



Clockwise from top left:  
 Men being deported as part of Operation Wetback, Elysian Park, Los Angeles, California [Library of Congress]; Fiesta Boricua on Paseo Boricua, Chicago, Illinois [Creative Commons by Plij, 2008]; Immigration Reform march, Washington, D.C. [Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, *Two Reforms, One Day, One Broad Message*, 2010]; A freedom flight arriving in Miami from Varadero, Cuba, 1970 [Juan Clark Cuban Refugee Center Collection]; East (Spanish) Harlem, New York, New York [Creative Commons by Mozart Diensthuber, 2006]



## An Historic Overview of Latino Immigration and the Demographic Transformation of the United States

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Immigration from Latin America—and the attendant growth of the nation’s Hispanic or Latino population—are two of the most important and controversial developments in the recent history of the United States. Expanding from a small, regionally concentrated population of fewer than 6 million in 1960 (just 3.24 percent of the U.S. population at the time), to a now widely dispersed population of well more than 50 million (or 16 percent of the nation’s population), Latinos are destined to continue to exert enormous impact on social, cultural, political, and economic life of the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Although space limitations make it impossible to provide a comprehensive account of this complex history, this essay is intended to provide an overview of the history of Latino immigration to the U.S. with particular emphasis on issues of citizenship and non-citizenship, the long running political controversies over immigration policy, and the global economic context in which regional migration and immigration have occurred. The essay suggests that the explosive growth of the nation’s pan-Latino population is the result of the intricate interplay of national, regional, and global economic developments, the history of U.S. military and foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere, the checkered history of international border enforcement and interdiction efforts, and, not least, the aspirations of Latin American migrants and potential migrants themselves.

### Foundational Population Movements: Mexico

The history of Latino migration to the U.S. has complex origins rooted in the nation’s territorial and economic expansion. Technically, the

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first significant influx of Latino immigrants to the U.S. occurred during the California Gold Rush, or just after most of the modern boundary between the U.S. and Mexico was established at the end of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48). Under the terms of the Treaty of

Guadalupe Hidalgo (signed outside of Mexico City in February 1848), the Republic of Mexico ceded to the U.S. more than one-third of its former territory, including what are now the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado,

Texas, and parts of several other states. In addition, the treaty also offered blanket naturalization to the estimated 75,000 to 100,000 former citizens of Mexico who chose to remain north of the new border at the end of the war.<sup>2</sup>

With exception of the approximately 10,000 Mexican miners who entered California during the Gold Rush, migration from Mexico was very light during most of the 19th century, averaging no more than 3,000 to 5,000 persons per decade in the period between 1840 and 1890.<sup>3</sup> This changed dramatically at the beginning of next century. As the pace of economic development in the American West accelerated after the expansion of the regional rail system in the 1870s and 1880s, and as the supply of labor from Asian nations was dramatically reduced by a series of increasingly restrictive immigration laws beginning in 1882, U.S. employers began to look to Mexico to fill a dramatically rising demand for labor in basic industries including agriculture, mining, construction, and transportation (especially railroad construction and maintenance). Drawn to the border region by the simultaneous economic development of northern Mexico and the southwest-

tern U.S. (largely facilitated by the eventual linkage of the American and Mexican rail systems at key points along the U.S.-Mexico border), at least 100,000 Mexicans had migrated to the U.S. by 1900. The outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 greatly intensified the movement of people within Mexico and eventually across the border, a trend that continued for the first three decades of the 20th century.

Historical migration statistics for this period are notoriously inaccurate because of inconsistent enumeration techniques, changing methods of ethnic and racial classification in the U.S., and the fairly constant movement of uncounted thousands of undocumented migrants into and out of U.S. territory. Extrapolation from both U.S. and Mexican census sources, however, provides a sense of the magnitude of population movement over this period. In 1900, the number of Mexican nationals living in the U.S. reached 100,000 for the first time and continued to rise dramatically thereafter, doubling to at least 220,000 in 1910, and then doubling again to 478,000 by 1920. In 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, the number of resident Mexican nationals is conservatively estimated to have increased to at least 639,000. When combined with the original Mexican American population (that is, the descendants of the former citizens of Mexico who lived in the Southwest at the end of the U.S.-Mexican War), the total Mexican-origin or heritage population of the U.S. in 1930 was probably at least 1.5 million, with the largest concentrations in the states of Texas, California, and Arizona, and a smaller yet significant number working in industrial jobs in the Midwest, especially in the

metropolitan areas of Chicago, Detroit, and Gary, Indiana.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a brief reversal of migration flows during the Great Depression, when an estimated 350,000 to 500,000 Mexican immigrants and their children were pressured or compelled to leave the country in a mass repatriation campaign coordinated by local, state, and federal officials, Mexican migration trends seen earlier in the century quickly resumed after the U.S. entered the Second World War in 1941.<sup>5</sup> Facing a significant farm labor shortage as a result



*Braceros arriving by train into Los Angeles, California (Oakland Museum of California, Dorothea Lange, 1942)*

of conscription and war mobilization, U.S. employer lobbies convinced the Federal Government to approach Mexico about the possibility of implementing an emergency bilateral labor agreement. Still stinging from the humiliation suffered by Mexican nationals and their children during the repatriation campaigns of the previous decade, Mexican government officials were at first reluctant to enter into such an agreement,

but after securing guarantees from U.S. officials that contract workers would be provided transportation to and from Mexico, a fair wage, decent food and housing, and basic human rights protections, the two governments signed the Emergency Farm Labor Agreement in the summer of 1942.<sup>6</sup>

Soon dubbed the Bracero Program (from the Spanish colloquial word for manual laborer) this new guest worker program had a number of important long-term effects. On the most fundamental level, the program not only reopened the southern border to Mexican labor, but also more significantly, reinstated the use of large numbers of immigrant workers in the

U.S. economy for the first time since the Depression. The scale of the program remained fairly modest through the war years, with an average of about 70,000 contract laborers working in the country each year during the war. Over time, however, the Bracero Program, which was extended by various means after the war, had the effect of priming the pump for the much more extensive use of such workers. By 1949, the number of imported contract workers had jumped to 113,000, and then averaged more than 200,000 per year between 1950 and 1954. During the peak years of the program between 1955 and 1960, an average of more than 400,000 laborers (predominantly from Mexico, but augmented by smaller numbers of Jamaicans, Bahamians, Barbadians, and Hondurans as well) were employed in the U.S. By the time the program was finally terminated in 1964, nearly 5 million contracts had been issued.<sup>7</sup>

The guest worker program instituted in the early 1940s also had the largely unanticipated effect of increasing both sanctioned and unsanctioned migration to the U.S. from Mexico. By reinforcing communication networks between contract workers and their friends and families in their places of origin in Mexico, increasing numbers of Mexicans were able to gain reliable knowledge about labor market conditions, employment opportunities, and migration routes north of the border. Consequently, the number of Mexicans who legally immigrated to the U.S. increased steadily in the 1950s and 1960s, rising from just 60,000 in the decade of the 1940s to 219,000 in the 1950s and 459,000 in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly over the long run, the Bracero Program helped to stimulate a sharp increase in unauthorized Mexican migration. Drawn to the prospect of improving their ma-

terial conditions in the U.S. (where wages were anywhere from seven to ten times higher than those paid in Mexico), tens of thousands of Mexicans (almost all of them males of working age) chose to circumvent the formal labor con-

tract process and instead crossed the border surreptitiously. This was seen in the sudden increase in the apprehension of unauthorized immigrants, which rose

from a negligible number in 1940, to more than 91,000 in 1946, nearly 200,000 in 1947, and to more than 500,000 by 1951.<sup>9</sup>

The increasing circulation of unauthorized workers in this era suited employers, who sought to avoid the red tape and higher costs associated with participation in the formal labor importation program, and would-be Mexican braceros who were unable to secure contracts through official means. Indeed, the mutual economic incentives for unsanctioned entry (bolstered by ever more sophisticated and economically lucrative smuggling, communication, and document-forging networks) increased so much in this period that it is estimated that at different times, the ratio of unauthorized workers to legally contracted braceros was at least two-to-one, and in some cases, was even higher in specific local labor markets. That the use of unauthorized labor had become a systemic feature of the U.S. economy is further reflected in that fact that over the 24 years of the Bracero Program, the estimated number of unauthorized persons apprehended—nearly 5 million—was roughly equivalent to the total number of official contracts issued.<sup>10</sup>

Although the U.S. government has never achieved an accurate count of the number of unauthorized Mexican migrants circulating or settling in the U.S. at any one time, population movement of this magnitude inevitably contri-

***“There is a definite need for a source of imported labor during the harvest peaks.”***

*R.E. Browne, Southern California Farmers Association, 1950*

buted to a steady increase in the permanent resident ethnic Mexican population. According to U.S. Census data (which again, significantly undercounted undocumented residents in each census) and recent demographic analyses, the total ethnic Mexican population of both nationalities in the U.S. grew from about 1.6 million in 1940, to 2.5 million in 1950, and reached 4 million by 1960.<sup>11</sup> The historical significance of the Bracero Program as a precursor to neoliberal economic practices and a driver of demographic change has recently been recognized in a number of public history projects, including the Smithsonian’s ongoing Bracero Archive project and the “Bittersweet Harvest” traveling exhibition.<sup>12</sup>

### Puerto Ricans

The growth of the Puerto Rican population in the continental U.S. has even more complicated origins. Almost exactly a half-century after the end of the Mexican War, the island of Puerto Rico became an “unincorporated territory” of the U.S. after Spain ceded the island and other colonial possessions at the end of the Spanish-American War of 1898. In the first years of American rule, Puerto Ricans were governed under the terms of the Foraker Act of 1900, which established the island as unincorporated possession of the U.S. and provided a civil government consisting of a Governor appointed by the U.S. President, an Executive Council comprised of 6 Americans and 5 Puerto Ricans, and an integrated court system. In 1917, the U.S. Congress, responding to an increasingly aggressive Puerto Rican independence movement, passed the Jones Act. The Jones Act sought to quell local unrest by providing a number of political reforms including a bicameral legislature (although still under the ul-

timate authority of a U.S.-appointed Governor, the U.S. Congress, and President of the U.S.), and a Puerto Rican Bill of Rights. More importantly, the Jones Act granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans except those who made a public choice to renounce this option, a momentous decision made by nearly 300 Puerto Ricans at the time.<sup>13</sup>

Although the authors of the Jones Act had not anticipated that their actions would open the door to Puerto Rican migration to the continental U.S., the extension of U.S. citizenship to island residents ended up having just this effect. Indeed, one of the lasting ironies of the U.S. government’s action in 1917 was that even though congressional leaders had expected to continue to control Puerto Rico as a remote colonial possession, a Supreme Court ruling soon revealed the Pandora’s Box Congress had opened by granting U.S. citizenship to the island’s inhabitants. In the case *Balzac v. Porto Rico* (1922), the Court held that although Puerto Ricans on the island did not have the same constitutional standing as “ordinary” U.S. citizens (based on the logic that the Constitution’s plenary power granted Congress almost unlimited authority to decide which specific rights people in unincorporated territory could enjoy), it



*Liga Puertorriqueña e Hispana, Brooklyn Section, 1922*  
(City University of New York)

also ruled that the conferral of citizenship allowed Puerto Ricans the unfettered right to migrate anywhere within U.S. jurisdiction. More importantly, the Court ruled further that once there, Puerto Ricans were by law “to enjoy every right of any other citizen of the U.S., civic, social, and political.”<sup>14</sup>

Puerto Ricans soon took advantage of this oversight by exercising one of the most basic rights of U.S. citizenship—that of free move-

ment within the territorial boundaries of the U.S. and its possessions. Beginning soon after the *Balzac* ruling, but increasingly after the Great Depression, growing numbers of Puerto Ricans began moving to the continent, and especially to New York City. Migration from the island was spurred by an evolving colonial economy that simply did not provide sufficient employment to keep up with population growth. Prior to the 1930s, the Puerto Rican economy was heavily oriented toward sugar production, which required intensive labor for only half the year and idled cane workers for the rest of the year. With unemployment now a structural feature of the island economy, the first wave of Puerto Ricans began to leave for the mainland, searching either for work or after having been recruited to work in the agricultural industry. Consequently, the mainland population began to grow. Between 1930 and the outbreak of the Second World War, the mainland Puerto Rican population grew modestly from 53,000 to nearly 70,000, though by now, the overwhelming majority of Puerto Ricans (nearly 88 percent) could be found in New York City where they became low-wage workers in the region's expanding clothing manufacturing and service sectors. In addition, Puerto Rican entrepreneurs also began to expand what would soon become a thriving ethnic economy servicing the needs of the region's rapidly expanding population.<sup>15</sup>

Puerto Rican emigration to the mainland accelerated after the war. Facing chronic unemployment on the island (which fluctuated between 10.4 percent and 20 percent for the entire period between 1949 and 1977), and the dislocations in both the rural and urban work forces caused in part by "Operation Bootstrap,"

a massive government sponsored plan to attract investment and light industry to the island, the Puerto Rican mainland population jumped from fewer than 70,000 in 1940 to more than 300,000 in 1950 and continued to climb to 887,000 by 1960. Although the systematic shift from agriculture to "export-platform industrialization" under Operation Bootstrap was intended to stimulate economic growth and lift workers out of poverty (which occurred for a minority of Puerto Rican workers) chronic unemployment and underemployment—and the economically driven migration that resulted—have been facts of Puerto Rican economic life since the 1950s.<sup>16</sup>

### Demographic Developments since 1960

The demographic landscape of Latino America began to change dramatically in the 1960s as a result of a confluence of economic and geopolitical trends. In 1959, a revolutionary insurgency in Cuba led by Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Ché" Guevara shocked the world by overthrowing the regime of dictator Fulgencio Batista. Although Castro's political intentions remained unclear in the first months of his rule, by 1960 the ruling junta made it plain that

it intended to rule Cuba under Marxist principles. In quick succession, a series of political purges and trials, expropriations, the nationalization of key industries and institutions (including labor unions and private schools), and the aborted invasion attempt by Cuban exiles at the infamous Bay of Pigs in the spring of 1961, led to a mass exodus of disaffected Cubans. Although a significant Cuban population had existed in the U.S. since the 19th century (mainly concentrated in Florida and New York City), virtually overnight the exodus of Cubans after the revolution created a major new Latino



*Freedom Flight arrives in Miami from Cuba, 1970  
(Juan Clark Cuban Refugee Center)*

American population. Numbering fewer than 71,000 nationwide in 1950, the Cuban immigrant population shot up to 163,000 by 1960.<sup>17</sup>

A second wave of Cuban immigration occurred between 1965 and the early 1970s when the Castro regime agreed to allow Cubans who wished to be reunited with family members already in the U.S. to do so. Although initially caught by surprise by the Cuban government's decision, U.S. immigration officials provided a mechanism for the orderly entry of nearly 300,000 additional Cuban refugees. As a result, the Cuban population of the U.S. reached 638,000 by 1970, which accounted for 7.2 percent of nation's Latino population at the time.<sup>18</sup> During the 1980s, a third wave of out-migration from Cuba occurred (the infamous "Mariel boat-lift"), swelling the numbers of Cubans in the U.S. by another 125,000.<sup>19</sup> These three major waves of post-1960 immigration provided the foundation for the modern Cuban American population, which currently stands at nearly 1.786 million, or 3.5 percent of the pan-Latino population of the U.S.<sup>20</sup>

The majority of Cubans and their children have tended to congregate in South Florida (nearly 70 percent of all Cubans continue to reside in Florida) but over time, Cubans and Cuban Americans—like other Latino migrants—have become more geographically dispersed over time. Although the different socioeconomic profiles of the three distinct waves of Cuban migration created a heterogeneous population in class terms, in aggregate, the immigrants that established the Cuban American population have the highest levels of socioeconomic attainment of the three major Latino subpopulations in the U.S. For example, in 2008, 25 percent of Cubans and Cuban Americans over age

25 had obtained at least a college degree (compared to just 12.9 percent of the overall U.S. Latino population); median income for persons over 16 was \$26,478 (compared to median earnings of \$21,488 for all Latinos); and 13.2 percent of Cubans lived below the poverty line (compared to 20.7 percent of the Latino population and 12.7 percent of the general U.S. population at that time).<sup>21</sup>

Political turmoil elsewhere in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s—particularly in the Central American nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua—also contributed to significant new Latin American immigration to the U.S. Again, although citizens of each of these nations had established small émigré populations in the U.S. well before the

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1970s, the political turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in an unprecedented wave of migration as hundreds of thousands of Central Americans—many of them undocumented—fled the violence of their homelands to enter the U.S. Caught between authoritarian regimes (often overtly or covertly supported by elements of the U.S. government) and left-wing insurgencies, Central American migrants became a significant part of the U.S. Latino population by 1990, when they reached an aggregate population of nearly 1.324 million. Reflecting their diverse origins and experiences, Central Americans have clustered in different areas of the country, with Salvadorans prominent in Los Angeles, Houston, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D.C.; Guatemalans in California and Texas; Nicaraguans in Miami; and Hondurans in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. Although most of the Central American nations have stabilized politically since the 1990s, the long term economic disruption and displacement caused by protracted civil- and

guerilla wars in the region has contributed to the continuing growth of this population (discussed further below).<sup>22</sup>

### **Economic Factors**

As dramatic as the story of Cuban and Central American political migration has been, however, the most significant development in Latino migration to the U.S. in recent history is rooted in profound economic shifts occurring both in the U.S. and in countries in the Western Hemisphere since the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first signs of things to come were the end of the Bracero Program in 1964 and a major overhaul of U.S. immigration law in 1965. Although both events have been touted as part of the wave of liberal reforms (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965) that characterized this tumultuous era, the end of the contract labor program and revamping of the U.S. immigration system helped hide from view some significant changes both in patterns of immigration and the utilization of immigrant labor in the U.S. These events also tended to obscure important structural changes in both the U.S. economy and the economies of Latin America that continue to the present day.

One change that largely escaped public view at the time was the gradual replacement of braceros with unauthorized workers, the vast majority of them originating in Mexico. Although the use of braceros had steadily declined in the early 1960s until Congress allowed the program to lapse at the end of 1964, there is no indication that the steady demand for labor that had driven both authorized and unauthorized migration for the previous quarter-century had suddenly dropped appreciably.

Given historical trends, it is much more likely that, as the program ran down, braceros were gradually replaced by unauthorized workers—or, after their contracts expired, simply became unauthorized workers themselves.

In any case, border apprehensions began to rise again almost immediately after the guest worker program's demise. Whereas the INS reported apprehending an average of about 57,000 unauthorized migrants per year in the nine years between Operation Wetback, a federal program that deported illegal Mexican immigrants from the southwestern U.S., and the end of the Bracero Program, apprehensions approached 100,000 again in 1965 and continued to rise sharply thereafter.<sup>23</sup> In that same year, the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Amendments (79 Stat. 911) almost certainly exacerbated this trend. Although the new law greatly liberalized extant policy by abolishing the national origins quota system and providing a first-come, first-served system for eligible immigrants, for the first time in history the INA imposed a ceiling of just 120,000 legal immigrants per year for the entire Western Hemisphere. Later adjustments in the law further lowered the number of visas available to Western Hemisphere countries.<sup>24</sup>



*Undocumented Mexicans being deported  
Los Angeles, California, 1976  
(latinamericanstudies.org)*

On the economic front, the 1973 Arab oil embargo further disrupted the American labor market and eventually helped lay the foundations for an even greater influx of both legal immigrants and unauthorized workers. The extended period of simultaneous contraction and inflation that followed the 1973 crisis—and a series of neoliberal economic reforms that were instituted in response—signaled a



massive reorganization of work and production processes that in many ways continue to the present day. This ongoing restructuring was regionally and temporally uneven, but across the economy the general long term trend was toward a contraction of comparatively secure high-wage, high-benefit (often union) jobs in the manufacturing and industrial sectors and a corresponding growth of increasingly precarious low-wage, low benefit, often non-union jobs in the expanding service and informal sectors of a transformed economy.

In the international arena, the deepening global debt crisis and austerity measures imposed on many Latin American countries over this same period by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund set the stage for even more drastic economic restructuring and displacement abroad.<sup>25</sup> These developments also dramatically altered the gendered composition of immigrant flows. Whereas prior to this time, migration from Latin America to the U.S. was heavily skewed toward males of working age, economic restructuring abroad eventually led to a growing number of women and children entering the migrant stream. The gender breakdown of immigrant populations varies from region to region, (with Mexican migration, for example, remaining somewhat skewed toward males and Dominican migration heavily skewed toward females) but the general trend in Latin American immigration since the 1970s and 1980s has been a pronounced feminization of migratory flows. As a result, although men still outnumber women, the aggregate Latin American population of foreign birth in the U.S. is rapidly approaching gender equilibrium.<sup>26</sup>

The effects of the combination of these dramatic structural shifts have played out differently in different regions of Latin America. In Mexico, the nation that historically has sent the largest numbers of migrants to the U.S., the deepening debt crisis, periodic devaluations of the peso, and natural disasters like the great earthquake

of 1985 helped to stimulate even more intense waves of out-migration by both males and females. As already noted, political turmoil and violence had similar effects on the nations of Central America. Moreover, in impoverished Caribbean nations like the Dominican Republic, the attraction of finding work in the U.S. (especially for Dominican women) has led to even more explosive growth in the émigré population. Whereas the Dominican population of the U.S. stood at fewer than 100,000 in 1970, by 1980, it had grown to more than 171,000, and as will be seen below, has continued to grow dramatically since.<sup>27</sup>

At the other end of the economic spectrum, ongoing economic restructuring in South America has led to a situation in which highly educated and highly skilled individuals from countries including Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Peru, Ecuador, and others have emigrated to the U.S. seeking economic opportunities not available to them in their places of origin. For example, according to a recent analysis of 2000 U.S. Census data, whereas only 2.3 percent of all Mexican migrants arriving in the U.S. in the 1980s had bachelor's degrees, 30 percent of those arriving from Peru and Chile, 33 percent of Argentine immigrants, and 40 percent of all Venezuelan immigrants had at least a bachelor's degree. For different reasons, this kind of "brain drain" migration has increased significantly in recent years. For example, between 2000 and 2010, the U.S. population of Chilean and Columbian descent or origin nearly doubled, and the resident population of Argentinian, Bolivian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Venezuelan origin or heritage more than doubled.<sup>28</sup>

As always, the economic dependence of the U.S. labor market on both "legal" and "illegal" immigrants has inevitably cemented and extended links of mutual dependence to immigrant-sending regions and thus has also contributed to the continuing cycle of licit and

illicit movement into U.S. territory. Since the 1970s, the same kinds of social networks previously established by European, Asian, and Mexican immigrants have been expanded by more recent migrants, strengthening the bonds of interdependence that have tied some immigrant-source regions to the U.S. for more than a century. The depth of this interdependence becomes clear when one considers the scale of remittances sent by migrants of all statuses to their countries of origin. One study notes that as recently as 2003, 14 percent of the adults in Ecuador, 18 percent of the adults in Mexico, and an astonishing one-in-four of all adults in Central America reported receiving remittances from abroad.<sup>29</sup> In 2007, Mexico alone received more than \$24 billion in remittances from its citizens abroad. Before the global economic contraction of 2008, when remittances peaked worldwide, remittances constituted at least 19 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Honduras, 16 percent of El Salvador's, 15 percent of Haiti's, and 10 percent of the GDP of both Nicaragua and Guatemala.<sup>30</sup> In short, in-sourcing of immigrant labor has become a deeply embedded structural feature of both the supply and demand side of the licit and illicit immigration equation and is, therefore, that much more difficult to arrest with unilateral policy interventions.

The effects of these interlocking trends have been intensified by ongoing neoliberal "free trade" negotiations and agreements designed to reduce trade barriers and foster greater regional economic integration. In the U.S., the two signal developments in this area, the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and a similar initiative, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (which is currently being implemented on an incremental basis with several

Caribbean, Central-, and South American nations) have been tremendously successful in increasing trade between the signatories. For example, since the ratification of NAFTA in 1994, trade between the U.S. and Canada has tripled, while that between the U.S. and Mexico has quadrupled. At the same time, however, these agreements also provided the means for U.S.-based firms to export parts of their production processes to comparatively low-wage and laxly regulated economies while downsizing production capacities (and shedding higher-wage, often-unionized labor) within the borders of the U.S. Together, these structural changes laid the foundations for an intensification of two trends that have come to define the U.S. economy

***"We seek a new and more open global trading system, not for its own sake but for our own sake."***

*Bill Clinton, Remarks on the Signing of NAFTA, 1993*

at the turn of the 21st century: the downsizing and outsourcing of production processes that were once based in the U.S. and a concomitant trend toward what might be called labor "in-sourcing" of ever larger numbers of both authorized and unauthorized immigrants.<sup>31</sup>

The stunning result of structural reshaping of the economy has been seen in two interrelated developments: the explosive growth of a Latino population with origins in virtually all the nations of Latin America, and an unprecedented explosion of the unauthorized population in the U.S. In 1970, the Latino population hovered around 9.6 million and constituted less than 5 percent of the nation's population. After that date, however, the Latino population not only grew dramatically but also became much more diverse. Overall, the nation's Latino population grew to at least 14.6 million by 1980, rose to 22.4 million in 1990, increased to 35.3 million in 2000, and approached 50 million by 2010.<sup>32</sup> Although ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans remain the majority of the Latino population (constituting 63, 9.2, and 3.5 percent of the total, respectively, in 2010), new immi-

grant influxes from elsewhere in Latin America created a more complex demography in which Central Americans (7.9 percent), South Americans (5.5 percent), and Dominicans (2.8 percent of the total) now also have significant population clusters. The three major Latino sub-populations of ethnic Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans grew substantially in the decade between the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Censuses (charting increases of 54, 36, and 44 percent respectively), but other Latino populations from sending regions in Central and South America grew at a much faster rate, ranging from an 85 percent increase in the Dominican immigrant community to a 191 percent increase in the Honduran population.

Overall, the immigrant populations of virtually all Spanish-speaking nations of the Western Hemisphere grew substantially in the decade between 2000 and 2010. The Dominican population of the U.S. increased from 765,000 to 1.4 million; the Guatemalan population jumped from 372,000 to 1.04 million; Hondurans from 218,000 to 633,000; Nicaraguans from 178,000 to 348,000, and Salvadorans from 655,000 to 1.6 million.<sup>33</sup> As of 2011, the combined pan-Latino population is estimated to have reached a figure of 50,478,000, more than 16 percent of the total population of the U.S.<sup>34</sup>

The number of unauthorized persons—again predominantly from Latin America but also from virtually every other nation on earth as well—has grown at similar rates since the 1970s. Reflecting ongoing economic displacement, chronic unemployment and underemployment, simmering civil unrest, and the escalating violence associated with the rise of the drug trade, human trafficking, and other illicit economic activities, unauthorized migration has risen along with legal immigration. It has always been difficult to estimate the actual

***Between 40 and 50 percent of all persons not legally in the country are individuals who did not cross the border illegally.***

numbers of undocumented persons within U.S. borders at any one moment, but demographers believe that in aggregate, the unauthorized population of the country rose from approximately 3 million in 1980, to about 5 million by the mid-1990s, reached an estimated 8.4 million by 2000, and peaked at between 11 and 12 million (or about 4 percent of the total U.S. population) before turning downward after the financial crisis of 2008-09. With much of the global economy in a sustained slump since then, the unauthorized population is estimated to have dropped by at least one million since 2009.<sup>35</sup>

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of slowing rates of unauthorized migration, heightened security measures and the ongoing recession have clearly contributed to the steep declines seen in recent years. Apprehensions reported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have dropped from a recent peak of nearly 1.64 million in 2000 to fewer than 450,000 in 2010. By 2011, border apprehensions had dropped even further to 340,252, a number that would have been almost unimaginable just five years earlier.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, deportations and enforced “voluntary departures” of unauthorized persons have risen sharply in recent years. According to data released by U.S. Immigration and Customs enforcement, deportations and other enforced departures rose from 291,000 in fiscal 2007 to nearly 400,000 in fiscal 2011—and were on an even higher numerical pace though the first five months of fiscal 2012.<sup>37</sup> Whether such trends continue when the economy recovers is an open question, especially given the increasingly integral role unauthorized workers have come to play in the economy.<sup>38</sup>

One other note should be added to this discussion. Although for reasons discussed elsewhere

in this essay the phenomenon of illegal immigration has commonly been associated almost exclusively with Mexicans, one should note that most migration scholars agree that somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of all persons not legally in the country are individuals who did not cross the border illegally but rather have overstayed valid tourist, student, or other visas. Thus, although illegal immigration has come to be perceived primarily as a “Mexican problem,” Mexicans ultimately accounted for about 58 percent of the estimated total in 2010—the remaining 42 percent, many of them visa violators, came from virtually every other nation in the world.<sup>39</sup>

### Future Trends

It is impossible to predict the future, but the entwined questions of Latin America immigration and the status of the millions of unauthorized Latin American immigrants currently in the U.S. will almost certainly continue to be two of the most complex and vexing issues on the American political landscape. On the one hand, growing international market competition makes it likely that the U.S. economy will continue to depend heavily on the labor of foreigners—and if patterns of regional economic integration continue, it is almost certain that Latin American immigrants of all statuses will continue to play a major role in the economic development of the nation. Indeed, before the current economic contraction, patterns of immigrant labor insourcing had accelerated to the extent that immigrants of all legal statuses were filling jobs in the U.S. at a rate comparable to the one that existed in the great age of industrial migration more than a century ago. Although the ongoing recession has clearly suppressed the hiring of both native and foreign workers, recent data reveals just how much immigrant workers have become crucial components of American economic life.

According to U.S. Census data, as recently as 2007, highly-skilled “legal” immigrants had be-

come essential in many key economic sectors, constituting fully 44 percent of all medical scientists, 37 percent of all physical scientists, 34 percent of all computer software engineers, 31 percent of all economists, 30 percent of all computer engineers, and 27 percent of all physicians and surgeons. With citizen members of the “baby boom” generation entering retirement in ever-increasing numbers, demographers predict that pressure to recruit highly educated and highly skilled immigrants will continue to rise.<sup>40</sup>

In the vast occupational landscape below such elite professions, immigrant workers of all legal statuses (the U.S. Census does not distinguish between “legal” and unsanctioned workers) have also become structurally embedded in virtually every job category in the economy. As would be expected, more than half of all agricultural workers, plasterers, tailors, dressmakers, sewing machine operators, and “personal appearance workers” are immigrants. Authorized and unauthorized immigrant workers are estimated to constitute another 40 to 50 percent of all drywall workers, packers and packaging workers, and maids and housekeepers. In the next tier, immigrants comprised 30 to 40 percent of all roofers, painters, meat and fish processors, cement workers, brick masons, cooks, groundskeepers, laundry workers, textile workers, and dishwashers. Beyond their expected presence in these labor-intensive occupations, however, immigrants of all statuses are estimated to hold 20 to 30 percent of at least 36 additional occupational categories.<sup>41</sup> But in addition to the numbers captured in official labor statistics, it is also important to keep in mind that untold numbers of other noncitizens toil in the vast and expanding reaches of the “informal” or unregulated “gray” and subterranean “black” market economies.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the turn to licit and illicit immigrant labor at all levels of the economy has been so great that it is estimated that foreign workers accounted for *half*

of all jobs created in the U.S. between 1996 and 2000 and comprised at least 16 percent of the total U.S. work force at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, on the other hand, the increasingly visible use of immigrant workers and the growth and dispersal of the Latino population since the 1980s into areas such as the American South and the industrial Northeast—places where few Latinos have ever been seen in substantial numbers before—have fanned the flames of dissent and nativism among those who are infuriated not only with what they see as the unconscionable expansion of the nation’s unauthorized population, but more generally, with the erosion of domestic living standards associated with the ongoing restructuring of the U.S. economy. Fears about the inexorable aging of the “white” citizen population and the rapid growth of a comparably youthful non-white Latino population have tended to heighten resentment against the foreign-born and their children—and especially against those without legal status. (In 2010, the median age of non-Hispanic white persons was 42, compared to a median age of 27 for all Latinos).<sup>44</sup> The widespread sense that the Federal Government—and lawmakers in both political parties—have not seriously enforced existing law obviously has also added to the frustration of those holding such views.

Consequently, in what is clearly the most dramatic recent development in the debate over immigration and border control policy, states and localities have entered the fray by enacting a range of measures designed to pressure unauthorized persons to leave their jurisdictions.

Following precedents set by activists in California and elsewhere, localities such as Hazleton, Pennsylvania in the East, Escondido, California in the West, and at least 130 other American towns and cities in between have passed local ordinances that do everything from criminalizing the hiring of unauthorized day laborers, making it illegal to rent to unauthorized residents, suspending business licenses of firms employing unauthorized workers, and criminalizing the public use of languages other than English. In addition, a number of states—perhaps most notoriously Arizona, and more recently, Indiana, Georgia, Alabama, and others—have debated and/or enacted a variety of measures designed to pressure unauthorized



*May Day March and Rally for Workers and Immigrant Rights, Seattle, Washington, 2011 (ImmigrationProf)*

persons to depart their jurisdictions. In 2010 alone, states passed more than 300 such laws, including measures requiring local law enforcement officials, teachers, social workers, health-care providers, private-sector employers, and others to verify the citizenship of any individual they encounter in their official duties or businesses—and make it a crime for non-citizens not to have documents verifying their legal status. Some have gone so far as to propose that unauthorized persons be prohibited from driving (or, for that matter, be barred from receiving any kind of state license), and that states not recognize the U.S. citizenship of infants born of unauthorized residents, regardless of the birthright citizenship provision of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Federal courts have thus far tended to enjoin or strike down such statutes as violations of federal prerogative in immigration matters, but the future in this arena of immigration and citizenship politics and jurisprudence remains uncertain.<sup>45</sup>

Given the tremendously unstable state of the U.S. and global economies and the highly politicized debate over border enforcement and undocumented immigration in the second decade of the century, it is impossible to predict even partial resolution to these festering controversies. Although the continuing precariousness of the economy may well lay the groundwork for the projection of more force on U.S. borders and an even more hostile climate for Latinos and non-citizens already within U.S. territory, global economic trends will almost certainly continue to create incentives for the ongoing structural use and abuse of both officially authorized and unauthorized Latino immigrant workers. Under these circumstances, it is likely that the historical debate over border enforcement, the continuing growth of the pan-Latino population, and the status of unauthorized persons will persist into the foreseeable future.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid, table 23, 62.
- <sup>10</sup> Philip Martin, "There is Nothing More Permanent Than Temporary Foreign Workers," in *Backgrounder* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, April 2001).
- <sup>11</sup> Gratton and Gutmann, "Hispanics in the United States," 143, table 3.
- <sup>12</sup> For information on the Smithsonian's Bracero Archive, see <http://braceroarchive.org/>, accessed June 19, 2012. For the Bittersweet Harvest project, see [www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/bracero\\_project/main.htm](http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/bracero_project/main.htm), accessed June 19, 2012.
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- <sup>37</sup> See U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “ICE Total Removals through Feb. 20, 2012,” [www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/ero/pdf/eroremovals1.pdf](http://www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/ero/pdf/eroremovals1.pdf), accessed June 15, 2012.
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