A STATE TRANSFORMED

Latino Immigration to North Carolina

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Latino Growth in the U.S.

Over the past twenty years, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in Latino immigration. According to the most recent U.S. Census, Latinos are now the nation's largest minority group, comprising 12.5% of the population. One noteworthy feature of recent Latino migration has been the emergence of new destination areas, outside of the traditional gateway states of California, Texas, and Florida. Among the most significant of these new growth areas has been the Southeastern United States, where the Latino population grew more than 100% between 1990 and 2000. No state in the country experienced a larger increase during this time than North Carolina, which saw its Latino population grow 394%. In light of this change, it is important to understand the nature of Latino migration and how it is reshaping the social, economic and cultural landscape of the state.

The New Immigrants

In the United States, Latino refers to people whose ancestry can be traced back to Spain or Latin America. Latin America generally includes Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Spanish speaking Caribbean nations. People from Brazil are sometimes considered Latino, even though their language is Portuguese. In 2004, Latinos accounted for 38% of all immigrants to the U.S. Just under half of these came from Mexico, illustrating that it is inaccurate to always equate Latino with Mexican. Latinos come from a variety of countries as highlighted on the adjacent map.

This map highlights the top 10 countries of origin for Latino immigrants to the U.S. in 2004. Together, immigrants from these 10 countries account for 35% of all immigration during that year.

Immigration to the U.S. Through Time

Immigration has been a source of tension and debate throughout U.S. history, with many first-generation immigrant groups (such as the Italians and Irish) facing hostility from existing residents. At times, groups of potential immigrants have been officially excluded by U.S. immigration policies. Many Asians, for example, were denied entry around the turn of the twentieth century, and provisions were put in place in the 1920s to restrict the flow of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. People have also been excluded for their political beliefs, mental and physical handicaps, and for being prostitutes, beggars or paupers. Nationality limits existed until 1976 and exclusion on the basis of political beliefs ended in 1990. Presently, the U.S. admits an average of 830,000 legal immigrants each year and estimates of illegal immigration add another 300,000 per year.
The Geography of Latino Immigration

Latino Settlement
The geography of Latino settlement in North Carolina is complex, as shown in the accompanying map. In general, there are significant concentrations of Latino settlement in the south-central Piedmont region and smaller concentrations in both Western Carolina and the Eastern Coastal Plain. The areas with high proportions of Latino residents tend to be in rural parts of the state. In four rural counties (Duplin, Lee, Sampson, and Montgomery), Latinos now comprise more than 10% of the total population.

Explaining the Increase
In general terms, the increasing Latino presence in North Carolina can be viewed as an outgrowth of globalization, and the increased political and economic immigration of counties in the Western Hemisphere.

One important factor in the decision to migrate is the lack of opportunities for migrants in their home countries. In Mexico, for example, many rural agricultural regions are in decline, and unemployment remains high in urban areas. This situation can make going North appear as the only viable option, especially for young people.

Although the majority of Latinos enter the U.S. legally, economic incentives are strong enough to induce many to undertake the illegal and dangerous border crossing illegally. This flow of undocumented migrants is facilitated by smugglers, known as ‘coyotes’, who work along the border, and also by employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers.

As long as disparities in employment prospects and wage rates continue to exist among countries in the region, the movement of families in search of a brighter future is almost certain to continue.

A Complicated Pattern
Census figures show that North Carolina’s largest Latino communities are located in urban areas. The county with the largest Latino population in the state is Mecklenburg (Charlotte), followed by Wake (Raleigh), Cumberland (Fayetteville), Forsyth (Winston-Salem), Durham (Durham) and Guilford (Greensboro). Taken together, North Carolina’s 34 metropolitan counties are home to 64% of the state’s Latino population. A closer look at Charlotte’s urban demography shows that Latino settlement is clustered in particular neighborhoods. This follows the well-known trend of previous immigrant communities, who often settle in ethnic enclaves where support networks and specialized services were available.

Reshaping the Region
The growing Latino community in North Carolina is fundamentally altering the economic, cultural, and social landscape of the state. From one perspective, Latino settlement has presented new challenges for education, social service and healthcare workers, who must now provide for a new Spanish-speaking constituency. But Latino migration is also bringing benefits. Latino workers and their families have revitalized many small, rural communities and provided a stimulus to the regional economy, both by filling jobs that few local residents want, and by paying taxes into state and local coffers. Latinos are also enriching Southern culture through the introduction of new foods, musical styles, arts and festivals.

The U.S. South is increasingly becoming ‘transnational’, characterized by a dynamic mixture of old and new traditions.

A Changing Workforce
Latinos immigrants have long been an important part of the state’s agricultural economy. Although many still work harvesting tobacco and planting Christmas Trees, only 15% of Latinos in the state today are employed in agriculture. The majority work in low- and semi-skilled industries such as construction, landscaping, hotel and restaurant work and food processing.

For their part, employers in North Carolina have generally welcomed this new low-wage labor force.

I absolutely depend on Latinos for my labor. Without them the work simply would not get done. The whole region would collapse.”

-Anonymous NC Farmer

Rightly or wrongly, Latinos have gained a reputation for being hard-working and compliant, although their status as immigrants (especially if undocumented) can also make them susceptible to poor treatment. Not all Latinos, of course, work in low-wage occupations. Many are making significant contributions to the North Carolina economy as small business owners, and by working in such highly skilled professional fields as medicine, engineering and education.

Latino Employment in North Carolina

Managerial & Technical & Service
Farming, forestry, Professional & Production, craft, repair
Laborers, operators, technicians

Total Latino population by County for 2000
49-1,895
1,086-3,080
3,081-13,440
13,441-27,440
27,441-44,071

Total Latino population by Census Track for Mecklenburg Co and Charlotte area, 2000
0
2,395
The Aguilar Family Story

"I was afraid I could never get ahead in my country . . . I want to make something more of my life," explains 35 year old Manuela Aguilar. Although Manuela completed a secretarial degree in Mexico, she was unable to find a job in the hometown in the central Mexican state of Michoacán. Manuela made the decision 13 years ago to leave her family and native homeland, accompanied by her husband Ignacio and their infant son, to come to North Carolina. The decision was not easy, and the first few years were trying for the young couple. Ignacio worked two jobs, while Manuela remained alone in the house all day. "I was afraid to go out," she recalls, "all day all I did was cry because I wanted to go back to Mexico." Yet the sacrifices have allowed them to send money back to Mexico to help secure food for their parents and siblings. And as time has passed, the family has made North Carolina their home. Today, the Aguilar's and their four children live comfortably in a well-furnished double-wide trailer on an isolated country road. Nearby live Ignacio's older brother and his family, as well as three other families from their home town. Their children, who are fluent in English, are doing well in school, and Ignacio has recently received a promotion at the factory where he works.

Ignacio and Manuela's one regret is that, since leaving Mexico, they have been unable to return even for a visit. Manuela's eyes fill with tears as she recounts, "my mother says to me - 'my daughter are you never going to return? You aren't even going to come when I die!'" Ignacio adds, "the children say they want to go to Mexico because they want to meet their grandparents." Back in Mexico, Luz Maria Gutierrez understands why her daughter Manuela had to leave, and is grateful for the support she has provided throughout the years. But that doesn't make her absence any easier.

"They wouldn't leave Mexico if there were schools for our children and work for our husbands. They don't leave to become rich, we need food and the basics to live. When there is no work they become desperate." - Luz Maria Gutierrez

Both Manuela and Ignacio agree that if there had been a way to make a decent living in Mexico, they would never have left. But they feel they are American now, and appreciate the opportunities that come to those who work hard here. They understand that some Americans are uneasy with the growing Latino presence, but Ignacio asserts, "we haven't come to do any bad things . . . we've come only to work. We don't want to be a burden on the government." He continues with passion, "I love this country very much, I would fight for the United States as I would for Mexico."

Not all Latino immigrants, however, see their future in the U.S. Others dream of earning enough money to build a home or small business back in Mexico. Ignacio's older brother Arturo, an immigrant of 20 years still yearns to return: "now that I am older, I would like to be there. To live happily . . . there is nothing like your homeland."

* Story is a composite from interviews with several families. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

For more information see: