



### **Latinos/as in the Midwest: A Historical Overview**

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#### **I. Latinos/as in the Midwest Today**

The Midwest has received notice in the past two decades for its rapidly growing Latino/a population. Indeed, much like the U.S. South, it has witnessed the influx of Latino/a migrants in rather unexpected places. Of the top ten counties with the fastest growing Latino/a population nationally from 1990 to 2000, Cass County, Illinois ranked number two with a 1975% increase while McDonald County, Missouri ranked number six with a 1578% growth rate. The other 8 counties with the highest growth that decade came from the U.S. South. In the next ten years, two Midwestern counties once again earned a spot on the top ten list (Beadle County, SD and Trempealeau County, WI) while seven of the remaining counties came from the South.<sup>1</sup>

Though the South and Midwest share some features in common, the Midwest is distinctive in a number of ways. Specifically, the Midwest as a whole is not exactly a “new” destination for Latino/a populations. It might be described more accurately as both an older

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/08/29/u-s-hispanic-population-by-county-1980-2011/>

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destination and a “re-emerging” one for Mexican immigrants in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Mexican immigrants first came to the region in the late nineteenth century and in greater numbers during World War I. Mexican migration to the region has continued relatively unabated throughout the twentieth century, although it has become more geographically dispersed. For people from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, the region became a new destination in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, the majority of the Latino/a population in the region is of Mexican descent while it is also home to Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, Cubans, Salvadorans, Ecuadoreans, Peruvians, and others. The Midwest has always been a unique meeting place when it comes to the history of Latinos/as in the United States. While the Southwest has a long history of primarily Mexican immigration (and was formerly part of Mexico), the Northeast attracted Caribbean migrants, and the Southeast drew Cubans historically, the Midwest has drawn significant numbers of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, and South Americans for several decades.

This diversity in national origin but also in nativity and generation—from older, established settlers in the major cities, to recent immigrants and refugees in small towns and suburbs—makes it difficult to characterize the entire region with one broad brush stroke. Still, a demographic snapshot of the population gives us a good overview. Of the 12 Midwestern states as they are defined here—North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio—Latinos/as are most greatly concentrated in the state of Illinois, specifically the Chicago metropolitan area (Table 1). In fact,

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<sup>2</sup> Gouveia, Lourdes, Miguel A. Carranza, and Jasney Cogua. "The Great Plains Migration: Mexicans and Latinos in Nebraska." In *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States*, edited by Victor Zuñiga and Ruben Hernandez-Leon. 23-49. New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2005.

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the population in Illinois outpaces the next largest settlement (Michigan) more than fivefold. In Chicago, Latinos constitute more than one fourth of the city’s residents. They have a significant presence in many surrounding suburbs and satellite towns as well. Given the enormous concentration of Latinos/as in the state of Illinois and specifically the Chicagoland area, most research and analyses of Latinos/as in the Midwest focus there.

The nativity of this group also varies by state, with 94% of North Dakota’s Latino/a population being U.S.-born while Illinois and Minnesota have the lowest U.S.-born proportion (60%). This suggests that much of the Latino/a presence in North Dakota consists of native-born transplants from other states, while states like Illinois and Minnesota have attracted many more foreign-born Latinos/as.

<b>Table 1 Latino/a Population in Midwest, 2011</b>						
<b>State</b>	<b>Total Latino/a Population</b>	<b>Percent of State Population</b>	<b>Percent U.S.-born</b>	<b>Median Age of U.S.-born (years)</b>	<b>Percent Foreign Born</b>	<b>Median Age of Foreign Born (years)</b>
Illinois	2,078,000	16%	60%	16	40%	39
Michigan	447,000	5%	78%	19	22%	35
Indiana	397,000	6%	66%	16	34%	33
Ohio	362,000	3%	77%	20	23%	32
Wisconsin	344,000	6%	70%	16	30%	35
Kansas	307,000	11%	66%	15	34%	37
Minnesota	257,000	5%	60%	14	40%	35
Missouri	214,000	4%	67%	17	33%	34
Nebraska	174,000	9%	61%	13	39%	35
Iowa	154,000	5%	64%	14	36%	34
South Dakota	23,000	3%	68%	n/a	32%	n/a
North Dakota	15,000	2%	94%	n/a	6%	n/a

Data from Pew Hispanic Center <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/>

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In order to better understand contemporary dynamics in the region and possibilities for the future, we must understand the history of these populations. Latinos/as' historical presence in the region reveals several key observations that this paper will outline below. First, Latinos/as in the Midwest (the overwhelming majority of which has been Mexican immigrants) have provided essential labor throughout the twentieth century. They have migrated in various waves to the rural heartland, the railroad hubs, and urban industrial centers primarily in search of work. Second, the population has been historically quite diverse as well as very geographically dispersed, and in some cases, isolated. As a result of this demographic and geographic diversity, Latino/a political participation and social integration have varied from place to place. Third, because of their geographic dispersal, their smaller concentration than in other regions like the Southwest or the East Coast, and the persistent emphasis on the black-white racial binary in the United States, Midwestern Latinos/as have remained largely invisible population as a distinct social group with interests and needs that at times differ from those of African Americans and European Americans. Only in recent years have Midwestern Latinos/as achieved a more visible profile locally and on the national stage. Finally, this increased visibility has been the result of several factors—population growth, more research attention to Latino/a communities, and increased social and political mobilization. While Midwestern Latinos/as have participated in community associations, mutual aid societies, and political advocacy groups throughout the twentieth century, the 1970s, witnessed a flurry of community activism, campaigns for social justice, and greater civic engagement that ultimately, brought the population significant socioeconomic gains and political empowerment.

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### The Early Twentieth Century

Mexican immigrants worked and lived in rural areas of the region as early as the late 1800s when the recent links between U.S. and Mexican railroads made travel from South to North possible. Most migrants came on those railroads from El Paso, Texas doing track and maintenance work or riding the trains to work the sugar beet fields of the Central Plains states. By 1910, the Mexican population numbered over 9,400 in Kansas and 3,600 in Nebraska. In the following decade, the census enumerated 14,000 Mexican-born migrants in Kansas. By 1930, that figure had grown to over 19,000.<sup>3</sup> While these numbers were relatively compared to the total populations of these states, they reflect the significant presence of Mexican immigrants in local labor markets.

The largest influx of migrants occurred during the turbulence of the Mexican Revolution and in the years of World War I. Mexican immigrants worked the railroads or came north in search of seasonal employment throughout the Midwest. They settled in Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Michigan, and beyond.<sup>4</sup> The greatest number, however, went to Chicago. As the largest metropolis and unofficial capital of the region, and the third largest city in the country, Chicago and its industrial labor market made it a desirable destination for much of the twentieth century. Cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee historically offered a high level of industrial employment. The possibility of manufacturing and service sector wages that attracted

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, Michael M. "Beyond the Borderlands: Mexican Labor in the Central Plains, 1900-1930." *Great Plains Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1981): 239-51. Grajeda, Ralph F. "Mexicans in Nebraska." *Nebraska State Historical Society* Sept 25 (2007).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Valdés, Dennis Nodín. *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. Valdés, Dionisio Nodín. *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century*. University of Texas Press: Austin, 2000. García, Juan R. *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. Vargas, Zaragosa. *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

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European immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries also beckoned Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans from Texas and rural agricultural areas in the early twentieth century. Moreover, several factors convinced Midwestern employers to actively seek out Mexican workers in these years. The decline of European migration during World War I and the steel strikes of 1919 prompted local mills to import Mexicans initially as strikebreakers. The increased restrictions on Southern and Eastern European immigration in the 1920s also encouraged employers to hire Mexican workers. Soon, Mexicans could be found on the railroads and in the meat packinghouses. During this time, Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio and American economist Paul Taylor documented hundreds of Mexican workers in these industries and others in the Chicago and Calumet region, which included Northwest Indiana. They estimated that in some plants, Mexicans made up as much as a third of the workforce. Sociologists at the University of Chicago took an interest in Mexican immigrants as well, documenting their cultural practices and their social integration in the city.<sup>5</sup> Beyond Chicago, Mexican migrants labored in Ford Motor auto plants in Detroit, the railroads of Kansas City, and slaughterhouses of Omaha, Nebraska.<sup>6</sup> They also followed the sugar beet, cherry, and apple crops of Michigan and worked the fields of Northwest Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

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<sup>5</sup> Gamio, Manuel. *The Life Story of the Mexican Immigrant*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1931, reprinted 1971. Taylor, Paul S. *Mexican Labor in the United States*. Vol. II, New York: Arno Press, 1932, Reprint 1970.

———. "Some Aspects of Mexican Immigration." *Journal of Political Economy* 38, no. 5 (1930): 609-15. See also, Arredondo, Gabriela F. *Mexican Chicago: Race, Ethnicity and Nation: 1916-1939*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. ———. "Navigating Ethno-Racial Currents: Mexicans in Chicago, 1919-1939." *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 3 (March 2004): 399-427. Innis-Jiménez, Michael. *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, García, Juan R. *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. Vargas, Zaragosa. *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Edson, George. "Mexicans in the North Central States." *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies: Mexicans in the Midwest* 2 (1989): 99-114.

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Mexican migrants were not the only Spanish-speaking population in the Midwest at this time, however, nor were they all working class or uneducated peasants. The Mexican men who came to work at Henry Ford's auto plants, for example, tended to be middle class and well-educated. Theirs was considered highly-skilled, prestigious, "modern" work. Some political exiles from the Mexican Revolution had operated printing presses or publishing houses, practiced journalism, or taught in Mexico. In the 1920s, small numbers of Spaniards, Cubans, Central Americans, and South Americans settled in the region as well. Some came temporarily as diplomatic officials, students, or businessmen but others were middle and upper class professionals—doctors, lawyers, journalists—who had decided to relocate for a variety of reasons.<sup>7</sup>

By 1930, the Mexican population in the region declined significantly as a result of the Great Depression. As was the case in the Southwest, Mexicans became targets of forced or coerced repatriation and deportation by federal authorities working in collaboration with local officials who refused to provide them welfare assistance.<sup>8</sup> Although the numbers of Mexicans declined sharply, communities remained in cities like Chicago, Toledo, Detroit, and in smaller towns, like Gary and East Chicago, Indiana.

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<sup>7</sup> See Arredondo, Mexican Chicago. See also, John Flores, *On the Wings of the Revolution: Mexican and Hispanic Immigrants, Transnational Politics, and the Making of a Midwestern Mexican American Identity, 1900-1954* (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Betten, Neil, and Raymond A. Mohl. "From Discrimination to Repatriation: Mexican Life in Gary, Indiana, During the Great Depression." *Pacific Historical Review* 42, no. 3 (1973): 370-88. Kerr, Louise Año Nuevo. "The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920-1970." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1976.

## **II. World War II, the Postwar Era, and Growing Latino Diversity**

The Mexican Americans who remained in the region during World War II participated fully in the war effort just as other Americans did. Many young men and some women served in the military. Others worked in defense industries that were vital to the war. Mexican American women throughout the region, for example, entered area defense plants, demonstrating their patriotism and loyalty to the United States by assisting “in the critical production of aircraft, tanks, trucks, jeeps, ships, uniforms, tents, medical supplies, small arms, heavy artillery, ammunition, bombs, and communication equipment.”<sup>9</sup> While wartime employment provided opportunities for earning higher wages, it also presented challenges such as long grueling hours, extended absences from family members, and at times, sexual harassment and discrimination. Still other Mexican American women sustained family members abroad by writing letters and maintaining social networks or by providing soldiers recreational and leisure activities through local USO-type organizations.<sup>10</sup>

During the war, migration from Mexico began anew. U.S. employers urged the federal government to assuage existing labor shortages by creating a guest worker program with Mexican nationals. In 1942, U.S. officials negotiated with the Mexican government to create the Emergency Farm Labor or Bracero Program to recruit men on short-term labor contracts. Braceros arrived to work in agriculture or on the railroads during the war, thus traveling throughout the country to fill jobs left behind by upwardly mobile American workers or those who enlisted. The agricultural program extended for nearly twenty years after war’s end,

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<sup>9</sup> Santillán, Richard. "Rosita the Riveter: Midwest Mexican American Women during World War II, 1941-45." In *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies: Mexicans in the Midwest* vol. 2, edited by Juan R. García. 115-47. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



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however, and became the primary engine through which Mexican immigrants learned of labor markets in the U.S. The Bracero Program also prompted tremendous undocumented migration as men who were unable to secure contracts simply traveled north on their own, without authorization. Others who were able to secure visas migrated during these years as well. Regardless of their legal status, Mexican workers became embedded in low-skilled industrial and agricultural labor markets in the Midwest and beyond. Their experiences would make Illinois, and Chicago, in particular, a prominent destination for ongoing migration in subsequent decades.

Mexicans journeying to the Midwest in these years began encountering Puerto Ricans who were sometimes also labor recruits but more often simply independent migrants in search of employment. As part of the island's economic revitalization campaign, Puerto Rican and American officials encouraged unemployed islanders - many of whom were still recovering from the devastating effects of the Great Depression - to move to the mainland and take up agricultural and industrial work. Insular officials and the U.S. Employment Service facilitated Puerto Rican relocation to places that had announced a need for workers—Chicago, Waukegan, and North Chicago, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Saginaw, Michigan; and Lorain and Youngstown, Ohio beginning in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Puerto Rican officials were also seeking to disperse their countrymen and women beyond the New York City area, where a saturation of migrants had produced a vocal backlash and public hostility against them.

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Still, in an era when European immigration had slowed to nearly a trickle, Midwestern employers often welcomed Puerto Rican and Mexican workers in many places.<sup>11</sup> By the 1960s, a predominantly Mexican American and Puerto Rican Latino/a population had settled in cities like Loraine, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Grand Rapids, Detroit, and Chicago.

Latino/a population growth accelerated dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s as ongoing Mexican immigration was increasingly accompanied by migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Cuba, Chile, and Ecuador. Cubans, for example, had begun fleeing the Communist revolution and Cuba's changing political system since the 1960s. Other Central and South Americans were similarly fleeing government persecution, though in many cases they were fleeing right-wing regimes. Civil wars, political turmoil, and economic instability propelled many others northward. The economic crisis of the 1980s also fueled ongoing migration from Mexico. These new migrants brought even greater socioeconomic diversity. While many newcomers continued to join the manufacturing and service sectors, their downward occupational mobility belied middle class backgrounds and professional training. Still most of these political and economic refugees settled in the Chicago area.

For most of the twentieth century, Illinois remained the third most popular destination for Mexican migrants in the United States trailing only behind California and Texas. As a result, Chicago has had the second largest Mexican population in the United States for many years,

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<sup>11</sup> Fernández, Lilia. "Of Migrants and Immigrants: Mexican and Puerto Rican Labor Migration in Comparative Perspective, 1942-1964." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 6-39. ---. *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Fernandez, Delia. "Becoming Latino: Mexican and Puerto Rican Community Formation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1926-1964." *Michigan Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 71-100. Maldonado, Edwin. "Contract Labor and the Origins of Puerto Rican Communities in the United States." *International Migration Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 103-21.

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following behind Los Angeles. It has also the largest Latino/a population in the region. Chicago also had one of the most diverse concentrations of Spanish-speaking people in the country, however. A 1973 report noted, “Chicago is unique in that it is the only major city in the U.S. with substantial percentages of all the major ethnic groups constituting the Spanish-speaking population of the nation.”<sup>12</sup> The 1970 census had officially counted 247,343 Spanish-speaking persons in the city, of which Mexicans were the largest group—106,000 or 43 percent of Latinos/as. Puerto Ricans were the next largest group, believed to number 78,000 people or 32 percent. Cubans, Central Americans, and South Americans made up the remaining 25 percent. Researchers and community leaders assumed a severe undercount, however, especially of recent Mexican immigrants, and particularly the undocumented. They argued that it was much more likely that nearly half a million Latinos lived in the city by the late 1970s. If we accept this estimate, then Latinos/as were a much larger population than official numbers indicated, and Mexicans remained the majority of the city’s Spanish-speaking people.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> City of Chicago, Department of Development and Planning, *Chicago's Spanish Speaking Population: Selected Statistics* (Chicago: author, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; and John Walton and Luis Salces, “The Political Organization of Chicago’s Latino/a Communities,” (Center for Urban Affairs, Northwestern University, 1977). Walton and Salces compared census undercount estimates for African Americans, which the Census Bureau calculated at 7.7%, and doubled this figure for Latino/a/Latino/as/as, arguing that they had higher mobility rates, language barriers to completing the census, and greater suspicion of the census because of undocumented relatives or other members of their households. These INS estimates of the undocumented may have been inflated, as the perception at the time was that “illegal aliens” were ubiquitous and creating a social crisis in the country. Still, Walton and Salces used the lower INS estimates. The Chicago office in fact estimated as many as 500,000 “illegal aliens” in the city.

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### III. Latinos/as in “Fly-over Country” and the Dearth of Visibility and Research

For several years now, Chicago has the distinction of being home to the third largest Latino/a population in the country. Yet researchers have produced surprisingly little scholarship on the population, especially in comparison to the populations of other regions. Despite Mexican Americans’ and Latinos/as’ growing presence in the region, until recently they have been little recognized in national policy or political discussions. This lack of visibility has mystified residents and researchers and can be attributed to the bi-coastal hegemony of knowledge on Chicanos/as and Latinos/as that has focused primarily on the East and West Coasts.<sup>14</sup> Described by some as “fly-over country,” the Midwest experiences frequent neglect in comparison to more densely populated areas of the country in California, Texas, Florida, and New York.

Still, the demographics have indicated historically that the region’s Latino/a population deserves greater attention. In 1973, the state of Illinois had an estimated 686,700 Spanish-speaking residents, most of them concentrated in Chicago and surrounding counties (Table 2).<sup>15</sup> This far exceeded the Spanish-surnamed populations in better recognized states of Mexican American settlement--Arizona (357,000), Colorado (272,500), or New Mexico (387,000).<sup>16</sup> Despite having almost twice as many Spanish-speaking residents as Arizona or New Mexico, and two and a half times the number of Colorado, however, Illinois received low priority in terms of federal policy and resources.

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<sup>14</sup> See “Moving Beyond Aztlán: Disrupting Nationalism and Geographic Essentialism in Chicano/a History,” in *A Promising Problem: The New Chicana/o History*, edited by Carlos K. Blanton (University of Texas Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> “Spanish-speaking” was the term used at this time and has since been replaced more frequently by “Latino/a” or “Hispanic.” This figure included hundreds of thousands of Latinos/as in the Chicago suburbs of Cook, Lake, DuPage, Will, and Kane counties. Walton and Salces, “The Political Organization of Chicago’s Latino Communities.”

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Illinois	686,700
New Mexico	387,000
Arizona	357,000
Colorado	272,500

This might be explained by the fact that the Midwest had few prominent Chicano/a or Latino/a leaders, unlike those who had emerged out of the Chicano Movement and political mobilizations in the Southwest. Midwestern Latinos/as also had few advocates in Washington, D.C. or national policy centers compared to the prominence of Southwestern Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans on the East Coast. Most scholarship and policy studies emanated from the Southwest and focused on the populations of the five Southwestern states.<sup>17</sup> On the East Coast, Puerto Rican educators and politicians highlighted the plight of their ethnic group.<sup>18</sup> In Miami, Cubans wielded an inordinate amount of political influence for such a recent immigrant group.<sup>19</sup> This neglect meant that Midwestern Latinos/as were sorely understudied and little understood by academics, policy analysts, and advocates. Consequently, Spanish-speaking people in the region lagged behind others in acquiring meaningful political power and resources to address their social, economic, and educational needs.

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<sup>17</sup> See the scholarship that sociologists and others began producing on Chicanos/as in the Southwest in the 1970s, such as Grebler, Leo, Joan W. Moore, and C. Ralph Guzman. *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: The Free Press), 1970; Joan Moore and Harry Pachon, *Mexican Americans* (Prentice Hall), 1970. For classic studies, see Sanchez, George I. *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940; Paredes, Americo. *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958.

<sup>18</sup> See Lorrin Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Sonia Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Justice in New York City* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press), 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Hideaki Kami, dissertation The Ohio State University, 2015.

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Beginning in the 1970s, however, this began to change. The handful of scholars who focused on the Latino/a Midwest called for greater attention to the region's historic and recent populations. The Chicana/o Studies journal, *Aztlán*, devoted a special issue to "Chicanos in the Midwest" in 1976 documenting the history of Mexicans in Chicago and Indiana's steel mill communities and analyzing 1970 census data on the Spanish-speaking population in the region. That year as well, Louise Año Nuevo Kerr completed her groundbreaking dissertation, "The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920-1970," which stood for over three decades as the only historical study of people of Mexican descent in the city. Scholars in the Midwest tried to draw attention to the significant Mexican American population in the middle of the country.<sup>20</sup> At the University of Notre Dame, Julian Samora began training graduate students and building the fields of Chicano/a and Latino/a Studies. Meanwhile, Nicolas Kanellos began documenting the literary work of Latinos/as in the region as well.<sup>21</sup> They and other researchers prepared reports and papers throughout the seventies, estimating the Spanish-speaking population in the Midwest at 1.2 million in 1973.<sup>22</sup>

This lacuna of scholarship and attention to the region changed significantly in the following decades, as a handful of historians and other scholars took up the call to research and

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<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Cardenas, "Los Desarraigados: Chicanos in the Midwestern Region of the United States" *Aztlán* 7:2 (Summer 1976), 153-86; Juan R. García, "History of Chicanos in Chicago Heights" *Aztlán* 7:2 (1976), 291-306; F. Arturo Rosales, "The Regional Origins of Mexicano Immigrants to Chicago During the 1920s" *Aztlán* 7:2 (1976), 187-202; Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, "The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920-1970" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> On Samora, see Alberto López Pulido, Barbara Driscoll de Alvarado, and Carmen Samora, eds., *Moving Beyond Borders: Julian Samora and the Establishment of Latino Studies* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 2009; Leticia Wiggins, "Planting the 'Uprooted Ones': La Raza in the Midwest, 1970-79," doctoral dissertation (The Ohio State University, Summer 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See special issue, *Aztlán* 7:2 (1976). Gilberto Cardenas, Call for Papers, *Aztlán* Journal special issue, "Chicanos in the Mid-West," February 25, 1975, box 9, Gil Cardenas Papers, Institute for Latino Studies Library and Archives, University of Notre Dame. Gilberto Cardenas and Ricardo Parra, "La Raza in the Midwest and Great Lakes Region" (University of Notre Dame: Centro de Estudios Chicanos, Institute for Urban Studies, January 1973), 33.

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publish on Mexican Americans and Latinos in the Midwest, thus bringing them more visibility.<sup>23</sup>

As Mexicans and other Latino/a populations have continued to grow in these areas, social scientists have been studying recent immigrants in Marshalltown, Iowa, Garden City, Kansas, and Columbus, Ohio to name but a few cities.<sup>24</sup>

### IV. Social Issues and Political Mobilization

Perhaps the greatest fuel for the increased visibility of Midwestern Latinos/as can be found in the grassroots activism, community organization, and political mobilization of the region's population that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Though Mexican immigrants and other Latinos/as had practiced the tradition of mutual aid societies, fraternal groups, and hometown clubs as far back as the 1920s, most of their efforts were directed internally within the community. Trade unionists in the steel mills and packinghouses and those involved in religious associations limited their work primarily to their members and their families. Yet there was great need to address the problems not only of recent immigrants but also long-time residents.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the works of Marc S. Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americanism & Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011); Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago*; Michael Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*; *ibid.*, "From the Near West Side to 18th Street: Un/Making Latina/o Barrios in Postwar Chicago" in *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America*, edited by Gina Pérez, Frank Guridy and Adrian Burgos (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 233-52.

<sup>24</sup> Grey, Mark A., and Anne C. Woodrick. "Latinos Have Revitalized Our Community: Mexican Migration and Anglo Responses in Marshalltown, Iowa." *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States* (2005): 133-154. Campa, Arthur. "Immigrant Latinos and Resident Mexican Americans in Garden City, Kansas: Ethnicity and Ethnic relations." *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* (1990): 345-360. Cohen, Jeffrey H. and Nidia Merino Chavez. 2013. "Latino Immigrants, Discrimination and Reception in Columbus," *Ohio International Migration*, 51(2):24-31

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Throughout the mid-twentieth century, many Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos/as experienced high rates of poverty, housing and employment discrimination, political disenfranchisement, and other forms of marginalization. Puerto Ricans, for example, were seldom acknowledged as U.S. citizens, though that birthright should have given them access to voting booths and other privileges and protections. Meanwhile, immigration officials frequently harassed, rounded up, and detained anyone suspected of being an undocumented Mexican immigrant in the barrios of Chicago and elsewhere. In most schools, Latino/a children experienced discrimination, a lack of resources, and low educational attainment. The dismal rates of high school completion among “Spanish-speaking” or “Spanish-surnamed” students in these years, however, must be understood in their appropriate context. Traditionally, high school completion was far from universal, with most Americans leaving school well before the twelfth grade. As economic shifts, deindustrialization, automation, and new technologies changed the labor market, a high school diploma became increasingly valuable and necessary to achieve upward mobility in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. While European immigrants in the past had managed to secure economic stability and even success with little formal education, this became more difficult in the postwar economy. Thus, the modest rates of high school completion among Latinos/as, which did not differ much from those of other immigrants in the past, had much more deleterious effects on their financial well-being and future earning possibilities. This coupled with the changing labor market meant that Latinos/as experienced wage and occupational stagnation and found it much harder to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as social movements across the nation seized public attention, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latinos/as took up calls for social



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change. Local communities engaged in a wide range of activist struggles and campaigns, from demanding better working conditions for the region's farmworkers to protesting urban renewal policies that destroyed poor people's communities. Activists and allies in cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, Grand Rapids, and Cleveland, to name a few, fought against employment and housing discrimination and demanded a fair share of War on Poverty monies and other federal resources go to barrios. Educators and parents demanded bilingual and bicultural curricula, more Latino/a teachers, and an end to overcrowded, dilapidated schools. Those who advocated on behalf of immigrant rights mobilized to defend the undocumented, calling for an end to deportation raids that terrorized barrio residents. Others applied for community health grants, helped staff legal aid associations, and organized worker rights groups. These years cannot be underestimated as a critical moment for the emergence of Latino/a political empowerment in the Midwest.

Indeed, community activists opened the doors to municipal government, higher education, and a wide-range of professions. Much of this success has been the result of both radical, militant activism-- student protests on college campuses, walkouts of public schools, demonstrations for the hiring of Latinos/as—and more moderate, reformist efforts such as voter registration drives, campaigns for Latino/a political candidates, and legal advocacy. These efforts and organizing led to the first Latino/a political candidates running for office and indeed the first Latino/a elected officials. In Chicago, for example, recent mayoral candidate and current Cook County Commissioner Jesus Garcia got his start as a student activist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a participant in an immigrant rights organization, and then an aldermanic candidate for city council. Garcia eventually made his way to the state legislature, as a number of other

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Latinos/as did in the 1980s and 1990s. This trajectory into electoral politics produced the first and still only Latino/a congressional representative from the region, Luis Gutierrez who represents a predominantly Latino/a district of Chicago and has been a vocal advocate of immigration reform. Latinos/as have been elected to other offices throughout the Midwest—school boards, city councils, and state legislatures—as well.

The labors of community leaders and activists in these decades must be credited for opening up the doors to many institutions—colleges and universities, churches, local governments, public education, law firms, corporate boardrooms. Though this history is too extensive to describe here in detail, the strategies, objectives, and models that leaders used in these decades can serve as lessons for organizing and mobilizing Latino/a communities in the twenty-first century. These pioneering generations have a great deal of wisdom to share.

### **V. Looking Ahead**

To be sure, many challenges persist in the twenty-first century, including inequitable schooling, income inequality, poverty, crime, and police brutality, to name a few. Moreover, the nation's changing economy and growing need for training beyond high school have put pressure on many families. Much of the Midwest (Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio) makes up part of the “Rust Belt”—areas that have witnessed industrial flight to the Sunbelt or overseas and that have been hit hard by devastating job losses. Even as high-paying and unionized industrial jobs have declined in the past five decades, the local economy of Chicago and surrounding suburbs

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continues to make it an attractive job magnet.<sup>25</sup> The persistence of light manufacturing, housing construction, and a strong service industry—hotels, restaurants, domestic work, home maintenance—that serve white-collar workers and tourists has kept many Latinos/as in the metropolitan area and has continued to attract more recent migrants. One of the most pressing issues that Latino/a families now face is being able to find affordable housing, transportation to and from work, and quality childcare and schools.

Over the past three decades, the meatpacking and food processing industries as well as the agricultural sector have drawn recent Mexican and Central American immigrants in growing numbers to small towns in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Anglo residents of some of these towns, like Marshalltown, Iowa have stressed the positive impact Latino/a immigrants have made in the economic revitalization of their communities. They note the reliability of the immigrant workforce and the ways in which immigrants contribute to local economies by establishing households, starting small businesses, and paying taxes. Certainly many employers have expressed a preference and appreciation for immigrant workers, whether because of the lower wages they often demand or their tractability compared to native-born workers. Still, immigrants, especially the undocumented, are vulnerable to exploitation, the violation of their civil and labor rights, and the threat of deportation. Postville, Iowa, home to a major slaughterhouse, experienced a devastating immigration raid in 2008 that forcefully removed several hundred Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants from the area abruptly and had a devastating impact on remaining residents as well.<sup>26</sup> While undocumented workers live a very

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<sup>25</sup> Durand, Jorge, Douglas S. Massey, and Fernando Charvet. "The Changing Geography of Mexican Immigration to the United States: 1910-1996." *Social Science Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2000): 1-15.

<sup>26</sup> Camayd-Freixas, Erik. "Interpreting after the Largest Ice Raid in U.S. History: A Personal Account." *Latino Studies* 7, no. 1 (2009): 123-39.

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precarious existence, as long as manufacturing and industrial food production continue to abandon Rust Belt cities for locations with lower, non-union wages in the rural South and Midwest, Mexican and other recent Latin American immigrants will continue migrating to these areas to offer their labor.

For native-born Latinos/as their varied political incorporation and social integration has led some down pathways to upward mobility through education, entrepreneurship, and civic participation. Others have encountered serious obstacles, especially in the form of racial discrimination, police abuse, stagnant wages, and lack of access to quality housing. Clearly, Latino/a Midwesterners have many ongoing challenges to address. We can be sure that the path forward will be illuminated by earlier generations who paved the way.