THE RESPONSE OF THE MEXICAN WORKING CLASS TOWARDS THE CALIFORNIA ECONOMIC RECESSION

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Abstract
This study explores how the 29.2 million Mexicans living in the United States, specifically those living in California, are responding to the current economic recession. High job loss, housing foreclosures, and economic turmoil spur further instability in an already vulnerable population. These immigrants play a crucial role in the economy of California and the United States; therefore, their responses to the current economic crisis will impact their future, and the future of the entire country. Through the use of four case studies, this study examines the attitudes of and the forced decisions this population makes as they negotiate the recession.

The current economic crisis is wreaking havoc amongst the population of California. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) established the month of December 2007 as the beginning of the current economic recession in the U.S. According to NBER (2009), an economic recession is a significant decline in economic activity, lasting more than a few months, which has a visible decline in profits, employment, industrial production, wholesale and retail sales. With this definition as a reference point, California is one of the states most impacted by the nation’s economic downturn.

As of June 2009, California posted an 11.5% unemployment rate, one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation (U.S. Labor Statistics 2009). As the population braces for further losses in employment, housing, and services, the Mexican immigrant in the United States is poised to suffer the most (Simmons 2001). The correlation between population and income numbers sets up the probability of this group being impacted the most out of any other minority group in California (Smith 2008). The Mexican population is the largest single group in the state of California with 11 million out of 36.5 million people (U.S. Census 2006). Out of this population, 40% fall below the poverty line, making this group highly vulnerable to these challenging economic conditions (Pastor 2009). Note: “Mexicans” are only one type of Latino ethnic group. Oftentimes, studies lump all Latino groups together and
refer to them generically. However, it is important to acknowledge that 68% of Latinos living in the U.S. are Mexicans.

The high vulnerability experienced by the Mexican immigrant in comparison to other ethnic groups results from the lack of preparedness due to a low level of education, lack of capital, lack of employment equity, lack of upward mobility and opportunity, discrimination, and lack of political clout (Valenzuela 2009). It is ironic for this population to leave one country in pursuit of a better life with the ability to produce so much wealth for the state of California, and yet live in the shadows of the American dream. Presently, regulators and politicians struggle with the issues tied to this population but they have yet to find a meaningful solution.

This study explores the impact of the economic recession as it relates to the Mexican population living in California. There has been a huge population explosion, producing a workforce that has become the backbone of the Californian economy. This workforce once yielded great economic power for the state that is now stalling, suggesting that much economic energy is going to waste (Pastor 2009). More specifically, this study explores four Mexican immigrants’ perceptions of and responses to the current economic recession. To begin examining this issue, the first objective of this study is to provide a demographic overview on the status of Mexican immigrants in the United States. With this information serving as a foundation, the responses and opinions of Mexicans actually living in California towards the recession are shared in four case studies. A sociocultural approach will frame the literature review and guide the discussion of the findings to answer the research questions: What are the thoughts of the Mexican working class towards the economic recession? What role will the Mexican population play in the future of California? The literature review highlights important data that helps to understand why the current economic recession has a unique impact on the Mexican population living in California. This study is important because it brings significant insight to a population not well represented in political circles or in higher education. Therefore, this study highlights the value of this population to the state of California.

**Literature Review**

The Mexican population in the United States has risen dramatically since the 1970s. Even though United States immigration laws have been a challenge for Mexicans, Mexico is one of the leading countries for legal and illegal migrant workers to the U.S. (Center for International Studies 2002). The migration of Mexican citizens was initially encouraged by the United States in 1942 via the international agreement with Mexico called the “Bracero
Program.” This guest worker program recruited Mexican farm laborers to migrate and work the fields of the United States (Marentes 1999).

Large-scale settlement in the U.S. by Mexicans began in the 1970s as a result of the ending of the Bracero program (Marentes 1999). By 1980, Mexicans were the largest foreign-born population in the nation, with 2.2 million first generation Mexicans living in the United States. The number of Mexican immigrants doubled from 1980 to 1990, and more than doubled again from 1990 to 2000. While the growth rate of the Mexican immigrant population has slowed considerably since 2006, the cumulative increase was almost 17 times larger in 2008 than in 1970 (U.S. Census 2006).

Presently, Mexicans represent close to one-third of California’s population. The Pew Hispanic Center completed a study on the characteristics of first generation Mexican immigrants in 2008. The study found that Mexican immigrants in the United States as a group represented a younger population compared to any other group, and that this younger generation of Mexican immigrants had a significantly higher percentage of males. Furthermore, this population: (1) had the lowest number of U.S. citizens, (2) was less likely to have a level of education higher than grammar school, (3) was more likely to be in low skilled occupations, (4) was more likely to have bigger families, and (5) was more likely to have higher poverty rates (Gonzalez 2002).

The current economic recession in the United States poses challenges for United States citizens. Like many people in the United States, the Mexican population experiences the struggles of the economic downturn in the country. The housing crisis in the United States is one of the major factors that led many to lower their living standards. The dream of many Mexican immigrants is to own a home and many have accomplished their dream. There were about 1.75 million mortgages in the U.S. by June 2008. California is the top state suffering from home foreclosures. There have been more than 365,000 foreclosures in California since 2007 (Los Angeles Times, June 2009). The Pew Hispanic Center released a report in May 2009, where it made an association between the counties that had the highest number of foreclosures and the counties that are known as places where high percentages of immigrants reside. This association reflects the ever-growing trend in California where the loss of investment and housing by a population is disproportionately evident in a community located primarily in areas that deal greatly with blue collar and agricultural sectors. These trends are indicative of a workforce that is currently suffering the brunt of the economic downturn.
Demographics in the Labor Market
The subject of the Mexican immigrant in the labor force offers a variety of areas of research; however, this study will briefly cover the demographics of Mexican immigrants in terms of their composition in the labor market. It is highly important to understand that the choices this population makes in reaction to the economic downturn will directly influence the labor market.

Mexican workers represent two-thirds of Latino immigrants in the U.S. workforce (Pastor 2009). Mexican workers have a profound presence in the United States labor market, particularly in the service and agricultural sectors. Mexicans reflect 65% of the Hispanics in the service industry and 92% in the agricultural sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005). One in every four foreign-born workers in the United States is from Mexico. Of the 18 million foreign-born U.S. workers in the labor force, including employed and unemployed workers, 4.9 million, or 27%, were born in Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). As this data indicates, the Mexican population holds a significant share of the low wage labor market. The demographics show that the Mexican immigrant is employed in the least coveted positions of the labor market due to the low wages and poor working conditions. This population is composed of a young work force that is ready and willing to work, which is indicative that the Mexican labor pool is more likely to remain underpaid as long as they are willing to work for less. Furthermore, as long as the economic crisis persists they will be willing to work for less to avoid being unemployed (Pastor 2009).

The Working Poor
In describing the experiences of Mexican immigrants in the labor market, it also important to pay attention to predetermined conditions that hinder upward mobility. As Pastor (2009) notes, the majority of the foreign-born Latino households contain three or more workers, which is twice the number for other ethnic immigrants and more than three times that for non-immigrants. In 2004, the average income for a Mexican family of four in California was rounded to $24,000. The overall Latino poverty rate is nearly 40 percent. Over half of the Latino population was already living in conditions extremely challenging even before the recession started. There are other factors that further aggravate those living in poverty. Individuals remain poor when they are not able to obtain employment because they lack the adequate skills necessary to perform the job, live long distances from available jobs, or have challenging child care responsibilities (Wilson 1996). However, Pastor (2009) notes that these factors are not the case of the Mexican population and instead he describes Latinos as experiencing a working poverty. There is a difference between nonworking poverty and
working poverty. Latinos live in working poverty because they almost always have some kind of job, but are not able to make a high income (Pastor 2009). Low levels of education are a principal reason why the Mexican population has a disproportionately higher poverty rate and lower income and labor socioeconomic status than other groups in the U.S. (Migration Policy Institute 2009).

Education
Education is a key component for economic stability and upward mobility (Gonzalez 2002). Even though Mexican immigrants have been present in the U.S. for many years, they are not only over-represented among the ranks of the low income, but also in low educational attainment. Latinos are concentrated in the lowest paying jobs and many lack the skills and education necessary for the procurement of better paying positions (Smith 2002). An increase in the educational level of the Mexican working class is perhaps the most important step in promoting economic prosperity. Yet, examining the educational pipeline for the educational engagement of Mexican immigrants show that the numbers are dismal, to say the least.

In California, only 5% of Mexican immigrants have graduated from a four-year college, while 84% have a high school education or less (Public Policy Institute of California 2008). This finding is evident in Latino youth, who live in communities where economic and social opportunities are limited. They have no ability to control the basic circumstances that shape the opportunities available to them through the schools they attend, the neighborhoods where they live, or the jobs are available to them (Portes 1994). Due to conditions such as ethnic and language differences, minority students are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources, including qualified teachers; these differences also contribute to lowered student achievement (Gandara 2003).

Educational Practices
There is also evidence that some of these practices, including instructional practices within classrooms and parent involvement practices within schools, vary by the ethnicity and socioeconomic composition of the student body, which could also lead to differences in student achievement among ethnic groups (Stipek 2004). Educated parents serve as role models for their children and establish higher expectations for their academic achievement. Furthermore, they are capable of helping their children in school assignments and answering questions about college from first-hand experience (Gonzalez 2002). However, for first generation Mexican children, the affect of parental education may not be as significant due to the low levels of education obtained by most Mexican immigrants (Gandara 2003).
A cultural deficit approach is often used in explaining the low educational attainment among Mexican immigrants. The cultural deficit model characterizes the Mexican culture as being incompatible with academic success because the culture emphasizes present satisfaction over future payoffs, family interdependence over individual success, and maintaining the Spanish language, which can create a lack of English proficiency (Gonzalez 2002).

**Academic Theories**

Mexicans immigrants are considerably different from the average American in educational acquirement. Applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) will further enable this researcher to explain the educational experience of this minority ethnic group. Solorzano and Yosso (2000) use CRT to argue that education theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups. **Critical Race Theory** is defined as “the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (Masuda 2001). CRT in education frames the experiences of different ethnic student bodies and further helps understand each in terms of disciplines, epistemologies and research approaches (Solorzano and Yosso 2001). Another theory that further explains the Latino experience in education is **Latino Critical Theory**, which is defined as “exploring how Critical Race Theory might expand beyond the limitations of the black/white paradigm to incorporate a richer, white supremacy, particularly as it impacts Latinos in their individual and collective struggles for self-understanding and social justice” (Iglesias 1997.). LatCrit provides a better lens to analyze Latinos’ multidimensional identities and can address issues like language, immigration, ethnicity, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression (Solorzano and Yosso 2001). Both CRT and LatCrit challenge the traditional views of education and pushes the envelope to promote a furthered discourse regarding ethnic students and the U.S. education system.

Like other social institutions, education is composed of unique practices, traditions, norms and languages (Figueroa 2007). Recent research argues that resources are highly important in affecting student achievement. Arrellano (2003) suggests that related policies should be aimed at improving the material resources available to students and the settings in which they live, thus affecting the family, school and community structures. The attempt to eliminate the achievement gap and bring equality to an underrepresented population is the key necessary to create a competitive edge for a group that
contributes immensely to the U.S. economy and hopes to succeed equally with the rest of the United States in achieving the American Dream.

American Dream
Educational attainment is fundamental in accomplishing the American Dream. In the previous section, background data on Mexican immigrants and education theories regarding this group were provided to show the disadvantages this population faces in the U.S. education system. Mexican immigrants came to the United States for the purpose of achieving better lives; therefore, it is important to view how this population perceives the American Dream in order to best understand their response towards the current economic recession. The premise behind the American Dream has always been closely connected to the notion of access to economic opportunity (Starks 2003). Research during the 1970s and 1980s found that socio-demographic characteristics such as race, education, gender, occupational class, and income are associated with beliefs about opportunity and inequality (Smith 2008). The achievement of the American Dream is meaningful to the Mexican immigrant not only because of the long history of immigration to California but because of the social and cultural indicators that are displayed within this population in terms of their pursuit of upward mobility.

Mexicans mostly represent a group of low-wage earners who seek the opportunity to improve their lives economically and socially. The act of pursuing the American Dream for Mexican immigrants embodies going well beyond the living status of their parental generation (Alba 2006). Castaneda, an expert in global politics and Latin American Studies, describes the Mexican American Dream: “The real Mexican dream is that people leave for the United States, find a well-paying job, improve their income level slightly over time, eventually obtain papers, bring their family or create a family, and build a family in the United States” (2009). However, the lack of legal documents, the inequality in economic and educational opportunities, lack of political clout, and no historical access to inherited wealth or assets plays an obvious role in the shaping the outcome of this population’s search for the American Dream (Kahn 2002). The negation of the American Dream typically results from the aforementioned conditions; now adding a newer and deepening economic recession, this population now faces a starker future.

Maneuvering through the barriers has always been part of the Mexican immigrant experience in the United States, but the current recession and the loss of homes due to foreclosures and unemployment is further intensifying this experience. Presently, the American Dream seems to be fading with the record loss of capital (Kahn 2002). The acquisition of a home and
real property ranks as the highest goals in regards to the American Dream. Furthermore, the home for the Mexican immigrant represented an entire life’s effort, savings, and investment. In the Mexican community, having a home is considered a sign of “having made it,” hence the fulfillment of the American Dream. The resulting losses from the housing debacle will have lasting effects in this community, which now has to cope not only with the pre-existing barriers but with these new economic conditions that threaten their livelihood. The Mexican population has displayed immense willingness to work and persevere in their desire to remain a part of the American Dream. A great number of immigrants come to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream, but the outcome of this dream will most likely be influenced by the labor market. As previously stated, education is the key component for economic stability; therefore, the level of education achieved will have the greatest influence in the success of the Mexican immigrants.

The literature has provided a framework of themes directly related to the Mexican immigrant experience in the United States. In analyzing the response of this population towards the current recession, it is crucial to take into consideration the historical background this population has in the United States, specifically in the areas of labor market demographics, their perception on the American Dream, and their educational attainment. All of these components are not only what makes this population so unique, but also are what will influence and shape their response towards the recession.

**Method**

This study uses qualitative analysis to review how Mexican immigrants in California are responding to the current economic recession. To capture the Mexican immigrant experience, this study is complemented by interviews of four Mexican immigrants. Because California is home to both undocumented and documented immigrants, the researcher purposely selected two participants with legal residential status and two without. The purpose of the division is to analyze if the legal status of the immigrants influenced their responses towards the economic recession.

**Participants**

The present study used the technique of *snowball sampling*, where the subjects for the study are recruited through known acquaintances. This technique was used to facilitate contact and establish a trusting relationship with the participants of this study.

To recruit participants for this research, a recruitment flyer was sent via e-mail to the researcher’s contacts in the community, as well as to classmates,
members of church, neighbors, and friends. After receiving e-mails and phone calls regarding interested and possible participants, the researcher contacted the potential participants to answer any questions and confirm eligibility. The participants were selected based on the following eligibility criteria:

1. They had to be of Mexican origin, and currently living in California.
2. They had to label themselves as belonging to the uneducated working class.
3. They needed to state that they were experiencing the effects of the current economic crisis, which includes but is not limited to possible job loss, uncertain housing, or other changes in their living conditions.

To verify eligibility, the researcher contacted the interested participants by telephone to inform them about the purpose of the study and the reason for the criteria. The researcher interviewed the immigrants to see if they met the stated criteria for research. After the initial interview, times and locations were set and scheduled for a meeting that would be most convenient to the research subject for the full interview process.

The participants signed a consent form agreeing to be interviewed and audio recorded. The researcher e-mailed or mailed the consent forms to the participants for their review and signature a week before the interview. These forms were ready by the time of the interview. Because the population is Spanish speaking, it was each participant’s choice about whether to read and sign the consent form in either Spanish or English.

Table 1 show the details about each participant in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Year Immigrated</th>
<th>No. of Family Dependents</th>
<th>County in California</th>
<th>Place from Mexico</th>
<th>Legal Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>San Joaquin</td>
<td>Michoacán</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Stanislaus</td>
<td>Jalisco</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Stanislaus</td>
<td>Nayarit</td>
<td>Documented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isidro</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yolo</td>
<td>Michoacán</td>
<td>Documented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Details about study participants.

Interviews

Using a qualitative analysis, the participants were interviewed using a case study approach. The questions varied from closed- to open-ended because incorporating both types of questions enriched the opportunity to fully capture detailed information during the interviews. The questions were sorted into main themes such as the economic recession, immigration, education, labor experience, and perceptions on the future of California. The four interviews took place in the participants’ homes. Interviews were...
conducted individually in Spanish. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to English. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The researcher took written notes on non-verbal responses that developed during the interviews because relying only on verbal responses can limit the story being told. The notes were important because they complemented the interviews by capturing a complete image of the narratives. For example, some of the participants had some tears, silence, different facial expressions, or special attitudes during the interviews. The researcher used pseudonyms to keep the participants’ names confidential. All information related to the interviews was kept confidential and securely stored.

**Analysis**

In order for the researcher to reach concrete conclusions from the interviews, all of the transcribed responses were carefully reviewed and coded. To maintain privacy every participant was given a random pseudonym by the researcher that was used throughout the study.

The researcher used open coding to identify the major themes that came out of the interviews, including the recession outlook and limited opportunities available to immigrants. Activity codes were used to analyze the responses of the participants. *Process codes* are “words and phrases that facilitate categorizing sequences of events, changes over time, or passages from one type or kind of status to another” (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). *Activity codes* are codes that identify constant kinds of behavior (Bogden and Biklen 1998). Using process and activity codes allowed the researcher to analyze the responses from different perspectives.

Table 2 outlines the themes, process codes, and activity codes used to analyze the case studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Process Codes</th>
<th>Activity Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recession Outlook</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>Self Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work Ethic</td>
<td>Citizenship Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Disadvantages in Education</td>
<td>Career Aspirations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Themes, process codes, and activity codes.

The participants’ responses were highly important because, in them, the Mexican immigrants revealed more than just answers to questions, they revealed critical parts of their lives as immigrants, personal insight and the experience of being a immigrants during the recession: a view point from ground zero, so to speak.
During the interviews, the four participants were enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts and responses in regards to the current economic crisis in California. The narratives provided personal insight on the life experiences of these Mexican immigrants. The interviews allowed the participants to share their own insights as to how they see their role benefiting California in conjunction with their personal futures. Two of the participants were undocumented and the other two were documented, which provided different perspectives. According to the coding, two themes were identified: the recession outlook and the opportunities immigrants have in the labor market and for education.

Recession Outlook
The narratives right away revealed the attitude that the interviewees had towards the recession. Pedro came from Michoacán, Mexico in 2003. In the years that Pedro has been in California he has worked in the fields, but more often in the construction industry. He is unemployed for the first time since his arrival in the U.S. He never imagined that this country would go through such a crisis. As a result of the recession, Pedro has made radical changes in his lifestyle. The biggest changes for him were that he had to sell his car and reduce the amount of money his sends to his parents in Mexico. Even though Pedro is going through rough times, the following passage demonstrates the positive outlook he has towards the recession:

There are many folks like me living in California, and like me, we don’t just want the economy like it is, we are eager to be part of the recovery for a better economy (2009).

Like Pedro, many Mexican immigrants see themselves as part of this state. Many are going through losses in this community, whether jobs, homes, or savings. Along with the high number of housing foreclosures, the Mexican immigrant has also experienced a tremendous loss of wealth. Some have spent their entire life’s fortunes and effort on acquiring a piece of the American Dream that has now vanished. Interviewee Isidro came to the U.S. in 1974 from Michoacán, Mexico. He currently lives in Yolo County with his wife and three children. Isidro offers a more detailed response about his experience of the recession and his attitude:
My house meant more to me than just a thing that was owned, it was a home. It took me 30 plus years to get to this dream. With the loss of my home went many years of hard work and thousands of dollars that will never come back to me. My future plans are to live in a trailer that I own and I will stay here to work (2009).

The interviewees were lucid in the responses they gave. They seemed very willing to open up and share what they felt about the pressing economic crisis, their hopes, opinions, and solutions. Rarely do Mexican immigrants have the opportunity to feel so empowered with the position they hold regarding the state’s economy. Isidro has been in the U.S. for a longer period than Pedro. Therefore, Isidro has invested more years of hard work to accomplish his American Dream of having a house. Pedro’s original American Dream was to come to California to work and help his parents financially. The young age of Pedro and his short trajectory in the U.S. shows that he is discovering where he is headed with his life. However, both Pedro and Isidro desire to be part of the recession recovery through being part of the labor force.

Because Isidro has been part of the labor force in California for the longest period of time of all the participants, he shares his experience in the labor market in California. He started with a strong voice as he remembered his experiences in the fields, and made frequent pauses and showed facial expressions that suggested he has had a challenging journey in his jobs. Isidro shares his experience in the work force:

I have learned about jobs mainly through my cousins, friends and by talking to people in the farms. I adjust fast into jobs. I have always made minimum-wage salaries or below, and of course no benefits. In the places where I worked many of my co-workers were undocumented. It broke my heart when immigration officers came to the fields and aggressively took farm workers. Even though I had my green card; it reminded me that once I was in their shoes. Working in the fields has been the hardest job I had, mainly because of the injustices bosses made with Mexicans. (2009).

Isidro’s experience represents the story of thousands of Mexican immigrants who have to put up with injustices in their work. In the previous passage Isidro reveals that he has obtained his jobs through his network and that he has always worked in low wage jobs. This suggests that he is among a network of people where educational aspirations are not considered. The opportunity in education and labor is the other theme that was identified through the findings.
Opportunities

Another participant, Petra, is a native of Jalisco, Mexico. Along with her two sons and husband she came to the United States in 2003 to have a better opportunity to improve their economic stability. Petra shared the following regarding her experience of seeking opportunity and working in California:

> When I initially came to California, my sister who already was here was able to accommodate me in the cannery where she worked. After two years of working there I accidentally injured my hand while working. The cannery knew that I was undocumented, so they did everything they could to get rid of me. For me, my greatest boundaries that I have in jobs are that I do not know English and my legal status (2009).

Based on Petra’s response, one can deduce that Mexican immigrants, like many other populations, obtain their jobs through the people they know. The disadvantage of Mexican immigrants is that their educational attainment is so low that their network continues to be made up of people who work in the lowest paid jobs, with no benefits and the worst conditions. Furthermore, Petra has the barriers of her legal status and her lack of English language skills. Not knowing the language is a huge obstacle because that means that often times she is not able to speak for herself and is not able to knock on doors for new opportunities to accomplish her American Dream, which is to have economic prosperity.

Pedro talks about his career aspiration as a Mexican immigrant:

> It is important to have an education for those who will use it in their jobs, but for him is has not been an issue not having an education because the jobs that he seeks do not require a university title (2009).

In addition to Pedro’s perception of education, Maria adds insight about why education is not part of this population’s experience:

> I started from the bottom with nothing. I have worked in fields, canneries, in cleaning [jobs], in restaurants, and in low wage jobs. I feel that I have a potential to work in better job positions, but the biggest barrier for me is the same one that many of the Mexican people have…the lack of higher education. But with or without education what keeps me going is “las ganas de trabajar” [willingness to work] (2009).
The insistence on working is a common character trait in this population. Even through the darkness of the current recession, the Mexican population still holds onto the beacon of hope for a better life. This beacon is their willingness to work and work together, which is their only way of making it out of the dark. The only way of coming out of the recession, as Maria puts it, is to get together and help each other out:

*This recession is giving many people hardships, but more than obstacles I see this recession as an opportunity for the state to grow. It is a sign for all of us who live in California to become united and help each other* (2009).

Isidro offered the following insight in regards of the future of California. “California is the gold state: it has land waiting to be farmed and it has people like me waiting to work.” Furthermore, this willingness to overcome needs to be paid attention to. The Mexican population in California is set to go back to work. It is ready for an amnesty, ready for acceptance, ready to prosper once again alongside the rest of the citizenry. They no longer want to feel like a burden but rather an asset necessary for recovery. Petra indicates that:

*Everyone needs to understand that undocumented Mexicans are hard-working people. As an undocumented worker I can’t really get benefits much less be a burden to the state* (2009).

The participants’ legal status has an impact on their experiences in the U.S. The respondents who have a U.S. government-issued ID have fewer barriers in obtaining employment, whereas the undocumented respondents have a complicated experience in the process of job searching and while working. Furthermore, the respondents who do not have documents see their disadvantage in the economic recession because they cannot obtain benefits. Mexicans are surviving the current recession because this population remains hopeful in the economic recovery of the nation; all the while they continue working in low wage jobs that are more readily available, hence keeping the economic integrity of the state of California intact as others lose hope.

**Conclusion**

This study explored how Mexican immigrants are responding to the current economic recession in California. Looking at Mexican immigrants’ demographics, labor market participation, educational attainment, and their pursuit of the American Dream are important considerations when exploring
scholarship about this group because Mexican immigrants have a long history in California.

This study was complemented by four case study interviews that were conducted using a qualitative analysis to deduce the findings. The narratives provided personal insight on the life experiences of Mexican immigrants in California and their attitudes towards the current recession. Historically, in times of crisis it has been a common practice by the powers-that-be in California to put the issues of the Mexican immigrant aside, and to attach negative stigma and place blame for the state’s financial woes on this group. This practice only diverts attention away from possible solutions. As evidenced by previous researchers and the results of this study, the Mexican population is evermore present today and will continue to be so in the future. Previous findings and interviews show that this population is large and has a strong work ethic. The Mexican immigrants see themselves as a population that will bring prosperity to the state. However, it is important to be aware that it is not just economic growth that produces prosperity; it is also key policy changes that can affect this population in a positive light that play an important role.

The key policy areas that can improve the well-being of the Mexican immigrant population in California are tied to education because it is well-known that higher education is a crucial factor in bridging the achievement gap as well as stirring positive economic development. Current educational policies need to be redeveloped and improved in order to ensure that this population gets an opportunity to bridge the achievement gap within the structure of the U.S. education system.

The future can, in turn, yield a higher payoff in terms of wealth for the state. Following are some policy considerations from a student perspective on the areas of education and immigration reformation:

- Meeting the needs and investing in the restructuring of the education system for the early years at the K-12 level
- Laying down a solid foundation to prepare students for higher education can be achieved through well-developed outreach programs that focus their efforts in low income communities and high schools districts highly representative of this demographic area
- Developing early outreach is imperative to align Mexican immigrant youths with the notion of success through education
- Creating an amnesty program for the high numbers of undocumented immigrants working and living in the state
This study opens other possible areas that can be explored further, including policies regarding education, labor and immigration. The case study interview approach made the analysis of the participants’ responses more detailed and complex in the present study. However, this study can be improved in the future by increasing the number of participants. California is the home of more than 11 million Mexican immigrants and this population can no longer be ignored at the macro-level. If the state of California manages to develop policies aimed to stir positive economic and academic growth in the Mexican community, the returns in the near future could be great and will work for the benefit of stabilizing the vitality of the Golden State.
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