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Nuestro Cuento: Examining Barriers to Integration and the Impact of Limited Opportunities in Latino Immigrant Communities

By **Alexis Rios-Jimenez** CHCI-Public Policy Fellow

Executive Summary

This brief examines the experiences of Latino immigrant communities in the United States, with a focus on Mexican immigrants and the challenges faced by undocumented individuals. It will address the systemic barriers that hinder their successful integration into American society. These communities have endured a long history of overt racism which fueled exclusionary policies and rhetoric that demeaned them and relegated them to the periphery of American society. Consequently, these historical failures have left deep, lasting scars on the policy landscape affecting the Latino immigrant community and have perpetuated significant challenges stemming from intergenerational social divisions. Through an examination of deficiencies in contemporary policies affecting Latino immigrants, policy recommendations will be presented that highlight areas where decisive policy action could significantly benefit migrants experiencing difficulties navigating a foreign land and culture. Such recommendations aim to facilitate their integration into the social, cultural, and economic ecosystem of the United States.

Background

Latino Roots in the U.S.

The Latino community's rich history

and contributions to the U.S. can be traced back to centuries of Spanish settlers and indigenous peoples who largely inhabited much of what is now the Southwestern United States. Following the Mexican-American War, people who had lived in what were then the northernmost territories of Mexico, suddenly found themselves to be new citizens of a foreign nation—immigrants of the very land they were born in.[1] These changes were not benign, as many lost land and their livelihoods through miscarriages of justice by a discriminatory legal system that prioritized the interests of Anglo-American settlers.[2] Entire communities were marginalized as they sought to navigate a new legal and social landscape.

Attitudes Towards Migrants in the Early 20th Century

At the turn of the 20th century, racist and xenophobic attitudes toward migrants were increasingly pervasive, reinforced by the widely accepted but flawed science of eugenics.[3] Nativism engendered deep resentment towards most immigrant groups that did not originate from western and northern Europe.[4] Though deemed racially inferior, decades of beneficial economic factors had spared Mexican migrants from restrictive immigration legislation. [5] Growing numbers of migrants in the U.S., however, began drawing

increased xenophobic scrutiny. Shifting sentiments gave way to piercing rhetoric by opponents of Mexican immigration who argued that “the Mexican’s Indian blood would pollute the nation’s genetic purity, and his biologically determined degenerate character traits would sap the country’s moral fiber and corrupt its institutions.”[6]

After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, unemployment skyrocketed, leading to intensified attacks on Mexican immigrants fueled by anti-immigrant sentiment.[7] Around this time, an estimated 400,000 to 1,000,000 Mexican migrants began being rounded up in raids later termed “repatriations” and forcibly deported to Mexico. These perversely xenophobic efforts broke up entire communities and illegally relocated U.S. citizens, who made up around 60 percent of those affected.[8]

WWII Through to the Civil Rights Era

As the United States entered World War II, and vast numbers of its men and women were mobilized for the war effort, there was a dramatic increase in labor in the agricultural sector. This led to the establishment of the Bracero program, a bilateral guest worker program that allowed Mexican workers into the U.S. to work on short-term contracts.[9] At its peak in

the late 1950s, the program had approximately 50,000 farms employing over 400,000 Mexican nationals annually.[10] By the end of the program, over 4.6 million visas had been issued, sparking a full transformation of the southern border migration landscape and creating an established network of migration-oriented laborers.[11] The mutual benefits from these programs would go on to be heavily curtailed with escalating deportation drives which culminated in the largest mass deportation in American history, Operation Wetback.[12] This effort leaned heavily into the racial hysteria and bigotries of the early 20th century and resulted in as many as 1.3 million people being removed from the United States, many of whom were also U.S. citizens.[13] During this time, however, there were also Latino-led efforts to desegregate public schools across California. In 1947, the landmark case of Mendez v Westminster et al. took place. School districts that had implemented racist policies to prohibit Latino children from attending “White” schools were compelled by law to abandon those practices. This case laid the groundwork for Brown v. Board of Education, which desegregated schools nationwide.[14]

A major shift in U.S. immigration policy would come with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, signed into law under President Johnson. It eliminated quotas that had for decades favored northern and western Europeans and had for the first time, implemented caps on the number of visas for migrants from the western hemisphere at 120,000.[15] This led to a profound change in the U.S. demographic profile as well as a large disruption in traditional migration patterns that contributed to an increase in undocumented migrants.[16] The societal implications of these

actions were harmful to Latino immigrant communities who faced greatly narrowed opportunities for legal migration and increased discrimination and opposition to their integration into American society.[17]

Problem Analysis

Understanding the Latino Immigrant Landscape in the U.S.

Today, Latinos make up the second largest racial group in the U.S. with a population of over 65.2 million, constituting nearly one-fifth of the entire population.[18] Further, with over 21 million immigrants of Hispanic origin residing in the United States, of which 7.4 million individuals are undocumented, there is a crucial need to address the vital issues that have deep impacts on these communities.[19]

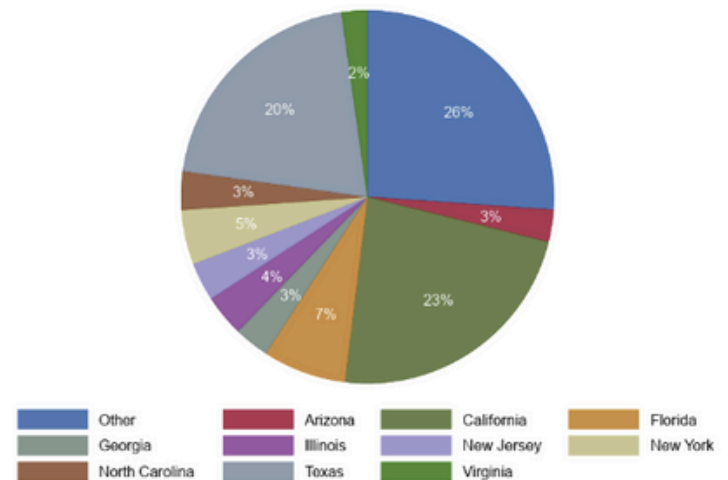
As individuals migrate to a new country, they undergo an acclimation as they transition into a distinct social environment. Generally, interactions between different cultures can vary greatly, and can best be defined by three core processes: assimilation, acculturation, and integration. It is crucial to be able to identify the

markers of each concept when examining the experiences of immigrants.

Assimilation in the context of immigration is the process in which newcomers adopt the values, customs and practices of the mainstream culture of their new host country.[20] This often involves conforming to the host nation’s norms, including language and appearance, at the expense of a migrant’s cultural identity. Acculturation is a harmonization of cultures wherein there is no one culture that subverts the other. Instead, a sort of blending occurs where aspects of each are adopted by the other, without the erasure of any one cultural identity. [21] Integration on the other hand, is the ability for a newcomer to be able to participate and become active contributors to the social, cultural, and economic framework of a nation. One such quote from sociologist Milton Gordon explains thinking about integration to the extent in which immigrants are accepted into the “organizations, institutional activities, and general civic life of the receiving society.”[22]

Figure 1: Hispanic Undocumented Immigrants, by State

Figure 3: Hispanic Undocumented Immigrants, by State



Source: CMB estimates using the one-year 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) data, Ruggles et al. (2021).

integrating into the cultural, economic and social frameworks of the United States is essential for Latino immigrants to be able to set themselves up for advancement. As the largest immigrant group, ethnic enclaves have formed in the U.S. over time. This has given Latinos, and especially Mexicans, the option to settle in areas where they would be able to live and work without being forced to learn English or to Americanize altogether.[23] Due in part to the lack of legal protections and access to services that many undocumented Latino immigrants experience, many elect to reside in areas that have substantial Latino populations as shown in Figure 1. [24]

Many areas with large Latino immigrant populations have undergone a degree of acculturation as regional efforts to aid migrants have been implemented. However, a lack of decisive action on the larger, national level concerning immigration is glaring.[25] The most pressing issues include immigrant access to healthcare, bilingual education, English-language acquisition, and driver's licenses for immigrants.[26] Additionally, many undocumented immigrants also face consistent challenges in their everyday life due to their inability to access essential services and participate in everyday activities without valid identification which contributes to their social and economic marginalization.

Education

Educational institutions serve a vital core function in providing school-age immigrants with a foundation for stability and advancement in a new host country. After-school programs, English-learning support courses, scholarships, mentoring, and tutoring services are all part of a major support system for immigrant youth. A promising trend has been the consistent increase in

Latino enrollment at four-year institutions, which has seen a 287% jump from 2000 to 2020.[27] Latinos also make up the largest portion of first-generation students, accounting for 44 percent of the 2015-2016 academic year.[28] However, while these trends suggest inroads are being made, it is also important to consider that over 70% of Latinos without an undergraduate degree cite having to help support the family as a factor in their decision to not pursue higher education.[29] Availability of financial resources is a massive impediment to Latinos pursuing higher education, particularly migrants. Additionally, despite growing numbers amongst first-generation college students, directing efforts toward assisting immigrant youth pursuing a bachelor's degree remains critical. As of 2021, 19 percent of the Latino immigrant population were enrolled in undergraduate programs compared to 23% of U.S.-born Latinos.[30]

Healthcare

One of the most important aspects of the longevity and prosperity of any community is the equitable access to healthcare. A consistent barrier to integration has been immigrant access to healthcare. The Latino population overall has the highest uninsured rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.[31] In 2022, 16.8 percent of Latinos in the U.S. were uninsured, compared to 5.3 percent of non-Hispanic whites.[32] These statistics highlight the impact strict immigration eligibility restrictions can have on immigrant enrollments. A lack of awareness of the availability of certain health services can negatively impact families and communities overall. [33] Additionally, undocumented migrants alone contribute billions of dollars in taxes annually for programs they are not eligible to access. Over \$6.4 billion in

Medicare taxes were received from undocumented migrants in 2022 alone.[34]

Policy Recommendations

- **Educating for Success:** Pursue policies that uplift Latino immigrant communities such as expanding financial aid, availability of scholarships, after-school programs, tuition assistance, and college preparatory counseling.
- **Toppling Structural Barriers in Healthcare:** Eliminate eligibility restrictions in Medicaid that are linked to immigration status to provide access to undocumented migrants who contribute billions of dollars into the program. Additionally, assuage concerns over public charge regulations by affirming that receiving health coverage won't have a negative impact on an individual's immigration status. Streamline the healthcare application process to encourage migrants to enroll.
- **A Modern Approach to Immigration:** Expand initiatives that provide undocumented immigrants with forms of identification. This would allow them to take a step toward successful integration by enabling individuals to engage in everyday activities and access essential services that would otherwise be out of reach. By offering tools to bridge the gap for those navigating life without legal status, municipal IDs foster a sense of belonging and participation in their adopted communities.[35]

Conclusion

With millions of individuals residing in the U.S. who actively contribute billions of dollars into the economy, there is a clear moral and economic impetus to ensure governing authorities actively work to facilitate their transition from

migrants to full-fledged citizens. Latino immigrants have a strong history of resilience, thriving despite generational disparities; nevertheless, new initiatives and a bolstering of existing policies are needed to maximize opportunities for immigrants and the Latino community at large. The success of these initiatives will require robust frameworks that prioritize access to education, equitable access to healthcare, and resources that promote civic engagement. In doing so, the United States can take meaningful strides toward living up to the ideals upon which it was founded and in turn, become a more inclusive society for all who seek the American Dream.

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