

# **Across Races and Nations: Building New Communities in the U.S. South**

## **The New Latino South: An Introduction**

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November 2001



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## Demographic Overview

Immigration is transforming the racial-ethnic demography of the U.S. South. Since 1990, people from all over the world—but above all, from Mexico and other countries in Latin America—have entered the region in record numbers. Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population of the U.S. South increased by 88%. In Tennessee, the Mexican-born population grew at a faster rate than in any other state in the country.<sup>1</sup> These recent Latino immigrants, along with Latino migrants from other regions of the country, have settled primarily in areas where jobs at the low-wage end of the labor market are abundant. From western Arkansas to coastal North Carolina, from the tip of southern Louisiana to northern Kentucky, Latinos have located in rural and urban areas throughout the region.

This introduction presents basic population data from the 2000 census regarding the distribution of Latinos in the South. When interpreting these data, it is important to keep in mind that Latinos do not represent a “race,” as commonly defined by the U.S. Census or the color-conscious classification system of the United States. Although in popular terms Americans tend to racialize Latinos as “brown,” people of Spanish heritage in fact range in skin color from “white” European to “black” African. This is a consequence of the historical interaction of diverse groups—primarily European colonialists, indigenous peoples, and West Africans—in the areas now known as the southwestern United States and the many countries of Latin America. The history of Spanish conquest and colonialism generated sufficient cultural commonality among these groups that Latinos (or “Hispanics,” as the U.S. census has tended to name this group) are now considered an ethnic group. They are defined by their common culture, most importantly their Spanish language heritage.<sup>2</sup>

The data presented here encompass those individuals who identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic at the time of the 2000 census. Not all of these individuals are recent immigrants, nor are they necessarily foreign-born; some were already in the South and others migrated to it from elsewhere in the United States. As many have noted, these numbers are no doubt an undercount of the Latino population, as those who are immigrants but lack legal documents may seek social invisibility and avoid participation in the census.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the summary of recent data on Latino immigration in Miller, Spring, June, 2004. “Latino Immigrants in Tennessee: A Survey of Demographic and Social Science Research,” University of Tennessee College of Law, photocopy.

<sup>2</sup> However, some “Latinos” do not speak Spanish as their first language, and others do not speak it at all (e.g., indigenous peoples, people of Hispanic descent whose families have lived in the United States for generations, or Brazilians, who speak Portuguese). Similar complexities and contradictions may be found throughout the U.S. racial classification system, which creates “races” and, in the case of Latinos/Hispanics, ethnicity, out of extremely diverse peoples.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the Latino population based on non-census sources (e.g., vital statistics, school records) often arrive at figures that are double the census count. For example, a recent study of the Latino population in

The table below provides a state-by-state ranking of the Latino population count in the historically “non-Latino” (i.e., minus Texas and Florida) South. Although Georgia has the largest Latino population as of the 2000 census, both in absolute numbers and as a percent of the total state population, North Carolina experienced a higher Latino growth rate from 1990-2000. Moreover, Virginia and Louisiana, both of which had relatively low growth rates in the Latino population (106 percent and 16 percent, respectively), nonetheless have relatively large Latino populations. That is because their existing population base of Latinos in 1990 was already sizeable.

### Hispanic Population of the South, 1990-2000

State and Rank	Hispanic Pop. in 2000	% of State Population	% Increase 1990-2000	Hispanic Pop. in 1990
1. Georgia	435,227	5.3	299.6	108,922
2. No. Carolina	378,963	4.7	393.9	76,726
3. Virginia	329,540	4.7	105.6	160,288
4. Tennessee	123,838	2.2	278.2	32,741
5. Louisiana	107,738	2.4	15.8	93,044
6. So. Carolina	95,076	2.4	211.2	30,551
7. Arkansas	86,866	3.3	337.0	19,876
8. Alabama	75,830	1.7	207.9	24,629
9. Kentucky	59,939	1.5	172.6	21,984
10. Mississippi	39,569	1.4	148.4	15,931
11. W. Virginia	12,279	0.7	44.6	8,489

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

The distribution of this new population largely reflects the dynamics of the economy in different sub-regions. Not surprisingly, the mountain or Appalachian South and the Mississippi Delta—areas of entrenched poverty and, in many locations, economic stagnation or decline—have for the most part not attracted large Latino settlements. This is evident in the relatively small Latino populations in West Virginia, the only state that lies entirely within Appalachia, and Mississippi, the heart of the Delta sub-region. However, there are important exceptions to this generalization, such as the Appalachian region of north Georgia, where the extensive textile and poultry processing industries have attracted a large influx of migrants and immigrants.

The maps on the next two pages show more detailed, county-level patterns of Latino population distribution and growth. The first map indicates the proportion of the population in each county that identified as Latino or Hispanic in the 2000 census. It is immediately apparent that in several states—above all, North Carolina—the Latino

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the Memphis metropolitan area estimated a population of 53,628 Latinos, in contrast to the census count of 27,520. See Burrell, Luchy *et al.* 1997. “Preliminary Estimates and Projections of the Hispanic Population for the Metropolitan Area 1996-2000.” Memphis, TN: Regional Economic Development Center.

presence is widespread. Although the bulk of each state's Latino population may be found in cities, Latinos have dispersed throughout rural and urban areas alike.

Counties where Latinos represent a relatively large percent of the total population are typically more rural areas dominated by a traditional southern industry (including agriculture) or, in some cases, a military base (which some might consider a "traditional southern industry.") This is true, for example, of Whitfield County (represented by the dark green area in the northwest corner of Georgia), where carpet mills have attracted a large Latino work force to Dalton, the county seat, and surrounding areas. This pattern also accounts in part for the concentration of Latinos in western Arkansas, where many have located to work in poultry processing. The major metropolitan counties where Latinos approach or exceed ten percent of the population are Fairfax County, Virginia (located in the Washington, D.C. area), Gwinnett County, Georgia (part of the Atlanta metro area), Chattahoochee County (part of the Columbus MSA in western Georgia, where Fort Benning is located), and Chatham County, North Carolina (in the Raleigh-Durham MSA).<sup>4</sup>

The second map illustrates the growth in the county-level Latino population from 1990-2000, as compared to the average Latino population growth statewide. This map makes it possible to identify those areas where the growth rate diverges significantly from that of the state overall.<sup>5</sup> This includes areas of relatively low growth, such as the counties of metropolitan New Orleans (on the southeastern edge of the state), which already had a sizeable Latino population in 1990 that grew slowly relative to the statewide average. High growth areas include many counties, e.g., in West Virginia, that are so designated simply because their Latino population base in 1990 was quite small. More significant are those counties that have *both* high growth rates from 1990-2000 and a large Latino population (as a proportion of the total county) in 2000.

In general, Latinos have settled in larger numbers in areas with expanding labor markets, where they have both followed and enhanced economic growth. How they and their U.S.-born children will fare in the future is unclear, as many determining factors—from post-9/11 immigration policy changes to workplace organizing drives by Latino workers—continue to emerge. What does seem clear is that many of these newcomers are here to stay, and they are permanently transforming the racial-ethnic landscape of the South.

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<sup>4</sup> The relatively high proportion of Latinos in certain rural counties is in part a statistical artifact of the small population base. The majority of Latinos in the South live in metropolitan areas, but the large population base in cities means that they represent a smaller percentage of the total county population.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that many areas with apparently high growth rates are simply rural counties where the population base of Latinos in 1990 was so small that modest numerical growth translates into a large percentage increase. (For example, an increase from 10 to 100 people represents growth of 900 percent.)

## Latino Immigrants and the U.S. South: A Brief History

Latinos have lived in territory now considered the U.S. South for decades, even centuries. The first Europeans to settle in the present states of Texas and Florida were Spaniards, and Texas was once part of Mexico. Indeed, the original “illegal aliens” in what became the state of Texas were Norte Americanos who crossed the border into Mexico from the north, not the reverse. This history stands as an important reminder that the U.S.-Mexico border is a fluid boundary. Latinos settled in what became U.S. territory well before the contemporary flow of immigrants from Latin America or, for that matter, the great wave of European immigration in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries.

In the more recent, post-World War II period, U.S. foreign policy combined with political and economic developments in certain Latin American countries has yielded a sporadic flow of Latino refugees, immigrants, and guest workers to the U.S. South. The large Cuban population that migrated to Miami after the Cuban Revolution is probably the most well known, but there are other settlements as well. The bracero program (1942-1964), which permitted Mexican farm workers to enter the U.S. to work in agriculture, yielded small populations of Latinos scattered throughout the South. Many of these Mexican farm workers replaced African Americans who were themselves also migrating—to the North, in search of greater freedom and better-paying industrial jobs. More recently, people of Spanish heritage who already lived in other regions of the United States migrated to the South, especially after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 granted them amnesty in certain circumstances.

Still, the Latino presence in areas of the South other than Texas and Florida has until quite recently been scant, and it is on those areas of the “non-Latino” South that we focus in this report. (For our purposes, this includes the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee.) Here, the new immigrants who have arrived over the past decade enter a region where most people have no direct experience with immigration. There is little pre-existing infrastructure of Spanish-language institutions, and racial-ethnic diversity has been highly restricted.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the distinctive history of the U.S. South means that new immigrants must find their way in a social landscape defined in many locations by the contentious racial divide between black and white.

### Race and Racism in the U.S. South

From the period of initial European settlement in the 17<sup>th</sup> century up until the prohibition against slave importation in 1808, many people who came through the South’s major ports of call arrived not as voluntary immigrants but as human cargo in the holds of slave ships. They came not in search of opportunity or freedom, but as captive laborers whose first stop in their new country was the auction block. This is a defining

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<sup>6</sup> Louisiana is an exception to this generalization. The Spanish and French influence, which dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is still evident here, especially in New Orleans and southern Louisiana more generally. However, the population that considers itself “Latino” is small relative to Texas and Florida (as of the 2000 census, 107,738 vs. 6,669,666 and 2,682,715, respectively). Hence its inclusion in the “non-Latino” South.

feature of southern history that, to this day, influences social and economic dynamics in the region—including the complex responses to contemporary immigrants.

Today, the South has by far the highest concentrations of African American people of any region in the United States. The map on the next page illustrates the distribution of the black population in the historically “non-Latino” South. The contiguous group of majority-black counties in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas compose the Mississippi delta, while the swath of additional majority-black and adjacent counties in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina represent the Black Belt. Named originally for the color of its rich soil, the “Black Belt” has also become a reference to the racial composition of this sub-region. Many of the counties in the Delta and the Black Belt remain tied to a rural, agricultural economy in which the most fertile land is held disproportionately by white elites; economic opportunities are limited and poverty, especially among African Americans, is widespread.

The white area in the central and northern portions of the map roughly follows the contours of the Appalachian Mountains. In this sub-region, slave labor built railroads, mined salt, and worked in many other antebellum industries, but mountainous topography prevented the development of large plantation agriculture. Racial exclusion in the period after the Civil War led to disproportionate out-migration by African Americans, and today that population is relatively small. An important exception is the coal-mining area of southern West Virginia, to which many African Americans migrated during the industrial boom in the early twentieth century.

During the industrial transformation of the U.S. economy in the period after the Civil War, many employers in the U.S. South experienced less need for immigrant labor than their counterparts in more rapidly industrializing areas of the country. The legacy of the South’s labor-intensive agricultural system, organized originally around slavery and later around sharecropping and tenancy, produced a seemingly endless supply of impoverished workers, both black and white. (The exception once again was the coal field region of Appalachia, where labor shortages during the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries required coal operators to recruit foreign-born workers.) Few of the millions of immigrants who poured through the original Ellis Island, opened in 1892 in the harbor of New York City, found their way to the Deep South. Lacking large concentrations of industry and urban population centers, the South offered neither the economic opportunities nor the ethnic communities that many immigrants sought.

Indeed, in order to industrialize, elites in the South were forced to recruit not labor, but capital. During the late nineteenth century, proponents of an industrial “New South” sought to attract northern capital by advertising the region’s most abundant resource: cheap labor. Abandoning their traditional stronghold in New England, many textile manufacturers relocated their mills to rural areas of the piedmont South, a sub-region that stretches from central Virginia and North Carolina into northern South Carolina and Georgia. Here, they built and controlled company towns where they housed the new workers—women, men and children—who left their hard-scrabble farms for jobs in the mills.

Following the code of Jim Crow, which by law required racial segregation in all aspects of social life, these new industrialists hired only white workers for production jobs. Black working class Southerners remained largely confined to agriculture and a narrow band of occupations at the lowest wage end of the labor market—primarily domestic service, janitorial and laboring positions. During World War II and its immediate aftermath, an increasingly diverse array of manufacturing companies opened branch plants in the South. Drawn like their predecessors by the region's low-wage, non-union, white labor force, for the most part they also upheld the color bar. Only in the 1960s, faced with the demands of the civil rights movement and an increasing shortage of white labor, did southern manufacturers begin to hire African American workers in large numbers.

This path to industrialization has important consequences for the contemporary South, many of which pertain to the social and economic position of new immigrants. Southern elites' affection for branch plants, low-wage labor and racial segregation produced minimal economic diversification and few opportunities beyond low-skill industrial jobs, though this is changing in certain areas. The rural South in particular (and the South is the most rural region of the country) remains heavily dependent on manufacturing, agriculture and natural resource extraction—economic sectors that date back a century or more. Moreover, the rural South's manufacturing sector still consists disproportionately of non-union, labor-intensive industries, where corporate profitability, even survival, depends on low-wage labor. During the intensified global competition and “deindustrialization” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, some of these manufacturers downsized or closed their factories altogether, in some cases laying off entire communities, and sought cheaper labor outside the United States.

In more recent years, the global linkages between the U.S. South and other parts of the world have taken new forms. Foreign capital as well as labor has flowed into the region. Investors from Germany, Japan and elsewhere have found the South, particularly the I-85 corridor that stretches between Atlanta and Richmond, a desirable location for their chemical, automobile and other industrial plants. In the early 1990's, Spartanburg, South Carolina boasted more foreign capital per capita than any other city in the United States. The South is still the branch plant haven of the United States, but the corporate headquarters for many of those plants may now be in Tokyo rather than New York.

This period of intensified globalization drew people from all over the world to the U.S. South. Even as jobs became more abundant in this region—albeit low-wage jobs, often with no benefits—the economic viability of many communities in Mexico and elsewhere declined dramatically. Increasingly, the United States and other powerful countries have created global institutions, such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, which impose terms of trade and development that are favorable to corporations and wealthier nations but destructive to poorer peoples and countries. For example, the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement between the U.S., Canada and Mexico destabilized sectors of the Mexican economy and contributed to the

unprecedented numbers of Latino workers who arrived in the South during the past decade.

In some instances, particularly in the rural South, these new immigrants found employment in traditional low-wage manufacturing industries, such as textiles and agricultural processing. In more urban locations, and in scenic rural areas with extensive tourism or other sources of growth, immigrants have also found jobs in construction (for men) and the service sector. These jobs are far from stable, however, as the South's disproportionate dependence on traditional manufacturing makes its economy especially vulnerable during recessions. One recent study indicated that, from January to early September 2001, the interior South (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee) lost 36,000 jobs—more than twice as many, per capita, as the rest of the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

Economic turmoil and insecurity unfortunately predispose some southern workers, both black and white, to blame new immigrants for their troubles. The events of September 11, 2001, as interpreted by right-wing politicians, tend to intensify these sentiments. Anti-immigrant organizations have begun to organize publicly in the South, and their appeals to fear, racism and nationalism recall those of white supremacist organizations in the past. Unfortunately, southern history is replete with examples of progressive movements that succumbed to racism. Their defeats inevitably benefited primarily those who already enjoyed a disproportionate share of wealth and political power in the region.

Generations of Southerners have lamented the region's history of racism, slavery and violence, but too few have placed their hope in those most dispossessed by this legacy. The "Across Races and Nations" project grew out of the conviction that social justice in the South depends on bottom-up movements that join people across racial-ethnic barriers. If southern history holds any lessons, surely one of the most important is that white supremacy and racial/ethnic division have repeatedly defeated progressive movements and must be challenged if such movements are to succeed. The extensive immigration of recent years creates a new social context in which multi-racial/ethnic coalition-building becomes more complex yet also more necessary. This resource book is an effort to provide the information that, we hope, can help make those new coalitions not only necessary but possible.

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<sup>7</sup> David Leonhardt. 2001. "The Rust Belt with a Drawl." *New York Times*. Nov. 13: C1, C8.