

***Brechas: Regional Migration Trends and Alternative Roads for Mexican and Latino Families in the Midwest**

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Megatrends & Families: Focus on Demographic Change, Migration and Urbanization in North America

Author's Note:

Brechas is defined in Mexico and other parts of Latino America as an alternative road.

Introduction

The United States Midwestern region has experienced Mexican and Latino migration and immigration trends for 100 years dating back to the early 20th century from cities and towns throughout the heartland (Congressional Research Service, 2012). However, the largest regional migration trends have been experienced in the last four decades. What Aponte and Siles (1994) called the “Browning of the Midwest” has become common place. Rural midwestern communities that were at one point predominately White have experienced increasing numbers of immigrant families. At the center of this rural migration trend are Latinos and in particular Latinos from Mexico. This recent migration process over the decades has not only impacted Latino families, but it also has a significant ecological impact. Entire human ecological systems including, educational systems, community systems, and other systems have adapted to Mexican migration and immigration trends from the great plains to the great lakes. Further documented by Milard and Chapa (2005) in their *Apple Pie and Enchiladas* book the Mexican settlers were not always welcomed in some communities and met with resistance in their daily lives. Social and political tensions at the national level became center stage in the rural Midwest causing more rifts and *barreras* (barriers) for Mexican and other Latinos in the heartland. While on the other hand positive change has begun to grow out of the corn maize fields where decades of cultural discontinuity in some cases have become cultural awareness and cultural responsiveness throughout these communities. However, the Mexican families and their communities have continued to demonstrate resiliency through their family values, culture, sense of community, faith and through their ingenuity (Viramontez Anguiano, Martinez, Chavez, Harrison & Jacob-Bellowe, 2022). In the modern era their resilience and ingenuity have transformed whole communities, in rural Midwest vibrant downtowns now you see *panaderias*, *tiendas* other Latino based businesses and general businesses that are owned by Latino families. These businesses are not only serving the Mexican population but serving other immigrant Latinos, other immigrants, and the White population. At schools, homecoming royal courts and class presidents no longer are only White rather you see Latinos with last names such as Rodriguez and Gonzalez.

This paper explores the migration trends and realities of modern Latino Midwestern families. Specifically, this paper will illustrate the challenges and triumphs of Mexican families as they have struggled to carve out a place in the heartland. *The experiences are based on the author's 30 years of ethnographic culturally responsive research.*

Demographic trends in the Midwest

The Midwest region saw some of the highest increases of Latinos during the late 1980s well into the modern era. Mexican and other Latino families migrated to the Midwestern states seeking out better social, economic, educational and health opportunities. From 1990 to 2010 the percentage of Latinos in Iowa increased to 1087%, Minnesota 1627%, Nebraska 1084% and Indiana 973% and other states demonstrated major increases of Latinos (Congressional Research Services, 2012). The Corn Belt of northwestern Iowa and southern Minnesota is an example of a new-growth destination and is now home to thriving Latino *comunidades* (communities) first drawn

to the area in the early 2000s by economic opportunities (Grey et al., 2003). Iowa and Minnesota have the highest concentration of Latinos in the region. They are the largest minority group in Iowa, representing over 6.9% of the total population in the state, and are the third largest population demographic in Minnesota, making up nearly 6% of the total population (Gutierrez & Richmond, 2021; U.S. Census, 2022). These major increases changed the fabric and infrastructure of Midwestern towns, especially rural communities. School districts were transformed in a relatively short period of time. During 2018, Latino preschoolers changed the face of most public early childhood education classrooms in the Midwest, Illinois increased by 30%, Iowa 33%, Michigan 20% and Nebraska 28% (Education Trust, 2023). However, despite the population rises of Latino children most Midwestern states saw very little Latino teacher gains during these growth periods. In Nebraska during 2006, 4 out of 5 majority Latino student-based districts had no Latino teachers (Nebraska Department of Education, 2006). This has continued to be a major issue as most districts throughout the Midwest have struggled to establish a biliterate infrastructure. Despite these challenges new settlement destinations continue to show higher levels of achievement for Latinos than traditional settlements. Some research shows that some Midwest Latino youth demonstrated signs of acculturative stress because of marginalization and struggles with mental health (Taylor, Ruiz, Nair, and Mishra, 2022). It is important to point out that despite the record number of Latino growth that during times of economic hardship or economic growth that often immigrant Latino are more likely to have the lowest paying jobs and to be unemployed (Viramontez Anguiano, Reyes, and Chavez, 2013).

As it relates to the pandemic, Latino frontline meatpacking workers in northwest Iowa and southern Minnesota were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, as in this region meatpacking plants can be the sole employer for miles (Fremstad, Rho, & Brown, 2020; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). Disruptions to the plant often disrupt the entire family system and community. This is relevant because meatpacking was one of the first industries to be impacted by COVID-19 outbreaks (Kline, 2021; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). Over 33% of those employed by this industry identify as Latino or Hispanic and more than half of all employees are immigrants (U.S. Bureau Of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Latino families: 30 years of ethnographic research trends in the rural Midwest

The primary researcher has traversed rural midwestern communities for 30 years. The research has focused on migration and immigrations trends of Latino families and their adaptation to the heartland. The researcher had sought out to learn about family life, family dynamics, cultural, generational realities, family-school relations, pathways and *brechas* to higher education, immigration issues, fatherhood and motherhood, community life and overall factors related to Latinos families. The research unfolded in family homes, churches, community centers, schools, mobile home meeting rooms, farms and other spaces that respondents considered safe. The major objective of the culturally responsive ethnography was to learn more about the often-nuanced daily lives of Latino families in the Midwest. As a result, the researcher collected decades of culturally responsive data from the *brechas* (alternative roads) that the families often had to take to survive and thrive in the Midwest. What follows are key themes from this ethnographic research over the last 30 years.

Living in the Shadows and Resiliency

The road to the Midwest had often been a strained and sometimes deadly experience for most Latino families. Families have migrated from Mexico dating back to 1900. For most families settling in states including Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and other states especially in the rural regions meant that the families were willing to give up their home for a new way of life, language, and culture. Critical to this migration was the essence of family; for most Latinos, their goal was to eventually settle in the Midwest and not return to Mexico and other parts of Latin America. These decisions were often driven by social, political, and economic realities back in Mexico and Latin America. The romanticized interpretations of small rural communities would not hold true for Latino families as the process of adjustment for immigrant Latino families was difficult. Several varied familial, social, cultural, and economic factors made acclimating to life in their new environment a continual challenge. The reality of limited English language proficiency, as well as cultural differences between the mainstream culture in the Midwest and the Latino culture served as a barrier. The economic difficulties that immigrant families faced were due to the combination of hurdles related to occupational and educational opportunities. Often immigrants worked in low-paying jobs and had a low level of educational attainment.

Furthermore, with the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRAIRA) Latinos who had migrated to the Midwest as undocumented individuals would face less forgiving immigration policies and laws. Thus, this new law made the immigration process and eventually permanent residence or sometimes called obtaining the *green card* extremely difficult for individuals and their families. Family reunification through immigration services also became extremely difficult, especially for those families who had mixed legal status. Daily life for Latino individuals would become a major undertaking including obtaining secure employment, driving to work with no official driver license, participating in any government base assistance, assistance in matriculating their children to universities and colleges and other legal realities.

One person shared:

People think that where we are from is a beautiful place based on the tourism industry, but like every place, there is a good side and a bad side where there is no employment. I read that hunger can be greater than fear. You can be scared but if you're hungry it's worse. I came with my sister and brought my children seeking economic and educational opportunities. Someone helped my three kids to cross, using legal documents. 9-11 had not happened so it was easier to cross this way.

Another person shared her realities of living undocumented in the rural Midwest:

Adapting—you can't adapt now. You have to go out to go to the store, but it's straight there and then back to the house. We go from home to work and back. We don't want our kids to be like us, we want them to be involved. We have them in swimming, karate, chorus... We don't want them to feel like us, it's too hard.

Yet another person discussed the challenges of being undocumented and the changing environment:

I had a license, but once they started demanding a social security number I could no longer get one. In the past when I was in an accident, I had a license and insurance. Now, I pray to God that nothing happens. That's the difference in "the North" [here], the climate has changed, and without papers it's gotten really bad.

Despite living in the dark or shadows as one father shared at a community meeting the Latino community demonstrated resiliency especially as they saw the future generations as a beacon for hope. This was a reoccurring theme from Northwest Iowa to Northern Ohio. Immigrant Latino families demonstrated a social-centric way of life placing at the center family and the community. As a result of this collective foundation the families were able to develop a system of resiliency. Despite what challenges they may face in the community whether it may be migration and immigration issues, adaptation to language and culture, relationships with the school and the community or other challenges they continued to rely on the social capital and cultural capital that was generated within the families and their communities. For Latinos, social capital is rooted in la familia (the family) and branched out into *el pueblo* (the community). The life source of the community success was the consciousness of social capital. That is, for *el pueblo* it was important to share and give resources that would benefit the Latino community and its future. Over 30 years of ethnography, the researcher saw families and whole Latino communities utilize their various sources of capital to not only overcome the obstacles that they faced rather go beyond survival and thrive. One person shared the importance of the Latino community and their views about the majority community:

I have been here for over 20 years, and we have encountered prejudice, discrimination, racism at every level; however, our community has endured. Whenever we need the Latino families, business[es], church[es], newspaper, and radio to rally around a need or a cause, Latinos support us by the hundreds. Although there are some Americanos organizations and individuals who may not want us to be here, I have found most Americanos to be supportive of our community. The mayor and other prominent leaders in the city and the county have been open about how we make the community strong through our work and our culture.

Another person shared:

We have to work together as a community to deal with the challenges that we face, whether it deals with immigration issues or helping our young people earn scholarships. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. struggled and fought for the rights of Black families so they would have a better life in America, Cesar Chavez fought for earlier generations of Latinos—we need to fight for our future, our children. It doesn't matter how much education you have, if you speak English or not or if you are legally here we have to be one community working towards the same goals to better our community.

Another Mexican parent and prominent leader stated:

We have to develop our young people to carry on the work that we have started. I have been working with la comunidad (community) through the church, social outreach, and health initiatives for over 20 years, and I don't see enough of our young people being involved in our community. We, the elders, need to make sure that we challenge the young people that there will come a time that they will have to lead our gente [people].

Latino Families and Education and Schools in the Rural Midwest

The primary researcher had travelled across the Midwest from Iowa up to Minnesota and across to Ohio, one consistent interactive system was the Latino family and the schools. As discussed by Bronfenbrenner (1989) the mesosystem which was the interaction of the family, and the school was the center of the daily existence of Latino families in the Midwest. These relationships between Latino families, teachers, school administrators' other families and the larger community dictated how Latino families adapted in the different rural communities. Regardless of where the researcher engaged in the ethnography Latino families demonstrated their dedication to their children's education and stressed that this was a major reason why they migrated from Mexico and Latino America. What was clear was that the families experienced cultural and linguistic discontinuity. Over the years the researcher found that if a school district responded in a culturally responsive manner to the new Latino families rather than reactionary that not only did the Latino families benefit rather the whole community was better off. Moreover, if there was a Latino family, school, and community partnership the learning environment for Latino children and youth was not only positive but also more conducive to achieving regardless, if it was early childhood education, IB/AP courses or pathways and *brechas* to college. Furthermore, depending on the school district some developed a cultural and linguistic infrastructure to meet the needs of the families, including bilingual parent liaisons that provided social and educational outreach. In short, often parents were dedicated to their children's education and were seeking meaningful partnerships with the schools to ensure the educational success of their children.

One person shared their experience with the school and district:

We have always approached [the schools] as much as we can. Before, there were no people who spoke Spanish at the schools; now there are. Before, we did not visit the school because of our fear of the language. I remember when we enrolled my son in school, we went and there wasn't a relationship with the teachers because they didn't speak Spanish and we didn't speak English. Now there are people that help us.

Another person shared about how Mexican and Latino parents need to be dedicated to their children education and engage with the school:

To be involved in your children's education, that takes time, and sometimes that is difficult because a lot of the fathers here work at the meatpacking plant and they have long shifts. In my opinion, you have to review homework, ask how things are going at school, and you need to inspect the mochila (backpack) and ask what did you learn today and what did you see. You also need to be involved with the school and communicate with the teachers. Take time with your children. However, there are fathers that don't inspect the mochila. They don't take the time to

learn about how things are going in school. At night, my wife and I work with our children. Sometimes I do it and other times she does. You must be focused on your children.

Midwest Latino Families During the Pandemic

During the summer of 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic the researcher made an important decision to continue the ethnography in person rather than moving the research to an online format. He concentrated the research in Northern Iowa and Southern Minnesota. The culturally responsive research took on a different form and pushed the researcher to the limits while trying not to contract COVID himself. The research was conducted in some of the communities with the highest percentage of COVID in the Midwest and the United States. Often, he was forced to meet families outdoors, conduct interviews through windows, large halls with no central heating and other spaces to ensure the health of the respondents and himself. For the researcher this was the most difficult ethnography that he had conducted. Family members and Latino leaders were open about how COVID had impacted their families and their communities. Unfortunately, families lost members and Latino communities were caught in the middle of a national political tug of war as it related to COVID. However, for the families, despite the life threatening realities of the COVID they continued to demonstrate resiliency to overcome.

One person shared his life-threatening experience with COVID:

I was in a coma for a month, in a coma, one month, and one week entirely in a coma, sleeping. That was in May, in June I was really strong, and all of the people there when I was infected, they all died, I was the only one who saved myself. A lot of people died, it's barely been a month and they stopped the therapy, they would give it to me here in the hospital, but from there they sent me to the hospital. Only two weeks to give therapy for the basics, how to shave, put my shoes on, change my clothes, but only with one hand, this hand I could not move, it was completely numb. Also, with a gadget they would put my socks on, for shoes they gave me therapy, little by little it was here that I began to recuperate more in therapy. It was there that I lost all of my savings, apart from the insurance paying their part, I had to pay my part. I paid a lot of money. A lot there, my savings of 20 years, there it all went, ambulances everything. I have healed a lot because I couldn't move, and when I was in the hospital where they gave me therapy, they would stand me up and I wouldn't last even 5 seconds standing, I would fall, I couldn't walk, not even 15 steps.

Another Latino parent and religious leader shared:

My role as the minister is to serve my congregation. I communicate with Latino fathers and their families every day. The pandemic did not change this; we kept our doors open. I delivered food to families, met families here at church, met over the phone and online. We provided the families with information and connected them to medical professionals and other people who could help. We did everything to help the families during these hard times. Some of our families had COVID, and we were here to serve, as this is what we are supposed to do.

One of the Latino parents shared the realities of COVID in the Midwest:

At the plant, people were getting sick and still coming to work because they did not want to lose money. Eventually, I got sick with the COVID and my wife also got sick as she also works at the plant. My young daughter had to take care of us. It was a scary time. People from the church and people from the community helped. Unfortunately, my daughter also ended up with COVID. Thank God, we made it through.

Another parent shared how Mexican and Latinos were caught in the political realities of COVID at the national level.

The pandemic hit the meatpacking plants in Iowa towns hard. Parents were not speaking up about the difficult work conditions at the plant during the pandemic and were getting sick and were afraid to speak up. Local Latino young people and other Latinos met with at the time candidate Joe Biden during a town hall meeting on Univision to discuss the dire situation. The young people and other Latino community members spoke up about the difficult work conditions that Latinos were facing at the meatpacking plants during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate the migration trends of Mexican and Latino families in the Midwest. From 1900 Mexican families and eventually other Latino families migrated to El Norte (the North) to establish and cement their futures in the heartland. Their resiliency has served as a foundation to their survival and thriving in this vast region from the great plains to the great lakes. This paper through 30 years of ethnographic research chronicled the lives of the regional migration trends of the families and their Latino communities in the rural spaces of the Midwest. In summary, whether it was Iowa, Minnesota or to the shores of Lake Michigan generations of Mexican and other Latino families celebrate the Midwest as their home.

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