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## Hispanic Immigration to the Southeastern United States

### **I. Introduction**

Over the past decade, Hispanic immigration to the United States, the vast majority of which is of Mexican origin, has changed dramatically. Now, men as well as women, are coming to live and work for longer periods of time and are choosing new destinations in the U.S. to settle. Traditional immigrant receiving states, such as California and Texas, are no longer the primary destinations for many Mexican immigrants. Instead, the Southeast, or as I will refer to it in the following pages by its more common nomenclature “the South,” has witnessed a huge influx of documented as well as undocumented immigrants over the past decade. The U.S. Census estimates that between 1990 and 1999, the change in the Hispanic populations of California and Texas rose by only 25-49.9%. However, in Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina, the change was well over one hundred percent (U.S. Census, 2000). In another study documenting the change in the Hispanic population between 1990 and 2000, North Carolina’s Hispanic population grew by almost 400%, Arkansas’s by 340%, Georgia’s by 300%, and Tennessee’s by about 275% (Rural Migration News, 2001). Despite these massive changes, it should still be noted that while Hispanics may be growing in number in the Southern states, they still are far more numerous in states such as California, where the total Hispanic population is 32%, or almost 11 million of the states almost 34 million inhabitants. In Georgia, however,

Hispanics constitute 5.3% (435,227 persons) of the state's 8,186,453 residents (U.S. Census, 2001).

Though the total number of Hispanic immigrants in the South remains a small percentage of the total population, the impact of the immigrants in the region has been great. In this essay, I will discuss the various ways this newly emerging population has affected and been affected by the South, both economically and socially. This is a particularly interesting study because unlike California, Texas, and other high immigrant receiving states, the Southern states have little history connecting them to Mexico or other Latin American immigrant sending nations. The South also has a long history of racial segregation and discrimination that initially would make it appear to be an unlikely location for large Hispanic communities to be accepted amongst natives. What prevalence has such a history had with reference to Hispanics in the South? What has been native response to this fairly new wave of immigration to the region? Economically, how have Hispanic immigrants impacted the South? What other issues has the presence Hispanic immigrants brought to light? Using various case studies from different areas of the South, I will address these questions, as well as provide information concerning the general motivation of the immigrants for moving to the Southeastern United States. For myself, as well as many other "native Southerners," these are vital issues that have just recently begun to be addressed, but that will carry immense importance as the new century progresses.

## **II. Native Response to Hispanic Migration in the South**

When one thinks of minorities in the South, memories of slavery, racial oppression, segregation, and white supremacist organizations often arise. Considering

this environment, it would seem highly unlikely that a new minority group could easily gain acceptance into the notorious and firmly established “good-ole-boy” style social hierarchy (Duchon and Murphy, 2001). The increasingly large numbers of Hispanic migrants who have settled into the various locations within the regions are, however, adding a new dimension to the traditional white majority and black minority populations. While most white Southerners are well accustomed to the African-American populations in the region and are well aware of the history that has strained their relations, they are unaccustomed to the new culture, language, and customs that the Hispanic immigrants have brought to the South (Hernández-León, Zúñiga, Shaddock, and Villareal, 2001).

Surprisingly enough, it seems that Hispanics have had relatively little trouble being accepted by the majority of the population, both white and black, in at least some regions of the South (Studstill and Nieto-Studstill, 2001). In South Georgia, where mostly Mexican migrants work on the peach, tobacco, onion, pecan, peanut, and cucumber farms, many local, long term residents have grown to accept the migrants as necessary for the economic survival of the region, which has become increasingly vulnerable due to competition from domestic as well as international producers (Studstill and Nieto-Studstill, 2001). The same seems to be true in areas of North Georgia as well, where the huge industries of poultry processing and carpet manufacturing constitute the vast majority of the each specific counties labor market and economy (Engstorm, 2001; Guthey, 2001). Louisiana also has experienced a high influx of Hispanics migrants looking for work in the coastal, oil producing areas where the need for foreign labor was created by local flight after a drop in oil prices in the 1980’s (Donato, Bankston, and Robinson, 2001). Unlike the Georgia cases, however, migrants in Louisiana have made

no effort whatsoever to mingle with the local populations, most likely due to the very seasonal nature of their work (1980's (Donato, Bankston, and Robinson, 2001).

In many smaller cities in the South that have received a large number of Hispanic immigrants over the past decade, the impact of the migrants is undeniable. In Dalton, Georgia, where over 80 percent of all carpet and rugs produced in the U.S. are manufactured (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2000), there are now many small *tiendas* that carry mostly Mexican food products, Mexican music, and offer various services for Spanish speaking residents. There are also several Catholic churches that hold mass in Spanish. This is no small feat for a notoriously Protestant area of the Bible Belt. Mexican restaurants, soccer clubs, Spanish newspapers and television programs, and a Spanish radio station all add to the list of businesses that have sprung up in the city over recent years (Hernández-León, Zúñiga, Shaddock, and Villareal, 2001).

The rapid development of a strong and visible Hispanic community in Dalton has been a cause for debate in the city. Many long-term residents feel overwhelmed by the fast pace of the change sweeping their community. However, since the carpet industry plays such an enormous role in the city's affairs, representatives of the carpet manufacturers are actively engaged with community leaders to discuss the issue and find a way to protect their own interests while quieting public discontent (Engstrom, 2001). As a result, a Commission on Immigration was established as well as a task force that specializes in the topic of undocumented immigrants and basically functions as an "informal extension of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)," (Engstrom, 2001: 52).

One of the most pressing issues in the debate over Hispanic migrants to the South, especially undocumented migrants, has been education. The main focus of the debate is usually centered on the language issue. For example, in many small communities in North Carolina, Mexican parents have stated that they feel greatly left out when it comes to matters of their children's education because they have no way of communicating with the non-Spanish speaking teachers (Dale, Andreatta, and Freeman, 2001). In many cases however, the city and county governments have done little to accommodate for the special needs of Hispanic parents and students alike. This could be attributed to the national debates over bilingualism in American schools and the proposal to make English the only official national language that have occurred over the past several years (Mitchell and Feagin, 1995).

The Dalton case has proven to be much more positive. While there can be no doubt that there has been objections from some members of the native population, many more concessions have been made to Hispanic immigrants; this allows for a more meaningful dialogue between the migrant community and the traditional Dalton residents. The initiative for such a dialogue was, however, taken by the carpet companies in the city who were undoubtedly not only thinking of the plight of the migrants, but also protecting their own interests by calming the storm that was inevitably brewing over the topic of education (Engstrom, 2001). Despite the companies' motivations, many new and positive measures were implemented in the area to aid the school system make a smooth transition. One particularly innovative program that has been instituted in schools with high levels of Hispanic enrollment, but is not limited to the school system, is a joint effort between Dalton City leaders and carpet industry representatives, and the Universidad de

Monterrey. This program offers bilingual teachers from the Universidad the chance to assist Dalton city schools by helping with the students as well as train other teachers in dealing with Spanish speaking students and their special needs. Moreover, the exchange offers other community development initiatives outside of the school system (Hernández-León, Zúñiga, Shaddock, and Villareal, 2001). While more research still must be done to determine the effectiveness of the program as it is further implemented, the basic principles behind it, such as promoting multiculturalism and a diverse educational system, can be very positive models for other areas that are faced with similar dilemmas.

### **III. A Case for Immigration: The Economic Impact of Hispanic Workers in Memphis, Tennessee**

Over the last century, there have been many studies that have focused on the negative repercussions of immigration to the United States and that have sought out to limit foreign immigration by changing public sentiment on the subject. One such text that was written in the mid-nineties suggests that immigration to the U.S. over the past century has only been detrimental and has taken away many valuable jobs and educational opportunities from the American people (Beck, 1996). While that may or not be true for the typically studied and heavily concentrated migrant areas of the West, immigration to the South has been quite necessary and has not greatly displaced local workers. As noted in the section above, Mexican migration was welcomed by each respective industry badly in need of workers in North Georgia (Engstorm, 2001; Guthey, 2001), South Georgia (Studstill and Nieto-Studstill, 2001), and Louisiana (Donato, Bankston, and Robinson, 2001). As a result of Hispanic migration to these regions, these

businesses were able to keep pace with a (generally) growing consumer demand for their products.

While these studies focused on the importance of migrants in the work force and their social impact, little was mentioned about their economic contributions to the communities. However, recently there have been other studies documenting such contributions for specific regions. An especially interesting case study was performed by researchers at the University of Memphis to assess the economic impact of Hispanic immigrants in the Memphis, Tennessee area. Memphis is a city that has experienced a large influx of migrants over the past decade. In 1990, the U.S Census listed 8,116 Memphis residents of Hispanic descent. In 2000, however a separate study conducted by a research team at the University of Memphis estimated that the Hispanic population had risen to 53,628 people (Mendoza, Ciscel, and Smith, 2001).

The estimated total economic impact of these Hispanic migrants equals an amazing \$1,020,000,000 dollars and 35, 972 jobs (Mendoza, Ciscel, and Smith, 2001). These numbers were calculated by adding the migrants' consumer expenditure and the jobs created by such increased economic activity, as well as the actual work done by the migrants in the community. It was estimated that Hispanic workers earned 570.8 million dollars in 2000, of which some \$85.6 million dollars were paid in income taxes to the U.S. government. In addition, Hispanics in Memphis generated another \$12.3 million dollars in local and state sales taxes. In the local economy, Hispanics have spent a whopping \$359.6 million dollars on consumer expenditures, including \$26 million dollars in savings at local banks, \$74.8 million dollars in housing, and \$20.2 million in local restaurants (Mendoza, Ciscel, and Smith, 2001).

With such large sums of money being earned, spent, and saved by Hispanic migrants, the enormous economic effects of Hispanics in Memphis are undeniable. Nonetheless, many skeptics may still ask at what cost to the local worker has all of this change signified? According to this particular study, there have been no costs to the local worker. As a matter of fact, many locals have benefited from the presence of new Hispanic migrants. "From 1995 to 1999, the number of jobs in the Memphis economy grew from 531,600 to 586,300. While the number of jobs grew by 54,700, the number of workers in the labor force grew by only 35,100," therefore creating new jobs above the available numbers of workers of all ethnicity (Mendoza, Ciscel, and Smith, 2001:9).

#### **IV. Social Networks and Emerging Patterns in Hispanic Migration to the South**

In the South, migrants have begun to challenge the stereotypical ideal of the seasonal, male Mexican immigrant who works in the agricultural sector of a given economy for a large part of the year and then returns to Mexico with his earnings. Increasingly, Hispanic migrants, both male and female, are coming to the South from other locations in the United States or even directly from Latin America as social networks expand and economic opportunities arise. Many migrants have also decided to make the United States their permanent home instead of returning to their native countries after a certain period of time (Guthey, 2001; Rees, 2001).

According to Massey, "People gain access to social capital through membership in networks and social institutions and then convert it into other forms of capital to improve or maintain their position in society," (1999:43). This theory can be applied perfectly to Guthey's study of the North Georgia migrants working in the poultry industry. First, he

observed that many migrants were reluctant to ever return to Mexico because they had already formed tightly knit social networks in Georgia. Many Mexicans also decided to remain in the area to continue saving money or to support their expensive lifestyles in the U.S. instead of returning to Mexico at all (2001).

In Dalton, Georgia, the issue of migration trajectories and destinations has been researched quite thoroughly. While the majority of Hispanic immigrants, including many Mexicans and virtually all Central Americans, still go to California or Texas before settling in Dalton, the number of migrants who choose Georgia as their primary destination is growing steadily (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2001). This could be an indicator of the rise of transnational social networks; for example, most migrants go to a location where they already have family or friends who will help them start their lives in the U.S. Another possibility is the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in heavily populated migrant states that most likely caused the flight of a number of immigrants into areas where immigration is not so pressing of an issue. The most prominent example of the reality of anti-immigration attitude was the passing of Proposition 187 in California. In recent years, however, more and more Hispanics are choosing Georgia as their primary destination when migrating directly from Latin America. Economic factors cannot be denied when discussing the movement of migrants into the U.S. South, whether it is from primary destinations in the U.S. or directly from Latin America (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2000). The expansion of many industries throughout the South has created a need for unskilled, oftentimes migrant labor (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2000). Migrants are sensitive to these changes and have begun to seize new opportunities in the area.

It should also be noted that the migrant experience, especially in relation to destinations within the United States differ greatly between men and women. In the South, many more women than men tend to choose small locals such as Dalton as their first and final destination. Oftentimes, this is a result of family reunification. In Atlanta, however, Rees discovered that about 10% of the females she interviewed for her study were single, less likely to work in agricultural jobs, and generally more educated than the average Mexican female migrant (2001).

## **V. Conclusions**

Hispanic immigration to the South is a topic that has long been overlooked in many scholarly discussions on the issue of immigration to the United States. A recent U.S./Mexico binational report overlooked the issue all together (Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US Commission on Immigration Reform, 1998). Although, the issue has yet to infiltrate national consciousness, it will undoubtedly be of increasing importance in the years to come. As a country founded by immigrants and for immigrants, these types of studies are particularly useful not only in uncovering motivations of migrants who come to the U.S., but they also reveal a huge amount about our unique national society, or in this case, our original regional culture. The South has always been an area of the country that's history, customs, and culture set it apart from the rest of the country. Therefore, it makes sense that the issue of migration in the South would naturally need to be studied separately and differently from the issue in other parts of the country.

In closing, I feel I have learned a great deal from this assignment. Surprisingly, in my research, many assumptions I had about the seemingly inherent nature of racial prejudice in many regions of the South did not affect Hispanic immigrants the way it has African-Americans over the past few centuries. I was also delighted to discover the positive ways Hispanics are affecting various communities in the South, including some of my own. Continued studies may help discard stereotypes, not only of Hispanic immigrants, but also of the Historic South and its residents.

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