion increases, that this is going to pose another obstacle to trying to reduce disparities in health care, especially if a lot of the programs and resources are targeted towards the major Hispanic centers. So I think there needs to be some attention to, what do we do about these new growth communities? How can we help them to address the needs of their growing Hispanic population?

**JACKIE JUDD:** And do you know what the answers to those questions are, in your mind, anyway? I presume it is

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not enough to say that well, let's just try to duplicate what has happened on the ground in large urban areas.

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Right, well, at one level, at some point, they are going to have to address the fact that a lot of the recent immigrants that move in don't have health insurance coverage and that is a major barrier for anybody, but especially people who are going to have problems, who are going to have other problems such as language barriers and maybe not being as familiar with the U.S. health care system. Also, I think certain safety net providers, such as community health centers, often provide a lot of assistance to low-income recent immigrants in a lot of the larger communities that have a substantial immigrant population. And I think these are strategies that also can be helpful in some of these new growth communities as well.

**JACKIE JUDD:** Thank you very much, Dr. Peter Cunningham, for joining us. This is an interesting study.

**PETER CUNNINGHAM, PhD:** Thank you.

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