

Issue Brief: Latinos and Immigration

Key Words

Latino, immigration, Mexico, SB1070, migrant labor, population growth

Description

This issue brief considers immigration and population growth in the Latino population of the United States, with special attention given to the legislative and social implications of immigration for this community in the context of the larger American population.

Key Points

- “Latino” Americans have been identified as the fastest growing population in the United States; much of this growth can be attributed to immigration
- Immigration policies differ between various ethnoracial subgroups (i.e. Cuban vs Puerto Rican vs Mexican)
- Latinos present significantly within illegal *and* legal populations in the US, resulting in various legislative, social and industrial consequences

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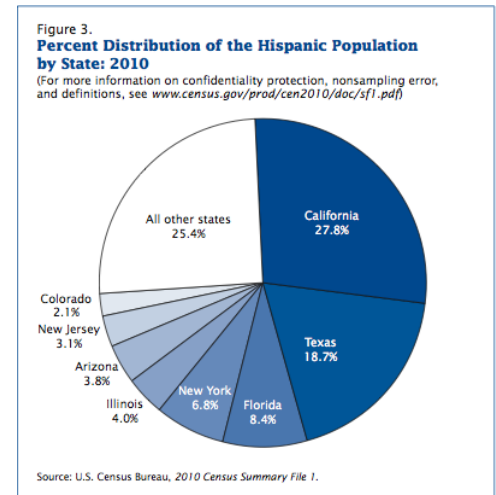
The ethnoracial title of “Latino,” according to the US Census, refers to those “persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spanish speaking Central and South America countries, and other Spanish cultures.” As of 2010, the Latino population accounted for 16% of the total population of the United States. While still constituting a “minority” demographic status, the Latino population of the United States shows the greatest upward numerical trajectory – those self-identifying as Latino increased by 43% from 2000 to 2010. Immigration is a concern for both Latino populations and the US government, as it serves as the

primary means for population increase in the Latino community. In this capacity, Latinos represent the fastest growing ethnoracial population of the United States, incurring some obvious social, economic and political ramifications.

The major concentration of Latino populations in the United States can be found in the Southwest and West states, with the highest distribution of Latinos found in California and Texas (see figure 3). These population bases have grown exponentially in the last ten years alone, prompting immigration to become a “hot button” topic for states affected by burgeoning immigrant populations.

In California, it is approximated that the California state government spends over \$21 billion¹ on public services for illegal immigrants. Interestingly, this approximation includes education, healthcare and incarceration costs as “public services” provided for illegal immigrants. This concentration of resources in specific states for the service of such vast immigrant populations has played a significant role in compounding ethnic tensions between Latinos and other ethnic groups, posing a prescient concern for both state and national governments.

At this point, it is important to draw attention to the “illegality” of immigrants, as the terms “illegal” and “immigrant” are often viewed as interchangeable. In fact, according to the FAIR, as of 2008 the United States served as home for 9 million “legal” immigrants, and 13 million “illegal” immigrants. This

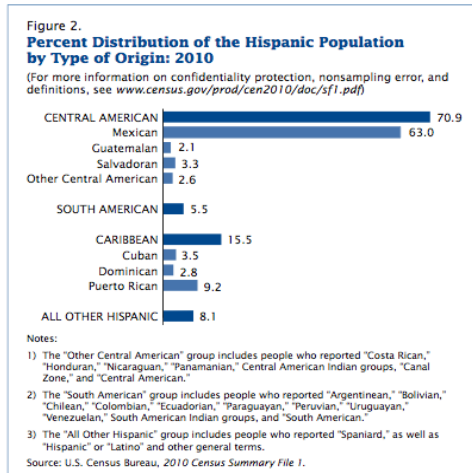


US Census Bureau, 2010 Census

¹ Federation for American Immigration Reform, 2010

distinction is specifically pertinent to Latino communities, as there exist (at times) social distinctions according to the legality of one's status in the US.

Puerto Ricans and Cubans, for example, are far more likely to have legal



citizenship than their Central American counterparts, even though Mexicans comprise 63% of the total Latino population of the United States (see figure 2). Because Puerto Ricans, in particular, are American citizens, there is often a tendency to look down upon Mexican-Americans

US Census Bureau, 2010 Census

as "beneath" the social standing of other (specifically

Caribbean) Latino-identifying groups.

Similar sentiments exist between Cuban Americans, and other Latino immigrant communities. The "Wet Foot, Dry Foot" policy, specifically, makes naturalization far more accessible to Cuban communities. The policy connotes that those Cubans who are able to access US soil, by whatever means, will be allowed to stay in the United States, with up to 20,000 visas made available annually for Cubans. Mexicans, on the other hand, who are more likely to cross a land-based border, have an institutional history of difficulty in acquiring citizenship. After the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which allowed over 2 million undocumented Mexicans to acquire legal status, anti-Mexican immigration policy and public sentiment has risen.

One of the most controversial legislative decisions in US history occurred in the state that serves as a primary point for Mexican immigration, namely Arizona's

Senate Bill 1070. Summarily, the bill dictates that aliens that reside in the state of Arizona for more than 30 days must register with the US government, and carry identification on them at all times dictating their status as illegal or otherwise.

Further, this act provides that persons can be stopped, at the discretion of law enforcement, if they appear to be “illegal” and arrested. This act essentially legalized racial profiling in the state of Arizona,



Nate Beeler, The Washington Examiner

prompting the US District Court to place an injunction on the bill, prohibiting the profiling and arrest clause of the bill. The bill continues to circulate the Senate floor, however, and its predicted that the legislative future of SB 1070 will be indicative of the nature of immigrant relations in the United States.

As Latino immigration continues to rise, so to do its implications for the future population of the United States. It is estimated that 1 in 7 US workers are immigrants, with one third of immigrant workers coming from Mexico alone. The implications of this are far-reaching – the US migrant workforce is primarily comprised of Latinos, and thus the basis of US primary industry falls in the hand of immigrant populations. Latinos have also become the baseline of the service industry, with food service serving as the industry with second highest saturation of Latino immigrant constituents.

This influx of employment has also prompted immigrant settlement, with a new generation of Americans (born of immigrants) set to comprise a much larger

portion of the populace. Latinos are predicted to comprise 24.4% of the total population by 2050.² The future of this population is uncertain, indeed, but the following holds true: the US must adjust its stance on immigration, specifically Latino, as Latino immigrant populations continue to rise and reshape our understandings of what a true “American” appears to be.

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² US Census Bureau, 2008