



# MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN SOUTH CAROLINA: A PROFILE



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 ABOUT THE STUDY

Recognizing the significance of the growing Latino presence in South Carolina, a research team led by Dr. Elaine Lacy conducted interviews with Mexican immigrants, the largest component in the Latino population, in the Upstate, Midlands and Low Country of South Carolina between 2003 and 2005. The growing Latino population also led to the creation in 2004 of a research group at the University of South Carolina, the Consortium for Latino Immigration Studies, to examine various aspects of this growing population. The Consortium, housed in the Arnold School of Public Health at USC, helped facilitate this study.

The major aims of the study were to provide a baseline profile of Mexican immigrants in South Carolina, and to establish a record of their migration patterns, reasons for moving to South Carolina, length of time in the state, demographic features, economic, social and cultural behaviors, and future plans. We also wished to hear, in their own words, more about the immigrants' experiences and major concerns. Another goal of the study is to provide information about this population that can help shape public policy.

Most of the respondents in the study were selected using the snowball method of sampling. We located some subjects by going door to door in mobile home parks, others through churches, in tiendas, English language classes, or through other subjects' social networks. Many subjects were interviewed in *consulados móviles*, "mobile consulates" held at least four times annually in South Carolina by the Consulado General de México representing the Carolinas (based in Raleigh, NC). On these occasions, Mexican nationals come to the designated location to obtain various types of documentation including copies of birth certificates, passports, or most commonly, to secure a *matrícula consular*, a photo ID card that will enable them to open bank accounts, among other uses. We interviewed subjects in consulados móviles in Greenville, Columbia, Lexington, Hilton Head, and Charleston, SC over the course of two years. Respondents' counties of residence include Aiken, Anderson, Beaufort, Charleston, Dorchester, Greenville, Jasper, Kershaw, Lexington, Newberry, Pickens, Richland, Saluda, and Spartanburg.

The research team interviewed 200 subjects age 18 and over. The method of obtaining information was through face-to-face, in-depth interviews conducted in Spanish. Subjects were asked a series of 69 open-ended questions, and each interview was tape recorded and transcribed by Spanish speakers. The questions asked are noted in Appendix I. After discarding some interviews because of unclear or damaged tape recordings, missing questions and answers, or other, similar reasons, 181 interviews remained. These provide the basis of this report.

## CONTEXTUALIZING MEXICAN IMMIGRATION

### **History of Mexican Immigration to the U.S.**

Since the late 19th century a number of push and pull factors have shaped Mexican migration between the United States and Mexico. Mexican migrants made their way into the U.S. in relatively small numbers until the early 20th century, when almost one million Mexican refugees crossed the border to escape the destruction of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917. During World War I and throughout the 1920s, largely in response to an official agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments, Mexican workers continued to cross the border to fill jobs predominantly in the southwestern U.S., mostly in agriculture, railroad construction, and mining. Over time, many of these workers began taking jobs in urban areas including Chicago and New York. By the 1940s, the Mexican worker recruitment program was reinstated as large numbers of U.S. workers joined the armed forces. This revised “Bracero Program” (1942-1964) resulted in the arrival of 4.6 million Mexican workers to help U.S. growers and other employers fill jobs mainly in the western U.S. These programs contributed to what some scholars have called the “revolving door” of Mexican migration to the U.S. to satisfy labor demands and to help meet the economic needs of impoverished Mexicans, especially in rural western Mexico (Lacy, 1988; Canales, 2003).

These flows of Mexican refugees and workers into the U.S. in the 20th century remained unrestricted until 1965, when the Immigration and Nationality Act set limits on the number of immigrants that could legally enter the country from Mexico and

other Latin American nations (setting a 120,000 cap for the western hemisphere). Mexican immigration in the 1970s and 1980s was largely temporary and of short duration. (Bustamante, 1997, Gástelum, 1991) Since the late 1980s, however, Mexican migration to the U.S. has increased dramatically, thanks to economic push factors in Mexico, labor needs in the U.S., and provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). A recent report on Mexican migration to the U.S. termed the flow “one of the largest mass movements of workers and families in the modern age” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004:1) The 2000 Census revealed that the U.S. foreign-born population increased by 11.3 million in the 1990s, and Mexican immigrants accounted for 43 percent of that growth (Census 2000).

A major factor in this movement is the spread of global capitalism, which has increased the flow of goods, money and people across international borders worldwide (Tehrani, 2004). Additional critical factors driving Mexican emigration is their economic crisis of the 1980s, devaluation of the peso in 1994, and neo-liberal economic policies that since the 1980s have adversely affected Mexico’s economy, leading to high rates of unemployment. After adjusting for inflation, Mexico’s per capita GDP since the 1980s has grown at only 0.7 percent, which is less than a third of that of the U.S. (De la Garza and Szekely, 1997; Durand et al., 1999, 2001; Alba, 2002, Escobar Latapí and Martin, 2006; Portes, 2006). States in southern Mexico have been especially hard hit in recent decades. The Mexican government’s Marginalization Index, which

reports on Mexican communities' education and income levels as well as basic goods and services such as housing, potable water, indoor plumbing, and electricity, indicates that the index of marginalization in the southern Mexican states increased since the 1990s. Recently, municipalities (similar to counties in the U.S. states) with high to very high levels of marginalization include 94 out of 111 municipalities in Chiapas, 59 out of 75 in Guerrero, 431 of 570 in Oaxaca, 141 of 217 in Puebla, and 130 of 207 in Veracruz (Consejo Nacional de la Población, 2002).

Finally, while many Mexican migrants, both authorized and unauthorized, have historically returned to Mexico either periodically or permanently, the percentage of those coming and going has decreased since the 1980s. This is the result of a shift out of seasonal agricultural work into more permanent employment in the U.S., the amnesty and family reunification aspects of IRCA, which “anchored families in the U.S.” (Escobar Latapí and Martin, 2006; Durand et al., 1999), and increased border enforcement, which makes return trips to Mexico more risky and expensive.

**New Immigrant Destinations**

An important difference in post-1980s Mexican immigration and that of earlier periods is that recent immigrants are becoming more dispersed, moving into areas of the U.S. outside the traditional Mexican immigrant gateways of Texas, California, Chicago, and New York. Since the early 1990s, six states in the U.S. Southeast (Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) have experienced an increase in Latino immigration in general that exceeds that of the national increase: between 1990 and 2005 (last available Census data), the Latino population in these states increased by an average of 447 percent while increasing by 85 percent for the U.S. as a whole (See Table 1). The Census Bureau reports that 73 percent of Latinos in these six states were of Mexican origin (compared to 63 percent for the nation as a whole).

**Table 1. Hispanic Population For Six Southern States, 1990-2005**

<b>STATE</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>CHANGE 1990-2005</b>
Arkansas	19,876	86,866	126,932	539%
Alabama	24,629	75,830	99,040	302%
Georgia	108,922	435,277	625,028	474%
North Carolina	76,726	378,963	533,087	595%
South Carolina	30,551	95,076	135,041	342%
Tennessee	32,741	123,838	172,704	428%

Source: Census 1990, 2000, American Community Survey data 2005

**Table 2. Hispanic Population as Percentage of Total Population, 1990-2005**

<b>STATE</b>	<b>% Hispanic 1990</b>	<b>% Hispanic 2000</b>	<b>% Hispanic 2005</b>
Arkansas	0.09	3	5
Alabama	0.06	2	2
Georgia	2	5	7
North Carolina	1	5	6
South Carolina	0.09	2	3
Tennessee	0.07	2	3

Source: Census 1990, 2000, American Community Survey data 2005

### **Why the Southeast?**

Latino immigrants entered the Southeast in large numbers in the 1990s for a variety of reasons, the most salient being economic factors. The South’s dynamic economy, newly diversified, proved extremely robust in the 1990s, providing jobs at a rate that exceeded that of the nation as a whole. Further, in the face of increasing global economic competition, some southeastern companies made the strategic decision to compete by remaining in the region and hiring low-cost immigrant workers (Schunk and Woodward, 2000; Kochhar, 2005; Murphy et al., 2001).

Some Mexican immigrants to the Southeast arrive from traditional Latino settlement areas in the U.S. (such as California, Texas, New York and Chicago), “pushed” by competition over jobs and housing, and by increasing anti-immigrant sentiment. Further, IRCA played a role as well: the act legalized 2.3 million previously unauthorized Mexican migrants living in the U.S. and allowed them to send for immediate family members, and as traditional migrant receiving areas became overcrowded, newly legalized Mexican immigrants felt the freedom to relocate to new areas of the country (Durand, 2000; Johnson-Webb, 2002; Kochhar et al., 2005; Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2002; Murphy et al., 2001;

Odem and Lacy, 2005; Schmidt, 2003). Many of the newly legal immigrants and their family members relocated to the Southeast, drawn by jobs such as those provided by Olympic facilities construction for the 1996 games in Atlanta, the region’s construction boom in general, and by poultry processing and agricultural jobs (Mohl, 2005).

The Southeast’s booming economy also resulted in the permanent settlement of former Mexican agricultural migrant workers in the region. Since the 1980s, migrant agricultural workers, many of them of Mexican origin, have traveled through the Southeast as part of east coast migrant worker streams, and with increasing job opportunities many of these former migrants “settled out” to take year-round jobs in the region (Odem and Lacy, 2005).

As Mexican migrants moved into the region from other states or settled out of migrant streams to take jobs and enjoy the relative tranquility and lower cost of living the Southeast offers, word spread through social networks to communities in Mexico where jobs are scarce or wages are low. Trans-border networks of job recruiters and labor brokers also help create ties between Mexican and U.S. southeastern communities. As

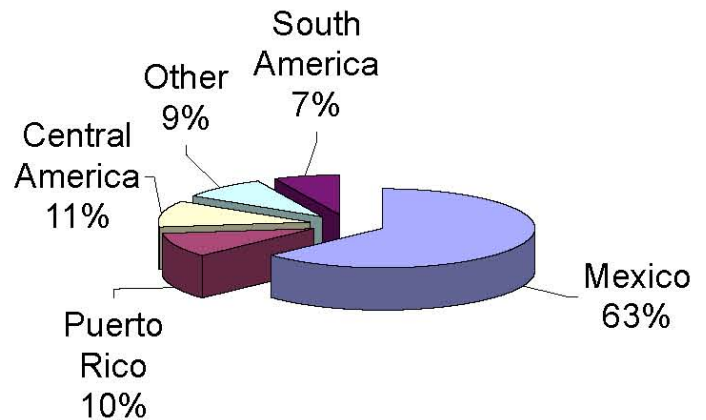
one group of migration scholars put it, “Residents of these Mexican [sending] communities often have better information about the availability of certain types of U.S. jobs than do local U.S. residents.” (Escobar Latapí et al., 1997).

### **Mexican Immigration to South Carolina**

While the Latino population in South Carolina has not grown as rapidly or reached the same levels as those in North Carolina and Georgia, South Carolina has remained among the U.S. states with continued rapid increases in this population cohort. The Census Bureau estimates that the Mexican-born in South Carolina increased by over 600 percent between 1990 and 2005 (from roughly 11,000 to 85,000). According to the 2005 American Community Survey, Mexican-born individuals comprise 63 percent of South Carolina’s Hispanic/Latino population. (See Figure 1.)

It should be noted that for a variety of reasons the Hispanic population is undercounted by census enumerators. The most common factors associated with undercount of Hispanics in the census include complex household makeup or cultural differences in defining households, individual/family mobility, legal (authorized vs. unauthorized) status, fear or distrust of government, and language barriers (Davis, 1992; Edmonston, 2002; Romero, 1992). Given the larger percentage of those of Mexican origin within the Hispanic/Latino cohort in the U.S., their household characteristics, and the fact that their numbers include a high percentage of unauthorized persons, we should assume that the Mexican immigrant population is far larger than the Census reports.

**Figure 1: Country of Origin, Hispanic Population in South Carolina 2005**



## MIGRATION PATTERNS

### **Migration and Social Capital**

Most respondents in this study originated in states in southern and southeastern Mexico. Over one-half (54 percent) arrived from the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Puebla. These states represent new “sending” states in Mexico, states whose rates of out-migration have increased dramatically in the last decade as result of deteriorating economic conditions (Alba, 2002; Pickard, 2006; Latapí and Martin, 2006). Other states in the Southeastern U.S. are witnessing similar migration patterns: the majority of Mexican migrants to North Carolina, for example, arrive from southern Mexico rather than from the traditional sending states in central and western Mexico (Kasarda and Johnson, 2006).