

Latinos and the Accessibility to Social Services

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Abstract

Since the 1980's, immigration from Latin America into the U.S. has been scrutinized in various news outlets; resulting in policies and laws that have started to reflect an anti-immigrant rhetoric that ultimately casts a negative connotation onto the Latino populations residing within the U.S. (Vasquez, 2011). To appease the general public, policies that criminalized Latino immigrants soon emerged however the impact would be in the way that was intended. The first part of the study investigates how the anti-immigration laws did not yield less criminals, but rather removed necessary funding for services that could have aided Latinos (Kouyoumdjian, Zamboanga, & Hansen, 2006). While the second portion of the study focuses on interviews with five diverse individuals, all stemming from various fields that have interacted with the Latino population. All five of these individuals currently engage in occupations that collaborate directly with the Latino community, such as housing, immigration, financial literacy, and citizenship clinics. While many agreed that services are relatively present, they also deemed them inaccessible to the vast majority of the population that needs them the most. This study reviews the impact of anti-immigration policies on social services, and examines the real-world experiences of the individuals working within them.

Latinos in the United States have historically faced challenges that have affected the way they receive assistance and resources. Since the 1980s, immigration restrictions have increased in order to prevent the influx of Latinos and Hispanics from entering the United States. Media outlets often showcased Latinos as criminals attempting to break the law by illegally entering the U.S., further reinforcing the stigma that they are simply criminals. These ideals were soon manifested into laws such as the Immigration Act of 1999. Regardless of the public policies intended to regulate immigration, they resulted in higher incarceration rates for Latinos for petty crimes such as simple traffic offenses (Vasquez, 2011). These laws and stigmas have ultimately affected the availability of services Latinos need, such as mental health services (Kouyoumdjian, Zamboanga, & Hansen, 2006). To gain a greater perspective on how they impact social services overall, five professionals were interviewed to base the results on empirical evidence. These individuals serve in various fields including housing and immigration services. The criminal justice system has wrongfully convicted hopeful Latinos in search of a better future, and in turn, affected the accessibility of necessary resources.

Anti-Immigration Laws

Before the 1980s, immigration appeared to be a controlled situation. Circular migration consisted of Mexicans and other Latinos/Hispanics entering the U.S. in order to work for a few months, and then going back to their home countries to help support their families (Massey, 2017). However, beginning in the 1980s, there appeared to be a shift, and suddenly the border was perceived as a gateway for criminals to enter the United States. The media helped perpetuate the portrayal of the Latino population as inherently bad and intending to cause harm on Americans. They were seen as a threat to national security, and blamed for the increase in criminal activity. The stigmas that were used to attack this population were so concrete, that

lawmakers felt justified passing laws in order to oppress them. The legal system attempted to locate and remove harmful and dangerous criminals; however, after the 1980s, the only results were higher rates of incarceration for the oppressed population (Vasquez, 2011).

People within the legal system have the ability to punish and remove others that are not suitable members of society. Media outlets would often portray Latinos in this light, which justified some laws intending to harm them. One in particular was the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. This law was intended to locate and combat terroristic activity that Latinos and Hispanics may be planning. With the media outlets depicting them as the sole cause of criminal activity, it was seen as justifiable to try to combat them directly. However, this was not the case. Studies later found that there was no significant amount of Latinos participating in terroristic activity (Vasquez, 2011). To date, there is no evidence that Latinos have carried out any terroristic plot against the American population. The results of this policy only increased the amount of noncitizens who could be classified as aggravated felons. With the broadened definition of an aggravated felon, Latinos were targeted more harshly and thus sentenced to deportation. Others laws such as the Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996 aimed to accomplish similar goals, only to find that it also increased the amount of people who could be classified as felons (Vasquez, 2011).

Regardless of the results, other states followed suit and implemented harsher policies similar to the antiterrorism act. The results were not different. The amount of Latino motorists being stopped by police increased to 58%, despite Latinos only accounting for 2% of the population. Approximately 117 out of 224 noncitizens were detained for traffic offenses in Maryland. And even counties such as Cobb county in Georgia saw an increase of Latino detainees, rising to 33% of the overall population (Vasquez, 2011). Federal laws set a basis for

discriminatory policies to be in place in different states throughout the country. The aim was to target the criminal activity that was easily portrayed as being caused by the Hispanics in the area. However, the repercussions of these policies yielded the same results.

With all the laws and policies that were implemented, there were a few statistical pieces of evidence to suggest that they did not accomplish their goals. Research found that these laws only increased the number of criminal convictions that were removable offenses. Meaning that petty crimes, such as traffic offenses, were one of the biggest reasons for Latinos being detained. Another study found that the top three offenses were not violent crimes. The first being drug crimes, this included possession of a substance. The second was traffic offenses such as not having a license or speeding. And third was immigration violation, such as overstaying a visa. The media and lawmakers showcased Latinos and Hispanics as dangerous criminals whose only intention was to inflict harm onto the American population. However, serious crimes such as sexual assault and murder only accounted for less than 5% (Vasquez, 2011). This showcases the small margin of immigrants who are violent criminals. Nonetheless, the majority is continuously targeted.

The second finding found that there was a decreasing amount of relief remedies available to immigrants who had been convicted of crimes (Vasquez, 2011). Meaning that convictions, such as traffic offenses, further reduced the accessibility that people had to sources such as lawyers. However, the lack of resources were not just inaccessible to the convicted ones; the entire Latino and Hispanic population suffered as a whole with limited funding going to resources intended to help them. Resources such as access to mental health services are not very common in the Latino population. With research suggesting that minorities undergo higher instances of stress and depression, it appears to only make sense that there would be more mental

health facilities aimed at helping minorities. However, a very limited amount are readily available, and an even lesser amount of people are able to access it. Past research has indicated that approximately 22% of Latinos live in poverty. Adding the stressor of discriminatory laws aimed against the population, the Hispanic and Latinos population may see greater instances of depression and other mental health-related disorders (Hanson, 2006).

Accessibility

The extent of the criminal justice system is not solely limited to governmental laws and policies. It extends to various fields that ultimately affect our everyday lives, including social services. It is not surprising that the anti-immigrant rhetoric has helped spew xenophobic laws that do not reduce the amount of criminal activity within the communities. Instead, these policies reduced the amount of funding that is necessary for social services aimed at Latinos. To focus on understanding this, five professionals were asked a series of 8 questions regarding their occupations and their perspectives (Appendix). However, it is important to note that all questions were altered to the specific interviewee's occupation. Although they may not directly work in the social service industry, they assist indirectly by observing the social service deficit targeted against the Latino population. These five individuals target specific aspects that interact daily with the Latino communities, including housing and immigration services.

First, it is important to assess different kinds of social services and what constitutes inaccessibility. Social services can be defined as services provided by the government, with the intent of benefiting the community. This could apply to healthcare, education, housing, or any other kind of service that aims to better the lives of the people residing within that sector. Although some of the interviewees may not directly work within the field of social work, they do overlap into the field by providing services tailored to the Latino population. Seeing as these

services are available, the question arises as to whether or not they are accessible. Accessibility can be defined as something that is of reach, or simply attainable. Social services typically require some sort of metric that determine whether an individual qualifies for services they seek. This relief not only helps provide support to the community members, but it also serves as a symbol of acceptance for a specific population of people. Although research helps give overall data on the likelihood of receiving help, it is important to talk to the professionals engaging within in it in their everyday lives (Brach & Fraserirector, 2000).

The five individuals interviewed were asked 8 questions regarding their viewpoint on the Latino/Hispanic population in their area, their advocacy work in relation to social services, and the stigmas that ultimately hinder Latinos and Hispanics from attaining assistance. Three of the interviews were conducted in person, and two were transmitted via email. With all the data collected, three separate themes are analyzed in relation to accessibility to government services: the inherent problems apparent in society, how it affects accessibility to social services, and the impacts of Latinos in their everyday lives.

The Inherent Problems

The aforementioned research details the laws in place that ultimately criminalize a vulnerable population. As minorities, Latinos are not only targeted by law enforcement, but stigmatized by policy makers. Stigmas can be manifested in various ways. Some may show active forms of aggression to another group of people which not only yield manipulative techniques, but can lead to a cycle of exploitation (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). One of the most alarming forms of discrimination became apparent in a field that may not be initially perceived as biased: insurance claims. When interviewing a paralegal from a local law firm, she explained that some companies will purposely use intimidation techniques to prevent workers from filing

compensation claims with their insurance companies. In order to avoid the loss of paying for worker's compensation, they will adamantly deny some claims depending on the worker's legal status. However this systematic manipulation is not exclusive to insurance agencies, many employers will adamantly threaten workers whom they are aware may have undocumented legal statuses. The paralegal goes on to explain that some clients have admitted their employers will threaten to contact Immigration and Customs Enforcement if they attempt to receive compensation for their losses. This not only creates a realm of manipulation, but the employees are now subject to further exploitation at the hands of their employers. Aside from showcasing instances of discriminatory practices, this also exemplifies the exploitation of the Latino population.

This systematic racism can also become apparent when it comes to basic civil liberties. Despite the fact that the U.S. does not hold an official language, much of the documentation necessary to vote, apply for citizenship, or even obtain a driver's license can sometimes be limited to English only. When asked about barriers that prevent Latinos from seeking help, a policy analyst for a financial literacy non-profit explained that one issue are those language barriers. She detailed how approximately 3000 individuals could have qualified for DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, had it been available in another language. When necessary documents are not provided in their native language, an individual cannot apply for asylum or other forms of assistance. This same issue was echoed by a program coordinator for community engagement and development. He expressed that language restrictions not only apply to Latinos who do not speak English, but also to ones who do not speak it fluently. He goes on to say that for some, conversational English may not suffice to maneuver through the jargon necessary for legal matters. These barriers may detail the concept of language, but overall they

reflect the societal perception of what is considered “American” and what is not. When basic civil liberties are only permitted for individuals who are fluent enough to comprehend specific material, it hinders other populations from being able to obtain those same privileges.

Accessibility

Seeing as stigmas can be manifested through various outlets, the theme is extended to see how it affects accessibility to social services. As mentioned, social services can be applicable to services such as education or even medical care. During the interviews, all participants were simply asked if they felt these services were accessible to the Latino population. The overarching consensus was simply no. When speaking with the policy analyst, she provided some reasoning behind the lack of attainability. She explained how many of the services are limited to metropolitan areas with heavier traffic, meaning that anyone who resided within the outskirts of the towns were less likely to have access to these services. Many individuals with lower income have had to resort to leaving to homes in areas with a lower price value. As for the ones who do not list transportation as an issue, another issue that arose was simply time. Speaking with a founder of a non-profit aimed at finding affordable resources for Latinos, he was asked his thoughts on what prevents some Latinos from having access to housing resources. He explained that some offices are only open during specific business hours, and many of the working class Latinos work during similar hours. This prevents the population from benefiting from the local sources that could have been readily available to them. Although time and location may not be an issue exclusive to Latinos, the founder of the non-profit expressed that one of his inspirations for the organization was when he realized that other local non-profit organizations were not doing enough to advocate for issues that residents care about. And in a predominately Latino

neighborhood, services like these are evident that the Latino population experience a disadvantage when it comes to accessing them.

Real World Experiences

Statistics and data are necessary to evaluate the instances of systematic hindrances of the Latino population, but it also important to personify these issues and explain the impacts it has on everyday people. When speaking with the non-profit founder, he detailed an instance where a woman in an apartment complex underwent weeks without proper air conditioning in her home. Her leasing office refused to service the issue, and the founder ultimately had to contact local city code enforcement in order to resolve it. Despite the issue being a simpler fix in comparison to others, this example shows the lack of assistance for many Latinos in the area. A more serious issue was presented in a separate interview that detailed domestic assault. The policy analyst had previously worked to promote civic engagement amongst Hispanics and Latinos. She recalled an instance where a young woman shared her narrative of having government enforcers prevent her from obtaining social services. She stated that the woman had been the victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her husband. When she called local law enforcement, the woman explained that the police appeared more concerned with her lack of identification, rather than the situation itself. With a call as serious as domestic violence, the woman was subjected to further belittlement by being interrogated about her legal status, rather than focusing on the perpetrator. Although the woman was no longer in physical harm, this was not the case for others. An immigration paralegal detailed an instance when a man had been detained due to his undocumented status. He has previously been run over by an opposing political party member, and suffered a fractured skull and other abrasions. Nonetheless, he remained in a city detention center with little to no medical attention. One of the most heart-wrenching examples mentioned

during these series of interviews was when the paralegal detailed how a grown man cried and pleaded for healthcare, only to be consistently denied. The paralegal did go on to say that they eventually were able to assure the man received the medical attention he deserved, but this is one case in the slew of the others that go unnoticed.

Conclusion

The criminal justice system has historically oppressed the Latino and Hispanic populations. And although the intention was to reduce crime rates, it only ended up targeting a larger population of people and categorizing them as convicted felons. The stigmas against them however extend far beyond the legal field. There are limited resources for populations that are in dire need of them. With minorities with mental health issues at higher rates than others, funding should be prioritized in order to help them. After speaking with all the participants, it is clear that accessibility to these social services are limited. For the ones that are not limited, the community members may not seek them due to the mistrust in the governmental services. Latinos are consistently being overlooked with the justification that they are criminals. It is important to recognize the hardships Latinos face in the U.S. in order to find ways to truly fix the problem.

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Appendix

1. What is your job title?
2. Do you interact with any racial minorities in your job field?
3. How do you service the Latino population within your community?
4. Does your job allow you to refer them to resources you may not provide (i.e. resources for mental health, domestic abuse, immigration services, etc.)?
5. Do you believe these resources are easily accessible for them?
6. If not, what barriers do you perceive prevent Latinos from accessing them?
7. According to research, many laws targeting illegal immigrants are due to them being perceived as “criminals.” Have you ever perceived any stigmas in the legal field that could attest to this?
8. What is your overall view on the accessibility of resources for Hispanics/Latinos in Georgia?