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The Most Common Spanish Surnames in the United States: Some New Data Sources

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Abstract

Data from two sources not available until recently, the National Death Index and the Medicare enrollment files, reveal patterns in the distribution of Spanish surnames in the U.S. not observed by previous investigators. The Medicare data permit ranking of surnames for specific geographic areas, showing, in the case of Spanish surnames, that the frequency distribution in the U.S. reflects the distribution among Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans.

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The ranking of the most common Spanish surnames in the United States has intrigued a number of investigators. In the 1960s, Elsdon Smith reported on the 100 most common Spanish surnames in the United States (301–26),[1] and more recently J.N. Hook reported on the ten most common Spanish surnames (165). Both Smith and Hook relied on lists published by the Social Security Administration. These lists, published decennially, rank common surnames held by persons on the Social Security rolls. Smith used the list for 1964; Hook, the list for 1974. A list from 1984 has since been published (Social Security).

Robert W. Buechley ("Spanish Surnames" 137) and other analysts have pointed out problems associated with using the Social Security statistics. One problem is that the Social Security list of surnames is limited to six characters. Thus names with variant spellings such as *Gonzales* and *Gonzalez* cannot be distinguished. (Both are reported as *Gonzal*). Further, the name *Martinez* cannot be ranked because it cannot be distinguished from *Martin*. A second issue concerns the inclusion of residents of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in the Social Security lists. All Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens by birth and therefore are automatically eligible to participate in the Social Security System. The difficulty with the published lists is not that residents of Puerto Rico are included but that separate figures are not available for island residents and for residents of the fifty states. This would not be a problem if the rank order of Puerto Rican names were similar to that for other persons with Spanish surnames

living in the United States. But such is not the case: Puerto Rican names do rank quite differently. Buechley observes that the more common Puerto Rican names have far higher ranks in the United States list than do many of the more common names among California's surname population ("Spanish Surnames" 138). The name *Rivera*, for example, ranks twenty-seventh in California but ranks fifth among the Spanish surnames on the United States list (Social Security), apparently because of its high rank among Puerto Ricans.

This paper reports on the use of two alternative data sources – statistics of deaths and counts of Medicare enrollees – to develop a list of the most common Spanish surnames in the United States that excludes the island of Puerto Rico. Because I recognize that particular Spanish surnames vary markedly in rank from place to place, as Buechley demonstrates by using surname data from telephone directories ("Characteristic" 56), I also use newly available sources to examine the most common Spanish surnames in Puerto Rico, as well as in the geographic areas with the largest Hispanic populations within the continental United States.

I derived the statistics based on surnames appearing on death certificates from two separate sources. Data for the United States (exclusive of Puerto Rico) came from tabulations prepared by the National Center for Health Statistics based on the National Death Index (NDI), which was initiated in 1979 and contains the names of all decedents in the United States. The NDI tabulations used in my study are for the five-year period 1979–1983 and cover the 500 most common surnames in the United States among decedents, which gives prospective users of the file some idea of the magnitude of the numbers involved (National Center). Since only fifteen of these are Spanish surnames, I limited this study to a short group of Spanish names. (It is hoped that future studies will include a larger group of surnames.) Data for Puerto Rico comes from the machine-readable death record file for the year 1979 prepared by the Department of Health.[2] The other source of surname information is the enrollment file of the Medicare program for the year 1980.[3] The file is limited to persons sixty-five years and over, but this should not affect rank order unless there is reason to believe that older persons with Spanish surnames have different surname distributions from younger persons. The Medicare statistics include geographic variables that allowed me to examine surname distribution by area.

Table 1 lists the fifteen most common Spanish surnames in the United States according to the death record files for 1979–1983 and, for comparison, the fifteen most common surnames among decedents in Puerto Rico during the same time period. My list for the United States corresponds more closely

Table 1. Fifteen most common Spanish surnames among decedents in the United States and in Puerto Rico.

Rank order	United States Name	United States Deaths, 1979-83	Puerto Rico Name	Puerto Rico Deaths, 1979
1	Garcia	8,629	Rivera	961
2	Martinez	7,905	Rodriguez	910
3	Rodriguez	7,473	Gonzalez	566
4	Lopez	5,703	Torres	497
5	Hernandez	5,408	Perez	423
6	Gonzalez	4,949	Ortiz*	406
7	Perez	4,564	Santiago*	402
8	Sanchez	4,133	Lopez	358
9	Gonzales	3,347	Cruz*	344
10	Rivera	3,256	Martinez	322
11	Torres	3,137	Colon*	311
12	Ramirez	2,959	Diaz	304
13	Flores	2,827	Garcia	301
14	Diaz	2,514	Ramos	295
15	Gomez	2,398	Hernandez	293

* Name not in top 15 list for the United States

to the rank order for California Spanish surnames described by Buechley than to the Smith and Hook lists based on Social Security files (which include residents of Puerto Rico). Thus *Garcia* ranks first in both lists, *Martinez* second, *Lopez* fourth, and *Hernandez* fifth. Surname distributions differ between the Puerto Rican and United States lists. *Rivera*, for example, ranks first in Puerto Rico but tenth in the United States. Similarly *Torres* ranks fourth in Puerto Rico but eleventh on the mainland, while *Ortiz, Santiago*, and *Cruz* rank sixth, seventh, and ninth respectively but do not appear among the top fifteen in the U.S. On the other hand, names that rank first and second in the total United States, *Garcia* and *Martinez* rank thirteenth and tenth, respectively, in Puerto Rico.

We might expect Medicare enrollment statistics to confirm the rank shown by the counts of decedents by surname, and in fact this is the case. It should be noted that because the Medicare numbers in Table 2 are greater than the NDI figures in Table 1, the higher counts should provide an even more definitive picture of name patterns. Fourteen of the fifteen names for the U.S. residents are the same in both sets of data, with only relatively minor rearrangement. With a single exception, among the top fifteen names on the

Table 2. Number of Medicare enrollees with selected surnames in the United States and in Puerto Rico, March 31, 1980 (Rank in parentheses).

Surname	United States	Puerto Rico*
Garcia	18,054 (1)	2,218 (9)
Martinez	15,244 (3)	2,767 (5)
Rodriguez	15,302 (2)	7,449 (1)
Lopez	11,122 (4)	2,511 (7)
Hernandez	10,304 (6)	2,466 (8)
Gonzalez	10,672 (5)	4,322 (3)
Perez	9,299 (7)	2,678 (6)
Sanchez	7,970 (8)	1,606
Gonzales	6,075 (9)	103
Rivera	4,695 (16)	6,719 (2)
Torres	5,189 (12)	3,507 (4)
Ramirez	5,664 (11)	923
Flores	5,179 (13)	613
Diaz	4,809 (15)	1,970 (10)
Gomez	4,917 (14)	528
Fernandez	5,948 (10)	672

* Rank order available only for names in the top ten.

NDI list, the differences in rank between the two lists do not exceed one position. The exception is for *Rivera* which is sixteenth on the Medicare list and tenth on the NDI list. It may be of interest to note that *Rivera* ranked third on Smith's list derived from the Social Security files. There is one other large difference between the lists. A name that does not appear on the NDI list, *Fernandez*, ranks tenth on the Medicare list.

The Medicare enrollee data show, as do the death certificate data, that *Rodriguez* and *Rivera* are by far the most common surnames in Puerto Rico. However, I found the Medicare data differs from the death record data for Puerto Rico in that *Rodriguez* ranks ahead of *Rivera*. As is true for the death record statistics, the Medicare enrollment figures indicate that Puerto Ricans are less likely to have surnames such as *Flores, Gomez*, and especially *Gonzales* than are elderly persons of Spanish origin elsewhere. The reason that surnames most common among residents of Puerto Rico do not hold the same rank in the mainland Spanish surname population is that a majority of this population is of Mexican origin, and, as Buechley reports, a different group of surnames is more common in this population ("Spanish Surnames" 138–39). Thus the distribution of surnames among Mexicans is a much more important determinant of the Spanish surname ranking in the United States than is the distribution of surnames among Puerto Ricans.

To focus further on the distribution of surnames among Mexican Americans, I examined the Medicare enrollment data for California and Texas, the states with the largest populations of Mexican origin (Table 3). Although I could not separate those of Mexican origin from all persons of Spanish origin in the Medicare enrollment files, it is quite clear that the vast majority of all persons of Spanish origin in these two states are of Mexican origin. In the 1980 census, for example, those of Mexican origin account for 80 percent and 92 percent, respectively, of Spanish-origin residents of California and Texas. In contrast with the pattern in the Southwest, in New York State, which has the third largest number of persons of Spanish origin in the United States, a substantial majority (59 percent) is of Puerto Rican origin and only 2 percent is of Mexican origin. Similarly in Florida, which has the next largest number of Hispanics, another group predominates: Cubans, who account for 55 percent of the total (U.S. Bureau of the Census 134). When I compared the rank order for the most common Spanish surnames in these four states I found an interesting pattern of similarities and differences (Table 3). In California and Texas the twelve most common surnames are the same, but with several differences in order. In both states *Garcia* and *Martinez* rank first and second respectively, and neither *Rivera* nor *Fernandez* appears among the top fifteen Spanish surnames.

When I compared the rank order of the most common surnames in New York State with those in the other areas of interest, I found that the pattern more closely resembled that for Puerto Rico than that for the United States as a whole. In New York, as in Puerto Rico, the two most common surnames are *Rodriguez* and *Rivera*, with *Gonzalez* ranking third. *Garcia*, which is first in the Southwest and in the total U.S., ranks fourth. In Florida, as in New York, *Rodriguez* ranks first, reflecting its predominance among Cubans. However, *Rivera*, which is second in New York, is not among the first fifteen Spanish surnames in Florida, an indication that this name does not have the same high frequency among Cubans that it does among Puerto Ricans. A name that does appear to be found more among Cubans than among other Spanish ethnic groups is *Fernandez*, which ranks fourth in Florida. In New York this name ranks eleventh, and it does not appear among the first fifteen in the Southwestern states. It would appear that the relatively high ranking of *Fernandez* in the United States as a whole in the Medicare enrollment list – tenth – is largely due to its prominence among Cubans. (However, this surname is not among the top fifteen in the U.S. death record list.) Some names that rank high in the Southwest such as *Gonzales, Ramirez*, and *Flores* are much less common in Florida and New York.

Table 3. Number of Medicare enrollees with selected common surnames in four states with largest Hispanic populations, March 31, 1980 (Rank in parentheses).

Surname*	California	Texas	Florida	New York
Garcia (1)	4,564 (1)	5,187 (1)	2,588 (3)	1,165 (4)
Rodriguez (2)	2,951 (4)	4,141 (3)	3,142 (1)	2,247 (1)
Martinez (3)	3,471 (2)	4,167 (2)	1,598 (7)	1,084 (7)
Lopez (4)	3,167 (3)	2,326 (6)	1,540 (8)	1,102 (6)
Gonzalez (5)	1,911 (8)	2,793 (5)	2,902 (2)	1,335 (3)
Hernandez (6)	2,272 (5)	3,078 (4)	1,765 (6)	795 (10)
Perez (7)	2,035 (7)	2,226 (8)	2,240 (5)	1,144 (5)
Sanchez (8)	2,058 (6)	1,798 (11)	1,021 (10)	639 (14)
Gonzales (9)	1,789 (10)	1,844 (10)	101	125
Fernandez (10)	1,047	394	2,333 (4)	743 (11)
Ramirez (11)	1,892 (9)	2,100 (9)	309	362
Flores (12)	1,606 (11)	2,233 (7)	147	200
Torres (13)	1,283 (13)	1,079 (14)	523 (12)	962 (8)
Gomez (14)	1,339 (12)	1,207 (12)	743 (11)	411
Diaz (15)	1,036	597	1,429 (9)	797 (9)
Rivera	952	631	324	1,481 (2)
Gutierrez	1,122 (14)	1,086 (13)	425 (15)	163
Ramos	1,030	773	441 (13)	529
Ortiz	809	720	258	702 (12)
Morales	939	748	432 (14)	556 (15)
Reyes	1,065 (15)	946 (15)	301	384
Cruz	747	539	398	653 (13)

* Rank in total U.S. in parentheses. Information not available for surnames below 15th in rank.

This paper, which uses heretofore unavailable Medicare enrollment data, demonstrates the marked variation in surname distribution among Spanish-origin populations of different backgrounds. I used geographic areas of residence as proxies for ethnic background. California and Texas represent Mexican origin; Florida and New York, specific Caribbean backgrounds. The differences found in surname distributions are in accord with those pointed out by earlier researchers using other types of data sources. It is clear that Spanish surname distribution varies markedly among the geographic areas of the United States and that those variations reflect the diverse origins of their Hispanic populations.

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Notes

1. Actually Smith does not separately delineate the Spanish surnames in his list of the 2,000 most common surnames in the United States, but Buechley points out that the published list includes 100 Spanish surnames ("Spanish Surnames" 137).

2. I am grateful to the Department of Health of Puerto Rico for providing a copy of the death record file for Puerto Rico.

3. I am grateful to the Health Care Financing Administration for providing detailed statistical data by surname from the Medicare enrollment files.

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