

## INTEGRATING MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN OREGON, USA<sup>1</sup>

## INTEGRACIÓN DE MIGRANTES MEXICANOS EN OREGON, ESTADOS UNIDOS

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### ABSTRACT

Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. Today, Latinos represent up to 15% of the total US population. In Oregon the numbers show a similar trend, Latinos are up to 12% of the state population with Mexicans representing the largest group within this population. However, students of Mexican descent still struggle to obtain a college degree with only 54% of them graduating from high school. The majority of the adult Mexican population in the state lacks legal status, has low educational attainment and comes from rural areas (King et al. 2011). This gets translated into a lack of social capital that is transmitted to their descendants and constraints them to be academically successful and later being able to contribute to economic development in Oregon. Based on an interview with 41 Mexican immigrants, this paper presents barriers to adult Mexicans immigrants' civic engagement. Lack of information is the most frequent barrier. This paper spells out a discussion on how to increase the civic participation of Mexican immigrants in order to help their children to succeed in school.

### RESUMEN

Los latinos son el grupo étnico de mayor crecimiento en los Estados Unidos. Hoy en día, los latinos representan hasta el 15% de la población total de Estados Unidos. En Oregon los números muestran una tendencia similar, los latinos representan hasta un 12% de la población del estado, siendo los mexicanos el grupo más grande dentro de esta población. Sin embargo, los estudiantes de origen mexicano se encuentran con muchas barreras para obtener un título universitario, solo 54% se gradúa de la preparatoria. La mayoría de la población adulta mexicana en el estado carece de estatus legal, tiene bajo nivel de educación y proviene de zonas rurales (King et al. 2011); esto se traduce en una falta de capital social que se transmite a sus descendientes y los limita para alcanzar el éxito académico y más tarde contribuir al desarrollo económico de Oregon. Basado en una entrevista con 41 inmigrantes mexicanos, este documento presenta las barreras para la participación cívica de los mexicanos inmigrantes en edad adulta, la falta de información es la barrera más frecuente. El presente ensayo ofrece una discusión sobre cómo incrementar la participación cívica de los migrantes mexicanos para ayudar a sus hijos a alcanzar el éxito en sus estudios.

### KEYWORDS

Mexican immigrants, barriers, economic development, Oregon

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Migrantes mexicanos, barreras, desarrollo económico, Oregon

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The Latino population represents up to 12% of the total state population, with Mexicans being up to 90 percent of these residents (King et al., 2011). Approximately 70% of the Mexicans living in Oregon reside in the upper northwest quadrant of the state (King et al., 2011). Woodburn and Beaverton, Oregon, contain a large Mexican population. Woodburn shifted from 17 percent Latino to 59 percent Latino between 1980 and 2010, while by 2010 nearly one in three residents of Beaverton was non-white, reflecting immigration from Asia and Africa as well as Latin America (US Census Bureau, 2010).

Woodburn, located in Marion County, is more agricultural than where the city of Beaverton is established. In Woodburn, generations of Mexicans have settled in the area since the 1940's, when they first started coming to the state for agricultural work as a result of the Bracero Program<sup>3</sup> (Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza, 2010). On the other hand, Beaverton, Washington County, is considered the “the fastest growing immigrant population” and takes pride in calling itself as the “most diverse city” (Martinez-Starke, 2011). The Latino population in the city of Beaverton represents 16%, with Mexicans being the largest population within this segment. Overall, a small proportion of Mexican immigrants have resided in Oregon since mid-century. However, most Mexican immigrants arrived in the last two decades, including the majority of those who settled in Beaverton and Woodburn. It was not until the 1980's that Mexicans started settling permanently in their new communities of residence in Oregon (Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza, 2010; Alcalá Tobón, 2013). The combination of Mexican population concentration and immigration history make Beaverton and Woodburn valuable case studies for exploring barriers to Mexican immigrant civic engagement.

The truth is that regardless of their legal status, Mexican immigrants have settled permanently in the United States, only a few still consider that idea of going back to their communities of origin. In Oregon, the majority of these new residents maintain relationships with their communities of origin, they send money regularly, build houses, which may be never inhabited, belong to organizations that

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<sup>3</sup> A bilateral program that allowed primarily working age men from rural communities to work in the U.S. temporarily and with documents due to the World War II shortages (Ibarra-Mateos and Rivera-Sánchez 2011).

support community development projects in their hometowns, this type of ties are inevitable. However, as said before, they see their life and the future of their children in the United States. They have established themselves in Oregon and own houses, businesses, have their children in schools, among other factors.

However, the growth in the Mexican population does not translate to an equal growth in educational opportunities for their children. The adult Mexican immigrant population faces constraints to successfully engage in the receiving society, among the factors are: lack of legal status, inability to obtain driver's license and socio economic status (Gonzales Berry, Mendoza, & Plaza, 2007). This paper presents the barriers to civic engagement among 41 Mexican immigrants residing in Woodburn and Beaverton, Oregon, who were interviewed in the summer and fall of 2012. Mexican immigrants lack the knowledge to be involved with government agencies, including educational institutions. This paper spells out a discussion on how to increase the civic participation of newcomers to Oregon that can be translated into engaging the adult Mexican population for the betterment of the education of their children. This can also be translated into an active economic participation by these children who will soon join the work force. In this respect while the research was conducted at two sites its potential for application could be across the state and beyond.

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## METHODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted with 41 Mexican immigrants residing in the cities of Beaverton and Woodburn, Oregon. Both cities are situated in the upper northwest quadrant of the state, where up to 70 percent of the Mexicans in Oregon reside. Interviews were a convenience sample conducted across multiple venues including the Oregon's Farmworker Union (PCUN), Oregon Human Development Corporation (OHDC), Chemeketa Community College, public library, and Mexican restaurants in the city of Woodburn. In the city of Beaverton the venues include the Beaverton Hispanic Center; churches, public libraries, Farmer's Market and Mexican restaurants.

The interviews lasted for up to 60 minutes and were conducted in Spanish. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured in nature, addressing the following topic:

- Experiences the interviewee have had that he or she considered to have been barriers to civic engagement in Oregon.

The process of analyses of the interview questions was implemented using thematic network to understand the factors that the participants reported as influencing their barriers to civic engagement in Oregon. This study aims to contribute to prepare local governments and actors, including educational facilities, across the region for ways they could increase productive engagement with the Mexican community and at the same time increase the level of social, economic and political engagement of these residents and of their descendants.

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## RESULTS

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES

The majority of the Mexicans residing in Oregon share similar demographic characteristics: they are from rural areas, have a low level of literacy and limited knowledge of English, and usually lack legal status (King et al., 2011; Warren, 2009). Warren (2009) estimates that up to 95% of undocumented migrants in Oregon are Mexican.

In average, respondents have been residing in the United States from seven to 20 years. Fifty-six percent of respondents were either married or cohabiting with a partner and 56% were younger than forty years old. Forty five percent of respondents had no more than nine years of education. Mexicans from southern states count for a high proportion of the Mexican community in the U.S.

(Gonzales-Berry & Mendoza, 2010). This sample also resembles those characteristics, 63 percent of the interviewees are from rural areas in Mexico, 76 % come from the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca and Jalisco. (See Table 1).

The proportion of Latino population in the U.S. has grown significantly in the past few decades. Today, Latinos represent the largest minority group in the country. However, this growth in the Hispanic population does not draw a parallel outcome in terms of their political, social or economic participation. DeSipio (2011) argues that institutional and demographic barriers prevent Latinos from fully participating in the United States. Participants in *the Latino Immigrant Civic Engagement Trends* by the Wilson Center argue that the barriers that inhibit Latino civic engagement in the US are as follows:

- 1) processing backlogs for citizenship applications; 2) a lack of Latino ethnic role models in government (the relative low numbers of Latino political officeholders and congressional staffers); 3) lack of legal status of many Latino immigrants; and, 4) socioeconomic factors, especially the fact that many immigrants find themselves in "survival mode," focused on meeting daily material needs (Donnelly, 2009).

Similarly, in her research related to Latino Community Leadership in Oregon, Curiel (2007) argues that Latinos are less likely to vote or engage in political activities basically because: a) they are more likely to engaged in activities that satisfy their primary safety needs such as food and housing (which get a priority in the needs hierarchy according to Maslow's theory); and b) they do not see voting as something that really influences the wellbeing of their community. Usually factors like the length of stay in the U.S. legally and ability to speak English, contribute positively to levels of civic engagement among Latinos while other factors such as growth in the "anti-immigrant sentiment" and the mass media in Spanish have negative influences (Curiel, 2007).

Table 1.  
 Demographic Distribution of Interview Respondents.

	Men %	Women %
<b>Legal Status</b>		
US Citizen	12	7
Permanent Resident	20	17
Undocumented	22	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Age groups</b>		
20-29	15	17
30-39	12	12
40-49	12	10
50-59	8	7
60 +	7	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	15	12
Married	27	22
Cohabiting <i>Union Libre</i>	2	5
Separated	5	2
Divorced	2	3
Widow	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Urban or Rural Birthplace</b>		
Urban	20	17
Rural	34	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Years of Education</b>		
4 – 6	15	10
7 – 9	10	10
10 – 12	17	15
13 – 15	7	7
16 +	5	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>First Language</b>		
English	4.5	0
Spanish	63.6	68.4
Zapotec	9	21
Mixtec	14	5.2
Tarasco	4.5	5.2
Mixe	4.5	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own calculations based on data from the interview.

## BARRIERS TO MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN OREGON

Table 2 summarizes the reasons why the Mexican immigrants interviewed do not engage with their communities of residence. Interviewees stated their love and respect for the state, however, some adult Mexicans are concerned and fear deportation.

“It is hard to make friends here, the police are nice, you can call them and they will help you but sometimes I am scared of going to some places where I know there is going to be a lot of people and police officers after those gatherings. All my family is here, I do not want to be deported, my family needs me and I just do not see my life back in Mexico.”

Other barriers to civic engagement are compounded by the educational attainment and socioeconomic status of Mexican immigrants. Also, lack of time and low levels of English fluency represent barriers to this engagement. Those interviewees who have had a bad experience with the Mexican government do not want to attend meetings that deal with government issues. At the same time, this sample shows great respect for the American society and government and people believe that in this country their children will have a better future.

Most immigrants do not know how many public issues work in the United States. Non-profit organizations that provide services in Spanish and citizenship classes where immigrants have the opportunity to be heard and to learn about the country's history and civic values exist, but not all immigrants in Oregon know about these opportunities or are allowed to apply for citizenship, so only a few visit those organizations or attend those lessons. As newcomers, people need help to adapt and learn how to become receptive and engaged with the community. Lastly, two people stated that they are not interested in civic engagement in the United States since their goal is to go back to Mexico in a couple of years.

Table 2.

*Why do people not participate?*

Reason	Cause
Do not know what to do	Lack of information
Concern about getting into trouble	Affect immigration/Citizenship status
	Time
Intrinsic issues	Money
	Language
	Education
Negative attitudes towards government	Bad experiences with government entities/ organizations
	Prejudices about corrupt and inefficient governments
No interest	

Source: Own information based on data from the interview.

## DISCUSSION

In Oregon, Latino students account for up to 21.04% (118,017) of the Oregon public school students (Oregon Department of Education, 2012). Today, Latinos comprised the second largest group of students in Oregon public schools. However, Hispanic students struggle to finish high school. According to the state’s annual public education report, in the 2011-2012 school year, only 56.5% of Latino students graduated in four years (compared to 70.1% of their White counterparts (p.20). Similarly, Latino students are hardly represented in Talented and Gifted Programs (TAG). Only 8.44 % of students in Oregon’s TAG programs are Latinos, compared to 74 % of TAG students who are White (p. 74).

In states with longer and more established Latino communities, schools may be more familiar with providing services for immigrant families. However, in “new destinations” such as Oregon, school



Districts are continuously making efforts to meet the demands of the increased services needed by these families. In her study of New Latino Diaspora in Wisconsin, Lowenhaupt (2012) states that “immigrant families’ participation in traditional forms of family engagement was rare, perhaps due to a focus on providing newcomers with the opportunity to engage in current practices instead of redefining those practices to reflect changing demographics” (p. 20). Schools in Oregon should pay close attention to this as a lesson. It is not enough to provide professional bilingual services for these families, but schools should also focus on providing tools for building strong connections with these Latino families.

Therefore, just like nonprofit organizations, schools play a crucial role in immigrants’ civic engagement; organizations which are involved with the immigrant communities and help them to integrate with the American community should help to educate immigrants into the American civic system. These pro-immigrant organizations as well as educational facilities are the “bridges” between the immigrant community and the American community (Rivera-Salgado et al., 2005).

The biggest concern for the Mexican immigrant community is lack of knowledge and information about how to be involved with the broader society. This includes that persistent idea that they are in the United States to work and that the possibility for their children to obtain a college degree is just a dream. This lack of realistic possibility is then transmitted to their children. Research suggests that children as young as 11 years of age can perceive that college is not a realistic possibility (Grotsky & Jones, 2004). Additionally, once in junior high school and/or high school low income Latino students lack of information about college opportunities and tend to decide that college is not for them or “many students do not match their capabilities and potential” (Grotsky & Jones, 2004; McWhirter, 1997; Rodriguez & Wan, 2010).

Organizations and schools in Oregon should look for ways to invite people to participate more, to get to know the city, to go to festivals, they should inculcate in the immigrant the willingness to spend

time with the local community. Schools are neutral spaces for Mexican immigrants to gather. In this sense, these educational facilities can help to established in the Mexican community the willingness of being engaged and eager for information, this willingness will also increase immigrants' knowledge about educational opportunities for their children. This may enhance the learning prospects of their children and in the future increase their chances to be successfully incorporated into the economic development of Oregon.

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