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INTRODUCTION

LATINOS ON THE GREAT PLAINS: AN OVERVIEW

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I am pleased to join co-editors Gus Carlo and Miguel Carranza in this special issue of *Great Plains Research*, focusing on the "Latino Experience on the Great Plains." As an invited contributor to this issue, I have decided to write from my personal knowledge and experiences as the former director of the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University from July 1994 through July 1998. It was during this time that I worked closely with a number of midwestern scholars to promote the most extensive studies and reports on Latinos of the heartland, including the Great Plains. At JSRI, we were able to produce four regional conferences (immigration and Latino communities, the histories of Latino Voices, the state of the art of Latino social science, and Latino psychology). We also generated more than 140 reports and placed them (full text) on the JSRI website: <<http://www.jsri.msu.edu>>. I believe that this body of knowledge provides a useful benchmark for information on Latinos of the Great Plains but still leaves more questions than answers on the Latino presence and experience.

In this essay I write generally of the history, demographics, and social issues of Great Plains Latinos. I welcome more study and research on this expanding population. The population is too important and valuable to ignore in our work.

The First Latinos

Historians will note that the Latino experience in this region dates back to the 16th century with the intrusion of Spanish explorers who came in search of fabled places and gold (Chávez 1992). As far as we know, the Spanish were the first Europeans to reach the Great Plains. Although few remnants remain of the earliest *españoles*, there is no doubt that they left a lasting imprint in the region. Their legacy is found in our western traditions and cowboy culture that includes large ranches and laws governing the use of land and water (Fernández-Shaw 1991). Yes, for those who don't know

this history, Hispanics were the first to introduce horses, rodeos, the barbeque, and most of the traditional implements and customs used in cattle ranching, herding, branding, and range management. Spanish names are prominent among Indian families and several communities. One historian has suggested that the name Kansas may have come from the Spanish word *cansar*, which means "to tire or wear down."

Demographic Issues

The current Latino presence is not new or unusual in the Great Plains. Latinos have been flowing in and out of the region since the early 1900s. Latinos of Mexican heritage are the dominant group among Latinos who came to find employment and livelihood for family and friends. Latinos from Puerto Rico (US citizens by birth), Cuba, and Central and South America have broadened the fabric of Latino presence. The stories of Latino migration are not much different from the stories of other immigrant families. They continue to arrive to establish a better life for their families. But Latino experiences are not generally the same as those of other immigrants from Europe. The Mexican experience, for example, is that of seasonal agricultural work and relatively little assistance in housing and year-round employment. Unfortunately, there is little written of recent Latino immigration and settlement. What information we have is based on studies conducted by social scientists since the 1980s. But if the experiences of the earlier settlers are similar to the experiences of Latinos who settled the Midwest and western states, then their experiences would have been stories of struggling to overcome language barriers, some social discrimination, and problems being accepted by the white communities.

At the close of the 20th century, the Latino presence was very evident in nearly every county of the Great Plains, in the large industrial "agribusiness" plants and in the elementary schools of most communities. Latino culture was also flowing from radio stations that played the so-called Tejano music, a Mexican version of polkas played with accordions and instruments of German manufacture. Tejano conjuntos (musician groups) were gaining popularity in the Great Plains for evening entertainment and festivities. Salsa music and the Latin pop of Selena and Ricky Martin were common fare on many radio stations. In high schools, the Spanish language outdistanced other foreign languages taught, bumping instruction in German, French, Italian, and in some places, Polish. The decade of the Latino arrived in the Great Plains during the 1990s.

Contemporary Processes of Change

There are two major trends in the Great Plains that have been largely overlooked by federal and state policy: the increased reliance of service sector businesses (e.g., hotels and tourist sites), agricultural producers, and food processing industries on Latino labor, and the remarkable growth of Latino enclaves throughout the region. The relative absence of attention to these developments has left many Latino households at the margin of policies and programs that would enhance their roles in communities and employment. Certain food processing industries, particularly meatpacking, are experiencing steady and rising employment of Latino workers. As the meatpacking industry has restructured and established plants in Great Plains communities, it has attracted Latinos from immigrant and Latino family networks in California, Texas, Mexico, and Central America.

By legalizing undocumented workers and prioritizing family unification in federal immigration laws, more foreign-born Latino workers have “spilled over” from the traditional states of the West and moved to the Great Plains. The locations where Latinos are currently residing (and working) are invisible in government census reports. Most of the demographic and related changes have occurred since the 1990 census.

Latino Roles and Contributions

Nonetheless, the influx of Latinos to many Great Plains areas is so great that it has tended to offset some of the aging and decline in the native population. Communities experiencing Latino growth find their communities increasing in size and once again generating a large number of young people. The scale and nature of these demographic changes present formidable challenges to Latinos, their employers, and their communities. Incorporation of Latinos calls for greater understanding of boundaries of language, ethnicity, culture, and class. Just as Latinos search for ways of inclusion, local governments and employers face similar hurdles in schooling, public programs, involvement, training, and outreach within Latino communities. Incorporation also means that youth become a positive force within these communities provided they receive appropriate support from their schools and local leaders—that is, provided they are regarded as assets and not liabilities within their neighborhoods.

The positive attributes of Latino newcomers are important to recognize. I have already mentioned the demographic shifts and the relative

youthfulness of Latinos. Latinos as a whole bring positive values and attitudes toward hard work, supportive family networks, and respect for authority (see Marin and Marin 1991). Yet, Latino contributions tend to be undervalued or ignored, and instead, attention is focused on what is perceived to be the Latino's drain on the infrastructure of their communities. There is too often widespread ignorance of the revitalization and range of skills Latinos bring to communities, and in its place a false belief that Latino immigrants abuse public services and welfare. In fact, though they tend to be poor, Latinos use welfare and services at rates far below that of other Americans.

Areas of Need

The source of the growing burden on community infrastructure is to be found in how the service sector businesses, meat-processing plants, and other employers restructure the labor force in order to keep the cost of wages and benefits down. Too many firms operate on a premise of an endless supply of low-cost Latino labor and thereby regenerate a working poor in their communities. There is a growing need to monitor the restructuring of industries and businesses to address the incorporation and successful deployment of new Latino families.

There is much we do not know, but it is clear there are many needs and issues related to the changes in Latino demographics and their inclusion, employment, and income generation as new residents. There is a severe deficit of accurate information about Latino well-being and their perceptions of civic participation, public services, conflict resolution, employee-employer relationships, adequacy of schooling, and community infrastructure (e.g., housing, health care, police and fire protection).

But does all this mean that the Latino experience can be taken for granted? That it will continue without problems and concerns for Latinos and the general populations of the Great Plains? Of course, my answer is no. We cannot take the demographic growth as cause for celebration, because problems and issues are evident wherever there has been considerable growth in Latino concentration.

In rural America, white people's reactions to increased Latino immigration have historically brought about two trends: social divisions based on ethnicity, and white flight. Several case studies show evidence that established white residents often do not recognize Latinos as part of their community and do not take into account Latino needs in community development

efforts. Ethnic and class divisions between local white residents and Latinos have resulted in fractured communities, within which the traditional white residents of long standing have tended to develop the local economy not through residents' demands for social equity but through residential and economic segregation. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the white flight from rural places where Latinos are settling is due, at least in part, to anti-immigrant, anti-Latino, or anti-farmworker feelings. Rural community news articles point to increased ethnic conflict between whites and Latinos as the Latino population increases in size. In some communities, the white population seems to leave as the Latino population moves in, especially in old neighborhoods.

What can follow are distinct ethnic neighborhoods, with most of the community resources invested in the white side of town, and conflicts erupting with charges of racism and discrimination. Concomitantly, several issues loom in importance. Does an increasing concentration of Latinos in enclaves result in questionable socioeconomic outcomes? What would happen to the communities without the influx and employment of Latinos? What happens to the non-Latino population? Does the community develop an inclusive attitude toward Latinos? Is the Latino population concentrated because of jobs designed for them? Is the Latino population limited in economic opportunity because of the rise of immigrants from abroad, resulting in labor competition? Conversely, are Latinos giving rural towns a population revival, saving the communities from losing their economic base? Are Latinos adding culture and global awareness? Are Latinos more productive and filling important jobs? Are Latinos contributing to the revenues and financial viability of businesses?

While Latinos in the Great Plains work in many different positions, they are still considered to be migrant and seasonal farm workers. Few have knowledge of the new magnets that are attracting larger numbers of Latinos. There is, for example, the tourist trade and services sector, providing jobs for people to work behind the scenes in hotels, clinics, offices, and so on. There is also the restructuring of the meatpacking industry. Large-scale meat processors such as Monfort, Swift Armour, and IBP, Inc. offer year-round jobs that pay at least \$6 an hour (1999 earnings), much higher and more stable earnings than are possible as seasonal farm workers. Jobs at these meatpacking plants are attractive to Latinos. Spanish speaking is not a problem and there is relatively little local competition for many of these routine and unpleasant jobs. However, industrial restructuring is characterized by assembly-line processes that are labor intensive but demanding in

quality and consistency of performance. Rarely do the plants close down, as workers and machines operate in a steady cadence of more output, less waste, and little downtime in processing. Related to these labor-intensive operations are increases in local service sector jobs, as workers settle with their families and tend to bring children in larger numbers into schools, recreational programs, or downtowns. Agribusiness restructuring also includes greater integration of farms into the assembly-line process as contracts are aligned for the essential raw inputs of cattle, pigs, turkeys, and chickens. There is a noted shift from owner-operated farms to farmers who are assembled by contracts. All of these systems employ Latino workers. Labor recruitment, especially of immigrants and Latinos, has been initiated locally in response to labor shortages and increasing competition. By removing skill from operations and seeking low-wage labor (i.e., immigrants, Latinos, and women), labor costs have been kept relatively low.

Issues of Community Development

Population growth resulting from the growth in service sector employment and the installation of new meatpacking plants has brought many positive economic outcomes for rural places, such as a stable market for beef sales, growth in local business, a strengthening of community organizations, revitalization of local schools, and an expanded tax base. However, it has also brought new problems. Meatpacking, for instance, creates unusually high population mobility. The work is difficult, unpleasant, and dangerous, and the job hierarchy is relatively flat. Some plants discourage workers from receiving health benefits, which are usually only offered after the first six months of employment. Turnover is therefore very high, as workers have a hard time staying at the job for a long period of time due to illness, injury, problems with pressure from management, economic insecurity, and dislike of the job. Plants constantly recruit and hire new workers to fill vacancies, so there is a stream of newcomers to the host communities. Because poultry and meatpacking plants keep searching for labor, and because they attract the most financially needy workers, poverty and correlates of poverty are increased. Places undergoing this rapid turnover have had to confront sudden demands for housing, education, health care, social services, and crime prevention. In most of these places, available housing has been inadequate, overcrowded, and dangerous. Lack of health insurance for Latino workers and difficulties in affording copayments among the insured have led to widespread inadequate prenatal care, problems with tuberculosis, gaps in

child immunization, and deficient dental care. Related increases in school enrollments have brought about the need for bilingual and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. However, it is difficult to find and attract qualified bilingual teachers to remote places. Latino teenagers find it especially difficult to gain enough English skills or social confidence to be successful in high school, and so have problems with truancy, implying worsening conditions for future generations. School turnover is relatively high in meatpacking towns, paralleling that of the plants. Language translation has become an expensive issue for courts, schools, and social service providers.

The Need for New Perspectives

Until recently, rural communities have not been studied in terms of the ethnicity and Latino concentration of residents. Emerging research is showing that, contrary to popular opinion, increasing Latino population is not predictably the cause of the lower socioeconomic conditions in communities with higher percentages of Latinos. It is increasingly evident that the loss of the non-Latino population has more to do with the relationship between community ethnicity and declining socioeconomic well-being (Allensworth and Rochin 1996). Loss of non-Latino population usually means loss of better-educated, higher-earning residents. Loss of non-Latinos in the communities of rural California, for example, translated into higher concentration rates of Latinos in the same communities. Because Latinos are moving into most communities, their growth is not necessarily a cause of poorer conditions. Instead, the decline takes place where communities experience exodus of the better-paid white workers. Hence, where Latinos settle is not the issue of most immediate concern, it is where non-Latinos leave from and go to that is the bigger concern.

Latino concentration need not bring about ethnic tensions, but, nonetheless, it does bring about negative feelings in established residents. One article in the *Daily Globe*, a newspaper in Worthington, Minnesota, found that an overwhelming majority of residents surveyed felt that the influx of Latinos into their community had not been good for the community, and many made shockingly racist comments about the newcomers. Unlike California, where settled Latinos often provide services to newcomers and where immigrants are segregated in particular towns or parts of cities, immigrant meatpacking workers in the Midwest often obtain services from non-Hispanic providers, making them more visible in their communities.

Nonetheless, changes in local culture due to Latino settlement can be seen as positive, adding diversity and international flavor to the community, or as enhancing culture dimensions of the community. Moreover, Latino integration can add value to the economic base of their towns.

For the most part, neither the industries attracting Latinos to rural America nor the communities housing the workers have planned sufficiently for the integration of the new Latino settlers. In general, throughout the nation, policies regarding Latinos have been reactive rather than proactive, and they continue to be so. Agribusiness plants make little attempt to prepare places for the changes that they can expect or to encourage development of proactive policies and programs. Some communities have tried to prepare for changes in their communities prior to the installation of a new processing plant. In Garden City, Kansas, for example, a ministerial alliance began a public education program when negative rumors started circulating about refugees who began arriving in the 1980s. Because of such efforts, newcomers were at least tolerated by most established residents, although it is less certain whether they have been integrated into the community. Lexington, Nebraska, hired consultants to estimate housing needs for the new population expected from the installation of a new meatpacking plant (Gouveia and Stull 1996). However, this need was drastically underestimated due to the plant's low projections of worker turnover and non-local hirings. In general, proactive policies can help if well formulated. Our future is best served by better knowledge, informed understanding, and enhanced communication.

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