

FOCUS

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Latino Children, Youth, and Families in Oklahoma

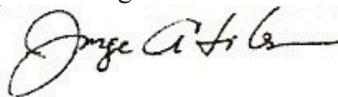
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Immigration and immigration policy have been the sources of much fiery debate and heated controversy in our country during the last several years. Since most immigration into the U.S. comes from Latin American countries, Latinos have found themselves at the center of this controversy. The purpose of this article is not to address the legal debate about immigration reform, but to offer the findings of a research study that serve to inform the process from the perspective of Latinos residing Oklahoma – those with legal status and those without legal authorization.

Nationally, Latinos are the largest minority group in the U.S. making up about 15% of the total population. However, it is projected that Latinos will contribute approximately 44% of the total population growth in the U.S. between 2000 and 2020, and 62% of total growth from 2020 to 2050. By the middle of the century, one in every four Americans and one of every two or 50% of Kindergarten thru 12th grade students will be able to trace their heritage to a Latin American country.

Approximately 279,000 Latinos currently live in Oklahoma. Among Latinos ages 16 and older, 56% are foreign born and 44% were born in the U.S. Nearly one-third (28.7%) of Latinos living in Oklahoma are unauthorized immigrants. About two-thirds (67%) of foreign-born Latinos in Oklahoma have been here more than 10 years and 29% have been here more than 20 years. More than four-fifths (or 85%) children living in immigrant families are U.S. citizens and less than 10% of school age youth are foreign born.

These demographic data suggest that a sizeable part of Oklahoma's citizens are of Latino heritage and that the vast majority of these are U.S. citizens who deserve the same rights and considerations provided to any other citizen. Furthermore, if current demographic trends continue, this percentage will only increase in the future. Unlike states whose Latino populations have deep roots, many going back before statehood (e.g., California, Florida, Texas), Latinos in Oklahoma are generally more recent arrivals. As a result, Oklahoma is just recently recognizing the necessity to create an infrastructure designed to meet the unique needs of these new citizens. In order to help assess the barriers to resources experienced by Oklahoma's Latino population, Oklahoma State University's Cooperative Extension Service and Agriculture Experiment Station jointly commissioned a research study of Latino children, youth, and families. A mixed methods approach that combines personal interviews, focus groups and surveys was used to collect data across Oklahoma. The following draws from this research to bring a more clear understanding to the experiences and challenges faced by Latinos living Oklahoma, and highlights how immigration policy has had unintentional negative affects on Latinos who are citizens of our great state.



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Immigration Reform and the Future of Latinos in Oklahoma

Barriers to Resources

Latino research participants mentioned both positive and negative experiences of living in Oklahoma. As more participants were surveyed and interviewed, these experiences began to emerge as repeated themes identifying the unique challenges of Latino *youth, families, and communities*. During the course of the focus groups, research participants described various barriers or obstacles that they identified as preventing Latinos in Oklahoma from seeking out or obtaining necessary individual, family, or community services. Two primary themes emerged in the focus groups: *access* and *fear*.

Language As A Barrier to Access

Most immigrants from Latin American countries speak Spanish as their native language. When they arrive in the United States, they begin the arduous process of learning English as a second language. Research has indicated that the younger immigrants arrive in the U.S., the more schooling they had in their country of origin, and the longer they live here, the more fluent they are in English. Because of factors inherent to brain maturation, the ability to learn any language slowly decreases with age and plateaus around puberty. Therefore, adolescents and adults from non-English speaking countries immigrating to the U.S. will have the most difficulty mastering the language. All the reasons mentioned above influence English fluency among different immigrant generations. Consequently, Spanish is the predominant language among 72% of first generation Latinos (the first to arrive in the country), but that number sharply drops to 7% among second generation Latinos (the ones born to immigrant parents), and disappears among third generation Latinos, for all of whom English is the predominant language.

English and Spanish speaking research participants described language as a natural barrier to services and opportunities in Oklahoma. The difficulties faced due to the lack of English proficiency can be multifaceted and difficult to untangle. Participants in each of the focus groups depicted how communication breakdowns and misunderstandings are frequent occurrences in their interactions with primarily English speaking communities in which they live. Ultimately, the barriers

associated with language lead to breakdown in work, education and service opportunities. Participants described how language barriers and ineffective translations of information often resulted in decreased access to needed services and opportunities and diminished comprehension of important information. The focus group of Spanish-speaking professionals, in particular, highlighted the need for government regulation in translation and interpretation services, and cited cases where incompetent services either botched or took advantage of monolingual clients who had no way to verify their translator's abilities. A commonly cited occurrence was for police departments to use volunteer interpreters when questioning someone who had been detained. Unfortunately, neither the police nor the person being questioned had any means to determine the veracity and accuracy of the interpretation services.

The practice of government officials and other private and nonprofit entities using volunteers is a reflection of the inadequacies of the infrastructure in Oklahoma to respond to a growing citizenry who are often limited in their English-speaking abilities. Research participants spoke of having to rely on untrained volunteers, friends, or their own children to interpret in such potentially life-altering situations as: a conference call with a Spanish-speaking interpreter to conduct psychotherapy; with doctors in emergency rooms and office visits; parent-teacher conferences and meetings with school administrators over conduct and performance issues; and during Child Protective Service investigations and in courts of law. Professionals and administrators in hospitals and social services who were interviewed expressed lament and deep concern over not having trained professionals who are bilingual. Unfortunately, their hands are tied. There are simply not enough bilingual professionals in Oklahoma to meet the demand, and based on the percentage of students in Oklahoma's major universities who are Latino, little is being done to increase the supply of bilingual professionals through targeted recruitment and scholarship programs.

Research participants also described how lack of fluency in English hinders daily activities, limits employment and educational opportunities, is a barrier to understanding laws and ordinances, and impedes the overall

financial success of Latinos. For these citizens, the traditional vehicles of information – print, radio, and television – are not widely translated into Spanish leaving many without access to important information about laws, opportunities, and resources. Latinos who don't have their immigration documents in order are particularly limited in accessing resources. Research participants described that often, even those who have their immigration papers in order, find little help from the authorities. Many research participants spoke of police and governmental officials who treated them with respect and dignity. However, many others told stories of how in traffic incidents, altercations in the neighborhood, or in cases of theft, police and other authorities did not facilitate justice for them. For example, one lady, a legal resident of the U.S. spoke of how an American lady ran a red light and hit her car. But the police gave her (the Latina) the ticket. When she protested, she reported the officer as saying:

“El policia dijo, ‘yo te deberia de haber llevado arrestada porque tu no traes licencia de aqui.’ Dijo ‘pero no te voy a llevar no más porque fuiste la agredida.’ (The policeman said, ‘I should have arrested you because you don't have a license from here [Oklahoma].’ He said, ‘but I'm not going to because you were the victim.)

Later she went to court to see if she could find a way to tell her side of the story and recoup some of her damages. Since she needed help communicating in English, the court relied on a purportedly bilingual, but perhaps unqualified, person to assist with the case:

“El que andaba limpiando lo dejaron que me interpretara.” (They put the guy who was cleaning [the janitor] to translate for me.)

An unintended byproduct of immigration policy is immigrants who are illegal often feel that they cannot turn to governmental authorities for justice or help for fear of repercussions. This fear has contributed to Latino residents not contacting police to report crimes in their neighborhood and has allowed hoodlums and delinquents to operate freely,

and gangs to flourish without fear of being reported. To their credit some police and sheriff departments, (e.g., the Tulsa Police Department) have recognized this side effect of Oklahoma immigration policy and initiated a program that allows Latino residents to report crime in their neighborhood without being questioned about their immigration status. The problem the police face is regaining the trust of the Latino community so they utilize the program. However, for many Latinos in Oklahoma, documented and undocumented alike, trusting a system, which they perceive as discriminatory, is a very difficult proposition, and particularly so after the enactment of HB 1804. Some, to avoid the hassle of proving their right to live here, and others out of fear for themselves or another family member being deported, resign to simply live in silence with the injustice.

Research participants also spoke of numerous volunteer organizations and churches that offered free English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Numerous participants had taken advantage of these classes, while others communicated that, due to extended hours at work, classes were simply not an option. Moreover, research suggests it takes the average student five to seven years of continued study to be proficient in a foreign language. Language is a significant barrier affecting both citizens and non-citizens of Oklahoma with no immediate solution in sight. In order for government and private institutions to adequately address this need, much more needs to be done in regards to encouraging bi-lingual students to graduate from high school and continue their studies in one of Oklahoma's institutions for higher learning. Additionally, Oklahoma's colleges and universities need to provide many more scholarships directed toward students, not only of Latino heritage, but also to those who can demonstrate a proficiency in Spanish.

Access to Community

The sense of community is an important issue for Latinos. Most scholars agree that Latino cultures tend to be much more collectivistic when compared to predominant U.S. culture, which is considered one of the more highly individualistic cultures in the world. Cultures with a collectivistic orientation emphasize group goals and interests over those of individual members.

Many Latinos living in Oklahoma struggle with lack of a strong sense of community. Our research participants talked about

several ways that this lack of community has impacted their lives, and expressed that there was very little in the community to bring them together or a place where they could gather. One participant stated:

"... no hay una o sea, identidad de comunidad... No hay reuniones donde nos podemos ver no hay, este... pues está dispersa la comunidad... Entonces no hay un lugar de reunión, no hay una comunicación. No hay información para todos al menos no que yo sepa aquí en este lugar." (There isn't any community identity... There aren't any meetings where we see each other, the community is all over the place... There isn't any place to meet, there's no communication. There isn't any information that goes out to everyone, at least none that I know of in this place.)

As a result, information about events and opportunities was not readily available to Latinos. Participants relied almost exclusively on "word of mouth" for their method of receiving information about events and activities. They also spoke about the lack of places to socialize and enjoy wholesome activities. For example, in one community, participants spoke of a small Mexican *abasto* (small supermarket/store) that opened and quickly became a meeting place for many Latinos. However, they reported that the police began to park their patrol cars outside of the store, which dissuaded many potential patrons from frequenting the store. They also spoke of a similar instance when the youth from their town began playing *fútbol* (soccer) in an empty field in a park:

"...y llega la policía y les dicen que nomás... que no se puede y los quitan de ahí. Entonces ellos prefieren irse mejor a comprar sus cervezas y que el mayor de edad les compre las cervezas a ellos que son menores de edad" (... and the police arrive and simply tell them that they can't [play there] and they run them off. So they [the youth] prefer to go buy their beer, and the over-age one [21-year-old] buys the under-age ones beer.)

Participants mentioned this case in the context of describing problems with their youth. Since there are no healthy outlets for their youth, like community soccer games,

young people turn to unhealthy alternatives such as alcohol and drugs.

The church was also discussed as a significant source of community for participants. People attend church and see others from the community, hear announcements, and receive flyers and handouts describing upcoming events and opportunities. Unfortunately, though, for many Latinos in Oklahoma this is not the case. One group mentioned that for several years there was not a Spanish-speaking clergy at the church to say Mass in Spanish, thus resulting in few Latinos attending. In one area, a Spanish-speaking priest recently arrived and church services are growing in attendance.

A person's native language is part of their identity, even more so if that is the only language they are able to speak fluently. Moreover, the lack of mastery of the host country's language can contribute to a person's sense of social and emotional isolation. Understandably, Spanish language was very important to many research participants. However, they also expressed the sense of feeling looked down upon by native English speakers when speaking Spanish in public. One lady said it this way:

"Y en cuanto oigo el inglés... para mí es una cortina de hierro, el idioma. Que siente esa discriminación. Simplemente en cualquier lado que está uno. Los Americanos nos oyen hablar y voltean a ver. Yo por ejemplo me detengo de hablar mi idioma cuando hay gente Americana porque el señalamiento..." (And as soon as I hear English... for me it's like an iron curtain, the language. You feel the discrimination. Wherever you are, the Americans hear us talk and they turn to look. As for me, I am hesitant to speak my language when I am around Americans because of the finger pointing.)

Another person mentioned that whenever she hears someone speaking Spanish it makes her feel safe:

"...escuchamos el español y volteamos a ver quien lo habla porque sentimos protección." (...we hear Spanish and we turn to see who's talking because we feel protection.)

And another elaborated about how language creates community and binds people:

“Yo se que ellos no van a discriminar. ¿Si? ¿Yhola cómo te llamas? ¿Dónde vives? ¿Qué haces?” (I know that they [people who speak Spanish] are not going to discriminate against me. And then, [they say] Hi, What’s your name? Where do you live? What do you do?)

There is a natural affinity and trust for the Latino when they find someone who speaks their language and understands them. This finding has direct and important implications for police and others who work with Latinos in Oklahoma. However, this natural affinity can be a double-edged sword for many Latinos living where community and legal structures are not in place to protect them and to work justice on their behalf. Even though research participants did speak of racial discrimination by non-Latinos, few emphasized this as a major problem. More often, participants spoke of how more established and acculturated Latinos would take advantage of those with less experience and inadequate English skills. Across almost all of the focus groups, interviews and surveys, participants highlighted the abuses that occurred from the hands of other Latinos. For example, referring to racism one person spoke:

“Es que si hay mucho, pero es que lamentablemente, yo pienso, nosotros como Latinos nos tiramos más entre nosotros... Pero normalmente, casi siempre, son los mismos Latinos contra los mismos Latinos.” (It’s that, yes there is a lot [racial discrimination], but it’s, unfortunately I think we Latinos do it more amongst ourselves... But normally almost always, almost always, it’s the very Latinos [discriminating] against the other Latinos.)

Another area that some participants mentioned as a deterrent to community formation was work demands. Latino immigrants tend to work long hours at low-paying jobs that offer little flexibility in scheduling. Often, men and women work more than one job, just to make ends meet. Unfortunately, long hours at work make it difficult for Latinos to spend much time socializing with family and neighbors as typically happened in their countries of origin. One participant stated in response to why it seemed like there was a lack of a sense of community:

“Tal vez por la misma razón de que se mantiene uno en el trabajo... Ya llegué a casa, hay que hacer la cena y ‘apurate, apurate.’ Como así me estaba preguntando unos de mis hermanos. ‘¿Y cómo se llama tu vecina de en frente?’ Y le digo, ‘pues no la conozco.’” (Maybe due to the same reason that you’re always at work... When I get home, I have to make dinner, and ‘hurry up, hurry up.’ It’s like when one of my brothers was asking me, ‘What’s your neighbor’s name, the one who lives across the street?’ And I told him, ‘I don’t know her.’)

Access to Childcare and School

Participants also found it difficult to find quality childcare and often didn’t know where to look. Interviews with administrative personnel at two large Oklahoma meatpacking plants indicated the lack of reliable quality childcare is a primary reason for absenteeism and turnover of their Latino workers. This was also reflected in responses to the survey. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being “very easy,” the average response for access to childcare was only 4.3 with some groups averaging as low as 2.7. A sizeable portion of the participants surveyed expressed not knowing about services such as Head Start or, if they had heard about Head Start, they did not know how to access it.

School is a socializing agent for children and for their parents that helps to organize and inform the community. Parents are made aware of resources, activities, and events for their children, themselves, and their families through messages from school. School is also a mechanism through which the larger community conveys its values and norms. However, participants assigned a low average rating for understanding messages from school. This points out the difficulty that many Latinos are having with the school systems in Oklahoma and may explain part of the reason that parental involvement trends to be low, and in some areas less than 50% of the Latino children are graduating from Oklahoma schools.

Fear As A Barrier

Perhaps the most salient theme that emerged within and across focus groups was the overarching experience of fear as a Latino living in the state of Oklahoma. Several

participants described the fear as a result of Oklahoma House Bill 1804, which became law in November 2007. This law, known commonly as the Oklahoma anti-immigration law, replicated federal immigration law and expanded it in certain instances by requiring additional proof of legal status when applying for driver licenses, certain government benefits, and employment. In addition, the law made it illegal to knowingly transport undocumented immigrants, even if they are a family member. HB1804 has been challenged in the courts and several sections of this legislation still remain to be implemented. Nevertheless, this law has had intended and unintended consequences for Oklahoma Latinos—documented and undocumented. An unfortunate side effect of the law in the mind of many Latinos is that Oklahoma is not a friendly place to live. An overarching theme that emerged among research participants – citizens, non-citizen legal residents, and undocumented alike—related to perceived barriers associated with anxiety and fear created by the anti-immigration law.

“You know so it’s just creating this fear and I work here in the agency and I hear it everyday. I don’t know how many times a day – the fear that people have... And it’s just constantly. I mean the people are afraid. And not just...not necessarily by illegals, but even legal people are feeling this is not a very friendly state to live in.”

Focus group participants described how many Latinos have left Oklahoma due to the fear that has resulted from HB 1804.

“...a lot of people left from here cause they were scared. Because there was rumor, you know, rumors get started. There was rumor that [a local company] was next [referring to a U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement raid on a local meatpacking plant]. So there were a lot of families saying ‘What do we do? What do we do?’”

The survey data collected also reflected the perception that HB 1804 had a pronounced negative effect on the Latino community in Oklahoma. The vast majority indicated that they knew people who had left Oklahoma as a result of HB 1804. Among those who left some were undocumented Latinos, but others were documented residents and citizens, and

non-Latinos with family members who could not obtain legal documents. Latinos who stayed in Oklahoma after the enactment of HB1804 reported that ethnic discrimination against Latinos in their community had worsened since the law came into effect and that the law had negatively affected the emotional well-being and access to proper health care for Latinos in their community. In fact, more than 30% of participants surveyed stated that they had avoided seeking medical assistance for fear of being turned in to authorities, and more than 50% personally knew of someone who had avoided seeking medical attention for fear of being turned in to authorities.

Some research participants spoke of wanting to take advantage of educational programs that would help them and their families, such as afterschool programs, parenting classes, etc., but they didn't attend due to fear associated with the risk of simply traveling back and forth to the event:

"...si me gustaría que hubiera platicas, primero de como educar, o como decirle a nuestros hijos o nuestras hijas a hablar de sexo. Que es una relación sexual. Que significa ya ser mujer. Pero sin el miedo de si voy a lo mejor me van a deportar, que me piden documentos. (...yes I would like it if there were talks, first on how to educate, or how to talk to our sons or daughters, talk about sex. What is a sexual relationship. What it means to be a woman. But, without the fear that, if I go, they are probably going to deport me, that they will ask me for my [immigration] documents).

"...ya tuvimos una experiencia mas o menos con, en la biblioteca publica nosotros los Latinos y fue la verdad muy poca gente y ... la comunidad lo necesita, yo creo que es urgente. Pero que siempre va estar el miedo a salir, a ser deportado" (we already had an experience more or less with, in the public library we, the Latinos, and very few people attended and...the community needs this, I believe that it is urgent. But, there is always going to be the fear to go out, to be deported).

This fear of the authorities was not limited to unauthorized immigrants. Participants spoke of racial profiling, of police stopping them due to small infractions (like not using

a turn signal), seemingly because they were Latinos. In these cases they would have to prove they had the right to be in the U.S., and if they weren't carrying the appropriate documents they would be arrested or detained. Many participants perceived that there is a generalized belief, shared by the police, that most all Latinos in Oklahoma are unauthorized immigrants. As a result if a person has a Latino appearance, and perhaps a foreign accent, they are often assumed to be an unauthorized immigrant until they can prove otherwise. A participant expressed this profiling by saying that if you are Latino, your name is "**Juan**" – that is, you are lumped into an indistinguishable pile of Latinos, and treated as if you were guilty of immigration crimes until you provide *proof* of your innocence.

"Porque la policía puede pararte y no les importa si eres legal o eres ilegal hasta que presentas documentos. Pero ya estás detenido, ya estás con el miedo, ya tus hijos están solos, ya hablaste a tu marido, ya lo sacaste de clase, ya esto, ya...o sea, total de cuentas, Juan te llamas." (Because the police can stop you and they don't care if you are legal or illegal until you present your [legal] documents. But, by then you are already arrested, by then you're already filled with fear, your children are already alone, you already called your husband, you already pulled him out of class, you already this, already that, by all accounts your name is Juan).

Others spoke of how they have to prepare their children in case mommy and daddy don't come home some evening because they were deported. One mother spoke of helping her four and six year-old children memorize a neighbor's phone number in the event they didn't come home. Another spoke of parents losing custody of their children when the parents were deported because the children were U.S. citizens. The children were sent to foster care and the parents were sent to Mexico without any clear reunification strategy. Several emphasized how this situation has created trauma in their children to the extent that they no longer want to go to school for fear of not finding their parents when they return home.

Y a mi me ha tocado. Que la gente...entrenan a los niños, los padres

platican a los niños – especialmente cuando la ley empezó a pasar – a saber que decir, a saber a quien llamar. Si no llego, le llamas a Fulano. Aquí esta el numero. Este, si nos agarren, este, tu dile que tu eres de aquí. Si pasa esto... era un miedo tal que muchos niños ya no querían ir a la escuela. Porque sentían, o sea sentían el miedo que '¡no te vayas!' '¿Que tal si regreso y ya no estas? y...'" (I have had to do it. People...they train their children, the parents talk to their children – especially when the law was first being passed – to know what to say, to know who to call. 'If I don't come home, you call John Doe. Here is the number.' This uh, if they arrest us, this uh, you tell them that you are from here. If this happens...it was such fear that many children didn't want to go to school anymore. Because they felt, that, well, they had this fear "Don't go!" "What if I come home and you're not here? And...").

When a specific group is marked due to their ethnicity, fear becomes an equal opportunity toxin that contaminates and destroys without respect for proper documentation. All members of the group – citizens and non-citizens, recent arrivals and those who have lived on this land for multiple generations – feel the debilitating effects fear produces. Racial profiling produces infringements on due process and the perception that the larger society is hostile. As a result, minority groups tend to internalize negative ethnic identities, which lead to detrimental effects on multiple aspects of life. Unremitting fear limits access to the resources needed to lead a productive and satisfying life and produces the anxiety and chronic stress that harms the mental and physical health of adults and children. However, discrimination towards an ethnic group hurts the larger community as well, because it inhibits the development of trust, reduces neighborliness, decreases civic participation, and weakens democracy.

Conclusion

Both our country and state are going through significant demographic changes. Social policies steer the organization and functioning of Oklahoma's diverse populations. Most policies are well intentioned and are seen as the application of an interpretation

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of law. However, most policies also have unintended side effects that with careful forethought, should be anticipated before their implementation. Oklahoma, perhaps more than any other state, with its roots as an Indian Territory should be sensitive to a people to whom a policy is applied without representation in our governmental system. If history is an accurate teacher, we should be quick to learn from the results of our past “legal” treatment of African Americans and Native Americans. While undeniably legal, the social policies applied to these minority groups at the hands of the majority group who occupied the positions of power, have been the source of ongoing difficult race relations

decades after the fact. Moreover, these poor relations affect most every aspect of our society through increases in poverty, crime, losses in productivity, declines in mental and physical health, and the resentment and bitterness that is often the result of human suffering and perceived injustice.

Today, approximately one-third of the Latinos living in Oklahoma are unauthorized to do so according to current law. However, approximately 85% of their children are American citizens. Results from this research study suggest that the way in which Oklahoma decides to treat unauthorized Latinos through the creation and application of law and social policy has direct effects on many, if not most,

Latinos legally residing in Oklahoma as well. These effects are seen in Latinos in Oklahoma having limited access to important resources, not being able to form healthy communities, dropping out of school, being the victims of crime and fraud, and being plagued with a chronic and pervasive fear. In order for Oklahoma’s future to be optimal, steps need to be taken to ensure fair and humane treatment of all of its current and future citizens. With the growing rate of Latinos in Oklahoma, the practical barriers to healthy and normal development created by recently implemented social policy need to be re-examined, as do the abilities of our current infrastructure to meet the current and future needs of our state.