

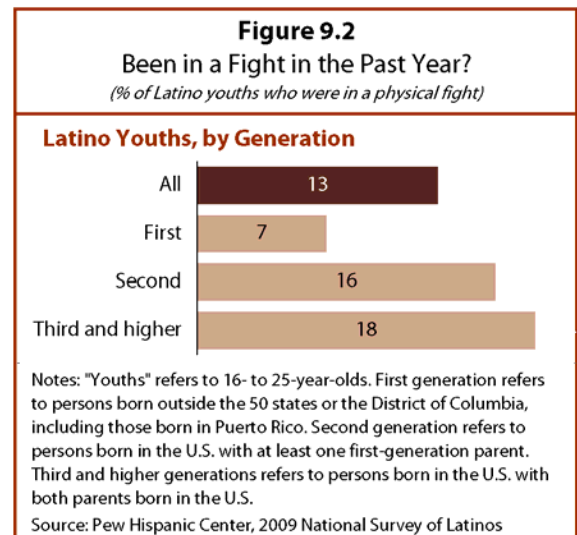
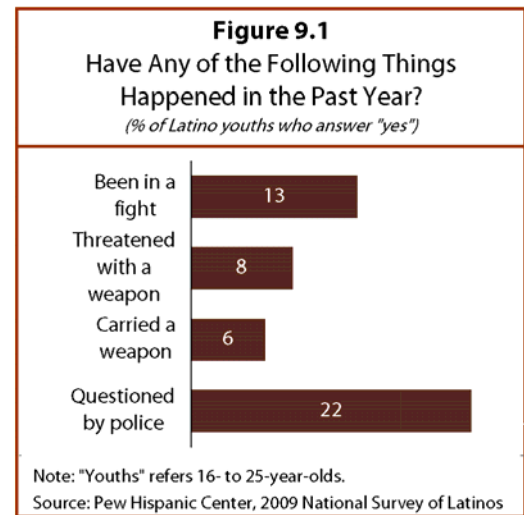
9. Gangs, Fights and Prison

Parents all around the world don't need social scientists to tell them what they already know: Adolescence and early adulthood are stages of life when their children are prone to make bad decisions.

In the case of Latino youths in America, there's a notable demographic twist in the pattern of risky behaviors at this phase of the life cycle. Among 16- to 25-year-olds, native-born Hispanics are roughly twice as likely as immigrant Latino youths to engage in behaviors that involve weapons, fights and gangs. They are also more likely to land in jail or prison.

Among all Latino youths surveyed, 13% say they got into a fight in the past year, 8% report they were physically threatened with a weapon and 6% say they carried a gun, knife or some other type of weapon.³⁸

Big differences emerge when these responses are broken down by generation. For example, just 7% of Latino youths who are themselves immigrants report that they got into a fight in the past year, compared with 16% percent of second-generation Latino youths and 18% of the third and higher generations of Latino youths. The survey also finds that exposure to gangs varies sharply by generation. U.S.-born young Latinos are twice as likely as young Latino immigrants to say a family member or friend has been in a gang (37% versus 17%). Similar patterns exist for the other risk behaviors tested.



³⁸ Because this survey was conducted only among Latino youths, it is not possible to compare these results with responses to the same questions among non-Latino youths. However, other data sources allow for racial and ethnic comparisons on some of these measures. For example, while Hispanics make up about 15% of the total U.S. population, the [2009 National Youth Gang Survey Analysis](#) prepared by the federally funded [National Gang Center](#) estimates that 49% of all gang members nationally are Hispanic, 35% are black and 7% are of another other race or ethnicity.

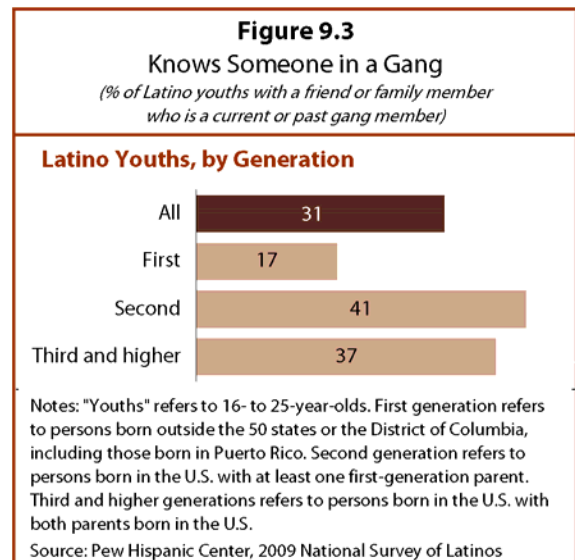
There are also sharp differences in risk-taking by Latino youths according to their age, religiosity and gender. Education, too, has an impact, but only among the native born. Within that group, high school graduates are less likely to engage in risky behavior than are those who lack diplomas. But among young immigrants, the relationship between education and risk behaviors vanishes.

Differences in age of just a few years appears to have an impact on the likelihood that a young Latino will report experience with dangerous behaviors. Hispanics in their early 20s are significantly more likely to have been at risk or been questioned by the police than those who are a just a few years younger.

For example, fully 13% of all those ages 20 or 21 report they had been threatened with a weapon in the past 12 months. In contrast, only 7% of those 16 or 17 years old and an equal percentage of those 24 or 25 say they were threatened—an age pattern apparent in varying degrees on each of at-risk behaviors or experiences asked about in the survey.

Why are the late teens and early 20s particularly hazardous years? These data can only partially answer that question. But the survey suggests that the younger group (ages 16 to 17) is more likely to be in school than are those in their early 20s. At the same time, slightly older Hispanics are more likely to be establishing families and careers, conditions that may reduce their exposure to risk behaviors or the temptations of the street.

Not surprisingly, the survey finds big gender differences on these questions. Young Hispanic males are significantly more likely than young Hispanic females to have engaged in risky behaviors such as fighting (19% versus 7%) or carrying a weapon (9% versus 3%). The survey also finds that more religious Latino youths are less likely to report engaging in risky behaviors than are their less-religious peers. Moreover, religion may help explain why immigrants, who tend to be more religious than native-born Latinos, are less likely to tempt fate by carrying weapons, getting into fights or joining gangs.



About two-in-ten young Latinos (22%) say they were questioned by police in the past year—a response that could encompass positive or benign contacts with law enforcement as well as more negative experiences.³⁹

The survey also asked Latinos about the presence of gangs in local high schools and the impact they have on community life. Only 3% of Latinos ages 16 to 25 say they are now or have ever been in a gang. But slightly more than three-in-ten (31%) say they have relatives or friends who are current or former gang members. The proportion who say they know someone who is now or has been in a gang swells to 40% among Hispanic youths born in the United States.

Latinos who trace their heritage to Mexico—a group that comprises more than six-in-ten Hispanics in the U.S.—are nearly twice as likely as other Latinos to say a friend or relative is a current or former gang member. However, Latinos of Mexican descent are no more likely than other Hispanics to report that they are or have been in a gang. Mexican-Americans also are no more likely than other Latinos to say they have been in a fight or involved with weapons in the past year.

The judgment of young Latinos ages 16 to 25 on the impact of gangs on their communities is unequivocal. Seven-in-ten say gangs make life worse for Hispanics, and an additional 25% believe gangs have no impact. Only 2% see gangs as beneficial.

The remainder of this section examines in greater detail how such factors as nativity, age, education, religiosity and gender, together and separately, increase the likelihood that Latino youths will engage in risky behaviors. It will also examine how these core demographic groups view the impact of gangs on life in their communities.

The Immigrant Paradox

Researchers call it the “Immigrant Paradox,” the tendency of Hispanic immigrants to be healthier than their U.S.-born children, have lower divorce rates, experience fewer mental or emotional problems, have lower rates of incarceration and otherwise outdo the second generation on a variety of measures of well-being.⁴⁰ Consistent with this earlier research, the Pew Hispanic Center survey finds significant differences on the proclivity for risk behaviors between young foreign-born Latinos and those born in the United States.

³⁹ The survey finds that young people who report experiences with violence or risky behaviors—fighting, carrying weapons, being in a gang—also are more likely to report they were questioned by police in the previous year than those who did not have these experiences.

⁴⁰ Summaries of the latest research into the Immigrant Paradox were presented at Brown University in March 2009 at the conference “The Immigrant Paradox in Education and Behavior: Is becoming American a developmental risk?” Videos and slides from the presentations are available online at <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Education/paradox/>

Second-generation Latino youths are more likely to carry a weapon (8% versus 3%), to have become involved in a fight (16% versus 7%) or to have been threatened by a weapon (10% versus 5%). Second-generation Latinos also are more likely than their foreign-born peers to say they have been questioned by police (26% versus 15%).

These generational differences sharpen when a slightly different analytic question is asked: What percentage of second-generation Latinos have direct experience in the past year with *any* of the three risky behaviors tested in the survey?

Overall, young second-generation Latinos are twice as likely as young immigrants to say they had experienced at least one of the three risky behaviors in the past year (22% versus 11%) and more than three times as likely to say they have experienced two or more (11% versus 3%).

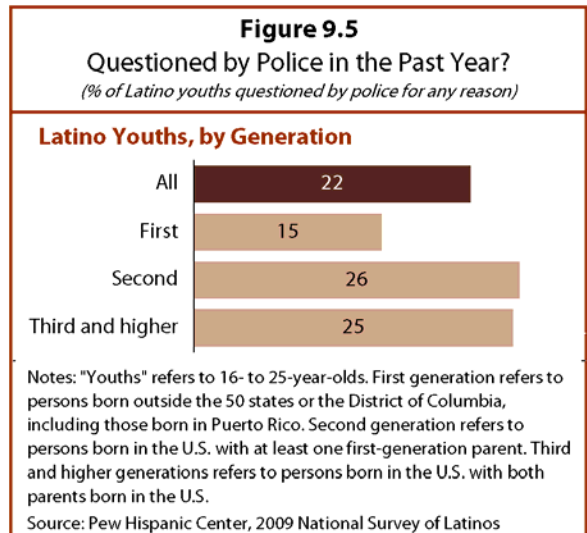
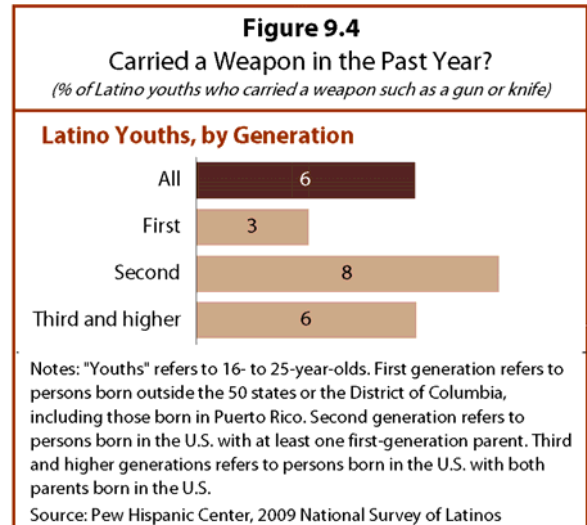
When contact with police is included in the analysis, fully a third of all second-generation Latinos (35%) had at least one of the four experiences in the past year, compared with 20% of their immigrant peers.

The High-Risk Years

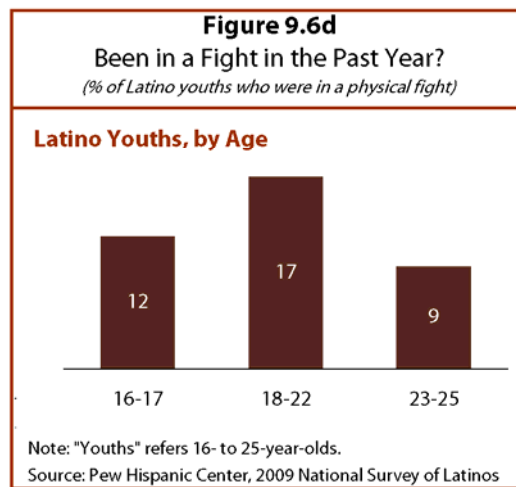
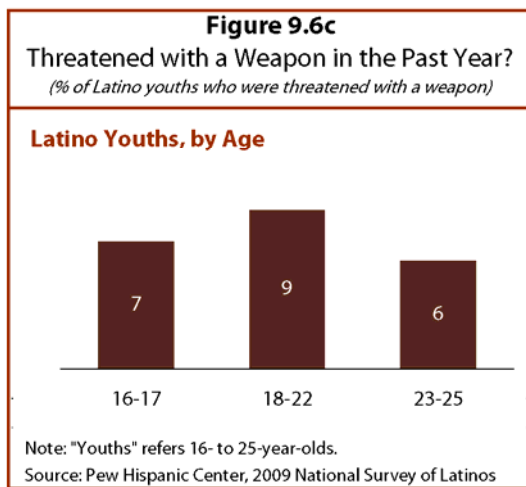
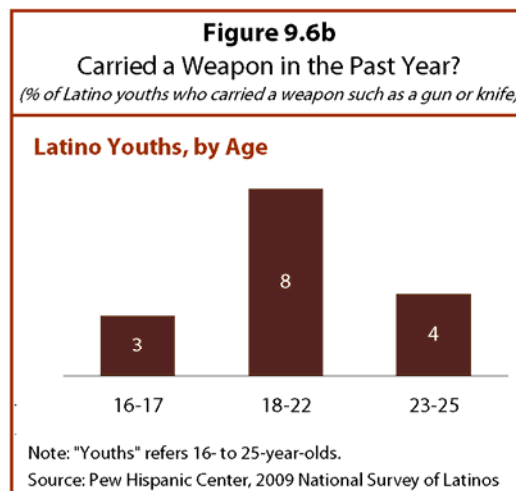
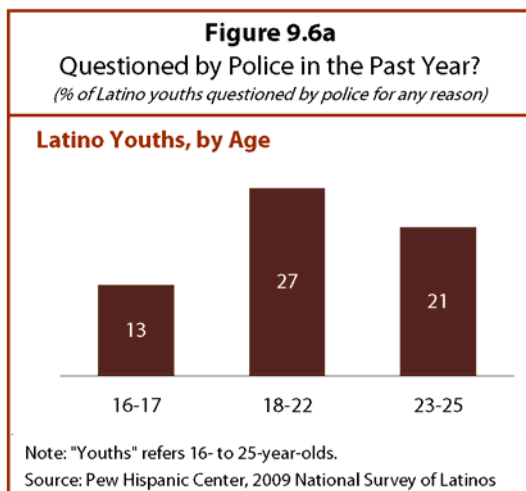
Even within the relatively narrow 16-to-25 age range targeted in this survey, experience with risky behaviors varies sharply by age.

The years immediately after their 18th birthdays—the age at which most young people have graduated from high school but before they begin to settle down—are particularly risky for young Latinos, these data suggest. On question after question, the youngest members of this age cohort—those 16 and 17 years old—and the oldest (23 to 25) are less likely than those 18 to 22 to have engaged in risky behaviors or been questioned by the police.

About one-of-six Latinos ages 18 to 22 (17%) say they were in a fight in the past year, compared with 12% of those younger than 18 and 9% of those older than 22. Latinos ages 18 to 22 are more than twice as likely as either younger or older



Latino youths to say they carried a weapon (8% for those ages 18 to 22, compared with 3% of all 16- or 17-year-olds and 4% of those ages 23 to 25). They also were slightly more likely than older Latino youths to have been threatened with a weapon and nearly twice as likely as younger Latinos to have been questioned by police (27% versus 13%).



When the results of the three questions measuring exposure to at-risk situations—carrying a weapon, being threatened with a weapon, fighting—are combined, the age pattern among young Latinos again sharpens. Slightly less than a quarter of all 18- to 22-year-olds (23%) have experienced at least one of the three risk behaviors in the past year, compared with 17% of Latino youths younger than 18 and 13% of Latino youths 23 or older.

What makes relatively younger and older Hispanic youths less susceptible to risk situations than 18- to 22-year-olds? These data cannot answer that question directly, though they do suggest that schooling as well as marital and employment status play prominent roles.

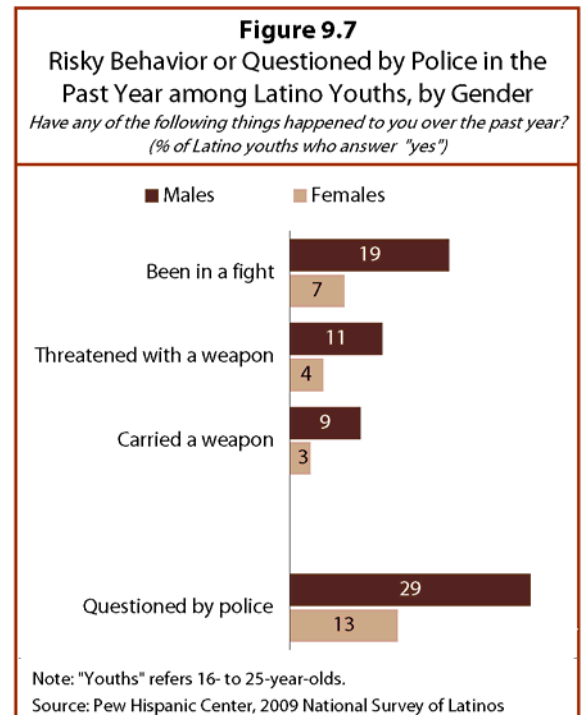
The overwhelming majority (79%) of 16- and 17-year-old Latinos are attending high school. Hispanics still in high school are less likely than Latinos who are not in school to have engaged in risky behavior in the past year (26% versus 33%).

Marriage and career may be among the reasons that Hispanics ages 23 to 25 are less prone to find themselves involved in risky situations. Latinos in this age group are significantly more likely to work full time and to be married than those just a few years younger, factors that this survey and other research suggest reduce a person's likelihood of engaging in harmful behaviors.

Fights, Weapons and Gender

Young Latino males are at least twice as likely as young Hispanic females to have experienced any of the three risky behaviors tested in this survey or to report being questioned by police in the past year.

For example, young Hispanic males are about three times as likely as young Hispanic females to report they have carried a weapon such as a gun or knife in the past year (9% versus 3%), to have engaged in a fight (19% versus 7%) or to say they were threatened with a weapon (11% versus 4%). Young males also are twice as likely as young females to say they had been questioned by police for any reason (29% versus 13%).



Second-generation Hispanic males ages 16 to 25 are particularly likely to say they had these experiences in the past year. In this generation, males are five times as likely as females to say they were threatened with a weapon (16% versus 3%) and nearly four times as likely to say they had gotten into a fight (26% versus 6%). Second-generation Hispanic males also were three times as likely as females to say they carried a weapon in the past year (12% versus 4%).

Given these findings, it may not be surprising that among second-generation Latinos, nearly four-in-ten (37%) males report they were questioned by police in the past year, compared with 15% of females.

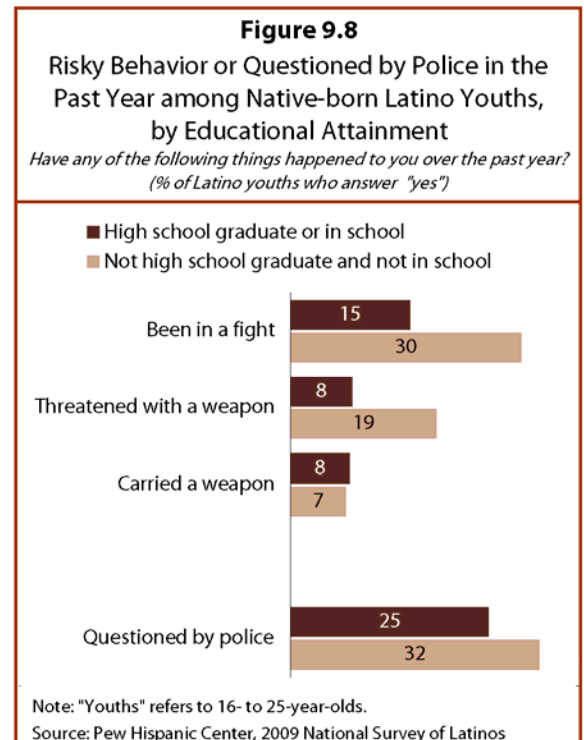
This gender pattern is also apparent among immigrants, but with one familiar difference: Young immigrants are significantly less likely than their second-generation peers to put themselves in potentially risky situations.

Among all young Latinos, males born in the U.S. are twice as likely as those born abroad to have carried a weapon (12% versus 5%) or to report they were threatened with one in the past year (17% versus 8%). About a quarter of all second-generation Latino males say they had gotten into a fight in the past 12 months, more than double the proportion of immigrant males (26% versus 11%). Similarly, second-generation Hispanic females are twice as likely as foreign-born Hispanic females to say they had gotten into a fight (7% versus 3%).

Does Education Matter?

At first glance, education seems to have little relationship to risk behaviors. Overall, 13% of young Latinos with at least a high school diploma report that they got into a fight in the past year—and so did 14% of those who never completed high school.⁴¹ High school graduates and those without a diploma also are about as likely to say they carried a weapon (6% versus 4%), had been threatened with a weapon (7% versus 9%) or were questioned by police for any reason (23% versus 21%).

However, a deeper look reveals a strong association between education and risky behaviors among young Latinos born in the United States but none at all when the analytic lens is focused on immigrants. Because immigrants are significantly less likely than the native born to report having any of the experiences tested in the survey, combining the two groups together masks the impact of education.



⁴¹ For purposes of this study, those with a high school diploma include students still in school, while non-graduates only include those who did not graduate from high school and are no longer attending classes.

A specific example may help clarify this finding. Fully 30% of young, native-born Latinos who failed to graduate from high school report they were in a fight last year—double the proportion of young native-born Hispanics (15%) with at least a high school diploma. But among younger Latinos born in another country, the link between education and fighting largely vanishes: 8% of those with high school diplomas and 5% of those who never finished high school got into a fight. A similar pattern emerges on questions asking whether respondents had been threatened with a weapon or questioned by police.

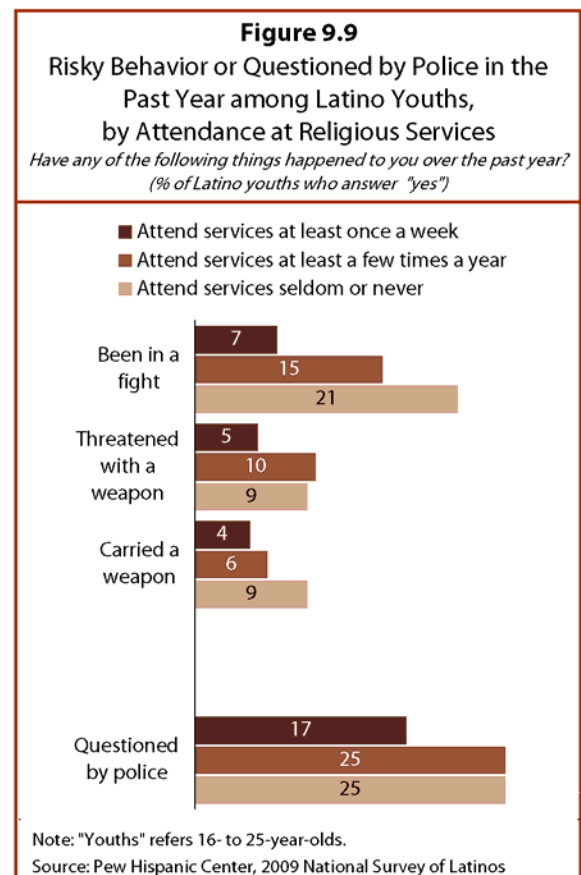
Religion and Risk

Young Hispanics who are highly religious are significantly less likely than others to engage in risky behaviors or to report they had been questioned by police. In fact, the survey suggests that religiosity may be one reason young Latino immigrants are less prone to unsafe behavior than their generally less religious native-born counterparts.

To measure the strength of their religious belief, respondents were first asked their religion and then asked how often they attended religious services: once a week, at least a few times a year, or seldom or never. Attendance at religious services was used in the analysis as a proxy for religiosity. While not perfect, this measure is often used in survey research to measure the strength of religious belief.

Overall, the survey found that young Latinos who attend services at least once a week are less likely to say they have had brushes with violence in the past year or contact with police. For example, only about 7% of young Latinos who attend religious services regularly say they got into a fight in the previous year, compared with 15% of those who go at least a few times a year and 21% who rarely or never attend services.

Similarly, Latinos who frequently attend religious services are only about half as likely to say they had carried a weapon as non-attenders (4% versus 9%), or to report they had been threatened with a weapon (5% versus 9%).



Regular attendees of religious services also are less likely to say they have ever been in a gang (2% versus 7%) or to have been questioned by police in the past year (17% versus 25%).

Latinos born outside the U.S. are significantly more likely to say they attend religious services at least once a week compared with second generation or later (41% versus 31%). When differences in attendance at religious services are taken into account, the “risky behaviors gap” between young immigrants and their native-born peers narrows or disappears.

For example, identical proportions of young foreign-born and native-born Latinos who attend religious services frequently report they were threatened with a weapon in the past year (5% for both groups). However, among infrequent attendees, a somewhat different picture emerges: Young Hispanics born in the United States are more than twice as likely as their foreign-born peers or more religiously observant native-born Latinos to say they had been threatened (12% versus 5%).

Experience with Gangs

Only 3% of young Hispanics say they are or used to be in a gang, but 31% say they have friends or family members with gang involvement. Among Hispanics ages 26 and older, only about 16% report ties to a current or former gang member.⁴²

In particular, young adults of Mexican heritage—a group that makes up about six-in-ten Latinos in the U.S.—are significantly more likely than other Hispanics to have a friend or family member who is or was involved in a gang (37% versus 19%).

	There are/were gangs at their high school*	Family/friend is/was in a gang
All	53	20
Gender		
Male	53	32
Female	43	29
Age		
16-17	55	31
18-22	54	33
23-25	44	30
26 and older	n/a	16
Generation		
First	37	8
Second	61	35
Third and higher	54	38

Notes: *Asked only of Latinos ages 16 to 25. Question asking about gang involvement of friends or family was asked of all Latinos. First generation refers to persons born outside the 50 states or the District of Columbia, including those born in Puerto Rico. Second generation refers to persons born in the U.S. with at least one first-generation parent. Third and higher generations refers to persons born in the U.S. with both parents born in the U.S.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009 National Survey of Latinos

⁴² While these numbers may suggest that the proportion of Hispanics who are involved in gangs has increased dramatically, another finding from this survey suggests otherwise. About 3% of all Hispanics ages 16 to 25 acknowledge that they are or have been gang members, virtually identical to the 2% of older Hispanics who acknowledge current or former gang involvement.

To measure the presence of gang activity in the schools, the Pew Hispanic Center asked slightly different questions of young Latinos based on their education level. Respondents who are still in high school were asked, “Are there gangs in your high school?” Latinos ages 16 to 25 who say they had graduated from high school or no longer were taking classes were asked a slightly different question, “Were there gangs in your high school?”

Table 9.2
Ties to Gangs, by Age and Origin
(% of Latinos who say family or friend is or has been in a gang)

Origin	AGE	
	16 to 25	26 and older
Mexican	37	18
Non-Mexican	19	13

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009 National Survey of Latinos

About half (51%) of young Hispanics say there are youth gangs in the high school they currently go to or the one they formerly attended. The survey further suggests that gangs are more common in predominantly Hispanic high schools than in those where Latinos make up less than half the student body.

While the sample of current high school students in the survey is too small to draw firm conclusions, about six-in-ten Latinos who currently attend a high school where at least half the students are Hispanic report that there are gangs at their school. But gangs are less prevalent in schools where less than half the students are Hispanic.

One caveat: Because gangs with different racial or ethnic makeup often exist at the same school, it cannot be inferred that respondents were thinking about only Hispanic gangs or other type of gangs when they answered the question.

The survey found that exposure to gangs varies dramatically by generation. Young Latinos who are native born are twice as likely as immigrant youths to say a family member or friend has been in a gang (40% versus 17%). Younger immigrants also are less likely than Latinos born in the United States to say there are gangs at their high school (42% for immigrants versus 59% for second-generation young Hispanics and 56% for third generation and higher).

Table 9.3
Hispanic Youths Say Gangs Hurt Their Community
(% of Latinos who say gangs in their community make life...)

	Better	Worse	No Impact
All	3	73	18
Gender			
Male	4	72	19
Female	3	73	16
Age			
16-17	3	66	29
18-22	2	66	29
23-25	3	75	18
26 and older	4	74	15
Generation			
First	4	77	12
Second	4	68	25
Third and higher	1	65	24

Notes: First generation refers to persons born outside the 50 states or the District of Columbia, including those born in Puerto Rico. Second generation refers to persons born in the U.S. with at least one first-generation parent. Third and higher generations refers to persons born in the U.S. with both parents born in the U.S.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009 National Survey of Latinos

The Impact of Gangs on the Latino Community

Fully seven-in-ten Latinos (73%) say that gangs have a negative impact on their communities, while just a tiny sliver (3%) say that gangs make life better for Hispanics where they live and 18% say gangs have little impact on their quality of life.

Hispanic youths younger than 20 are less likely than those ages 20 to 25 to believe gangs are harmful to Hispanics in their community (62% versus 74%). At the same time, these younger Latinos are more likely to say gangs have little or no impact (33% versus 20%).

While majorities of each generation agree that gangs harm the Latino community, there is considerable disagreement among young Hispanics about whether gangs have no impact. Among young third-generation Latinos, fully 43% say gangs have no effect one way or another on Hispanics in their areas. That's higher than the proportion of the second generation (27%) and significantly larger than the share of the foreign born who say gangs have no effect on Latinos. But the generations do agree on this: Gangs do not help the community; overall, only 2% of each generation say gangs make life better for Hispanics in their area.

Incarceration Rates

Census data indicate that about 3% of young Hispanic males were institutionalized in 2008 (Figure 9.4). The overwhelming preponderance of these young men is in federal, state and local correctional facilities. The young Hispanic male incarceration rate exceeded the rate of young white males (1%) but is less than the rate of young black males (7%).

Studies ([Butcher and Piehl, 2007](#); [Bailey and Hayes, 2006](#); and Fry, 1997) based on Census data report that immigrant adults are less likely to be incarcerated than their native-born counterparts. Young Hispanic males fit this pattern. In 2008 about 3% of young Hispanic males born in the United States were incarcerated, compared with 2% of young Hispanic males born outside the United States.

About 70% of young Hispanic males behind bars were born in the United States, but the nativity of Hispanic inmates varies, depending on the type of prison. More than 70% of Hispanics sentenced in federal courts were not U.S. citizens (a reflection of federal enforcement of immigration law), so the vast majority of Hispanic inmates in federal prisons were born outside the United States ([Lopez and Light, 2009](#)). Many more Hispanics were incarcerated in state and local correctional facilities, and most of the Hispanic inmates in these facilities were born in the United States.

Young men are more likely to be behind bars in 2008 than was the case in 1980. Young Hispanic men have not been an exception. In 1980 about 2% of young

Latino males were incarcerated, lower than the 3% incarceration rate in 2008. Compared with 1980, Hispanic incarceration rates have increased among both native-born and foreign-born youths.

More recently, young male incarceration rates have not changed in uniform fashion. Rates of incarceration have declined since 2000 for young black males, young white males and young Hispanic males who were born in the United States. However, incarceration among young immigrant Hispanics has increased since 2000.

Table 9.4
Incarceration Rates among Male Youths, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2008
(%)

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
All	1.5	1.4	2.2	2.8	2.2
Hispanics	1.5	1.8	2.9	2.9	2.7
Native born	1.5	2.1	3.6	4.9	3.1
Foreign born	1.6	1.2	2.2	0.9	2.1
Whites	1.1	1.0	1.3	1.5	1.2
Blacks	4.4	4.1	6.7	9.2	6.5

Notes: "Youths" refers to 16- to 25-year-olds. Incarceration rate refers to the institutionalization rate. Foreign born includes persons born in Puerto Rico.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from Decennial Censuses and the 2008 American Community Survey (ACS), Integrated Public Use Micro Samples (IPUMS)

"I heard a lot of friends who are from around here say 'Maybe you should let the white guy drive because the police will pull you over and search your car.' I've been searched twice...and they put me in handcuffs...and put me on the sidewalk and didn't find anything and let me go."

19-year-old Hispanic male

"[There's] problems with kids who go and say they're in a gang, and other kids are in another gang, and if someone does something to the other group...they get mad...and they retaliate...and a lot of people end up dying, and people on their MySpaces they'll have all these names of friends that they know who died because of gang wars."

21-year-old Hispanic female

"What's happening with gangs is that as Hispanics are becoming...teenagers...they are realizing that they have that gap between how they feel they are [and] how their parents expect them to be....when they are having family problems...they don't really feel like they can fit in anywhere...but gangs say... 'We are your family now.'"

20-year-old Hispanic female