

The New Orleans Index at Ten

Latinos in Metro New Orleans: Progress, Problems, and Potential

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Introduction

Hurricane Katrina and the flooding caused by the levee failure on August 29, 2005 precipitated the arrival of new Latino immigrants in New Orleans. These immigrants sought opportunities in New Orleans and provided labor needed to clean and rebuild the damaged city. However, the immigrants received a mixed reception; while their labor was urgently needed and welcomed, displaced residents, especially those in the low-skill labor force, feared that the newcomers would fill jobs and occupy low-cost housing New Orleanians needed to return home.¹

This ambivalence created a dilemma for the state, municipalities, and residents: How should they receive the Latino immigrant newcomers, many of whom were present in the U.S. without authorization?²

This dilemma mirrors the ongoing national debate over comprehensive immigration reform, which asks: Should we welcome or discourage settlement by the immigrants who work and live in our communities without authorization? Since the 1960s, an unauthorized immigrant population has been tolerated in the U.S. because of steady demand for the low-wage labor they provide, especially in agriculture, construction, food processing, and low-skill service sectors of the economy. This tolerance of unauthorized immigration is countered by those who seek to control and restrict immigration, especially unauthorized immigration.³ States and localities have filled this policy void with pro- and anti-immigrant laws and ordinances.⁴ For example, some states issue driver's licenses without requiring evidence of citizenship or immigration status, a pro-immigrant policy. In contrast, some states and localities seek to charge law enforcement officers with determining a detained persons' legal status, an anti-immigrant policy. New Orleans' local policy context for unauthorized immigrants changed dramatically over the last 10 years, but to date no one has assessed these policies.

In this essay we measure change in the Latino population of New Orleans, examine policies that have affected the recently arrived and often unauthorized Latino immigrant population, and provide recommendations for policies that can be implemented at the local and regional levels that support the integration of this growing population and ultimately improve the resiliency of the increasingly diverse New Orleans community.

Immigration history, "hurricane chasers," and permanent settlement

New Orleans has a long history of receiving immigrants from all over the world, especially Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Through much of the first half of the 20th century, the city was known as "the Gateway to the Americas" because of concentrated hemispheric trade through the port.⁵ By 2000, New Orleans' Latino population comprised 5 percent of the total population, but its diverse national origins made it distinct from other



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U.S. cities (Table 1). Most Latinos traced their origins to Central American and Caribbean countries, often the same countries that produced tropical fruits, coffee, and hardwoods for importation to the U.S.⁶ Slightly more than half were foreign-born, and of those, two-out-of-five had arrived in the U.S. before 1980. They were quite integrated in other ways as well, with a median household income on par with the area as a whole, and they were settled throughout the metropolitan area with small concentrations in Kenner (Jefferson Parish) and Mid-City (Orleans Parish).⁷ Among foreign-born Spanish-speakers, half reported speaking English very well. In short, they were quite integrated with the larger population and political leaders did not see them as a constituency with distinct needs.

The disaster that followed Hurricane Katrina caused catastrophic damage to homes, businesses, and urban infrastructure throughout the metropolitan area. This destruction created an intense and highly visible demand for construction workers, particularly those who were willing to accept the dirty, dangerous, and degrading jobs that involved removing storm debris and the putrid contents of flooded buildings.⁸ This demand was met in large part by Hispanic workers, many of whom were immigrants, who formed about a quarter of the national construction labor force.⁹ In March 2006, a survey of construction workers in New Orleans found that about half were Latino and of those, half were undocumented.¹⁰ The growth of New Orleans' Latino population after Hurricane Katrina—from nearly 60,000 in 2000 to 103,000 in 2013—is widely seen as originating with this labor demand.¹¹

TABLE 1: SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW ORLEANS METRO'S HISPANIC POPULATION

	2000 Population	2000 Hispanic population	2013 Population	2013 Hispanic population
Size	1,337,726	58,545	1,240,977	103,061
Percentage foreign-born	4.8%	56.0%	7.4%	49.4%
Percentage Hispanic or Latino	4.4%	100.0%	8.3%	100.0%
National origin of Hispanic population				
Mexico		17.4%		23.5%
Honduras		13.9%		25.0%
Cuba		9.9%		8.5%
Puerto Rico		6.3%		5.3%
Nicaragua		4.2%		5.6%
Guatemala		2.9%		6.9%
El Salvador		1.3%		4.3%
Dominican Republic		1.2%		3.9%
Other Central American		2.9%		1.5%
Other South American		4.3%		5.2%
Other national origin groups		35.7%		10.4%
Median household income	\$32,589	\$32,645	\$45,981	\$46,146
English language ability				
Foreign-born non-English speakers age 5 and older		24,122		47,854
Speak English "very well"		49.3%		35.7%
Speak English less than "very well"		50.7%		64.4%
Year of Arrival in U.S.				
Number of foreign-born from Latin America		28,316		50,737
Arrived since the last census		0.0%		11.8%
Arrived between 0 and 9 years before the last census		27.2%		40.4%
Arrived between 10 and 19 years before the last census		29.8%		16.8%
Arrived more than 20 years before the last census		43.1%		30.9%

Source: The 2000 U.S. Census, U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates, and the 2013 American Community Survey.

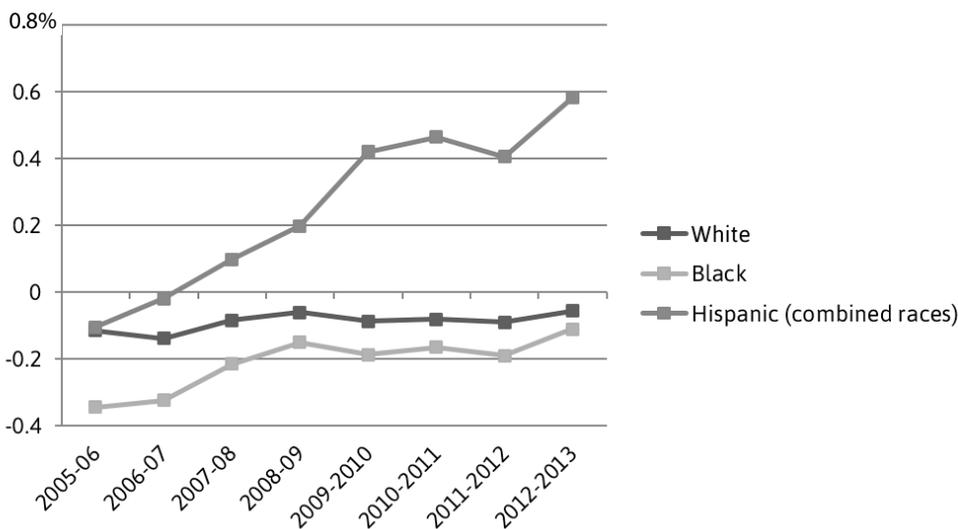
Note: Data is for the New Orleans metro (Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John the Baptist, and St. Tammany).

Several federal policy changes created conditions that made Latino immigrants the ideal labor force to quickly and cheaply rebuild the devastated area. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) suspended regulations that require employers to check job seekers' eligibility for employment, which allowed employers to hire immigrants regardless of their legal status.¹² Federal contracting regulations intended to ensure fair competition were also suspended to speed up recovery, and the Davis Bacon Act – requiring federal contractors to pay prevailing wages – was suspended to minimize labor costs.¹³ The Davis Bacon Act was reinstated November 8, 2005 after protests from organized labor and the Congressional Black Caucus, however, contracts already issued were not subject to regulation.¹⁴ Additionally, confusion over the roles of the U.S. Department of Labor and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in disaster response meant work sites were not monitored for any workplace violations.¹⁵ These working conditions may have played a role in deterring displaced New Orleanians – many of whom had lost their homes – from seeking construction employment in New Orleans, but not the Latino immigrants.¹⁶

Consequently, Latinos more quickly regained and surpassed their pre-Katrina population numbers in the metro area while non-Hispanic whites and blacks have not yet reached their pre-Katrina sizes. (Figure 1). By the time of the 2010 census, Latino populations had grown in all of the New Orleans metropolitan area parishes except for the heavily devastated St. Bernard parish,¹⁷ from which a large number of multigeneration Spanish-origin Isleños (Canary Islanders) had been displaced. The new Latino immigrants were similar to the pre-Katrina Latinos in their national origins – mostly Central American – but their recent arrival in the U.S. meant they were less integrated (Table 1). Because of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has a high proportion of foreign-born Latin Americans who arrived in the U.S. in recent years, which is likely the cause of a lower proportion of foreign-born non-native English speakers who reported speaking English “very well.” These changes in the composition of the Hispanic population of New Orleans indicate that a greater proportion of the community – mostly recently arrived immigrants – is not well integrated.

The true numbers of Latino immigrants who circulated through the city as temporary workers during the height of labor demand will never be known. Many of these “hurricane chasers”—the Latino immigrants who arrived after Hurricane Katrina—moved to the disaster-affected region from other places within the U.S. in search of higher wages and more employment opportunities.¹⁸ They were mostly unaccompanied men of working age with less than a high school education. Many were unauthorized immigrants, but there were also thousands of H-2B visa (guest) workers who were recruited to work for construction companies, restaurants, and hotels.¹⁹

FIGURE 1: ANNUAL PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN THE NON-HISPANIC WHITE, BLACK, & HISPANIC POPULATIONS, NEW ORLEANS METRO, 2005-2013



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2013.

The tremendous scale of this labor response exposed serious mistreatment of laborers, particularly unauthorized Latin American immigrants. Many employers paid Latino immigrants in cash and off the books or dubiously classified them as independent contractors. This allowed employers to avoid withholding payroll taxes and checking employees' work eligibility.²⁰ Wage theft—the nonpayment or underpayment of wages for work already performed—and other labor abuses were rampant.²¹ In 2007, Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D–Ohio, served 1997–2013) held hearings on the adequacy of labor law enforcement in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, with testimony from several immigrant and nonimmigrant workers.²² In response, the General Accountability Office investigated the Department of Labor's Wages and Hours Division and found “an ineffective system that discourages wage theft complaints.”²³ Although wage theft was the most common complaint, other abuses were also evident. Employers often neglected to provide Latino workers with safety gear, or information and training on the handling of hazardous materials in their native language. Injured workers were often abandoned at hospitals and sick workers were let go.²⁴ These abuses were possible in the chaotic post-disaster work environment in which enforcement of workplace regulations was a low priority.

When unauthorized immigrants complained about these abuses, their employers could simply call the local police or U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which immigrants feared would result in their apprehension and deportation. The omnipresent threat of deportation fueled other forms of victimization. Because Latino immigrants carried their wages in cash and avoided law enforcement officers, criminals labeled them “walking ATMs” and targeted them for robbery.²⁵ Such crime was greatest in the first several years after Hurricane Katrina, when labor demand was strong and crime rates were high.²⁶ In response to the wage theft epidemic, advocacy groups organized a legal clinic that helped exploited workers demand their wages from employers through legal means and even promoted a local ordinance in Orleans Parish against wage theft.²⁷

The growth of the Latino immigrant population also generated highly public political reactions. For example, in Jefferson Parish, residents complained that food trucks catering to Latino workers and day laborers seeking employment in the parking lots of home improvement stores were public nuisances. In 2007, the Jefferson Parish council chose to ban “taco trucks,” while in Orleans Parish, Mayor C. Ray Nagin welcomed them.²⁸ At the state level, between 2008 and 2013, 19 immigration-related bills were introduced, all of which sought to increase state control over unauthorized migrants. Among other things, these bills sought to allow law enforcement officers to verify immigration status; make harboring, transporting, employing, or renting to unauthorized immigrants a crime; impose penalties on licensed contractors who employ unauthorized immigrants on state contracts; and require employers to use the E-verify program. All but one was defeated.²⁹ These anti-immigrant sentiments and actions are incongruent with New Orleans' long history of immigrant reception and incorporation, but are consistent with contemporary immigration politics in which immigrants and immigration are symbols used to rally support for political candidates and parties.

Leadership, language, and legality - Resilience for immigrant Latinos

Two characteristics of post-Katrina Latino immigrants keep them from participating in civil society without fear of abuse and deportation: 1) legal status, especially among those who lack authorization and their families and friends; and 2) limited English language proficiency, which is more prevalent among the recently arrived. Although all of the native-born and many of the foreign-born Latinos in New Orleans are legally present, suspicions of “illegality” are often cast on anyone who speaks Spanish, Portuguese, or accented-English or who has a “Latino” appearance. This suspicion produces hostility and distrust among members of different racial and ethnic groups, as well as between law enforcement officers and the Latino community. Among those immigrants who are not legally present, fear of deportation hampers daily activities and makes them vulnerable to victimization by employers, criminals, and those who resent their presence. This fear extends beyond the unauthorized population, however, because many Latino families have some members with authorized status and some members without authorized legal status. Fear silences the community so that Latino immigrants need advocates.

Such advocates were found in a multigeneration Spanish-speaking community, primarily of Central American origin, which was already firmly in place in Kenner (an incorporated area in Jefferson Parish), and in a few other places in the metro area. In these neighborhoods, Spanish-speakers owned restaurants, bodegas, barber shops, convenience stores, insurance companies, newspapers, and legal and medical practices. These businesses grew alongside the newcomer Latino population. Communication increased as the two Spanish-language AM radio stations that operated before Hurricane Katrina were augmented by two FM radio stations and a local Telemundo affiliate television station. Latino-serving organizations already in place before Katrina, such as the Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, churches with Spanish-language services, sports clubs, and national-origin social clubs provided a social infrastructure that welcomed and supported newcomer Latinos. Within one year after Katrina, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans sponsored weekly meetings of a loosely formed coalition of Latino-serving organizations, which later came to be called the Latino Forum, to bring together many of these advocates to share information and resources and develop programs to assist the Latino immigrant community.³⁰ Between 2006 and 2008, several new Latino-serving advocacy organizations were created and national organizations established a presence in New Orleans.³¹ These groups focused on immigration issues, wage theft, housing, civic engagement, English as a Second Language education in public schools, language access, criminal justice, open governance, economic asset building, leadership development, and more.

These advocates documented a long list of hardships experienced by Latino immigrants, especially among those who worked as day laborers in construction. On the job, immigrants encountered inadequate information about worker safety and on-the-job hazards, insufficient safety equipment and training, no health insurance or treatment for work-related injuries, infrequent water and rest breaks, physical and verbal abuse, and wage theft.³² While housing was in short supply soon after the disaster, many workers lived in irregular and inadequate housing, such as hotels, a temporary encampment in City Park, abandoned houses, vehicles, and even their job sites. Inflated prices for housing and housing discrimination put many on the verge of homelessness.³³ As more housing became available, immigrants shared rental housing and living expenses.³⁴ Many immigrants found themselves without access to health care, especially because their language skills limited their ability to communicate with health care professionals, if they were able to see one.³⁵ In each of these contexts, Latino immigrants were vulnerable to mistreatment and neglect by employers, landlords, and health care providers who may have suspected them of being unauthorized and who may not have been able to effectively communicate with them.

While the region progressed toward and beyond recovery, concerns about legal status hampered Latino immigrants' ability to do the same. Unauthorized immigrants' hardships were exacerbated by their fears that contact with law enforcement authorities would result in deportation. In 2009, advocates secured agreements from the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) to curtail racial profiling of Latino immigrants, refrain from coordinating arrests with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and commit to cultural awareness training.³⁶ Unfortunately, these measures were not consistently implemented and have not endured.³⁷ In recent years, advocates have had to go back to the negotiating tables with NOPD and ICE, and file law suits to end deportation coordination with law enforcement.³⁸ No such agreements have ever been attained in Jefferson Parish, where more Latino immigrants live than in any other metro area parish. As long as immigrants fear that contact with the police will result in deportation, public safety is compromised because Latinos are easy targets for victimization and are often reluctant to report crimes they have suffered or witnessed.³⁹

Another key intervention affecting community resiliency sought by advocates was language access and education for English language learners. Immigrant Latinos with limited English language skills face barriers in every aspect of society, from setting up utility services in their home to informing a physician of an illness or injury. Immigrants' efforts to learn English are often complicated by long work hours, inadequate transportation, or expensive or insufficient language courses. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on nation of origin, is often cited as the law under which provision of language access to non-English speakers is covered. Many advocates, in fact, teach local jurisdictions and agencies funded by public funds that under Title VI these institutions are required to provide language access to their services in order to be compliant on the basis of national origin, as language discrimination can be determined in court to represent this form of discrimination. Nevertheless, most local public service agencies fail to meaningfully eliminate language barriers for non-English speakers.

Some institutions serving the public have introduced measures to facilitate communication with non-English speakers. Hospitals in the metro area, for example, have provided telephone-based interpretation services and printed important documents in Spanish.⁴⁰ The City of New Orleans hired a native Spanish speaker as an operator in their 311 system (a phone number providing access to non-emergency municipal services), added a language translation function to their government website, and created an outreach program within NOPD that is run by native Spanish speaking police officers.⁴¹ Jefferson Parish schools have worked with advocates to strengthen their English as a Second Language program for non-English speaking students in their system, and the Louisiana Supreme Court has established a certification process for ensuring quality interpretation services during court proceedings within local courts.⁴² While modest in scope, these examples highlight some of the efforts already underway by local jurisdictions that can help ensure better access to public services for members of the Latino community who have limited or no English language proficiency.

These two factors – unauthorized Latino immigrants' fear of law enforcement and government officials in general, and limited English proficiency – diminish the resiliency of the Latino population and the region. In 2008, when Hurricane Gustav set its sights on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, advocates urged the City of New Orleans Office of Homeland Security to secure an order from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to suspend ICE activity at evacuation locations and shelters so that Latino immigrants who lacked transportation could take advantage of New Orleans' City-Assisted Evacuation Program.⁴³ Although local Spanish language radio stations and volunteer advocates on the ground participated in assuring non-English speaking Latino immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, that they would not be subject to ICE inspections in out-of-state shelters, long-standing fear of government officials kept many from evacuating their homes before Gustav struck.⁴⁴ This situation is unlikely to be resolved until unauthorized immigrants no longer fear that their investments in their jobs, homes, and families are at risk when they evacuate to protect their lives.

Recommending resilience - Policy implications for immigrant Latinos

Nationally, the foreign-born population has been increasing its share of the population, reaching 13 percent in 2013.⁴⁵ While the New Orleans metro area lags at 7 percent, it is following the national trend.⁴⁶ Policy choices made today at the local and state levels will be consequential for the incorporation of Latin American immigrants and their children into New Orleans' civil society. The experiences of post-Katrina Latino immigrants in New Orleans illustrate that the most important policies have to do with how public service agencies treat immigrants' legal status and provide services for non-English speakers. Other cities provide some examples of best practices for immigrant incorporation.

Cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, and Pittsburgh have welcome centers that provide essential resources for newly arrived immigrants.⁴⁷ Such centers offer a wide array of instructional, vocational, recreational, family support, and social services in multiple languages appropriate to the local immigrant populations. Immigrant welcome centers may be sponsored by nonprofit groups or municipalities. Typically, they encourage immigrants to naturalize, which requires learning English and adjusting one's immigration status. However, not all immigrants are able to take these steps.

Most U.S. immigrants experience a period in their lives in which limited English language proficiency is an obstacle for accessing public goods and services. States and municipalities are legally obliged to take measures to accommodate them. Local public agencies can enhance language access services by coordinating with advocates and among other local public institutions. In New Orleans, stronger partnerships between government and local Spanish language newspapers, radio, and television stations could provide a quick and efficient means of distributing important public information.

Unauthorized immigrants, despite having violated a civil law, are still protected by the U.S. Constitution and entitled to the same treatment as other U.S. citizens and residents.⁴⁸ To access many services, U.S. residents need an identification card. Unauthorized immigrants are effectively barred from these services if they cannot obtain such a card. Some states allow residents to obtain driver's licenses without proof of residency, and municipalities may also issue library cards or other cards that provide proof of identity, age, and residence – an important resource for everyone.

Another proactive position that states and municipalities can take is to refrain from coordinating routine law enforcement activities with ICE. In doing so, local law enforcement improves public safety and builds trust with Latino immigrant families and individuals. The practice of local law enforcement arresting suspected unauthorized immigrants during routine traffic stops or coordinating and participating in ICE raids at sporting events does nothing to increase public safety, but it does erode the immigrants' trust in the police. Local law enforcement requires this trust in order to improve public safety outcomes. Furthermore, coordinating with ICE depletes public safety resources that should be devoted to eliminating criminal activities that cause property damage or bodily harm. By separating local law and immigration enforcement, states and municipalities make it possible for all residents, regardless of immigration status, to build the social and economic resources needed for responding to, and recovering from, disaster.

Policies and programs to strengthen Latinos

The arrival of Latino immigrant laborers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina exposed the difficulties of incorporating a population of recently arrived and largely unauthorized immigrants. Their strong presence immediately after the storm also made clear how much New Orleans relied on this labor force in its recovery. While many members of this recovery labor force left New Orleans in search of other opportunities, a large number remained, nearly doubling the size of the pre-Katrina Latino population.⁴⁹ How these post-Katrina immigrants incorporate into the New Orleans area will have an impact on the region's resilience in the face of future hazards. Based on close observation of the Latino community's experiences here in the past 10 years, two issues merit local (parish or municipal level) political action: language access and treatment of immigrants' legal status. Supportive local policies and programs, such as community-friendly policing sensitive to Latino community issues; separating daily law enforcement activities from ICE activities; ensuring professional interpretation services at schools, hospitals, city halls, and courts; and providing forms in Spanish language, are critical, easily implemented initiatives that help build trust in government among newcomer Latinos who have limited English proficiency and may not be legally present. Generating a sense of trust, in turn, helps strengthen societal ties that foster resiliency.

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The Data Center is the most trusted resource for data about greater New Orleans and Southeast Louisiana. Since 1997, The Data Center has been an objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

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The *New Orleans Index at Ten* collection includes contributions from The Data Center, the Brookings Institution, and more than a dozen local scholars. The aim of this collection is to advance discussion and action among residents and leaders in greater New Orleans and maximize opportunities provided by the 10-year anniversary of Katrina.

The New Orleans Index at Ten: Measuring Progress toward Prosperity analyzes more than 30 indicators to track the region's progress on economic, inclusive, and sustainable growth. Essays contributed by leading local scholars and the Brookings Institution systematically document major post-Katrina reforms, and hold up new policy opportunities. Together these reports provide New Orleanians with facts to form a common understanding of our progress and possible future.

The *New Orleans Index* series, developed in collaboration with the Brookings Institution, and published since shortly after Katrina, has proven to be a widely used and cited publication. *The Index's* value as a regularly updated, one-stop shop of metrics made it the go-to resource for national and local media, decisionmakers across all levels of government, and leaders in the private and nonprofit sectors.

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