

The US Index of Belonging and Rejection

America's Family Culture has become a Culture of Rejection:

The Parents of a Majority of American Teenagers Have Rejected Each Other

Patrick Fagan¹

The Index of Belonging (45%) and Rejection (55%) gives an instant read on the social health of America by measuring the proportion of American children who have grown up in an intact married family [See Appendix 2: Chart 1, Belonging and Rejection Indices for the US].

We have undertaken this study because, bad though it may be, the out-of-wedlock birth rate is not the key measure of family intactness. Rather what gives a much better read of how our American families are faring is what proportion of our children grow up in an intact home. When we take that measure (see Appendix 1 for the method) we find that:

- **Only 45% of U.S. teenagers** have spent their childhood with an intact family, with both their birth mother and their biological father legally married to one another since before or around the time of the teenager's birth.
- **55% of teenagers** live in families where their biological parents have rejected each other. The families with a history of rejection include single-parent families, stepfamilies, and children who no longer live with either birth parent but with adoptive or foster parents.
- The Index uses data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS gathered complete data about family relationships—parent's marital history and detailed parent-child relationships—for the first time in 2008. The large national sample allows for accurate estimates of the state of American families at the state and county, as well as the national, level.

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- This report is the first of a series of annual indicator reports using ACS data to track the health of American families. Future reports will be able to use 3-year combined samples and make estimates for even smaller geographical units.

Detailed Analysis

The ACS survey finds that, of the 12.8 million teenagers aged 15-17 years old in the U.S. in 2008, 5.8 million were living with both married birth parents, and 7 million were living with one birth parent only, with a birth parent and a stepparent, with two cohabiting parents, or with neither parent (in adoptive or foster families, in group quarters, or on their own).

This report uses two levels of analysis. First, the large population sample in the survey permits an accurate estimate of the “state of the family” for the nation as a whole, for the four regions of the country, and for each of the 50 States and the District of Columbia. The sample also permits estimates for the major racial/ethnic groups at national and regional levels. Second, the ACS survey reveals the situation of teenagers aged 15-17 at a local level for the 26 most populous counties.

The intactness of family life for American teenagers varies across states and regions in association with average parent education and family income levels and the ethnic composition of the state or region. But there are also variations that cannot be explained by socioeconomic and ethnic factors. These variations have to do with the cultural commitment to traditional family life in particular geographic areas.

Belonging Index by Ethnic Groups

The proportion of young people who have lived with both parents throughout their childhood varies dramatically across racial and ethnic groups [See Appendix 2: Chart 2: Index of Belonging for Ethnic Groups].

- 62% of Asian-American teenagers live with both married parents.
- 54% of White youth, a slight majority, live with both parents.
- 41% of teenagers from multiracial family backgrounds live in intact families.
- 40% of Hispanic teenagers nationwide live with both parents.
- 24% of American Indian and Alaskan Native adolescents—less than one in four—have lived with both married parents throughout childhood.
- Only 17% of African-American youth—less than one in five—live with both married parents.

Belonging Index by State and Region

Married two-parent families are still the norm for teenagers in eleven states, yielding a Belonging Index of 59% for Utah, 58% for New Hampshire, 57% for Minnesota, and 55% for Nebraska [See Appendix 2: Chart 3: Index of Belonging for the States].

Among the four regions of the United States the Northeast is the strongest (50.4%) while the South (41.0% is the weakest). [See Chart 4: Index of Belonging for the Regions]

The South—mistakenly thought of as the most tradition-bound region of the country—has the least family-friendly environment for children. In the majority of Southern states, fewer than 40% of teenagers live with both married parents. In some states, such as Mississippi (32%) and Louisiana (34%), only one third of children enter adulthood from an intact family.

Regional Variation within Ethnic Groups

Significant variations in the capacity to belong occur across regions within different ethnic groups [See Appendix 2: Chart 5: Index of Belonging by Region and Ethnic Groups].

- Among White teenagers, family intactness is highest in the Northeast, where 61% of teens have grown up in intact families, and lowest in the South, where only half of White teens have done so. The Midwest (55%) and West (52%) are close to the national average for White teens.
- Among Black teenagers, family intactness is highest – though still quite low – in the West (22%), and lowest in the Midwest (13%). The South (18%) and Northeast (17%) are close to the national average for Black teens.
- Among Hispanic teenagers, family intactness is lowest in the Northeast (30%), but close to the national average in the Midwest (43%), South (43%) and West (41%). Hispanic teenagers in the Northeast are primarily of Puerto Rican or other Caribbean backgrounds, whereas Hispanic youth in the Midwest, West, and South are predominantly of Mexican or other Central American origin.

Belonging Index for Largest Counties

The 26 most populous cities have a wide variation in their index of belonging, ranging from 71% for Nassau County in New York to 22% for Bronx County in the same state. San Diego County in California (45%) and Harris County (Houston) in Texas (46%) are closest to the national average [See Chart 6: Index of Belonging for 26 Largest Counties].

Large counties with the highest proportion of teenagers living in intact families are predominantly suburban counties with relatively well-educated and affluent populations and have relatively low proportions of families from non-Asian minority backgrounds.

- Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island, New York have 71% and 59%, respectively, of teenagers living in two-parent families.
- In Middlesex County in Massachusetts, 63% of adolescents live in intact families.
- Santa Clara (57%) and Orange (52%) Counties in California, and King County (53%), containing Seattle, in Washington State also have high ratios of youth living with intact married parents.

By contrast, large counties with low proportions of teenagers in intact married parent families are predominantly urban and have high concentrations of racial and ethnic minority groups with relatively low levels of education and income.

- In Bronx County (New York) only 22% of teenagers live in two-parent families
- Philadelphia County (Pennsylvania) has only 24% of its teenagers living in intact families
- In Wayne County (Detroit), Michigan, only 31% of youth live with both married parents
- Only 38% of adolescents live with their married parents in Clark County (Las Vegas, Nevada), as do 39% in Miami-Dade County (Florida)

The four most populous counties—Los Angeles County (California), Cook County (Chicago, Illinois), Harris County (Houston, Texas), and Maricopa County (Phoenix, Arizona)—have indices of belonging that are close to the national index value of 45% [Chart 7: Index of Belonging for New York City and the Six Most Populous Counties].

Belonging Index by Ethnic Group for New York City and Six Largest Counties

The proportion of teenagers living in traditional two-parent families varies considerably among New York City (where each borough is a separate county) and America’s six most populous counties (those counties with populations big enough to permit analysis by ethnic groups within the county) [Appendix 2: Chart 8: Index of Belonging for Ethnic Groups within New York City and the Six Largest Counties].

At the county level, the ethnic sub-groupings tell their own tale: from a Belonging Index of 71% for Asian-Americans in Orange County, CA, to 14% for Blacks in Cook County (Chicago), Illinois.

Asian-Americans are clustered towards the top, Black Americans towards the bottom with Hispanics close but showing relative strength in Cook County (Chicago) at 49%, above the national norm.

These numbers cry out for reform, not just for those at the bottom of the index but even for those at the top. The Rejection Ratio among Asian-Americans, the highest ranking ethnic group, is now higher than what was the percent of out-of-wedlock births in the Black Family back in 1965 when Daniel Patrick Moynihan tried to raise the alarm on those earlier indications of rejection.

The Driving Force of Rejection

Divorce and Childbearing Outside Marriage:

America's Situation Now

The Problem

Increased rates of divorce and childbearing outside of marriage have turned growing up in a stable, two-parent family into an exception, rather than the rule, for young Americans.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his famous report in 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, voicing concern about the consequences of out of wedlock births. Moynihan believed that without access to jobs and the means to support a family, that Black men would become alienated from their families, and their roles as husbands and fathers. Moynihan predicated that this would cause the rates of divorce, abandonment and out-of-wedlock births to skyrocket among Black Americans, resulting in high rates of poverty, low educational outcomes, and increased rates of abuse. To the end of rectifying this problem, Moynihan proposed education programs for the Black community, which would include job and educational programs and vocational training. Unfortunately, Moynihan was largely ignored, and two generations later, the consequences of out-of-wedlock births for Black Americans are deeper and more widespread than ever. This tragedy will continue, for the problems compound with each generation.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics' (NCHS) 1995 Survey of Family Growth Report, approximately 43% of first marriages end in divorce in the first fifteen years of marriage² (the rate is somewhat lower for first marriages involving children), and today, 3.6 divorces occur for every 1,000 couples married, up from 2.2 divorces per 1,000 marriages in 1960.³ Moreover, the divorce rate exists alongside a decreasing marriage rate. The number of children living in intact married two-parent families drops proportionately as young people go from early childhood to adolescence with separated or divorced parents.

In 2008, the Center for Disease Control reports, in their National Vital Statistics Report (NVSR) that 40.6 percent of infants were born to unmarried mothers. Among Black infants, 72.3 percent were born to unmarried mothers, whereas among White infants, 28.6 percent were.⁴

² 1995 Survey of Family Growth Report "First Marriage Dissolution, Divorce, and Remarriage: United States." May 24, 2001. Online: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/01news/firstmarr.htm>

³ U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, "Vital Statistics of the United States, and National Vital Statistics Reports (NVSR)".

http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/births_deaths_marriages_divorces.html

⁴ National Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 58, No. 16, April 6, 2010. Online: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr58/nvsr58_16.pdf

Variables in Family Stability

Race and ethnicity are strongly linked to the probability that a teenager is living with both married biological parents. Parent's age, education, employment and income are also related to family stability. Teenagers of parents who have higher levels of education are more likely to live with both married parents.

Furthermore, parents with more education are more likely to be employed and to have higher socio-economic status. They are more likely to begin having children at later ages. Education, employment, and income levels are tied to marital and familial stability.⁵

Consequences of Family Stability and Instability

A substantial body of research shows that children tend to do better growing up in two-parent households where mother and father are married harmoniously to one another.

Individually, children in intact families are significantly less likely to be poor or dependent on government welfare, show better academic achievement and more positive social development, have fewer accidents or injuries, exhibit better mental health and fewer behavioral problems, and have better relationships with their parents.⁶

On the community level, neighborhoods with high proportions of adolescents not living in intact families tend to have high levels of poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, domestic abuse, child neglect and abuse, delinquency, crime and crime victimization, drug abuse, academic failure and school dropout, and unmarried teen pregnancy and childbearing.

For all these reasons, the fact that only a minority of American youngsters are now growing up with two married parents throughout their childhood is a cause for local, state, and national concern. It is also, as Moynihan argued forty-five years ago, a reason for taking national action.

Implications

The decrease of strong families in the United States has major implications for the nation, and by extension, the rest of the world. A nation is only as strong as its citizens, and a lack of strong families weakens human, social, and moral capital, which in turn directly affects the financial (and thus indirectly the military and foreign policy strength) of the United States. A great nation depends on great families, but weak families will build a weak nation.

⁵ See, for example, recent replication of these findings in: Christopher G. Ellison, Amy M. Burdette, W. Bradford Wilcox: *The Couple That Prays Together: Race and Ethnicity, Religion, and Relationship Quality Among Working-Age Adults*, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2010) Vol. 72 , pp.963 – 975

⁶ This contention is now well established in the literature. See FamilyFacts.Org for thousands of research findings documenting these statements.

If the business sector of the United States were to pursue a strategy for manufacturing and technology that was analogous to the development of its families, each new product design would have less capacity than the prior one, and it would result in massive business failures and a return to an era of poverty.

Bluntly put, the United States will not be able to maintain its leadership role in the community of nations unless its parents take a leadership role in the communities they have built: their families, which are the fundamental units of our society. If the United States desires to be a leader in the world, pursuing what is good for itself and other nations, its parents must first be leaders of their own homes and children.

The costs of running American society are mounting due to accrued legislation and continually expanding expensive protections through the many additional services needed because of the breakdown of marriage. Current family structures add massively to these costs in every service sector, both public and private, especially in education, health, mental health and the administration of justice.⁷ The dysfunctional majority now expects the intact minority to pay disproportionately for these systems.

Such is the nation America has become. The dire predictions projected by the Moynihan Report for Black Americans apply to the nation as a whole, and America is now pursuing an ever more expensive and ever more failing family strategy.

The Root of the Problem

Sexual Dysfunction Leads to Rejection and Injustice

If we take the capacity to raise a family together as the mark of ultimate sexual maturity, then the majority of American adults are sexually dysfunctional. They do not understand how to think about their sexuality holistically, understanding it as a part of who they are, not merely something they do. This lack of a complete view of sexuality means that Americans cannot accomplish the primary purpose of the sexual act: the begetting and raising of the next generation.

Two opposing dynamics—belonging and rejection—are at play among American men and women. When rejection triumphs and a husband and wife reject one another, they are prohibited from living in harmony in a setting of belonging, and this is necessary to raise the children they bring into the world. This rejection is now the dominant feature of American family life and the children of these families, and society as a whole, must bear the burden. The rejection of husband and wife by one another is a private act with very public consequences.

⁷ See for instance, Benjamin Scafidi, *The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing*, Institute for American Values, NY (2008), on the very conservative estimation of the annual cost of divorce (\$112 billion).

Two great injustices occur when parents reject one another. First, children are not given their birthright: the marriage of their parents, which is a necessity if children are to reach their full potential. Not living in an intact family means that children are likely to live their whole lives with the emotional, relational, and psychological effects of this rejection. The second injustice falls on the rest of the community and the nation, for they have to undertake the added burden of raising the children who are weakened by their parents breakup.

Lack of belonging fosters this pattern of injustice. Disproportionately affecting Blacks and minority groups, the rejection by parents has become the new delivery system of disparities by race: high school graduation rates are lower, and crime rates, incarceration rates, addiction rates, and even mortality rates are higher for children whose parents walk away from each other.

History tells of the awful bondage of slavery and the massively unjust effects that it wrought upon individuals and families. One of the severest travesties wrought by slavery was its repression of the capacity for human flourishing when individuals were not masters of their own lives. An analogous though milder kind of developmental repression results in children from broken families, especially when this rejection is repeated generation after generation.

Statistics show that Black children are most affected and the Black family is most in need of change, but it is a change that cannot be forced. Families can only be changed from the inside out, and this change will begin when men and women learn how to live together again and raise their children well. A culture that wants to create such change must foster a sense of belonging between fathers and mothers who can then pass on this stability to their children.

This situation presents the Black family with a great opportunity to lead our culture. If Black communities and churches are able to re-establish successful families, and raise children that are capable to marry and raise their children of their own well, the rest of America will be able to look to them as an example for restoration and follow their lead.

The Solution

Reforming the Relationship Between Men and Women Will Provide the Foundation for all Other Reforms to Follow

Many reforms are needed in the nation: primarily religious⁸, but also financial, educational, legislative, legal, and judicial. However, all else is secondary to a reform in the relationship between mothers and fathers. American men and women need to learn anew how to belong, so that they can not only beget but also raise the next generation together. Correcting this sexual dysfunction is likely our biggest societal challenge. Should that be attained, many of the other reforms will gradually to fall into place: Social security will be reformed because the family unit will be stronger. Education

⁸ See again, the Ellison et al. study referenced above.

scores will rise very significantly, with significant fiscal benefits. The rates of crime, rape, assault, murder and addictions will drop creating a more just and orderly society. The list continues across all public policy dimensions.

Rejection on the scale we now have is a problem new to America and to the world, and new strategies and new forms of leadership are needed to respond to this challenge. Without this change—the restoration of the husband-wife relationship—all other attempts at reform are essentially built on social sand and will collapse over time, for want of a foundation.

Conclusion

The new challenge for America is to learn how to build a culture of belonging out of the ashes of our present culture of rejection. We rejected one opportunity for reform two generations ago when the governing classes rejected the Moynihan report. It was a very unwise national act, for which we continue to pay the price.

Family Research Council will track this index of Belonging and Rejection annually, in hopes of fostering a sense of crisis and a determination to act. During the next two years, an increased sample size—made possible by combining data from the next American Community Surveys—will enable us narrow the age measured down to age 17, the last year before adulthood (rather than the wider band of 15-17, used in this study). This extra sample size will also permit us to report the Index of Belonging for many more counties and cities.

We hope to welcome you back next year for an updated report on the state of family life in America.

APPENDIX 1

Description of Coding Procedure with 2008 American Community Survey PUMS File

The procedure we used to estimate the percentage of U.S. adolescents aged 15-17 who were living with both of their married biological parents began by locating all persons in the public use data file who were in the target age range. Then we checked the relationship of the teen to the reference person of the household. (The reference person was the adult in the household in whose name the house or apartment was owned or rented.) If the teen was coded as the biological son or daughter of the reference person, we checked to see if the parent was coded as being currently married. If so, we checked the date of the parent's most recent marriage. Was the marriage date before the year of the teen's birth, or within two years of the birth year? If so, the teen was deemed to be living with both parents, who were continuously married throughout the teen's childhood.

If the adolescent was described as the grandchild of the reference person, we checked to see if the teen was coded as "child in married-couple subfamily." If so, the

teen was deemed to be living with both married parents in a multigenerational family. We followed a similar procedure if the adolescent was described as the brother or sister or “other relative” of the reference person, or as a roomer or boarder, housemate or roommate, or “other non-relative.” So long as the teen was also coded as “child in married-couple subfamily,” he or she was deemed to be living with both married parents.

Adolescents who were the biological child of the reference person, but whose parent was divorced, separated, or never married, were classified as not living with both married parents. Likewise, if the adolescent’s birth antedated the year of the reference person’s latest marriage by more than two years, the teen was classified as not living with both parents, but, rather, in a bioparent-stepparent family. If the parents were not married but cohabiting, the teen was classified as not living with both married parents.

Adolescents who were described as the adopted son or daughter, stepson or stepdaughter, or foster son or foster daughter of the reference person were classified as not living with both married parents. Adolescents living in group quarters (e.g., correctional institution, halfway house) were classified as not living with both married parents.

The number of adolescents living with both married bioparents was divided by the total number of adolescents aged 15-17 in order to derive the percentage living with both parents.

We needed to follow this rather complicated procedure because the 2008 ACS questionnaire only asks about a teenager’s detailed relationship to the reference person, and not to the reference person’s spouse or partner. Thus, we have to infer that relationship by looking at the reference person’s marital history information. We know this procedure is not 100 percent accurate. It may be, for example, that even though the parents were married throughout the teen’s childhood, one of the partners in the marriage is not, in fact, the biological parent of the teen. Nonetheless, the procedure is the best that can be done with the limited information available in the ACS and classifies family living arrangements correctly in the vast majority of cases.

APPENDIX 2

Chart 1: Belonging and Rejection Indices for the US

Source: American Community Survey 2008

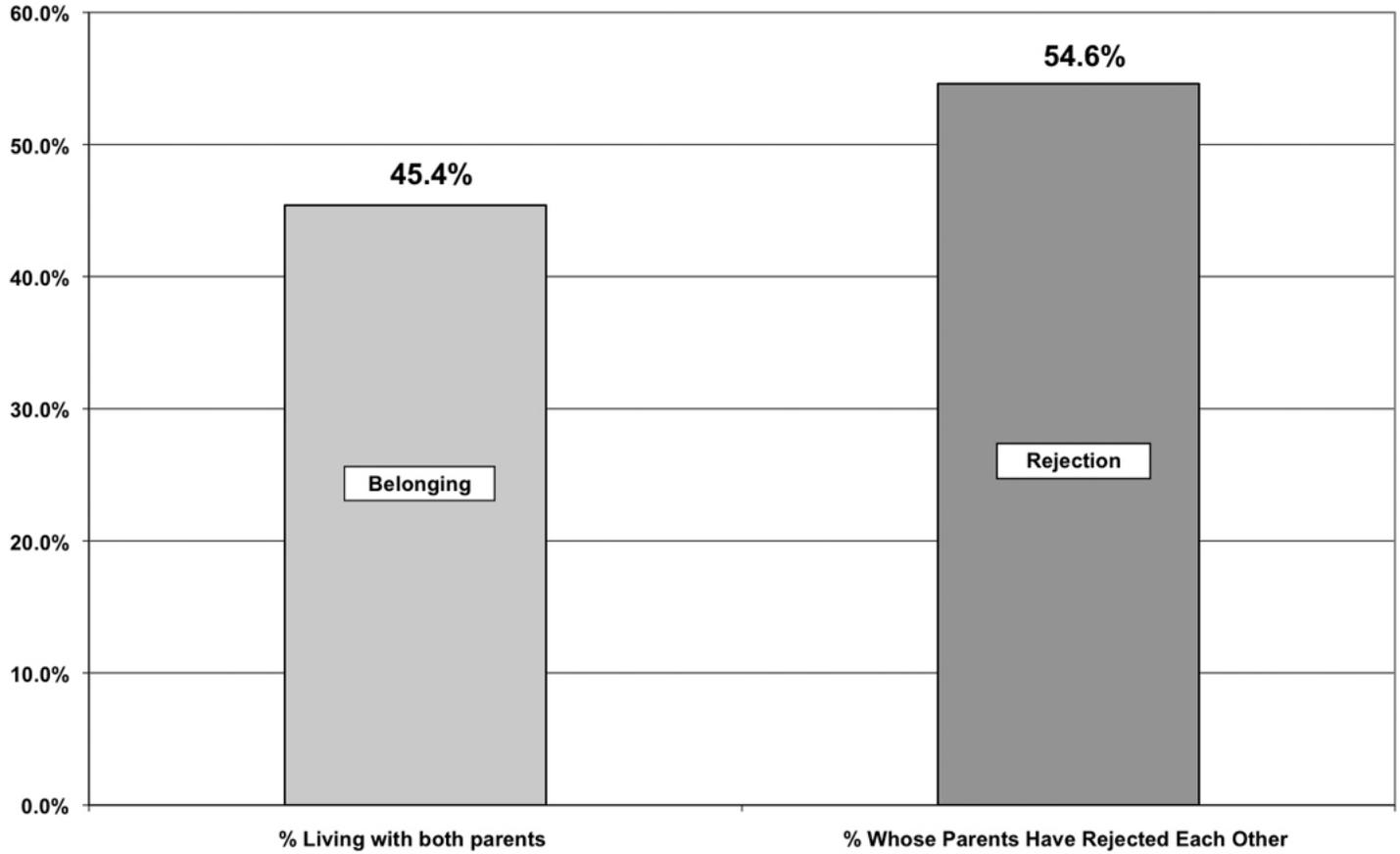


Chart 2: Index of Belonging, Ethnic Groups

Source: American Community Survey 2008

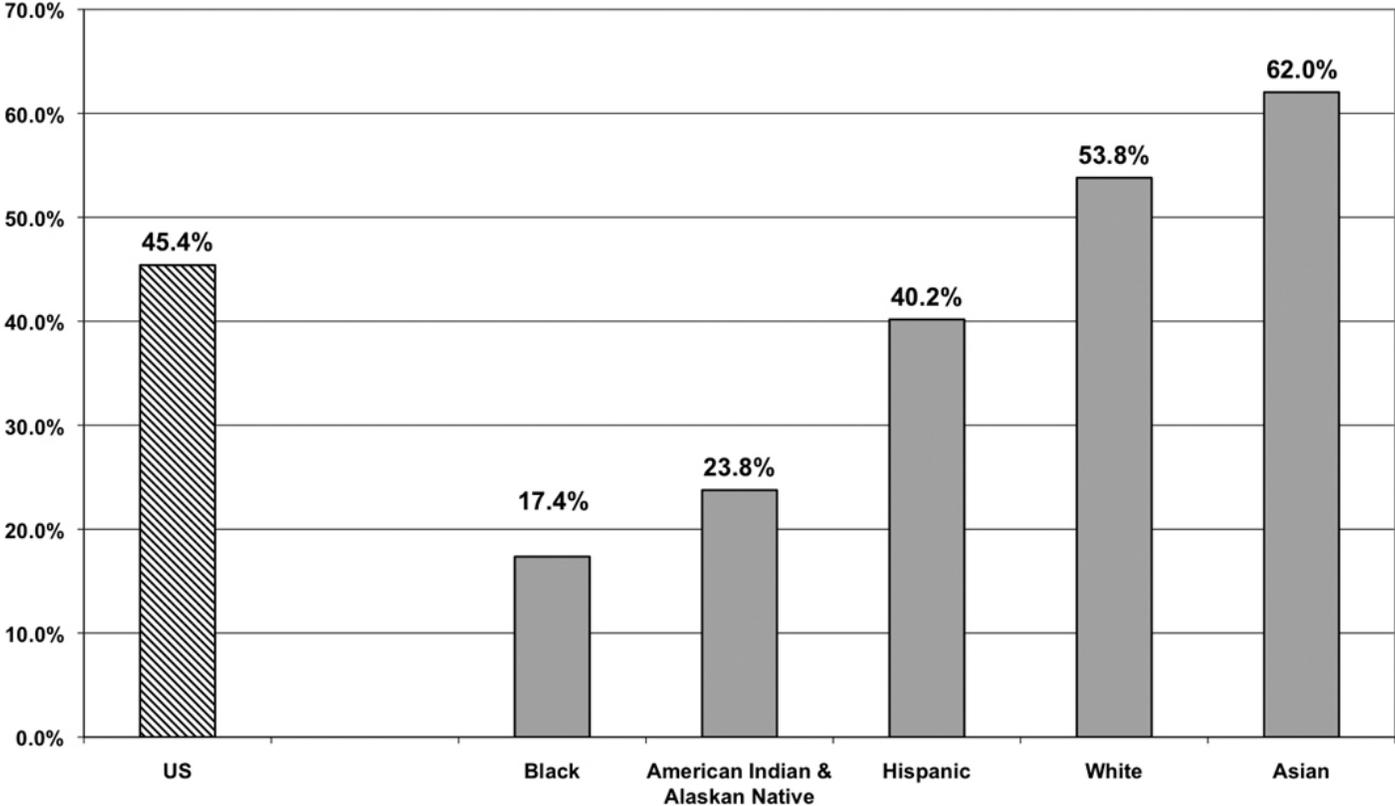


Chart 3: Index of Belonging for the States

Source: American Community Survey 2008

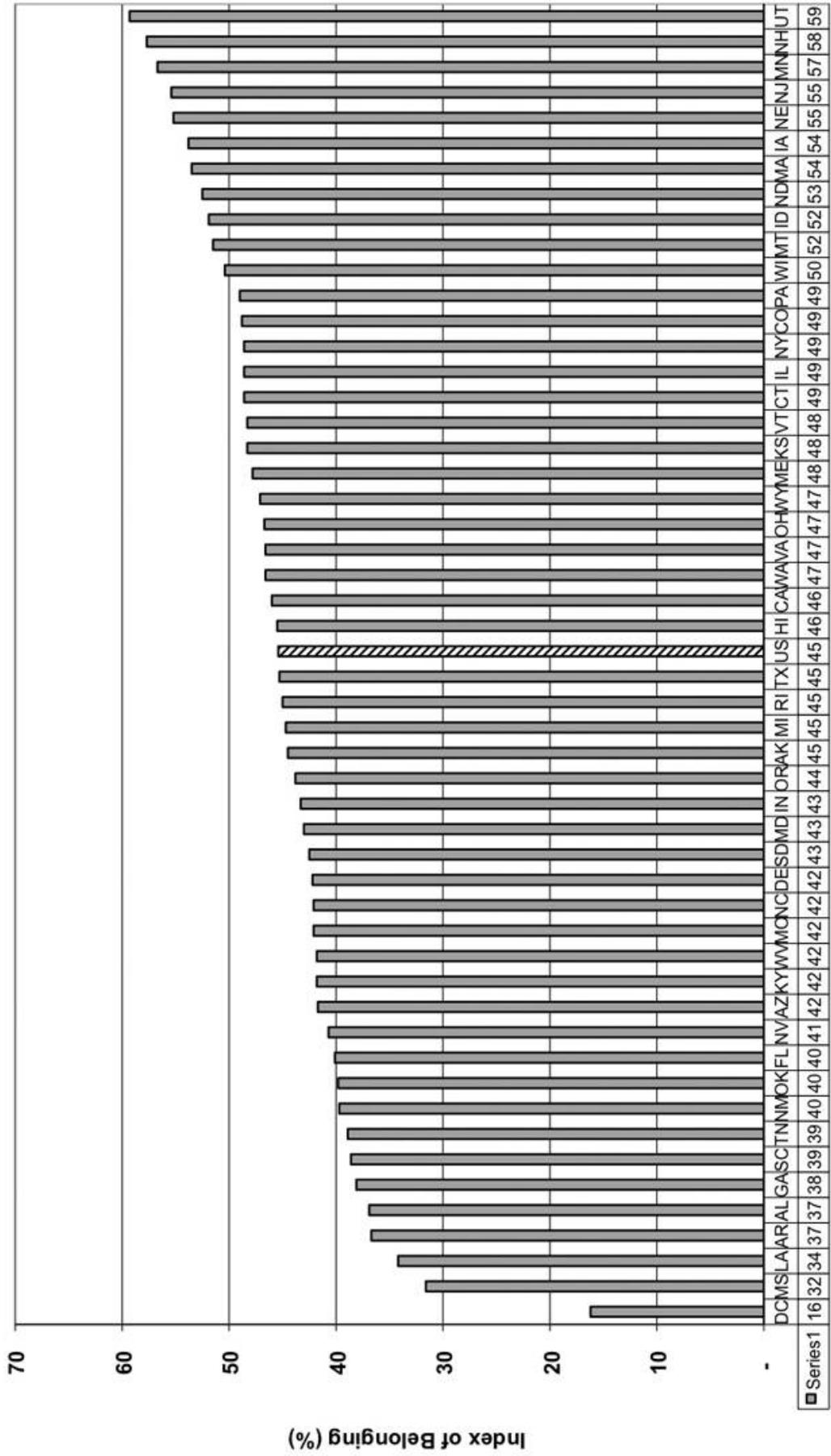


Chart 4: Index of Belonging for the Regions of the US

Source: American Community Survey 2008

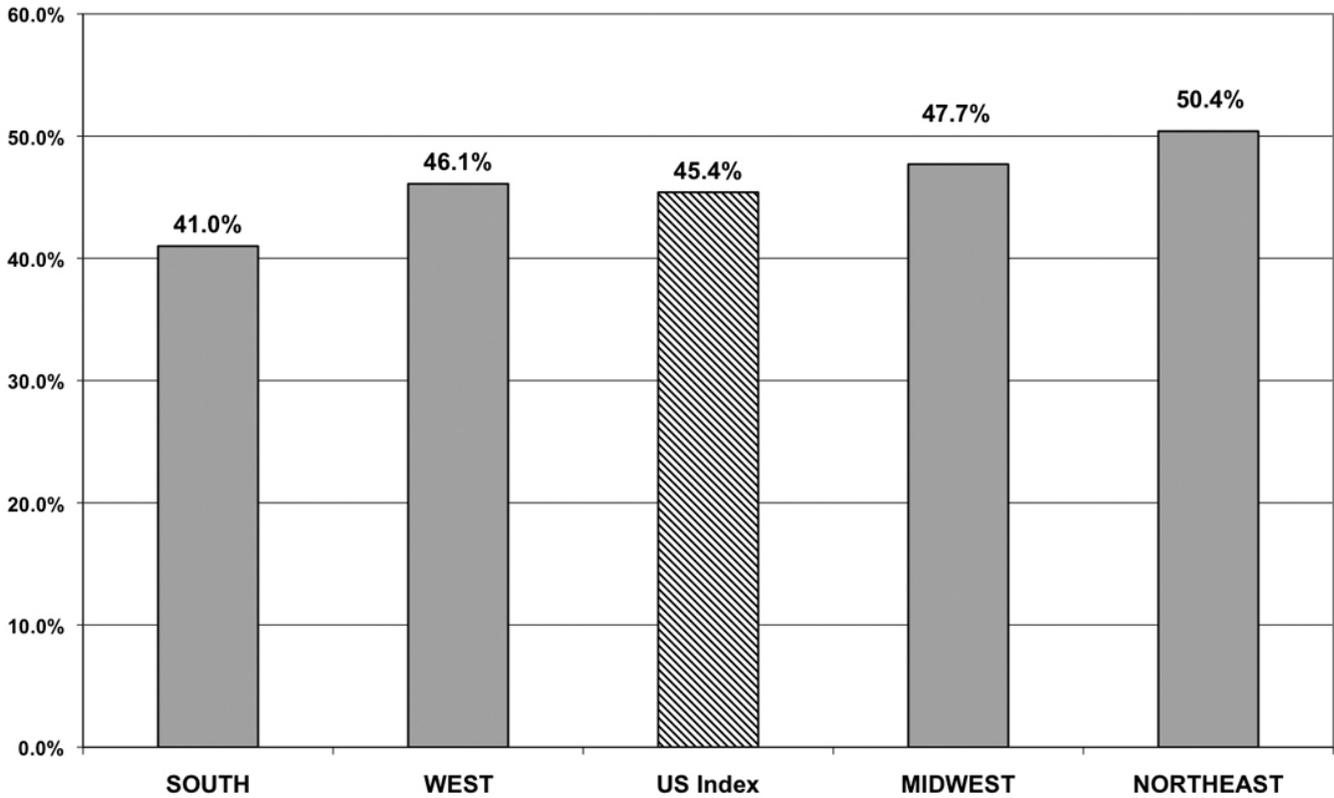


Chart 5: Index of Belonging by Region and Ethnic Group

Source: American Community Survey 2008

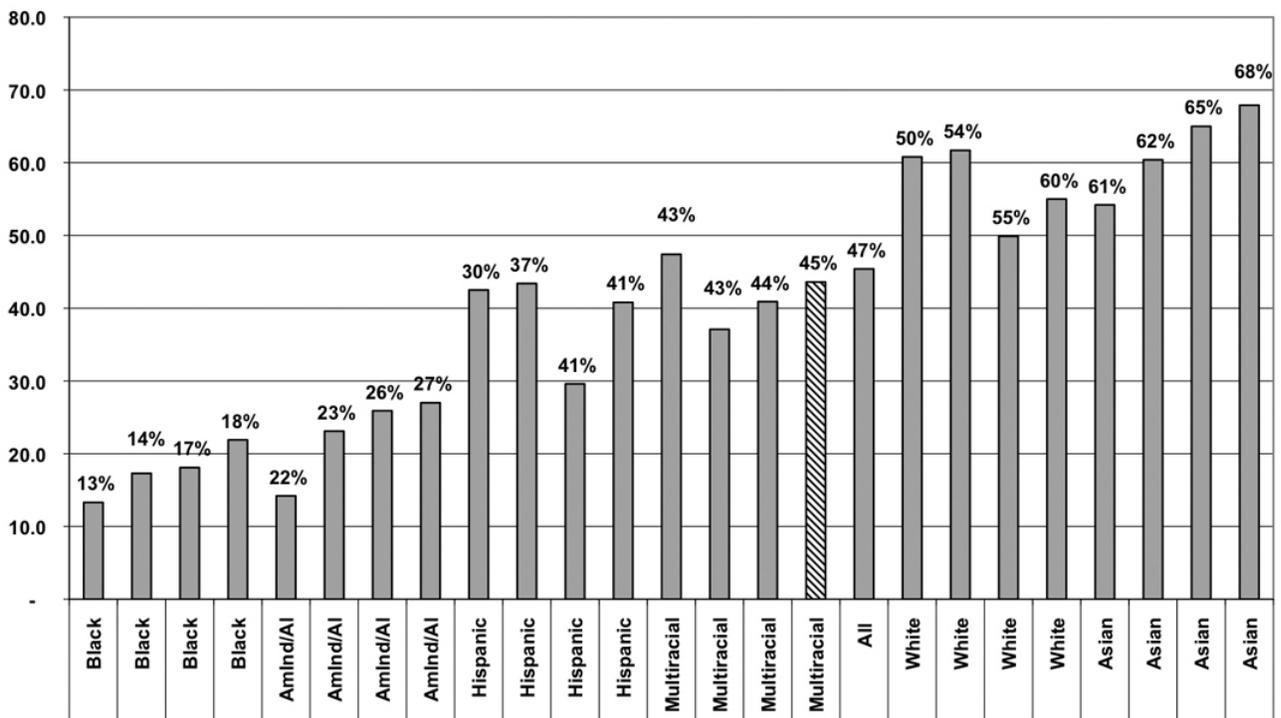


Chart 6: Index of Belonging for the 26 Largest Cities

Source: American Community Survey 2008

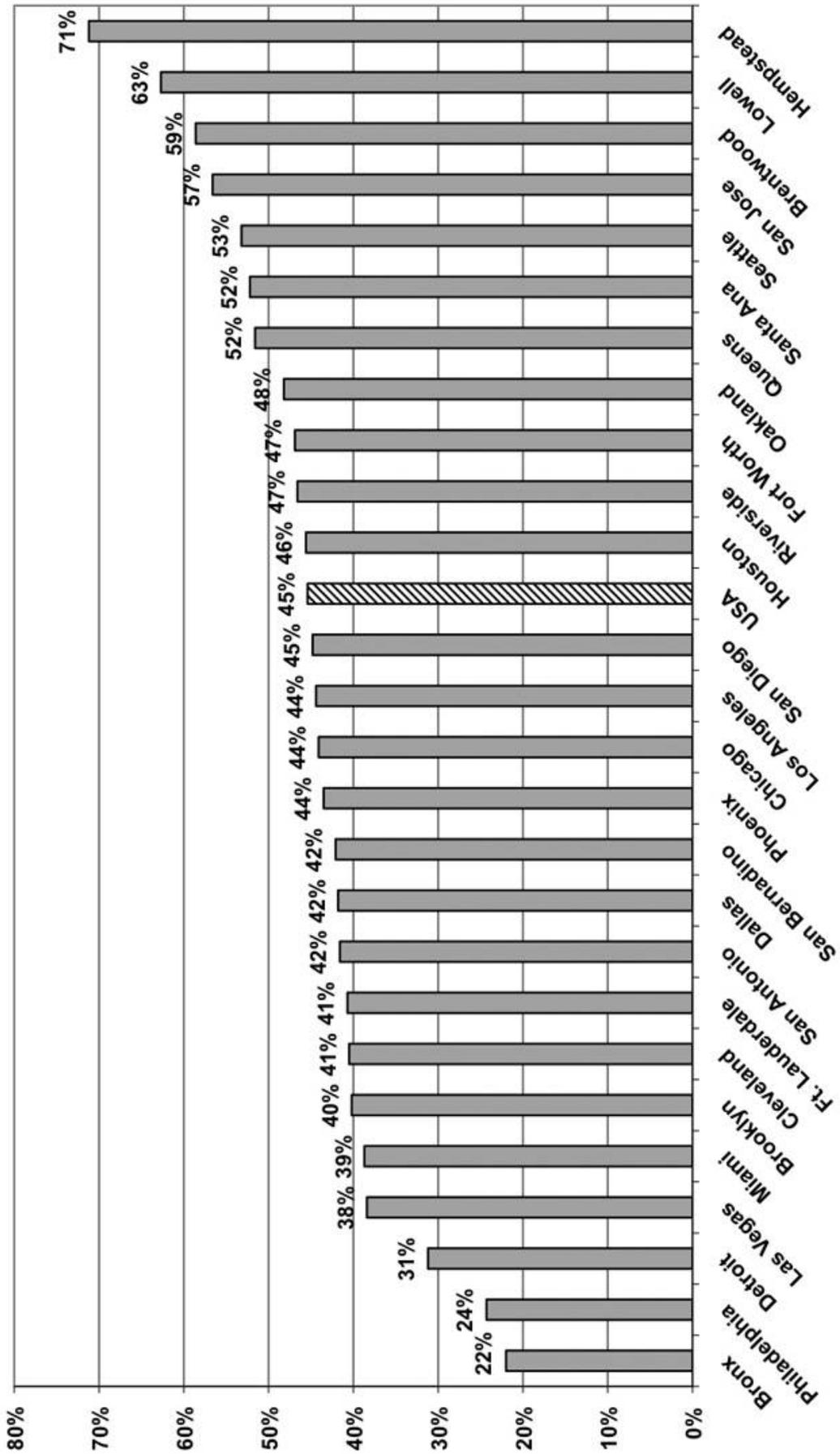


Chart 7: Index of Belonging For New York and Six Most Populous Counties

Source: American Community Survey 2008

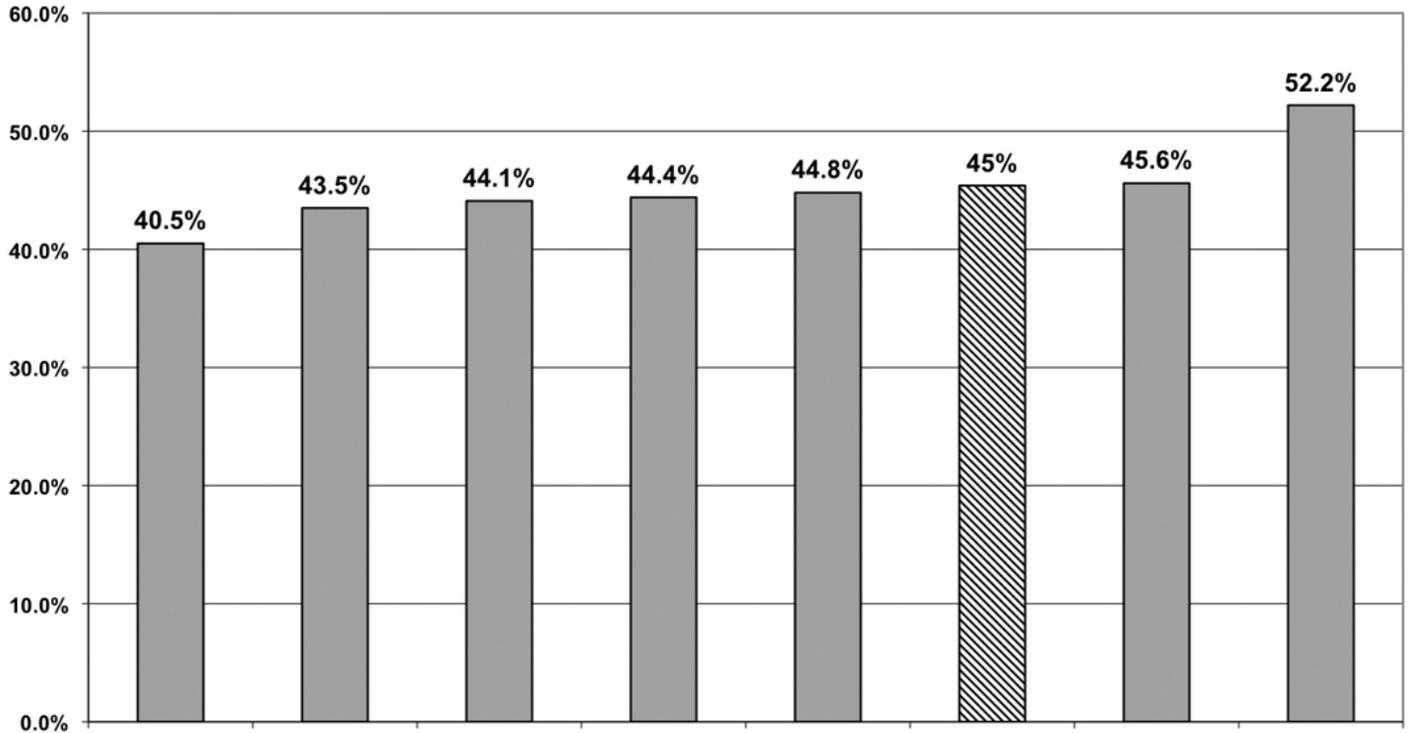


Chart 8: Index of Belonging for Ethnic Groups For New York and Six Most Populous Counties

Source: American Community Survey 2008

