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A GROWING PART OF THE STATE'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

By Hannah Gill

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### ABOUT PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION

The Immigration Policy Center's Perspectives are thoughtful narratives written by leading academics and researchers who bring a wide range of multi-disciplinary knowledge to the issue of immigration policy.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

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North Carolina has become a hub of Latino migration to the South. While many think this migration came suddenly, North Carolina has, in fact, been welcoming and integrating Mexican and other Latino migrants for generations. The polarized nature of the current immigration debate has suddenly made this steady growth more noticeable and more politically charged, but the role of Latinos in this state is an important and often over-looked story of how North Carolina continues to grow and evolve in a changing economy and world.

The increased recognition of North Carolina's Latino presence is best dated back to April 20, 2006, when Latinos in North Carolina took a break from their jobs in order to join thousands of people gathered in solidarity in the largest organized march of Latinos in the history of the state. Across the state, restaurants closed down, their kitchens empty of dishwashers, cooks, and cleaners. Hotels operated on reduced staff and trash accumulated uncollected at office buildings. On construction sites, machinery lay silent, while agricultural labor vanished on farms throughout the state. In poultry and hog slaughtering factories, meat lay untouched. Factories lost staff. Latinos, the backbone of North Carolina's economy, had stopped working for the day.

The purpose of the rallies, which took place across the nation, was to show support for comprehensive immigration reform being considered in Congress. But the political significance of those marches went far beyond the specific legislation. For the first time, the Latino presence in North Carolina—more than half a million people in 2006—was a visible reality to the general public. In Siler City, Chatham County, residents sitting on their front porches watched streams of people marching to the county courthouse to unite with thousands of other people. They watched Latina mothers pushing baby carriages with little U.S. and Mexican flags taped to the handles. They observed people waving banners reading “Si se puede,” “We shall overcome,” and “No somos terroristas”—“We are not terrorists.” They saw hundreds of U.S.-born Latino teenagers who had walked out of school that day, wearing handmade t-shirts and running through the crowds singing protest songs. They saw students from the university in Chapel Hill who had dressed in white, skipped classes, and carpooled to the rally to show support.

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The mobilization of thousands of Latinos affirmed the presence of new migrants in the state. For many North Carolinians observing these rallies, the fact that the state's Latino population more than doubled in size from 2000 to 2010,<sup>1</sup> or that North Carolina has more agricultural guest workers than any other state in the nation,<sup>2</sup> might have been a surprise. The places in which most Latinos work—in the back kitchens of restaurants, during night cleaning shifts in office buildings and hospitals, in remote tobacco fields, and behind factory walls in rural towns—are out of the public gaze. In their living spaces in apartment complexes, in migrant housing on isolated farms, and in low-income, high-crime parts of cities that many people avoid, Latinos have lived unobserved. Not only have migrants not been seen, they have not been heard, as the majority of Latino newcomers speak little English.

In the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of people from Mexico and other Latin American countries have moved to North Carolina as economic, political, and environmental refugees, attempting to find jobs and a better life for their families. As the region has experienced economic growth and increased global competition, industries have sought out the cheap labor of Latino migrants. Conditions of poverty, war, and environmental disaster in Latin American countries have also spurred migration to the region.

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In three decades the Latino population in the state grew from less than a half percent of the total population to 8.4 percent—more than 800,000 people.<sup>3</sup> North Carolina has contributed to a quickly growing national population of 50 million Latinos, now the largest minority group in the country.<sup>4</sup> Counties with the highest rate of growth for Latino populations include the rural and urban counties of Durham, Wake, and Johnston in the central Triangle region; Guilford, Alamance, and Forsyth counties in the Triad; and Cabarrus, Catawba, Union, and Mecklenburg counties in the eastern Charlotte metropolitan area. In some of these counties, such as Durham, Alamance, and Mecklenburg, for example, the population of people born in Latin America increased sevenfold between 1990 and 2000. While most of the state's Latino population lives in metropolitan areas, the four rural counties of Duplin, Lee, Montgomery, and Sampson have Latino populations that make up more than 13 percent of the total county population, reflecting labor demands in pork and poultry processing factories.

The nationwide rallies in April and May of 2006 were a wake-up call to demographic change not only in North Carolina, but also in other Southern states like Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama. The South and Southeast have become a new frontier for Latin Americans as migration networks have connected Mexico and Central America to Southeastern cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Memphis. While more than half (57 percent) of Latinos in the southern states of North Carolina and the five states mentioned above are born in Latin America, newcomers also include people who are relocating from the west coast, finding places like California too costly.<sup>5</sup> Instead of moving to traditional destinations in California and southwestern states like Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico as their ancestors have over the past two centuries, Latinos have responded to contemporary labor demands and increasingly moved to Southeastern states. Latino populations in the Southeast have been growing faster than in any other region of the country since the 1980s. Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population grew 148 percent in South Carolina, 145 percent in Alabama, 134 percent in Tennessee, 122 percent in Kentucky, 114 percent in Arkansas, and 111 percent in North Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

The shift in destination for the Latin American migrant stream is part of a larger demographic trend that includes new immigrants from other countries, as well as people relocated from all parts of the United States seeking to take advantage of cheaper cost of living and economic advantages of the South. Between 1990 and 2000, net migration (the number of people who moved to North Carolina minus the number who left) added more than one million new residents, immigrant and

non-immigrant. In 2010, these numbers reached nearly 1.5 million, making North Carolina one of the fastest growing states in the U.S.

Following national trends, the majority of Latinos in North Carolina are of Mexican descent: two-thirds of Latinos in North Carolina are from Mexico or have Mexican ancestry, followed by immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.<sup>7</sup> These numbers include immigrants, naturalized citizens, and native-born citizens, categories that include people born in Latin America or people born in the United States with Latin American ancestry.

Despite the strong presence of Mexico in the state, North Carolina's Latino population reflects a diversity of national, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. The word "Latino" is an umbrella ethnic category that describes many diverse groups of people. Latinos have an ancestry rooted in one of twenty-two different countries in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. In addition to different national origins, Latinos come from a diversity of class backgrounds. While the census reports that Latinos in North Carolina are mostly young, unmarried foreign-born men who have limited English skills and education, some migrants have had better opportunities and arrive with doctoral degrees and higher education. Immigrants vary from highly educated elites working as doctors and scientists in private and public universities and medical institutions to refugees from Central America and the Caribbean who have lost their hometowns to war and environmental disasters.<sup>8</sup> Most Latinos speak Spanish in North Carolina, but not all: groups of indigenous Mexican and Central American migrants speak Mayan, Nayarit, and Purépecha as their first languages. Other Latin American languages spoken in the state include Brazilian Portuguese and Haitian Creole.

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Latinos in North Carolina also represent different categories of legal residency or citizenship status. An estimated 51 percent of Latinos in North Carolina are native-born U.S. citizens. Of these, 53 percent were born in North Carolina and 39 percent were born in another U.S. jurisdiction and migrated to the state.<sup>9</sup> Another 7 percent of the total Latino population in North Carolina are naturalized citizens.<sup>10</sup> Most of the remaining 42 percent of Latinos lack legal immigration status. North Carolina has the ninth largest undocumented population in the country.<sup>11</sup> North Carolina's undocumented immigrants make up part of an estimated 11 million people living in the United States who have entered the country without legal documentation or have overstayed visas.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, North Carolina has become part of the trend of state and local municipalities seeking strategies to compensate for the failure of federal immigration reform at the national level. A growing number of state and local elected officials throughout the nation have passed aggressive state laws and county or city ordinances that attempt to reverse migration trends by targeting immigrants and sectors of society that engage with or offer services to immigrants.

Employers, landlords, health officials, educational institutions, and driver’s licensing agencies were all implicated in proposed new legislation.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), in 2005, 300 immigration-related bills were introduced at the state level and 39 passed. Since then, the number of bills introduced and passed increased consistently. In 2011, 42 states and Puerto Rico enacted 197 new laws and adopted 109 new resolutions for a total of 306 in 2011. Fifteen additional bills passed but were vetoed by governors. In 2010, Arizona passed SB1070, the most far-reaching immigration control bill passed by a state to that point. Despite the fact that the courts struck it down and it has not been implemented, other states immediately jumped on the Arizona bandwagon and introduced copycat legislation. By the end of the 2011 legislative session, five additional states—Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Indiana, and Utah—had passed SB1070-like laws.

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State and local policy makers have also sought strategies to increase the power of local law-enforcement agencies to enforce immigration law, a federal responsibility traditionally handled by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) division of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Deportation has been a widespread strategy; over the last two years, thirty-four states have entered into agreements with ICE through the 287(g) program and the Secure Communities program. These partnerships allow local law-enforcement authorities to check the immigration status of anyone arrested and to hold undocumented suspects for deportation proceedings. Such policies have been accompanied by rhetoric that presents Latinos as criminals, populations that drain public resources, and threats to “American” values.

North Carolina is on the forefront of deportation policy: six of the state’s 100 sheriff’s offices—Alamance, Cumberland, Cabarrus, Gaston, Mecklenburg, and Wake counties—along with the Durham Police Department, have implemented 287(g) agreements. State lawmakers passed Senate Bill 229 in 2007, which mandates that any person jailed on felony or driving while impaired charges have his immigration status checked. The Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Department was the first in the nation to implement the 287(g) program in 2006 and has been used as a model for other localities by DHS. All jurisdictions in North Carolina are currently activated under the Secure Communities program. As a result of these policies, thousands of immigrants have been deported to their native countries, separated from families in the United States, and compelled to start the migration process anew.

Immigration policies have had significant impacts on Latino communities and have created controversy and debate throughout the state in the years following the failure of federal immigration reform. In the west, Buncombe County residents have protested workplace raids and held town hall meetings to discuss the implications of demographic change in the region. In Alamance County in Graham, county commissioner meetings became a locale for protest and heated debate between the sheriff and county residents about lack of oversight of the 287(g)

program. In Beaufort County in Eastern North Carolina, residents protested a proposal by county commissioners to identify undocumented immigrants using health and social services by counting Latino surnames. In Smithfield, NAACP president William Barber called a press conference to condemn derogatory remarks towards Latinos by Johnston County Sheriff Steve Bizzell. In Wake County, organizers gathered to protest deportation policies in front of the county jail. On a statewide level, lobbyists and educational leaders pushed legislation to improve access to education for immigrants. Meanwhile, thousands of Latinos continued to settle in communities throughout the state.

As a primary new destination for Latino migrants as well as a center of debate over local immigration policy, North Carolina is an important barometer of contemporary immigration debates for the nation and especially for the Southeast, which has become a new frontier for Latin American migration to the United States. Immigration has revealed, in a personal way for many North Carolina residents, the state's global connections. It has also reemphasized the dependence of local municipalities on the need for sound policy from the national entities that govern them, and brought into relief the awkward intersection of federal, state, and local responsibilities.

Immigration is also controversial because it challenges traditional conceptions of identity and presents stark questions about who does and does not belong in North Carolina. The swift pace of demographic change in rural locales that attach importance to tradition and conservative values has evoked a strong reaction in many places. In North Carolina, reactions reveal concerns about expansion, encroaching urbanization, allocation of resources, and the incorporation of a population unfamiliar with U.S. society. These concerns, combined with a recession and an unfamiliarity of Latin American cultures and languages, have led to growing tension and conflict between native and migrant groups. Nationwide, there has been a rise in hate crimes towards immigrants and a resurgence of the white supremacy movement. In North Carolina, rallies led by ex-Klansman David Duke in 2000 and the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement in 2009 made it clear that hate groups have shifted their animosity to immigrants.

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Anxieties about the pace of demographic change have formed the foundation for aggressive anti-immigrant policies such as the 287(g) program in North Carolina. These policies operate on the logic of sending immigrants back to their countries of origin through deportation or through a "strategy of self-deportation," in which people leave communities that become unwelcoming places. Criticism of "sanctuary" cities for immigrants was heard frequently from Republican and Democratic Party candidates in the 2008 presidential primaries. Both North Carolina gubernatorial candidates, Beverly Purdue and Patrick McCrory, also supported a "crackdown on illegal immigration" and backed the 287(g) program.

The reasoning behind these policies, politically attractive for their tough stance on "crime," lacks a global understanding of the driving forces behind migration that compel people to risk their lives and endure brutal conditions for the opportunity to work in the United States. As economic,

political, and environmental refugees, many immigrants view the United States' labor market as a strategy for survival. Reasoning behind contemporary policies lacks a historical understanding of the role of the United States government and private industry in recruiting Latin American labor over past centuries. Economic and political relationships between Latin America and the United States that have created mutual dependencies as U.S. employers have sought out and become dependent on cheap migrant labor. Policies that target the immigrant only address one part of a much larger system in which the United States economy is heavily implicated.

Latinos, well into their third native-born generation in the state, are now North Carolinians with much to contribute to regional identities and histories. They have become an important part of North Carolina's heritage. Given their place as new North Carolinians, there is much at stake for Latinos, native and newly arrived, as the state and region experience demographic transformation. Aggressive anti-immigrant policies and the climate of reception that they create have very real consequences for hundreds of thousands of people across the state. For many new Latino North Carolinians, making the state a home is a struggle for survival, fairness, and dignity.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Mark Hugo Lopez, [\*Hispanics Account for More than Half of Nation's Growth in Past Decade\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, March 24, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Farmworker Justice, "[Fact Sheet: The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Guestworker Program](#)" (Washington, DC: Fall 2011).

<sup>3</sup> 2010 American Community Survey.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Mark Hugo Lopez, [\*Hispanics Account for More than Half of Nation's Growth in Past Decade\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, March 24, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Rakesh Kochhar, Roberto Suro, and Sonya Tafoya, [\*The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, July 26, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Mark Hugo Lopez, [\*Hispanics Account for More than Half of Nation's Growth in Past Decade\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, March 24, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> 2010 American Community Survey.

<sup>8</sup> Rakesh Kochhar, Roberto Suro, and Sonya Tafoya, [\*The New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of Rapid Population Growth\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, July 26, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> 2010 American Community Survey.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, [\*Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010\*](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, February 1, 2011), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.