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### Citation

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Historical Underpinnings and Consequent Effects of Labor Exploitation of  
Mexican and Central Americans in the United States

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors Studies in Spanish

By

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Spring 2022

## **Acknowledgments**

I first want to express my utmost gratitude to the University of Arkansas faculty, especially those in the Honors College, for guiding me in my studies over the last four years and allowing me to lend myself to such important research. I want to thank Dr. Erika Almenara and Dr. Steven Rosales for their wisdom and guidance through this research process. Both are extremely intelligent and gifted people who have shared with me their extensive expertise to stimulate critical analysis and thinking as is evidenced in this paper. I would also like to thank other members of the Spanish department who have helped me along in my degree as well as this research. Among other countless people who have given me the courage and confidence to continue my studies, I would lastly like to thank my parents, my sister, and my friends for always encouraging me and inspiring me every day.

I hope that this work and others like it will continue to bring light to the hardships faced by the Latinx community in this country. It is a community that I have several personal connections to, and though I am not of Latinx descent myself, the sense of family and community that I feel from having grown up surrounded by that culture has inspired me to assist in the fight for justice and equal treatment for these individuals. The Latinx community in this country is extremely powerful, and rich with stories and experiences. My analysis cannot begin to serve as a substitute for listening to their individual lived accounts, but I hope that it may further shed light on the ways the U.S. and some of its people have played a principal role in shaping the systems that exploit and mistreat others.

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## Introduction

The immigrant experience in the United States can hardly be summarized by looking at one group of people and the circumstances surrounding their acclimation and acculturation to a new country. Each immigrant has his/her/their own experience in navigating the confusing and often exploitative policies in the United States related to establishing a new home here. This project does not seek to generalize the experiences of the immigrants discussed, nor does it seek to make a spectacle of the hardships these people must face. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to the historical underpinnings that have shaped the place of Latinx<sup>1</sup> immigrants in the South today, starting with the development of migration patterns through guest worker programs, like the Bracero Program, and the federal immigration policies that followed. These policies made immigrating or working in the United States less attainable, emphasizing the characterization of migrants as “disposable citizens.” With more stringent measures in place, the number of undocumented immigrants has experienced an upward trend (albeit with some fluctuation during the Cold War era and during the Trump administration) because the opportunities were still available; however, they have become seemingly harder to access through immigrating legally. The southern United States is used as a lens here because several population metrics indicate that immigrants from Mexico and Central America<sup>2</sup> are moving to this region in significant numbers

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The term “Latinx” is used in lieu of traditional words such as “Latina/Latino” to emphasize the idea that these experiences are had by people who may not be properly identified by the gendered term. The “X” in place of an “A” or “O”, which are used in Spanish at the end of several words to indicate whether the word has a masculine or feminine connotation, is used to neutralize the gender of the term in favor of being inclusive. “Latinx” has been used more heavily in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after its promotion by Latinx queer communities to include those who may identify as gender non-conforming as well as those who identify as male or female (Torres, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Note: While this project focuses primarily on immigrants who come from Mexico and Central America, it does not seek to ignore the fact that several other groups of people who are of Latinx descent are subject to several of the same racist attitudes discussed. At times, this project will use the general “Latinx” in referring to the immigrants from Mexico and Central America to further acknowledge that while these nationalities are the focus of this research, the experiences of immigrating into an oppressive space are not reserved to people from these few countries. While not all Latinx immigrants from other countries are present in the same proportion as those from Mexico and Central America, they are similarly racialized due to having similar physical and cultural characteristics.

for work and family reasons (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016). This project then analyzes how the people who do manage to make it to the United States are often racialized and subjected to harsh work and societal conditions that make the process of immigrating and acculturating more difficult.

Food production has grown because of the exploitable and readily available workforce provided by this immigrant population. The growth of industry, namely the poultry industry in the southern United States, as this project will analyze, further adds to this equation in that corporations who employ undocumented immigrants have had a hand in the development of the attitudes and opportunities for Latinx immigrants. This project will explore this further alongside the hardships that result from the lack of protections offered to these individuals. Not only are they exploited monetarily, but also on a human level as many immigrant women have reported their experiences of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. Again, this is a result of the lack of protections offered to these legal and undocumented individuals. This creates a tumultuous environment for individuals who moved to a new country initially seeking economic opportunity that are left to navigate a country with policies and people now violating their rights. The situation then arises that various stressors (financial, cultural, familial, legal, etc.) can affect mental well-being, and ultimately the lives of their respective family members, which is underscored by the significant presence of Latinx youth in the foster care system. Several White nationalist groups and supporters of hardline immigration policy have historically sought to paint immigrants from these countries as victims of their own laziness and only have negative contributions to the United States, evidenced by the Trump campaign's harsh characterization of these people as criminals and rapists during the 2016 presidential campaign. Further, several have sought to suggest that these immigrants will ultimately produce a significant burden on the

welfare state and social security policies. However, this research underscores the importance of looking at a historical context and how the U.S. government has had a significant hand in shaping the system that has led to inevitable struggles for immigrants. It is not the supposed laziness or uncivilized attitudes of immigrants that lead them to rely on state-sponsored programs or live in lower-income areas. These are consequences of a system that has historically treated these people as disposable workers that have access to fewer rights than the average American. Rather, the blame lies with the policies and attitudes that are the product of long-held racist attitudes in the region.

## **Part I: Historical Context and the Development of Today's Immigration Laws**

To fully understand the experience Latinx immigrants in the United States have today, it is important to first analyze the historical attitudes people have had toward people who live in the United States that originated from Mexico. The attitudes that people have towards Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest will translate to their treatment in the South and will assist in the forming of opinions about Central Americans based most squarely on their shared phenotype and language (Cohen, 2011; Guerrero, 2017; Oboler, 2015).

The relationship between people in the United States and their counterparts to the Southwest has been a long and tumultuous one. The U.S., being the hegemonic power that it is, had been viewed as a looming threat for many years, including during the eras of westward expansion in the late 1800s. This is evidenced by some attitudes in Latin American literature that would characterize the U.S as an overzealous power focused on expanding and exploiting those around it, as described in Jose Marti's 1891 essay, "Nuestra América." These fears were a real response to the visualization Americans had of themselves as superior beings in terms of their racial make-up and seemingly perfect, civilized way of life. Because of this exceptionalism that many Americans in power felt, they believed that territorial conquest would be easy as well as justified – they used their civilized society and the amenities that could be offered to the "degenerate Mexicans" to qualify their expansion as a humanitarian mission (Weber, 2003). The shallowness of this "charitable act" was evidenced later during the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Before the ratification of the treaty, certain Southerners, fired by the victories experienced in the Mexican American War, sought to support an ultra-expansionist movement, and conquer all of Mexico. They later rescinded support after making the realization

that this would mean incorporating all the Mexican population into the United States (Weber, 2003). This underscores that the Americans supported the expansion for their own territorial gain and not to offer what they viewed as a better way of life to those living in Mexico. After the signing of the Treaty, the lands that now constitute the southwest United States were ceded. With this, the people who lived in these places that were formerly part of Mexico had two options: to move further south to remain in Mexico, or to remain in what was now the United States. Those that stayed would be given the rights of an American citizen on paper, but what followed was a loss of significant property and status. These people would ultimately be forced into the lower ranks of society and forced to work in agriculture and mining for minimal compensation. The events of the Mexican American War (and the Texas Revolution before that) left a sour taste in the mouths of Americans in the Southwest regarding Mexicans. Several heard the stories of the slaughter of troops by Santa Anna's army at the Alamo, which was an event that spurred further support for the Revolution, and later the Mexican American war. These attitudes did not stop after the war, however, and Americans in the Southwest would continue to apply these distasteful outlooks to the new Mexican Americans (Weber, 2003).

Further, it is necessary to consider the South's treatment of other minority groups in history to see how the racist attitudes can be transferred from one group to another. Lingering attitudes toward African Americans after the Civil War are well-recorded in history. The various injustices suffered during the Jim Crow era by Black people in the U.S. underscore how White people in the South were insistent on maintaining their social "superiority," and after the introduction of new groups of people who also do not look like them, these attitudes would translate (Guerrero, 2017).

Leading up to the World Wars, most Mexican Americans were of this group of people who remained when the lands that were previously part of Mexico were ceded to the United States, or they were part of the first large group of migrants beginning around 1890. The flourishing of industry in the Southwest, mainly in mining and agriculture, attracted migrant workers seeking stability and employment. This was further propelled by the Mexican Revolution, with political exiles and war refugees escaping to the United States. Because of the agricultural demand and the growth of these industries, immigration policy in regard to Mexico remained relatively relaxed. In fact, Mexico was left out of the restrictions imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924, which placed quotas on the number of immigrants permitted from countries in the Eastern hemisphere, because farmers were concerned that they would not sow and harvest enough crops without migrant laborers.

Coupled with the increased demand on the agricultural industry during the first World War, officials were desperate to find a way to supplement the agricultural worker population considering the loss of able-bodied men to the war effort. Thus, a program was born that would recruit workers from Mexico to come to the United States for a temporary period to work, with the expectation that they would eventually return to Mexico at the end of the agricultural season. This program, known as the Bracero Program, would prove instrumental in the formation of the practice of migrating to the U.S. for better economic opportunity. This is largely due to the migrant networks that resulted from the workers who communicated the economic benefits they had reaped from their work and the continued need for laborers. The intended goals of the program, which was supported bilaterally by both the U.S. and Mexican governments, were to supplement the agricultural workforce, as mentioned, in addition to “modernizing” these Mexican men to then return to their pueblos to grow the Mexican economy with their newfound

skills and ideas from the North (Cohen, 2011). The goals of these Bracero workers and these governments did not necessarily align, however, as several of these men would become dependent on the money they earned working in the United States without contributing significant skills to their hometowns, though some workers opened places of business in their pueblos, such as barbershops and restaurants (Cohen, 2011). As such, work in the U.S. became the beacon of opportunity for these men who perhaps struggled for work opportunity or adequate compensation in their home regions. It is worth noting that many efforts for recruiting braceros were focused on Durango, a state where the population was perceived to be more closely related to Europeans (lighter skin, less indigenous). This is significant because even with this weighing in their favor, braceros were often subject to horrific work conditions and treatment. There have been several studies conducted that have related the grueling labor, combined with the heat of the Southwestern climate, to several health conditions and even death among temporary agricultural workers (De Leon & Wells, 2017). To add insult to injury, after working in the beating sun, they were forced to acclimate to social spaces and deal with harassment that emphasized their racialization as outsiders (Cohen, 2011; Guerrero, 2017).

This program highlighted the tendency of the U.S. government to accept assistance from foreign workers during periods of economic growth while denying these workers the same economic opportunities they promised when the U.S. was experiencing economic hardship. During the Great Depression, the several hundred thousand braceros who had supported the United States through World War I during the first bracero program were repatriated to Mexico with both governments hoping they would reap the benefits they desired regarding “modernizing” their citizens (Martin, 2020; Cohen, 2011). Back in their home regions, the families of these men felt the emotional distance from the lack of a father-figure during the

agricultural season, which contributed to added stress on other family members and increased juvenile delinquency (Cohen, 2011). A significant motivator for men to pursue work as braceros was the notion that their manhood and masculinity was dependent on them being able to provide for their families. At the time, especially in Durango, where a significant proportion of braceros originated, the character of the “charro” was quite prominent in media. This character, who embodied machismo, or masculinity, was considered emblematic of the fairer-skinned and taller men of Durango. Thus, there was added societal pressure based on media portrayals that would lead men to pursue work outside of Mexico (Cohen, 2011).

The second Bracero Program saw the United States through World War II and remained in place until 1964, allowing growing families during the Baby Boom to have adequate food availability in this prosperous period following the war. Over the course of the program, 4.6 million Mexican temporary agricultural workers were admitted to the U.S. with the yearly quantity peaking in 1956 at 445,000 (Martin, 2020; Chishti et al., 2017). It is important to note that several industries and growers, such as growers in California and mines across the Southwest, emphasized the disposability of these workers, and this theme of viewing migrant workers as replaceable will become more and more evident with the growth of these industries. In 1964, Congress terminated the program for various reasons including the view that the temporary workers were keeping job opportunities from deserving U.S. citizens and that the program lowered the wages of U.S. citizen agricultural workers (Martin, 2020). Today, several articles critique the program for the discrepancy in the promises made to the workers and for the structures in place that allowed U.S. farm owners to exploit the readily available population of laborers.

In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) which completely restructured the way the U.S. decided which immigrants to permit to legally enter the country and how many available spaces there would be. Instead of quotas that were based on race and ethnicity, which had historically led to a favoritism toward European countries, the new act placed caps on the number of visas issued by hemisphere (Chishti et al., 2017). Preference for immigration was given to those who already had relatives in the U.S. who were citizens or lawful permanent residents as well as a limited number of employment-based preferences. The parallel of the ending of the Bracero Program and the initiation of this new policy that severely limited the chances of agricultural workers getting work visas has been linked to the significant rise in undocumented immigration in years approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century because the jobs they worked remained available, and the industries that employed them still desired cheap labor (Chishti et al., 2017; Martin, 2020; Guerrero, 2017; Cohen, 2011). Originally, the unstated goals of the new legislation were to continue facilitating immigration from European countries as people from these regions were more likely to have family members who had established themselves in the U.S. (Chishti et al., 2017). Immigration from these countries had flatlined, however, as several European republics began to flourish economically. Instead, the policy brought in the workers who had filled temporary agricultural positions who now had connections and family living in the United States. This constituted a significant factor in the rise in illegal immigration to the Southwest, and most of these people were concentrated in California and Texas (Detlaff et al., 2009; Guerrero, 2017).

The attitudes that were active in the Southwest at this time remained the same. Identifiers such as accented speech, skin color, and unfamiliar customs continued to be used to discriminate against Latinx people in the United States. With the influx of undocumented immigration, people

began to up the same rhetoric that labelled Mexicans as criminals and detestable that had been steadily present in the region. The mere fact that these immigrants were entering “illegally” was used to paint this picture more vividly, even if their behavior in the U.S. represented that of a model citizen (Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Regardless of the anti-immigrant sentiment, the jobs that braceros had once occupied remained open, so there was a remaining opportunity for economic advancement in their eyes, even if it had to be obtained illegally. Farmers and the food industry were eager to jump on the opportunity to pay these workers the same meager wages they had before to continue the rapid growth they experienced riding on the backs of these laborers. With the added element of looming punitive measures by immigration enforcement if discovered, the workers were often able to be exploited further by these farmers and eventually corporations as injustices go unreported (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016; Gray et al., 2017).

Another important aspect of the growing immigrant population were the social networks they maintained with other migrant workers as well as their families and neighbors back in Mexico. It is the relaying of information about successes and opportunities back to the pueblos that grew the Bracero Program and established significant communities of Latinx immigrants in certain clusters throughout the Southwest. One such community was used as a focus in Perla Guerrero’s *Nuevo South* as she traced the journey of an immigrant couple, Javier and Andrea, from California to Arkansas. The couple’s apartment complex located to the southeast of Los Angeles, in a community called Pico Rivera, serves as a prime example of the accumulation of these people in one area and their subsequent dispersal after hearing of better opportunities in the southern states to the east. During the Bracero Program, several members of the community of origin of the couple had established the aforementioned social networks in which more members of their community learned of the opportunities for economic advancement if they were to

venture north for work. Eventually, the practice became so linked with this upward mobility that those who did not go to the U.S. for work were seen as lacking ambition or enterprise (Guerrero, 2017; Cohen, 2011).

With this in mind, it is important to note that other immigration policies enacted following the INA rendered legal immigration almost impossible for agricultural workers that didn't have family ties or other means of securing a visa in the U.S. The economic motivation and societal pressure, however, did not leave with the passing of more stringent policies, so people continued making the journey north to work, only this time it was without documentation (Ortiz & Telles, 2012). This trip north became increasingly dangerous, forcing migrants to trek on foot through the arid Sonora Desert, a journey that has been documented as leaving hopeful migrants lost, having never completed the excursion and succumbing to the harshness of it (De Leon & Wells, 2017; Guerrero, 2017; Chishti et al., 2017). Nonetheless, countless migrants continue making this journey for the perceived chance at a better, more prosperous life. Following the growth of the poultry industry in the South, these same social networks would shift their narrative from promoting California and agricultural work to a focus on other Southern states that offered more affordable housing and more chance for economic achievement.

Prior to World War II, most poultry production occurred in the Northeast U.S., namely on the Delmarva Peninsula. During the war, the federal government shifted poultry production to Southern states to open space so the established factories in the Northeast could further support the war effort (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016). The explosion of the poultry industry in this region seems to be a result of many coinciding changes in the region. Early in the Southern poultry plants, Black women were the primary sector of the population laboring there (Paschal, 2021). It is worth noting, this was another severely exploitable and unprotected population. As

time progressed toward the 1980s, the South began experiencing a major economic boom. Several Southern urban areas began sprouting up and attracting people to work in a more urban setting.

Most of the people who would take up residence and work in these new urban centers were white men who got an education. This meant that the pool of potential agricultural and plant workers was reduced significantly (Guerrero, 2017). There was a notable labor shortage, but as Mexican Americans and Latinx immigrants laboring in the fields of California began to get news of the affordable cost of living in states like Arkansas, Georgia and North Carolina and the positions available in poultry processing plants, they began setting their destinations to the east, which was often set in motion by calculated recruiting by agents affiliated with the poultry industry (Stuesse, 2016). It is at this point that the social networks become crucial in furthering this phenomenon of migrating to Southern states. As is seen with Javier and Andrea, a few pioneers made the move to these states cautiously to see if the economic benefit was real and would then report back to these communities what they experienced. Though the work conditions were harsh even in the earlier days of this industry, the rewards were tangible and more significant than those in California. Notably, the cost of a house was about half that of Southern California at the time, so even though many workers were making about the same amount as they were in the agricultural fields, these wages went further (Guerrero, 2017).

The 1980s did not see many Latinx workers in poultry plants, but as more positions opened and the white working class in urban centers began creating families that depended on poultry for nourishment, the industry continued recruiting Latinx immigrants to work their lines, whether they were documented or not. The readily available population of new as well as established immigrants further painted these individuals as disposable in the eyes of the industry.

Even if they lost some workers to deportation or exhaustion, there would be a slew of other workers ready and willing to take their place. These removals of Latinx immigrants were not uncommon, with immigration enforcement raids occurring on poultry plants as more strict policies became enacted to combat the perceived threat of illegal immigration in the South (Guerrero, 2017). This push to combat the waves of immigrants came on the back of already established racist attitudes in the region. While the area had traditionally been discriminatory toward the Black population, this new group of darker-skinned people too challenged the status quo, something the White elite were not comfortable with or prepared for (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016). And while the industry essentially was able to grow because of these Latinx citizens and immigrants, the attitudes that were historically present in the South toward these individuals did not subside, as can be observed with their continued racialization and ostracization (Guerrero, 2017; Cohen, 2011). These attitudes carry on today and have shaped today's treatment of immigrant workers.

## **Part II: Present Attitudes Toward Mexican and Central American Immigrants in Poultry Plants and Their Experiences in the Workplace**

By 2000, Latinx immigrants made up about three quarters of the labor force in poultry plants in Northwest Arkansas, and more than half of the United States' poultry-processing labor force of about 250,000 people (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016). The use of the poultry industry as a lens comes from this statistic – that a significant majority of workers in several processing plants across the South are immigrants from Mexico and Central America. So, the poultry industry and its location in the South has a hand in shaping the experiences of several immigrant families. The attitudes that Southerners have toward these groups of people have not shifted significantly in terms of legislation and protections afforded these people, despite the increase in activists and groups who are vocal about advocating for the immigrant population in these areas. To begin this section, it is important to discuss some definitions regarding terms such as oppression, exploitation, and expulsion as these terms are paramount in defining the immigrant experience, especially the immigrants that are the focal point of this research.

Immigration is an international relation between two or more countries that can have defining effects of the perceived identities of immigrants. The reality of an immigrant is derived from the economic and social considerations made when deciding to leave the country of origin as well as the way that person is received in the host country in respect to their national origin. This notion assures that immigrants can have their cultural identity lost or altered by this process of homogenization that often leads to stories and characterizations that shape the way these people are ultimately perceived (Oboler, 2015).

Oppression and racism in the way that most people understand it is overt displays of distaste or stereotypical attributions toward a group of people based solely on their skin color. However, oppression is not always intentional nor is it necessarily an action executed by individuals upon others. It is often the result of everyday practices that have become so engrained in society that the oppressive dimension of them becomes shrouded in the notion that these acts of injustice are perhaps necessary evils that are a result of the society we live in. For example, the lack of opportunities to earn an education, jobs that fail to pay a living wage, or the difficulty in finding suitable healthcare can all be boiled down to oppressive policies and systems that are in place. Exploitation can be defined as the accumulation of status, power, and assets by a dominant group at the expense of the labor and energy of nondominant groups (Ayon et al., 2017). Lastly, expulsion refers to the people who are excluded from economic and social structures today (Moraña, 2021).

The strict enforcement of borders that is praised by many conservative politicians in the U.S. today seems to contradict the fluidity of capitalism when viewed in an international sense. The United States is more than willing to accept transactions from around the world that allow it to grow as an economic powerhouse, evidenced by the welcoming of various international corporations to stock exchanges based in the United States. However, when it comes to transactions that involve the movement and acceptance of people who bear an appearance that is different than what may be considered the status quo, many Americans are quick to change their attitude regarding this international cooperation (Moraña, 2021). It calls into question what markers of a different culture, or people from a different place, become threatening to Americans. Part of that can be addressed when considering the globalization of inequality, which is the idea that inequality is not only seen in social class divisions in individual nations, but now

in a global context that emphasizes more than just income. Inequality in the twenty-first century refers to more than finances, it refers to social vulnerability and the way those in power dictate the experiences of those who are subject to their decisions (Moraña, 2021). Perhaps, the White elite feel threatened by the influx of Latinx immigrants because they fear losing their ability to exploit and dictate the experiences of these minority groups.

People who racialize these groups further deteriorate individual identities in a variety of ways. The tendency of Americans to refer to all Latinx people as “Mexican” delineates individual national identities to group them all in one easily targetable demographic. This act diminishes individual national identities that serve to reinforce cultural values and relationships that may vary between Mexico and the countries of Central America. Additionally, Mexican-American citizens often get grouped in with Latinx immigrants resulting in what some consider to be a devaluation of what it means to be an American citizen, for if people can strip entire populations of being perceived as citizens or treat them as less than how a White American citizen would be, the question can be raised as to what significance does American citizenship really have in being accepted as an American (Oboler, 2015).

In today’s poultry plants, Latina women are an increasingly prevalent proportion of the workforce. It is important to note that the poultry processing industry has been consistently referred to as one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States because of the conditions people are subject to on the job as well as the consequences the labor-intensive work can have on their bodies (Gray et al., 2017; Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016; Detlaff et al., 2009). Financial stressors as men brought their families over from Mexico and the desire to support their children were significant motivators in placing Latinas in the workforce. Unfortunately, this population is one of the most easily exploitable as many corporations have targeted Latina

mothers as employees due to their desire to provide for their families and the lack of other employment options available to them (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016). On average, Latinas earn about 56 cents for every dollar that a White, non-Hispanic man would make (Ayon et al., 2017). This frustrating statistic is further corroborated by the median salaries reported in a poultry producing region in central Mississippi. Note that these numbers represent a population that is majority racial minorities. Men reportedly made a median salary of about \$36,000 while women made a median salary of just over \$19,000 (Stuesse, 2016).

Latina women are also significantly more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault while working in poultry plants. There have been documented accounts of Latina women being called into a supervisor's office for questions regarding their performance in which these supervisors, who are privy to the vulnerable state of these women, will coerce sexual favors or make sexually demeaning remarks. After these acts of exploitation, these supervisors will threaten these women with consequences such as termination or contacting immigration enforcement should the women decide to speak out or defend themselves (Gray et al., 2017; Stuesse, 2016).

On the job, workers have detailed various instances that can be considered dehumanizing, and these circumstances suggest that the conditions in the poultry processing plants are far from fair or livable. In addition to the ailments many plant workers accrue, day-to-day conditions are lacking in compassion and understanding of general human necessities. Workers have reported being denied a bathroom break at one point, having to soil themselves to keep up with the strenuous demands imposed by the plant operators (Steusse, 2016; Gray et al., 2017; Paschal, 2021). As mentioned before, federal agencies focus their policies on regulating production speed and the number of birds that can be processed per minute. The number that poultry plants could

produce in 1989 sat at around 90 birds per minute, which was then viewed as a significantly large number. That number has risen significantly since then, and the federal regulation for the number of birds that can legally be produced sits at 140 birds per minute since 2014 (Paschal, 2021). However, the Department of Agriculture has granted waivers to certain plants allowing their maximum to reach up to 175 birds per minute. Some of these waivers were approved for 15 plants, many of which were in the South, in 2020. Unfortunately, severe outbreaks of COVID-19 have occurred arguably because of the continued demand that workers continue showing up for work despite the severely contagious pandemic (Paschal, 2021).

These workers are subject to grueling work hours, making a social or family life difficult. Workers in the poultry processing plants are regularly denied vacation time or overtime wages and seldom are offered a raise. Those who work without documentation are vulnerable to being paid less than minimum wage. This is a rather common practice toward undocumented workers because their lack of immigration status means their compensation can go unreported with federal agencies. Thus, there is no way for the government to attain record of their work going underpaid (Guerrero, 2017). These hardships at work are compounded by other complications outside of the workplace. For example, undocumented immigrants are unable to obtain driver's licenses, among other necessary documentation (like a Social Security number), so they are at an increased risk of trouble with law enforcement in the event they are stopped. These immigrants receive charges for driving without a license as well as any other charge they may have accrued, making already expensive and scarce legal representation difficult to obtain. Add to this the significant costs associated with obtaining immigration paperwork (the application alone for a work permit necessitates a government fee of \$410, not including any potential legal assistance

someone may seek from an immigration attorney), and it is clear that there are systems in place that limit the opportunities for mobility among this vulnerable population.

Well-intentioned immigration policies at federal and state levels, or the lack thereof, that may seek to regulate corporations may indeed backfire on the populations that are continuously exploited by these industries. Certain initiatives, like operation SouthPAW, a multiagency taskforce that attempted to regulate the number of immigrants employed in plants by threatening and conducting raids, resulted in the underreporting of numbers rather than actual terminations, suggesting that these industry plants would remain resistant to punitive policies rather than actually adjusting their actions. Additionally, most labor regulations that concerned poultry plants were principally focused on regulating line speed to avoid adulterated meat and to avoid hindering a company's profits and productivity. There were few considerations made for the safety of the workers (Guerrero, 2017). This is evidenced too by the ailments accrued by the repetitive motions that working on a processing line necessitates. There have been regular recorded instances of workers developing back problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, and other physical ailments because of their work in processing plants (Guerrero, 2017; Stuesse, 2016; Paschal, 2021).

A notable example of this phenomenon can be seen with the Legal Arizona Worker Act, which required employers to verify the employment eligibility of a potential worker before hiring. Intended to sanction employers, this policy ended up affecting the undocumented worker population in that they were forced to work for longer hours without compensation for the corporations to maintain their levels of production while remaining under the radar (Ayon et al., 2017).

Many would seek to paint the Latinx immigrant population as a victim of their own decisions, having chosen to immigrate to the United States because of their own countries not being able to provide them the lives they desire. The reality is that these people, though denied simple rights by their countries, do not view the decision to immigrate as a choice but rather as a necessity to guarantee that their families can have a better life than what could be afforded them in their countries of origin. The experiences they have in the new country, however, are not a result of their choices or their actions. These experiences in which these vulnerable populations are exploited are a result of years of oppressive attitudes that have inspired policies that seek to promote the well-being of one group of people at the expense of minorities and other vulnerable communities, as evidenced by the history of Latinx immigrants and citizens in the United States. So, these immigrants may make the decision to leave, but they are not to be blamed for the environment in which they find themselves (Moraña, 2021; Guerrero, 2017).

Related to the environment in which immigrants are ultimately immersed is the way in which they must decide what aspects of their culture to carry on and which aspects they should amend to further acculturate (Detlaff et al., 2009; Guerrero, 2017). Acculturation refers to the process experienced at an individual level when someone is exposed to a new culture, and the act of acculturating varies according to several factors, including age, gender, religion, family structure, language, and personality (Detlaff et al., 2009). The shift in the attitude of the U.S. from incorporation of various peoples to grow the nation, to the exclusion of people in favor of maintaining racial and social superiority has resulted in the vast discrepancy in opportunities. The U.S. was founded as a nation composed of people from various origins and grew that way up until more stringent immigration policies were enacted. Because of this shift, immigrants must make themselves more “American” to be accepted by most people. And in the South,

where racist attitudes are quite often the norm in the areas in which Latinx immigrants were finding themselves in increasing quantities, this was more paramount in the eyes of those settling there.

In Fort Smith, Arkansas, as well as parts of Central Mississippi, researchers have documented instances of explicit racism targeting members of the Latinx community. These only serve as examples to give context to the kinds of attitudes held toward these groups of people across the South; these attitudes are not reserved to the areas in reference. A schoolteacher is noted as remarking how surprisingly well-behaved Latinx students can be, suggesting a preconceived notion based on their racialization that there are characteristics that would make them not-good students, such as laziness or contempt (Guerrero, 2017). This statement is also made in comparison to other minority groups, like Asian Americans and African Americans. This emphasizes the tendency of White people in the South to use the historical attitudes toward minorities to determine how they should perceive people who look different than them. In Mississippi, one researcher noted the language a landlord used to describe her tenants. She reportedly “did not allow Mexicans” to rent from her, although she had one family of “good Mexicans” that helped her with the housekeeping (Stuesse, 2016). Once again, these people are assumed to be a negative factor in a community based on her assessment of one family as “good” compared to the perceived norm.

This is seemingly contradicted by what present plant managers and recruiters may consider a “good worker.” Whereas those with Latinx characteristics have historically been considered lazy or crime-ridden by racists, various farmers expressed an idea that suggested the opposite was true. They are quoted as saying that workers who learn English become Americanized and lazy, and that those who struggle to acculturate or learn English (thus,

maintaining more of their Latinx characteristics) remain easily exploitable and vulnerable but are still “good” workers (Gray et al., 2017). So, while Latinx people feel pressured to acculturate and acclimate to the societies in which they are placed, this very action may even hinder the chances they have at securing employment. This creates a sort of paradox that further explains why Latinx immigrants and citizens face continued ostracization even after some degree of acculturation is achieved.

These attitudes are not reserved to observations by White people toward Latinx immigrants and citizens, but also between Latinx populations of varying identities. As discussed before, immigrants from Central America are often grouped in with Mexican immigrants for having similar phenotypes and speaking the same language. These national identities, however, are more complex than these shared characteristics, and members of these different nationalities often sought to further themselves from each other in hopes of not being perceived as undesirable as the rest of the Latinx population. For example, Mexicans and Salvadorans remain at odds often for the scapegoating both respective nationalities will execute toward the other. When immigrants are accused of bringing gangs and drugs to the United States, members of one nationality will often try to blame members of the other, and they will latch onto traits associated to Latinx immigrants and attribute them to another nationality to avoid them being attributable to their own (Cohen, 2011; Guerrero, 2017). This leads to further racialization and misunderstanding. The oppressive groups who originated this rhetoric now hear it corroborated by members of that same race, who supposedly would have a more accurate understanding of the nuances of those who look more like them.

The advancement of corporate America has complicated the ability of the government to intervene (Moraña, 2021). In present day America, corporate lobbies and vulnerable, power-

desiring politicians work to maximize their respective benefits without considering the workers who are the cogs that keep the machine running. As a result, the characterization of these workers as disposable continues as corporations continue contributing significant amounts of money to politicians who in turn will allow them to maximize their profits by further exploiting their labor force. Additionally, many of these corporations were able to avoid union contracts that had been imposed in other parts of the country. As a result, these industry powerhouses, such as Tyson Inc., targeted the most vulnerable population: single mothers with no other options (Cravey, 1997).

For these reasons, the exploitation of the Latinx immigrant (and native) population at the hands of the corporations that had previously promised them economic advancement and opportunities is evident. This discrepancy between what is promised and what is delivered further emphasizes the way in which those with power in the United States treat Latinx people as though they are disposable and replaceable. These experiences had in the workplace and outside weigh severely on the minds and mental well-beings of these people. These unfortunately translate to further hardships in the realms of family and childcare.

### **Part III: Carrying the Workplace Stresses Home and the Effect on the Family**

The hardships Mexican and Central American workers experience while on the job have effects on their minds and bodies that follow them home. These stressful events are then compounded by the pressing matters these families face, such as immigration cases, troubles with law enforcement, and inescapable pressure from their surrounding environment to adjust to an unfamiliar culture. These pressures on migrant parents result in their children becoming increasingly vulnerable to maltreatment and neglect, often at no fault to the parents as they are simply doing the best that they can, given the structures in place that make caring for their families difficult enough.

The traumatic experiences involving immigration often start on the journey migrants take across the border. Immigrants have been documented as experiencing such troubles as robbery, sexual assault, and other forms of explicit violence that leave them with traumatic memories of their time crossing the border (Solis, 2003). In tandem with this is the emotional preparation and successive exhaustion that comes from the trip north. Migrants hear the stories of the people who try to cross the Sonora Desert, for instance, yet they continue to make the treacherous journey knowing the risks they are taking (De Leon & Wells, 2017). Those migrants who do complete the journey are left with the memories of the trip, and there have been reported cases of posttraumatic stress disorder that have been directly related to these experiences, as well as mental ailments like depression and anxiety (Solis, 2003).

Related to anxiety is the looming fear of deportation on the minds of undocumented immigrants, especially with increased regional rhetoric about immigration enforcement in the South. Certain programs have been enacted that offer relief in terms of deportation, though this

relief comes with several caveats. Often, immigration policy is tumultuous because of the controversial nature of the issue. Typically, immigration reform is unachievable by an act of legislation since it is difficult for the bipartisan U.S. Congress to agree on a compromise regarding immigration allowances. The most sweeping immigration relief program in recent years came in the way of executive order in which the children of undocumented immigrants have received assistance from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This program has granted around 800,000 young people employment authorization and relief from potential deportation, yet this is an evidently insecure safety net since it has only been enforced by executive order and not by an act of Congress. This had been evidenced by the ability of the Trump administration to enact several measures limiting the scope and accessibility of the program, and even halting the program altogether (but not without challenges from federal judges). While the Biden administration took away some of the Trump-era restrictions, DACA has remained in political limbo. On July 16, 2021, a federal judge in the Southern District of Texas ruled that the policy was illegal. Since this ruling, no further news has come regarding the future of DACA. Currently, only those who already had DACA status or had petitions pending before the ruling are eligible for obtaining or renewing status.

After the journey to the United States, there are continued stressors in addition to the potential for immigration removal proceedings. Language barriers pose a significant obstacle for many immigrants seeking to obtain help, be that medical, legal, financial, or other assistance (Detlaff et al., 2009). These regions of the country where Latinx immigrants are increasingly finding themselves are White majority and therefore have had little motivation to learn Spanish, save for the couple of classes some students take during their years of secondary education that seldom produce any fluency. As a result, these families experience increased anxiety and

frustration in solving problems that an English speaker could resolve with a simple phone call. The loss of support systems is related to this. In their home countries, these migrants had friends, family, and neighbors they could call on for assistance, but after immigration to the U.S. these connections are not as useful. Thus, the initial adjustment to a new location can be difficult for migrants who have yet to establish themselves in the immigrant community. This can lead to increased difficulty in finding bilingual services and having a social network to rely on (Detlaff et al., 2009; Solis, 2003). All these factors create acculturative stress, or stress that is experienced by the increased difficulty in adjusting to a new culture. Part of this phenomenon involves the notion that the acculturative stress experienced by Latinx immigrants is different than that of other immigrants. The factors mentioned above as well as the transition from an ethnic majority to an ethnic minority can be disorienting for these individuals (Detlaff et al., 2009).

Meeting the financial needs of their families have forced women into the workplace. This has led men to sometimes have more responsibilities in the home or with raising children (Detlaff et al., 2009). Research indicates that women in the workplace coupled with more men being unemployed has led to an increased rate of domestic violence toward women in Latinx households. This perhaps comes from the uprooting of traditional family values that Latinx families have upheld in the past. As was evidenced by the success of the Bracero Program, men are expected to be the financial providers for their families in Mexican society. When they are not, this creates an additional pressure on these men based on the pressure they feel culturally to be the breadwinner. They then feel the need to assert their dominance in other ways in the household to retain their status as the head of the household, which can often come in the form of aggressive behavior (Detlaff et al., 2009).

These behaviors are not limited to spousal interactions, as children are also at an increased risk of experiencing physical or emotional abuse from their families in these situations. Latinx children of immigrants have been found to be five times more likely to be confirmed as victims of sexual than other types of abuse (Detlaff et al., 2009). This is possible for a variety of reasons. One possible reason is victims of sexual abuse are typically older, and this coincides with the tendency of immigrant children to be older than the children of native-born parents. It is also assumed that a significant number of cases of sexual abuse go unreported among immigrant communities for the fear of getting authorities involved. Because of this, it is likely that only the most severe of cases get reported to authorities and child welfare agencies.

It is difficult for researchers to determine the extent of the involvement of immigrant families with the welfare state as data on these interactions is not collected at the state or national level. Because of this, U.S. citizen children who come from immigrant families face greater barriers and uncertainty than native born Latinx people (Prado Jr., 2021). This then translates to Latinx children growing up in the foster care system and greater uncertainty and difficulties obtaining employment as they mature. Current policies restrict the available number of immigrant visas available to undocumented youth, which results in backlogs that can complicate the process of getting employment authorization. This is coupled with the fact that most of the emancipated foster youth already do not have access to family support and other support networks that facilitate the process of securing employment (Prado Jr., 2021).

Family disconnect is a common phenomenon among Latinx household in the sense that the children of these migrants are growing up in an environment that has several differences in social norms than the parents' respective places of origin. Immigrants who are more distinct from the host culture are more likely to experience racism and prejudice, therefore, these families

do not always try to resist their children adopting elements of American culture into their habits to protect them from discrimination (Detlaff et al., 2009). Increased parenting stress is a common phenomenon observed in Latinx families for this reason as they feel it is more difficult to discipline their children to maintain their parental control.

To illustrate the effect of this acculturation on Latinx families is a troubling statistic. From 1995 to 2005, the reported rate of maltreatment among Latinx families rose from 10% to 17.4%. In regions where there are more concentrated communities of Latinx individuals, these numbers are often higher. For example, in Texas, the rate increased from 36.6% to nearly 43.3% of reported cases from 2000-2005, a trend that is reflected in Southern states (Detlaff et al., 2009). Several of these families have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, with 52% of children of immigrants living below the poverty level nationally.

Immigrant families, therefore, are more likely to struggle financially and socially. These struggles then increase tensions inside the house, putting individual members of the family at risk. While immigrant and native-born Latinx families experience these struggles in the U.S., native-born families can secure access to public benefits programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and food stamps. Immigrant families have a more limited access to these welfare policies and health insurance because of the policies in place that exclude non-citizen parents, regardless of the citizenship status of the children (Detlaff et al., 2009).

According to the results of a study conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, about 77% of Latinx families that come to the attention of welfare agencies have a household income below \$20,000 annually. In Latinx families, it is more commonplace to find two-parent households with both parents often being employed, which comprised about 40.6% of the families in the study, which is based on data from the National Survey of Child and

Adolescent Well-being. This then alludes to the fact that despite both parents being present and available, there are such significant obstacles that these families are still unable to rise above the poverty threshold because of their low wages and exploitation based on their immigration status (Detlaff et al., 2009).

Another study conducted by a researcher at California State University followed youth in the Midwest United States and suggests the same implications for emancipated Latinx foster children. Although the study was not conducted in the South, the focus region of this study, the Midwest has several similar demographic and sociographic characteristics to the South that makes the information still relevant. The Midwest, like the South, has had historical instances of explicit racism and has not been significantly ethnically diverse. The study in reference followed 596 young people from age 17 or 18 until they were interviewed at 26 years old. Nearly one-third of participants indicated having been homeless or home-insecure at least once, and participants employed at the time of questioning reported an average wage of \$10.73 per hour (Prado Jr., 2021). While this study is not limited to Latinx youth, the outcomes suggest what can occur when there are limited options for social support and outreach. Latinx youth, especially undocumented, have an increased hardship in seeking employment after emancipation for not having the social support that several foster youths of any background lack as well as the additional acculturative stress immigrants experience.

## Conclusion

Latinx individuals have a significant place in the history of the United States. The tumultuous history of the relationship between the United States and Mexico has had real consequences on the lives of many people throughout this region of North America. The expansion and imperialism exercised by the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century laid the foundations for creating the identity of Mexican American and began the rocky relationship this group of citizens would have with White Americans for the following centuries. The racialization of Mexican Americans in response to prior conflicts, such as the Mexican American war, marked a continuation of racist attitudes that had already dominated life in the South, only now it was directed at a new group of perceived outsiders.

To combat what White Americans regarded as an attack on the status quo, policies that addressed the influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America were adapted that sought to regulate the flow of immigrants. However, the strict policies did not consider the established systems of temporary migration and the perceived necessity among Latinx people of seeking work north of the border. Thus, undocumented immigration became a way people could attain the economic opportunities they desired without having to traverse the complicated and time-consuming process of immigrating legally, albeit dangerous and stressful on the body and mind.

The already-established racialization of African Americans in the South would be adapted to racialize Mexican and Central American immigrants as well as other Latinx individuals, and the harsh labor conditions that Latinx workers would eventually face resembles those that Black people had historically been forced into. This has created an environment in which people are stripped of their national identities in favor of grouping them into one category that can easily be labelled outsider. This categorization makes it easier for White Americans with

elite power in corporate ownership and legislative influence to view this group of people as disposable, or a means to cheap production that can grow their respective industries without much loss of profit. As a result, labor exploitation runs rampant among the Latinx population, especially those who are unable to protect themselves from such injustices for fear of repercussions from immigration authorities. The stresses at work are compounded by several societal pressures that immigrants face in their new environment, such as acculturative pressure and harassment from superiors.

These stressful experiences are then carried from the workplace back to the immigrants' respective homes. Mental and physical ailments have been observed among this population as a direct result of their treatment at their places of employment and within their communities. Several immigrants have reported being diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression stemming from their experiences in the United States as well as their experiences crossing the border. Children and families struggle because of these injustices, evidenced by the increased rates of domestic violence and intervention by welfare agencies among Latinx families.

This project, then, concludes that the hardships that Latinx families face are a result of the historical characterization and treatment of Latinx individuals in the United States. Since these people have always been treated as disposable outsiders who are ridiculed based only on their status as immigrants or people with a darker skin color, the current policies regarding immigration and labor force protection overlook the needs of this diverse group of people. Several historians have noted the important role Latinx people have played in the development of the economy of the American South, yet they seldom receive any appreciation. Instead, they are continually subject to oppressive and life-altering policies that do not offer them any real relief

or protection from immigration and work-related problems. To address these issues on a fundamental level, it must be understood the ways that these problems are caused by misguided opinions and characterizations of these people rather than being a response to intrinsic problems that these individuals may bring to American society.

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