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Latino immigrants, discrimination and reception in Columbus, Ohio

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Abstract

Columbus, Ohio has witnessed rapid growth in its Latino population as immigrants settle in the city to access jobs and a generally low cost of living. Immigrants also face discrimination as they settle in Columbus and interact with the city's citizens. In this paper, we note how discrimination plays out in social and economic isolation; a lack of programs to support the incorporation of Latinos in the city; and state laws that target immigrants. We present results of ongoing ethnographic work with the Latino community in Columbus.

Keywords

Latinos Migration; Midwest US; Ohio; Discrimination; policy

Latino immigrants in Columbus, Ohio describe their experiences in generally positive terms and say that they are optimistic about their futures in the city. Nevertheless, these very same immigrants face discrimination in the city. They live in homogeneous neighborhoods with other Latinos (often other co-nationals) and are separate from the city's Anglo-American majority and large African-American communities. They lack programs to support their incorporation into the city and state laws that challenge their legal status. The discrimination that marks the lives of Latino immigrants in Columbus reminds them that many Ohioans believe they are illegally in the US and a threat regardless of their country of origin, legal status and work history. In this paper, we use data collected as part of ethnographic work with Latinos in Columbus to investigate the contradictions that immigrants encounter as they settle in the central Ohio.

We begin with a review of immigration to Columbus and note the diversity of the community as well as the discrimination that defines the lives of contemporary Latino movers in the city. Second, we examine the social and economic isolation that recent Latino immigrants face and the discrimination that immigrants encounter around work, schooling and healthcare. A discussion of state laws follows and we note the barriers that laws create for Latinos who hope to integrate with the city. We argue that cotemporary Latino immigrants live separate lives in Columbus, regardless of their status (and many are US citizens). We conclude with a focus on the ways in which the Latino community responds to these challenges.

Columbus and migration

While Latino migrants settled in Ohio in the past (see Acosta-Belén and Santiago 2006); it was only in the 1990s that the state's capital (Columbus) and metro area saw rapid growth in the Latino population. Between 1990 and 2000 the Latino community grew by 162.9% and reflected a shift in the US immigrant pool as Latin Americans, Africans (and particularly Somali refugees) and South East Asians replaced the historical Eurocentric immigration of the city's past (US Census 2011).

Social and Economic Isolation

Columbus is a secondary destination for Latinos and 85% of our interviews were with Latinos who had relocated from other parts of the US (and see CRP 2003; Frazier and Reisinger 2006; Gouveia and Saenz 2000; Kayitsinga 2009). The restructuring of agriculture and the growth of the meatpacking and poultry-processing industries as well as the expansion of service jobs encouraged Latinos to relocate and in the midwest low-wage service worked pulled in Latino immigrants (Johnson-Webb 2003; Kandel and Parrado 2005; Millard and Chapa 2004; Smith and Furuseth 2006).

Latino immigrants came to Columbus in search of reasonable wages, a lower cost of living and economic stability as the city grew (Barcus 2007; Borgas and Tienda 1985; Johnson and Lichter 2008; Suro and Singer 2002; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2001). While many migrants came to Columbus believing it was an affordable place to live and a safe place to raise a family, poverty and poor schools remained a serious problem. The average income for Latinos in Columbus was \$14,241 in 2007 with 22.1% of the group officially living in poverty in 2006 (ACS 2006).^[1]

Typical of Latinos in central Ohio was Elena Martinez who settled in Columbus (in the Hilltop neighborhood) with her husband and children after leaving California and her extended family early in 2002. "I've been here [at a restaurant in Columbus] for eight years! Eight years! My husband and I are here with our kids. Where else would we go? We can't go back to Mexico!" Originally from a small town outside of Oaxaca City, in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, she also worries about returning to California, and remarked, "I cannot go back to California and that life, those people, and it is calmer here, easier!" Pulled by the promise of work, jobs for both herself and her husband, a chance for her children (all born in the US) to safely attend public school, and the opportunity to own a home; the decision to move was not a difficult one to make. The family lives on the west side and she commutes by bus with her husband from their home to work in a restaurant on Columbus's east side.

Señora Martinez and her husband have worked for the same restaurant for several years and have been relatively successful at their jobs. Bilingual in Spanish and English, Señora Martinez was made an assistant manager in 2008. While the family earns enough to move them above the poverty line in terms of their income, they struggle to cover their expenses

¹The average income for Latinos regardless of their poverty status and origin was \$38,747 in 2006, well below the below the national average income for all households (\$48,451—see ACS 2006).

as the economy has slowed. They worry about losing their jobs and home. They cannot save for the future and they worry about their children who have faced discrimination at school.

While Señora Martinez is typical of many of the Latinos we interviewed; the Latino community in Columbus is heterogeneous. About 51% of the community is Mexican. The remaining 49% of the city's Latinos (a group of nearly 40,000) is divided between Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, South Americans, Cubans and Dominicans (ACS 2006).

The diversity of the Latino community in Columbus does not translate to heterogeneity in most neighborhoods. Length of residency and income does influence some integration and wealthier Latinos who have made their homes in central Ohio for years and who own businesses in the city live throughout Columbus with some concentration in Worthington (a town that is just north of the Columbus-see map). However, newer immigrants tend to live with co-nationals and apart for Anglo and African-Americans. Many Latinos are found in two lower income neighborhoods where at least 10% of the population speaks Spanish (see map): the Hilltop - Valley View neighborhoods on the west side of the city; and Whitehall on the east side (an independent city that is contiguous with Columbus).

Hilltop -Valley View are home to documented and undocumented lower income and lower-working class Latino immigrants who are generally from Mexico. Hilltop -Valley View was home to 20 of our informants. On the east side and in Whitehall (in a series of apartment complexes and trailer courts found around the Port Columbus Airport) is another group of low wage, unskilled and semi-skilled generally undocumented immigrants from Central America. We found nine of our informants in Whitehall. To the north and where Columbus and Worthington merge we identified five informants. Worthington is an area of growth and investment and it was where we found mostly settled, naturalized immigrants, including families from Brazil and Argentina, and many entrepreneurs and business owners who were established in the city and filled blue and white collar jobs.

There is a growing number of Latino owned businesses in these neighborhoods, including restaurants, groceries, clothing stores and bakeries. The city is also served by a Spanish language radio station, several Spanish language publications as well as churches. Nevertheless, these businesses do little to integrate Latinos with the greater Anglo-American and African-American communities in Columbus. The owner of a west side Panadería (bakery) responded to our question asking why he opened a store in the middle of a Latino neighborhood and not elsewhere. He looked at us as if we were fools, "why a panadería? Because here in Columbus, there aren't any bakeries open as a traditional panadería should be!" His response, though short, also indicated how little effort is made to integrate immigrants in Columbus; and while churches increasingly run services in Spanish; there is little energy or time given to the incorporation of Latinos in area congregations. [2]

²Community Research Partners noted that between 1980 and 2000 the average dissimilarity value for Latinos and Anglo-Americans increased from 28.5 in 1980 to 37.7 in 2000 indicating that these groups are growing less evenly spread throughout census tracts (CRP 2003).

The Limits of Support

A majority of the immigrants we interviewed (66%) experienced discrimination or knew of someone who had experienced discrimination. In nearly all the examples we heard, discrimination was an outcome of interactions with Anglo Americans. Acts of discrimination occurred at the work place, with teachers, local and state officials and with health care providers.

Discrimination was a problem in schools and every couple with children (9% of our informants) noted their children were harassed by other students, teachers and administrators. The experience of discrimination in area schools was centered on language use. Teachers and students who did not speak Spanish assumed that native Spanish speakers did not know English, were not smart and were illegally in the US taking resources. Cristina Cruz, a Guatemalan immigrant living in Whitehall recalled an incident involving her young daughter when she failed to use English (a reoccurring problem identified by Ms. Cruz),

...this is the reason why she didn't want to go back to school because she became too frightened. She was in third grade or fourth grade and she was studying but the director, I don't know if he was mad or just because she was the only Hispanic there and so he made her cry... And I couldn't go and speak to or yell at because I didn't know English. That is when, it hurts that they had done this to my daughter why, because just because we don't know how to speak English...and this is the reason why she stopped going to school because she didn't want to go back to school. When she was little, she stopped going to school for this reason.

While few informants experienced physical harm, the misrepresentation and misperception of Latinos by Anglo-Americans created a situation that promoted discrimination and led to isolation. Señora Teresa Morales described several occasions when local businesspeople and public employees ignored her. She blamed their actions on her physical appearance and surname. She said, "People look at me and think, because I am darker skinned and I have an accent that I must be Mexican. But I was born in the US!" Señora Morales has no connections to Mexico, speaks little Spanish and attends Columbus State University to complete her business degree.

Juan Mendoza (a naturalized 40 year old man from Tamaulipas, Mexico who lives in Valley View) described a similar experience during our interview. He noted that he was ignored when he needed medical service and felt that doctors and healthcare workers would not share information, "the doctors don't think I understand them when they speak English and they don't think I can pay for service! But I have money to pay I can cover my expenses!"

Many informants attributed health care problems to their poor treatment by others and their restricted access to health services. Studies have demonstrated that Spanish speaking immigrants do not have equal access to medical care and struggle to find care as they face discrimination by doctors, who falsely believe they cannot speak English, cannot afford care and cannot understand instructions (and see Farley and Alba 2002). Señor Roman Garcia (an immigrant who had moved from Texas to Columbus for the opportunities he thought he might find in the city) described access to health care for us:

Yes, it is difficult [getting any public medical services]. It is difficult because you always need health insurance. Those who don't have it, it becomes a serious problem. In fact, I imagine that maybe 90% of Latinos do not have health insurance to get access to medical services. For me, it hasn't been that difficult, but I have not had the need to use these services, but usually I go with private ones [doctors] where I pay [directly]. I pay when I go to the dentist or when I go to the doctor for a check-up. I have usually always paid. I have never used any kind of service that the government offers.

Law and the Mexican and Latino immigrant communities in Columbus

New laws regarding language use, citizen rights and licensing have appeared in Ohio. Among the bills proposed in the state are House Bill 184 (a proposed amendment to sections 9.63, 311.07, and 341.21 of the Revised Code), which addressed employment verification, the detention of aliens, and sanctuary policies; and Senate Bill 150 (a proposed amendment to sections 2937.23, 5747.07, and 5747.99 to enact sections 8.01 to 8.04 of the Revised Code), which required employers to register and participate in a status verification system to verify the work eligibility status of all new employees. If passed, Senate Bill 150 grants county commissioners the authority to provide local sheriffs the right to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Other laws in Ohio will require proof of U.S. citizenship in order to qualify for a valid driver's license while a second will require proof of citizenship when registering a vehicle.

These laws are stressful for all Latinos regardless of their legal status. Perhaps most importantly, laws that require proof of citizenship as a prerequisite for a driver's licenses and for a car to be titled force non-native and undocumented immigrants to operate vehicles without license or title and put everyone at risk if they are involved in an auto accident. Citizens as well as legal immigrants and naturalized immigrants cannot travel without papers and fear what may happen if they are stopped. Anna Delgado, a naturalized citizen who came to the US from the Dominican Republic as a young girl argued that, "the demand of citizenship makes everyone nervous. I've been harassed before, I've been stopped by the police. I think it is just profiling! And I'm a citizen. For undocumented immigrants, they are just nervous. They don't want to break the law, but they don't have a choice. Why should they risk being deported just to get a license?" Finally, "English only" amendments regularly appear in the state. These amendments create language barriers that limit the integration of immigrants and restrict their access to services and ability to engage in the political life of their community and state (see Fitrakis 2010). Taken together, these laws (whether they are approved or not) create an environment of insecurity for immigrants regardless of their legal status (and see Plasencia 2009). In fact, Latino immigrants talk about the vigilance and care they must take to respond to bigotry. They must carry identification, and sometimes find that even when they travel with identification they may be held, questioned and harassed.

Local action

In response to inequalities, growing animosities and work place discrimination a number of Latino advocacy organizations have emerged over the last several decades. In 1990, the

Ohio Hispanic Coalition (<http://www.ohiohispaniccoalition.org/>) was formed to push for improvements in the quality of life for the state's Latino population. The Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs (OCHLA, <http://ochla.ohio.gov>) was created in 1977 to foster communication between the Hispanic community and the state. Serving as a center of information, OCHLA developed programs to support Latinos in the state, gave advice on local legislation affecting the Latino community, and contributed expertise to support state policies and policy-related projects that might increase Latino representation in Ohio's workforce. While these advocacy groups document the positive contributions of Latinos in Ohio; their efforts are typically organized around teaching immigrants how to be good citizens and do not push the state or business leaders to reform their practices or reach out to hire Latinos.

Discussion

The groups that support Latino immigrants are tied to state and local government and their efforts are often limited to assimilation rather than advocacy and their support by Latinos is lacking (Taylor and Lopez 2011). Furthermore, businesses that have opened to serve the Latino community or a specific national or regional portion of the community have not built bridges to reach the Anglo or African American communities in Columbus.

Immigrants who settle in Columbus are challenged to balance their ethnicity, nationality, expectations and traditions with the expectations that characterize the Anglo-American population of Columbus. While Columbus has grown more diverse in recent years, immigrants who settle in the city face hidden as well as open hostility from local, native-born residents. The growing conflicts are fueled by increasing separation of the Anglo-American and Latino communities, a lack of support programs and new laws (Haverluk 1998).

The response of Latino immigrants to their reception in Columbus varies in relation to origins, settlement and the attitudes of the surrounding community. The majority of low wage, low skilled Latino immigrants settled in the Valley View and Hilltop neighborhoods have experienced Columbus differently than the skilled, entrepreneurs from across Latin America who settled in and around Worthington. There is growing tensions among poorer Latinos and African-Americans who often see Latino immigrants as a threat (see Morin 2008).

The largely Mexican community settled in Valley View - Hilltop tends to accept its isolation from Columbus' more powerful Anglo-American neighborhoods and simply move on, hoping that things will not get worse. Informants from these neighborhoods talked about bigotry and mistreatment on the job and by professionals in the city (and see report by). The parents of school aged children talked about the pressures their children were under and noted that many school teachers assumed that Spanish speakers were not as smart as a native English speaker. They also responded to questions about the coming changes to the legal code by telling us they would largely ignore them.

Wealthier and settled Latino immigrants and particularly those living in the north of Columbus did not share the experiences of bigotry identified by new immigrants to the area. These individuals tended to join the larger Anglo-American community and adopted middle class goals. And while discrimination and fears of a backlash concerns the community as a whole; there is little agreement across the Latino community concerning how best to handle the issue of undocumented migration to the US. In fact, tensions are also rising between settled Latinos and new immigrants as settled Latinos blame increasing discrimination on new immigrants who are poorly integrated into the community. Furthermore, settled immigrants fear that the rapid increase in Latino immigration may undermine their integration and the futures of their US born children (and see Lopez, et al. 2011).

Conclusions

Columbus, Ohio is a new and important destination for Latino immigrants. For immigrants who are moving from more traditional gateways the diversity of the Latino community in the city is welcoming and reflects the opportunities that Columbus may hold. Our research reveals that while new immigrant neighborhoods are emerging, they are generally isolated from the larger Columbus community. Discrimination, a lack of programs and a largely anti-immigrant climate isolates Latinos formally and informally. Formally, Latinos are isolated because there are few opportunities to enter the workforce in new and dynamic ways. Their children are often discriminated against because English may be a second language. There is a lack of programs to support the engagement and involvement of Latinos in the life of the city and finally, several bills challenge the rights of Latinos to own cars, drive to work and speak Spanish. Informally Latinos face discrimination from a larger community that assumes any Latino is a new immigrant and the presence of immigrants undermine U.S. culture and society (Plascencia 2009).

In Columbus, Latino immigrants increasingly negotiate their lives in a contradictory environment balancing a labor market built upon service work that holds few opportunities for growth and a society that actively discriminates against them and limits their freedoms (Durand, et al. 2000). The Latino community in Columbus and its relation to the city's larger Anglo-American population is a microcosm of the issues facing immigrants in the US. We have used this paper to argue that discrimination is not necessarily public or pronounced. Rather, Latino immigrants continue to struggle against social and economic isolation, the lack of support programs to encourage their progress and laws that seek to limit freedoms based on race, language and mobility.

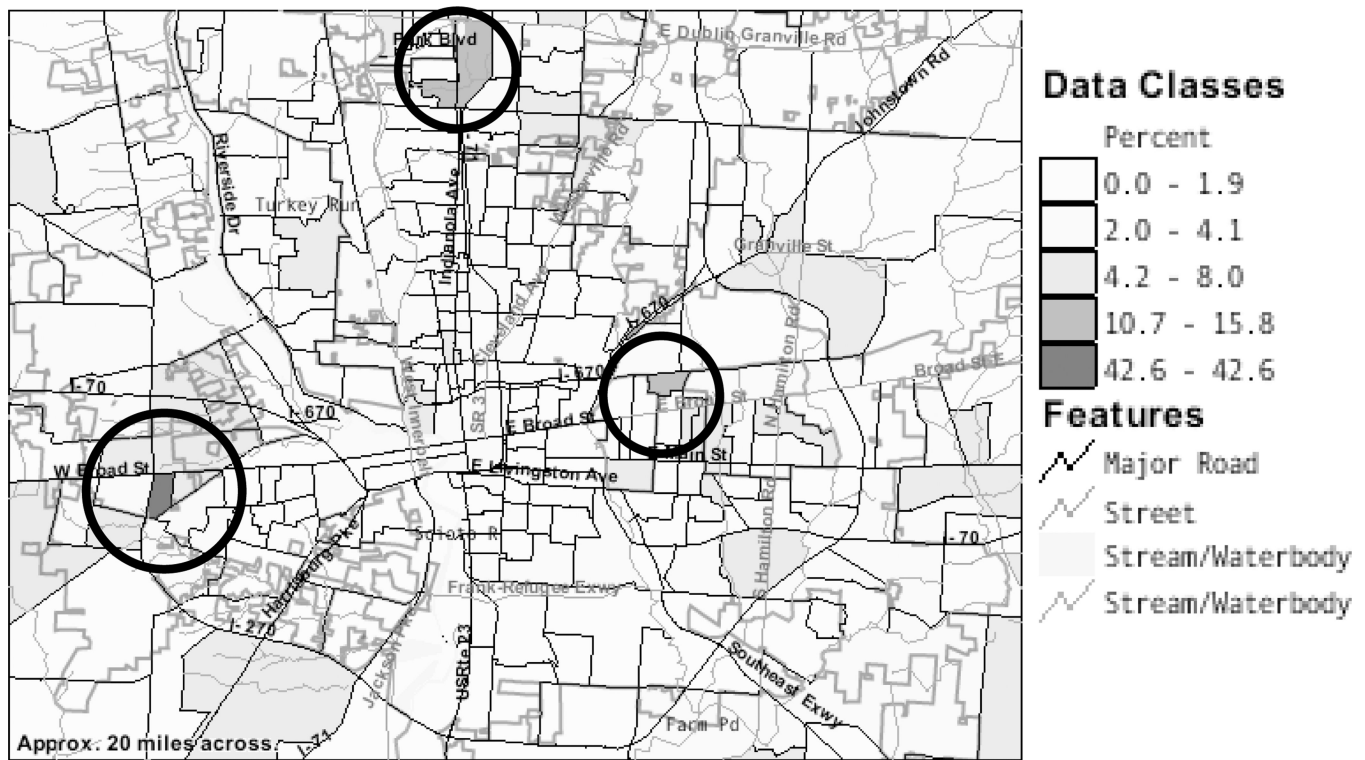
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Map 1. Hispanic populations in Columbus by census tract, US Census, 2000 and noting the location of three important locales for Spanish speaking immigrants. Valley View and Hilltop are located in the lower left of the map; Whitehall is to the center and right, while the Worthington community is in the northern center of the map (adapted from ACS 2006).