

9-2012

Latinos (Research Report #115)

Amanda D. Cawley

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Mark J. Schafer

LSU AgCenter

Troy Blanchard

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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Recommended Citation

Cawley, Amanda D.; Schafer, Mark J.; and Blanchard, Troy, "Latinos (Research Report #115)" (2012). *LSU AgCenter Research Reports*. 2.

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Racial and Ethnic Groups in the Gulf of Mexico Region

Latinos



Introduction

As part of a larger project that examines demographic and community changes in the Gulf of Mexico region, we reviewed literature for eight key racial and ethnic groups with significant influence in part or all of the region. The Gulf of Mexico region is incredibly diverse – with more than 13.5 million residents who trace their origins to scores of places in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. (See Table 1.)

Of these various groups, we focused our reviews on eight specific racial, ethnic and ancestry groups: African Americans, Cajuns, Creoles, Croatians, Latinos, Native Americans, Vietnamese and other Asians (not Vietnamese). Though some of these groups may be small in number, their effects on the region have been substantial. For instance, although only about 7.8 percent of the residents in the region identify as Cajun/French, this group has had significant effects on shaping the cultural and economic climate of the region through the tradition of Mardi Gras, ethnic food ways, com-

Table 2. Groups of Interest in the Gulf of Mexico Region

Racial/Ancestry Group	Percentage of Total Population	Number
African American	19.14	2,568,703
Cajun	7.81	1,092,377
Croatian	.05	6,422
Latino	29.72	3,988,491
Native American	.64	85,455
Other Asian	2.95	396,007
Vietnamese	1.15	154,669
White	63.72	8,912,239

Table 2 data from ACS five-year estimates and 2010 Decennial Census. Numbers do not add to 100 percent because individuals can indicate more than one race, ethnicity or ancestry group. "Other Asian" refers to Asian groups other than Vietnamese.

mitment to Catholicism and culture of revelry. (See Table 2.)

These eight groups emerged as significant through the existing literature that details their unique effects in building the culture, economic stability and political climate in the region, as well as their ties to the oil and gas industry operating in the Gulf of Mexico. For each group, we focused our review on common elements such as the culture, history, immigration, ties to the oil and

gas industry and economic standing of each group. In addition to these common elements, we examined other prominent themes that emerged for particular groups. For instance, the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Vietnamese fishermen living in southern Louisiana were widely discussed by

scholars and thus became a prominent discussion in our review of the literature on Vietnamese living in the region.

Here is the first in a series of eight reviews. This first review discusses the experiences of Latinos in the region, a group that has gained significant local and national attention over the previous 20 years as the number of Lati-

nos residing in the area, and in the nation, has drastically increased as a result of changing immigration laws and shifting economies¹.

Despite a long-standing history of Spanish presence and rule in the southeastern United States, the discussion here focusses upon post-World War II immigration to highlight the contemporary standing of this group in the Gulf of Mexico region. Upon our review of the literature, we found scholars discussing topics such as history, migration, culture, occupations, economics and politics in length. Conversely, only a limited discussion of the role of Latino workers in the oil and gas

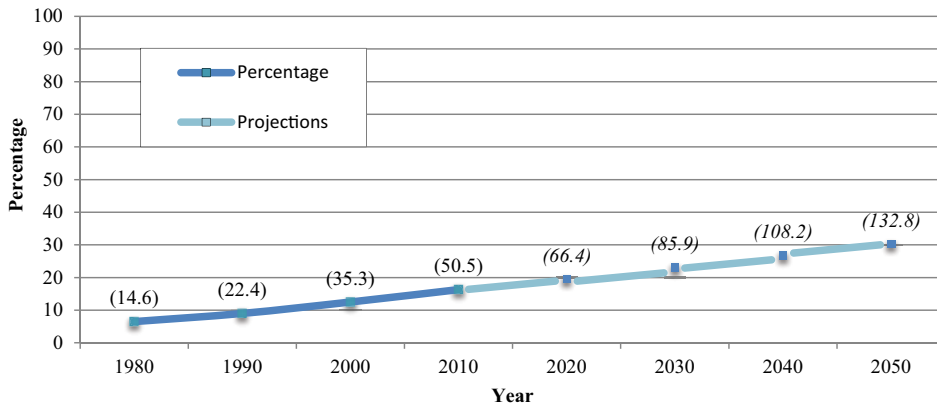
Table 1. Diversity in the Gulf of Mexico Region

Ancestry Category	Percentage of Total Population	Number
British	15.36	2,147,789
French	7.81	1,092,377
German	8.71	1,218,236
Middle Eastern	.49	68,544
Northern/Eastern European	5.24	733,424
Southern European	3.09	432,724
Subsaharan African/West Indian	1.22	170,670
Total Population:		13,985,914

Table 1 data from ACS five-year estimates.

¹One point worth clarifying is the use of the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino." While these terms often are used interchangeably in public discourse, they are not identical in definition. The term "Hispanic" refers to all Spanish-speaking peoples across the globe. "Latino" refers more specifically to people of Latin American origin (Odem and Lacy 2009). The following literature review refers to both Hispanic populations and Latino populations, not as if they are always interchangeable, but with understanding that these terms occasionally are referring to distinct groups. In summarizing the existing literature, we chose to use the terms the original authors used.

Latinos in the United States: 1980-2050



Data from United States Decennial Census. Projection data in italics from Ortman and Guarneri (2009). (Latino population in millions in parentheses).

industry and almost no discussion of ties to the land or environmental justice issues that might be facing this group of immigrants could be found. Given the recent substantial growth of Latino populations in this region, it is likely the scholarly discussion will broaden and further examine the relationship Latinos have to the Gulf of Mexico region.

Origins and History

Latino populations have a long and complex history in the United States. American history often emphasizes European colonization along the East Coast of the country, ignoring the Spanish colonization that predates it in the southern states. Some recent literature is beginning to reveal the long-standing history of Latinos in the United States (see Cummins 1988, Muzquiz 1997), however. Spanish occupation in the United States actually predates the founding of Jamestown by at least 100 years (Korrol 1996). More specifically, in the Gulf of Mexico region, Latino populations have been present since as early as the 16th century when Spanish exploration across the southern United States became a priority for the Spanish government. During the 17th century, Spanish occupation grew in the southeastern United States due to economic interests. Even during a decline in the Spanish empire during the 18th century, the

Spanish government remained committed to its presence in the United States (Mantero 2008).

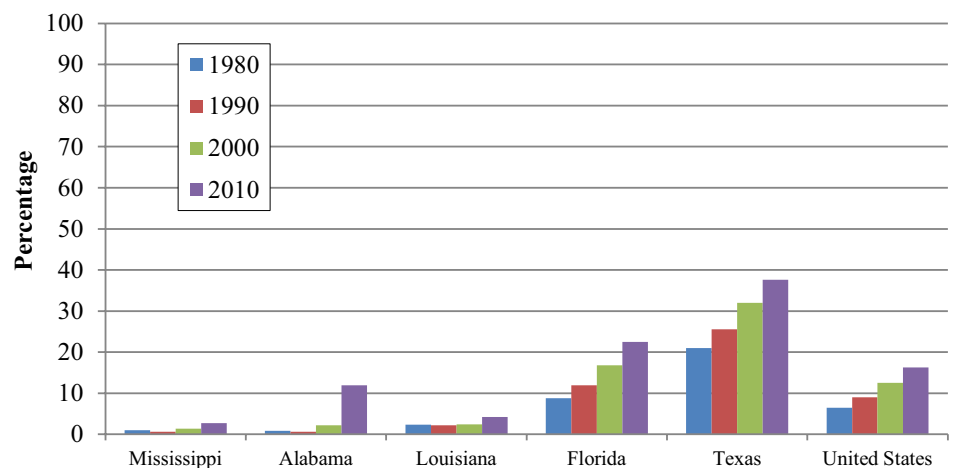
Several of the southeastern United States were at one point or another under the rule of Latin American countries. For instance, from 1763 until 1793, Louisiana was part of the Diocese of Cuba. After Louisiana came under Spanish rule in 1763, nearly 2,000 Canary Islanders settled along the coast of Louisiana (Din 1999), but this early group of Hispanic settlers soon was to be forgotten in the midst of French immigration. Similarly, current day Florida remained under Spanish rule after the United States realized independence in 1779, with

the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 (Mantero 2008). It is through oral traditions, writings and art that a complex life in Spanish colonial settlements from the 16th to the 19th centuries is revealed in current day Florida, New Mexico, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, South Carolina, California, Missouri, Mississippi, Kansas, Arkansas, Alabama and Nebraska (Korrol 1996).

Migration

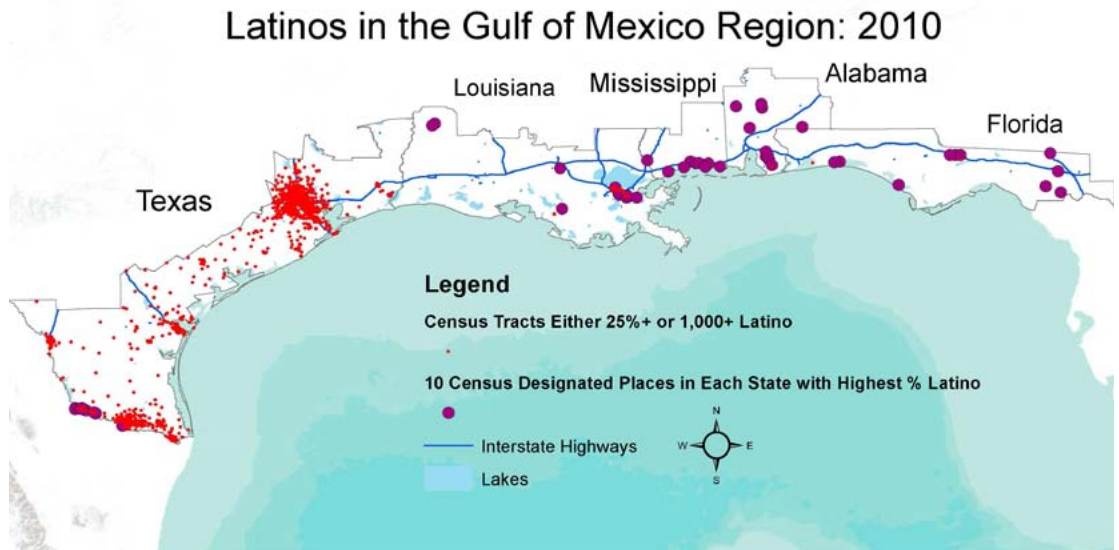
The existing literature contains a vast exploration of the growing Latino population in the southeastern United States since the 1990s (see Keely 1971; Mohl 2003; Kochar, Suro and Tafoya 2005; Donato et al. 2006; Hilfinger, Messias and Lacy 2007; and Fry 2008, to name a few). Given the historical Spanish presence in the United States, there has been a long-standing immigrant Latino population in the South, particularly in Texas and Florida (Mohl 2003). Since the 1990s, however, Latino immigration patterns have shifted due to legislative and economic changes in the United States and in Latin American countries, resulting in the spread of Latino immigrants across the southeastern United States and ultimately the country.

Latino Population of the United States and Gulf of Mexico Region: 1980 - 2010



Data from 2010 United States Decennial Census.

Recently, Latinos have become the largest and fastest-growing minority in the United States. According to census data, during the 1990s, the Hispanic population grew nationally by 61.2 percent, bringing the total Hispanic population from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000 (Mohl 2003, Mantero 2008). This pattern of population growth is a relatively recent trend that is arguably the result primarily of changing immigrant legislation.



Data from 2010 Decennial Census. Counties selected from Fannin et al. 2011.

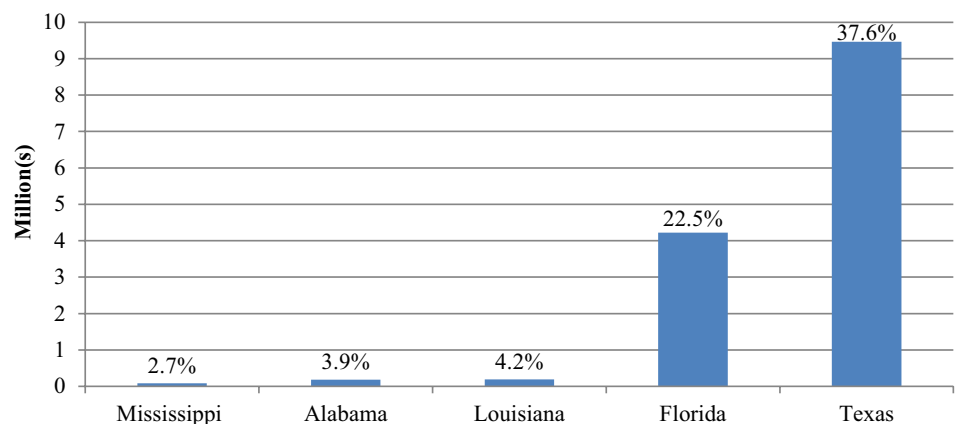
A century ago, 90 percent of immigrants were from Europe. In 1965, however, the federal government passed an immigration reform that phased out the existing quota system and replaced it with one in which family reunification became the cornerstone. The result was that the ceiling on total immigrant visas was raised by more than 100,000 annually. Eastern hemisphere countries were given a 20,000 visa limit per country, while Western hemisphere countries had no per-country limit as long as the total immigration from the Western hemisphere remained under 120,000 (Keely 1971). Without per-country quotas in the Western Hemisphere, immigrants from Latin America and Asia began immigrating in significantly higher numbers. The caveat to these policies was that relatives of U.S. citizens were not privy to the quotas in place and could immigrate at any time regardless of how many visas already had been issued (Keely 1971). Given this preference to family members, any immigrant who became a U.S. citizen could then bring all of his or her family members with them. After these policy changes, for every 100 immigrants, 45 came from Latin America (Mantero 2008).

Traditionally, upon immigration, Latino immigrants settled in southwestern states such as Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas. This pattern of settlement has changed with the passing of another notable piece of legislation known as the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. The passing of that act fundamentally changed the characteristics of immigration to the United States via the Mexican border. The Immigration Reform and Control Act was meant to stall undocumented migration through sanctions of employers, increased

border control and a legalization program for undocumented migrants already in the United States (Donato et al. 1992). With the passing of the act, however, rather than stopping undocumented immigration, undocumented Latino immigrants began to spread to new destinations across the country. In particular, many new Latino immigrants moved to the southeastern states bordering the Gulf of Mexico.

Another legislative decision that pushed immigrants, particularly Mexican immigrants, to southeastern states was the passing of Opera-

Latinos in Gulf of Mexico Region by State:2010



Data from 2010 United States Decennial Census. Percent of total population as data label.

tion Guardian. In the mid-1990s, Operation Guardian was created by the U.S. government to discourage the entry of undocumented immigrants by blocking traditional crossing points such as San Diego and El Paso. This program has simply pushed undocumented immigrants to crossing the U.S.-Mexican border at high-risk zones in the mountains and deserts and to settle in new destinations (Cordova Plaza 2009). In particular, Alabama became an important destination for Latino immigrants, with their Latino population increasing 208 percent from 1990 to 2000 (Mohl 2009). This shift in Mexican migration from traditional destinations to new ones is the reason Latino immigration has become a national rather than a local phenomenon (Mohl 2003).

The rate at which immigrants are settling permanently in the United States also has changed due to new immigration legislation. While prior to the Immigration Reform and Control Act, Latin American immigrants often were returning home after working in the United States for a few years, after the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, Latino immigrants became more likely to stay in the United States permanently to avoid the more difficult border crossings (Mohl 2003). In fact, every year since 1988, the number of undocumented immigrants who have succeeded in settling in the United States has increased despite stricter immigration policies (Cordova Plaza 2009).

Economic forces also are at work in conjunction with new immigration laws to aid the changing characteristics of Latino migration. With worsening economic conditions in Mexico, Mexican workers continued to seek work and higher wages in the United States despite the stricter immigration laws (Mohl 2003). In Mexico, there were de-

clining government subsidies for farming, high unemployment and the devaluation of the peso, which were pushing workers out of the country (Donato et al. 2006). On the flip side, there was a booming economy in the U.S. South in the 1990s, which was attracting immigrants to the promise of steady work and decent wages (Kochar, Suro, and Tafoya 2005). There also was a demographic shift that pushed Latino workers out of their countries of origin. With high fertility rates in the midcentury, many of these countries were experiencing an influx of people of working ages without enough jobs to meet the demand (Donato et al. 2006). It is primarily through both legislative and economic changes that Latino immigration and migration across the United States has become a prominent phenomenon in the southeastern states.

Culture

Similar to other immigrant groups in the United States, Latino immigrants have found comfort in communal activities and a rich cultural heritage based in food ways, kinship activities, religion and music. This cultural heritage is not only evident in their homes but in thousands of restaurants, grocery stores, clubs and festivals throughout the United States (Mohl 2003). Latino soccer leagues have emerged across the southeastern United States to provide leisure activities and Sunday outings for Latino families. For example, some 32 soccer teams make up the Latin American Soccer League of Birmingham (Mohl 2003). Bands and dance clubs offer weekend entertainment, while Spanish language newspapers and radio stations keep immigrants informed and well versed in their native language, culture and traditions (Mohl 2003). Music is particularly salient in Latino cultures – expressing emotion, experience and historical context (Mantero 2008).

Not only have Latino communities begun to integrate their culture into the places in which they've settled, but existing organizations have adapted to embrace Latino immigrants. Churches, schools, libraries and public agencies all have responded in mostly positive ways to immigrants. Based upon our review of the existing literature, the link between Latino immigrants and the Catholic Church often has been the focus of analysis (see Mohl 2003, Berchak 2007 and Shihadeh and Winters 2010). The Catholic Church and a number of Protestant denominations have offered Spanish-language religious services, English classes, employment assistance and other social services to Latino immigrants (Din 1999, Mohl 2003 and Berchak 2007).

Other cultural themes that emerged in our review of the literature include discussions of identity (Ramirez 2004), health (Harrison and Scarinci 2007) and language (Molina 2009). As the Latino population continues to grow, its culture will continue to be a strong presence in the communities Latinos inhabit and will continue to be the focus of scholars.

Occupations

Since Latino populations have a long-standing history in the U.S. South, there also is a long-standing history of employment. The relationship of Latino workers to the economies of the U.S. South has varied across time. During the 1920s, Hispanic workers replaced European immigrants in steel, meatpacking, railroad construction and maintenance jobs (Mohl 2003). When the Great Depression hit, Latino workers were repatriated at alarming rates for fear they were “taking” jobs American workers should be filling. With WWII, however, there were new farm labor demands that created a need for cheap labor Latino immigrants could fill.

From 1942 until 1964, the Bracero Program was implemented to legalize the temporary recruitment of migrant farm workers. Even after the Bracero Program was phased out, Latino farm workers continued to migrate to the southeastern United States, seeking out farming jobs (Mohl 2003). In more recent times, the booming economy of the 1990s resulted in a demand for cheap, nonunion labor. With an ongoing economic crisis in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s, Mexican workers felt both a push out of Mexico and a pull into the United States (Mohl 2003). Even in the economic downturn that began in 2000, employers sought out Latino workers for their lower wages and high levels of efficiency. While labor markets were tight, these immigrants remained a source of cheap, reliable and nonunionized labor (Mohl 2009).

The meatpacking industry is a principal example of how the employment of Latino workers has soared since 1980. In 1980, 9 percent of all meat-processing employees were Latino, and that grew to 20 percent by 2000 (Stuesse 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s there was a rising demand for processed chickens, nationally and globally, which led to the recruitment of Latino, primarily Mexican, workers who often shifted from agricultural labor to poultry processing (Mohl 2003). Today, more than 50 percent of all poultry workers are now immigrants (Stuesse 2009). Mississippi, for instance, though one of the poorest states in the country, is one of the leading poultry-processing states, resulting in a significant rise in Latino immigration since 1990 (Stuesse 2009). That is not to say Latino workers are no longer prominent in agricultural labor in the South. In fact, Latino workers make up a huge percentage of the farm labor force. For instance, in Georgia, Hispanics comprise more than 80 percent of the migrant farm

workers (Mohl 2003). In Alabama, Latino workers fill agricultural jobs as peach harvesters, sod planters, timber plants, seafood and poultry processors and they work at dairy farms, saw mills and nurseries (Mohl 2009). Latino immigrants also are filling jobs in hosiery, garment, textile, carpet, furniture and plastics manufacturing (Mantero 2008, Mohl 2009). In metropolitan areas, Latino workers fill jobs in restaurants, landscaping, roofing, construction, car washes and warehouses. They also are working as chambermaids in hotels and as janitors in office buildings (Mohl 2009).

Recruitment of Latino workers has been an active strategy used by some companies in the southeastern United States. American companies even have been known to place billboards in Mexico advertising job opportunities in the United States. In 2002, Gold Kist, a poultry processing plant, put a large billboard in Tijuana, saying, “There’s plenty of work in Russellville, Ala.” (Mohl 2003). Radio and newspaper ads in Latin American countries also have been used to advertise work in the U.S. South (Mohl 2009). Latino workers are an integral part of the southeastern United States labor force – providing a source of cheap, reliable, nonunionized labor in a variety of industries.

Ties to the Oil and Gas Industries

Similar to other industries, Latino immigrants recently have been recruited to work in the booming oil and gas industries in the Gulf of Mexico and in related industries because of the cheap, nonunionized and vast labor supply they provide. Many Latino migrants now are working in shipbuilding and fabrication yards along the Gulf Coast (Murphy et al. 2001). Also, with the price of oil dropping during the 1990s, the oil industry was forced to seek cheaper labor. Particularly in south Louisiana in Morgan City

and Houma, jobs in the oil industry abounded and offered decent wages to immigrants due to a local labor shortage (Donato et al. 2006). Larger oil companies tend to be the biggest employers of Latino workers because they have the means to house, feed and transport workers (Murphy et al. 2001). Many oil companies actively recruit Mexican workers by travelling to Mexico and offering assistance in transportation, housing and obtaining legal documents. Similarly, existing Latino immigrant workers often are offered a cash bonus to recruit friends and family (Donato et al. 2006).

There are arguably three reasons why southern Louisiana oil companies seek out Latino immigrants to fill jobs. First, the jobs are skill- and labor-intensive. Second, since the offshore oil industry cannot relocate, it relies heavily on the local labor force. Finally, since the price of oil fluctuates widely, companies must rely on a flexible labor force that can be expanded or contracted quickly (Donato et al. 2006). With the oil bust of the 1980s, many local workers left the region to seek other work, leaving oil companies searching for workers from other places. These companies soon realized Mexican workers had the skills and work ethic they were looking for – and these laborers were expendable should the price of oil drop again. Mexican workers also were often paid less than their local counterparts and remained nonunion. Given the Mexican laborers’ characteristics of expendability and being temporary and less costly, oil employers in southern Louisiana hired Mexican workers more and more often (Donato et al. 2006).

While several scholars mention the relationship between Latino workers and the oil and gas industry in the Gulf of Mexico, few articles examine this relationship in detail (Murphy et al. 2001, Donato et al.

2006). Scholars are more inclined to discuss the rights Latin American countries have to these waters (see Gruesz 2006) than discussing the integral role Latino workers play in filling jobs in the American oil industry.

Economic Standing

The new Latino labor force and the growing Latino community have become an important part of the economy in the southeastern United States. As Latino immigrants are filling jobs across the region, constituting up to 90 percent of the labor force in some areas, these workers also are planting roots in these communities and eventually buying homes and sending their children to public schools (Mohl 2009). In addition to spending money in the communities in which they live, many Latino immigrants also are starting their own businesses and generating revenue. The most common of these businesses are grocery stores, restaurants, landscaping enterprises and construction companies. According to census data, Birmingham experienced a 180 percent growth in Hispanic-owned businesses from 1990 to 2000. By 2002, in Alabama, Latinos had established more than 2,500 businesses that generated more than \$741 million in sales (Mohl 2009).

Several communities across the southeastern United States also have experienced growth and revitalization due to the growing number of Latino workers. For example, in Georgia and Mississippi, the growth in the poultry industry resulted in bringing resources to communities that were in need of revitalization (Mantero 2008). Another way in which Latino workers contributed to the economic transformation of the U.S. South was by enticing new forms of economic investment. Foreign-owned auto plants, high-tech research facilities and new food-processing plants

moved to the Southeast to take advantage of the Latino workforce (Mohl 2003). In summary, Latino immigrants in the rural and urban Southeast have become an integral component in the region's low-wage, low-skill economy by working for minimal pay, often under difficult and dangerous working conditions (Mohl 2003).

Ties to the Land

Latinos in the Gulf of Mexico region also have ties to the land in the region. With the industrialization of the South, many of the southern landowners hired Latin Americans to harvest their crops, manage their chicken coops and tend to the land (Mantero 2008). Similarly, Latin American immigrants often have land-centered customs, allowing them to work the soil and merge Southern and Latin American cultures (Mantero 2008). Despite brief mentions of ties to the land, our review of the existing literature indicates no scholars explicitly discussed the ways in which Latino populations rely on the land and the potential environmental justice issues that might be facing this group.

Politics

The growing Latino population in the southeastern United States has important political implications. In particular, the surge of Latino workers has placed topics such as unemployment and low wages at the center of political debate. Some politicians and scholars have suggested Latino workers have displaced black workers and maintained low wages for both groups (Mohl 2003). Arguably though, these workers are filling labor-intensive and dangerous jobs nobody else wants. Some black workers already had abandoned the jobs Latino workers are filling, rejecting the low pay and demanding work. Whether or not Latinos are displacing black workers, blacks and Latinos have been at odds over residential areas and cultural dif-

ferences. This often has led to open conflict and violence. In an attempt to mediate ethnic and racial conflicts, politicians, union organizers and advocacy groups have begun to take interest in meeting the needs of Latino immigrants (Mohl 2003).

Given the growing Latino population in the U.S. South, it is unlikely these issues will disappear from the political arena. On average, Latinos are participating more and more in the American political process, positioning themselves to be a strong political voice. Hispanic candidates in Georgia have had success in recent elections, allowing issues Latino immigrants are facing to come to the forefront. Several scholars recently have begun to examine the potential political power and voting base of Latino populations in the U.S. South (Bullock and Hood, Michelson 2010, Bedoya 2006). Redistricting, affirmative action, minority contracting and driver's licenses and tuition for undocumented immigrants are issues that are becoming more salient as the Latino voting pool grows (Mohl 2003). The number of Latino voters should only continue to grow as the Latino population grows and as more Latinos undergo the citizenship process (Mohl 2003).

Hurricane Katrina

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, La., in 2005, approximately 300,000 Latinos were affected. A predicted 140,000 Hondurans who lived in New Orleans were displaced and had difficulty finding shelter. In losing their documentation to the floodwaters, many Latinos were denied entrance to shelters for fear they were "illegals" (Mantero 2008). When the city began to rebuild, Hispanic residents faced discrimination as residents and as workers. Many Latino laborers were brought in to help rebuild the areas hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina, but hundreds of the workers hired for cleanup were

never paid what they were promised and often faced physical and verbal abuse by their employers (Mantero 2008). Without documentation, these workers had no recourse for the discrimination and exploitation they were experiencing. In our review of the literature, other authors explored the implications of Hurricane Katrina on Latino populations in New Orleans and other Gulf of Mexico states (Gruesz 2006). In the

face of disaster, because of negative stereotypes and discrimination, Latinos face unique challenges in the southeastern United States.

Conclusion

Latino populations are an integral part of southeastern United States in terms of their histories, economic standing and political influence. Despite their long-standing history in this region, the growing Latino

population in these states since the early 1990s has become a focus of both public discourse and scholarly discussion. Given the effects of the growing presence of Latinos in these states, it is unlikely the scholarly discussion will halt soon. Furthermore, as the fastest-growing and largest minority in the United States, Latinos are becoming an inextricable part of the Gulf of Mexico region.

Appendix

Overview of Latinos in the Gulf of Mexico Region	
Section	Broad Conclusions
Origins and History	Spanish rule in the Gulf Coast Region began as early as the 16th century, predating European colonization in the northeastern United States.
Migration	Due to legislative and economic changes, Latino immigration has increased since the 1990s. Similarly, since that time, the rate at which Latino immigrants are settling permanently in the United States also has increased.
Culture	Cultural elements such as music, food, religious affiliation, language, festivals and sports can be seen throughout the Gulf Coast Region and are often a means for immigrants to maintain their ethnic identities.
Occupations	Latino immigrants work in a variety of industries but they account for a significant amount of the growth in low-skill markets such as agriculture, poultry processing and service industry work.
Oil and Gas Industries	Although few Latinos work directly for the oil and gas companies that are in the Gulf Coast Region, many Latinos work in support industries such as shipbuilding and fabrication.
Economy	In addition to supplying lower wage work and settling permanently in areas along the Gulf Coast, Latinos also are starting businesses at a rate higher than any other ethnic group in the country.
Ecology	There is little documentation to suggest Latinos have strong ties to the land apart from those who work in agriculture.
Politics	With the Latino population growing in the Gulf Coast Region, political tensions have begun to rise between Latinos and other minority ethnicities. Similarly, states such as Alabama have passed legislation that prevents undocumented immigrants from accessing public services.
Hurricane Katrina	Latino immigrants, both documented and undocumented, had difficulty finding shelter and recovering after Hurricane Katrina. Despite those difficulties, Latino workers were instrumental in helping rebuild and they battled discrimination and exploitation as a result of their ethnicity.

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Acknowledgements

This research was funded in part by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management as part of a larger project studying ethnic groups and enclaves in the Gulf of Mexico region. We would like to acknowledge Harry Luton from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management for his feedback and encouragement throughout this project. We also would like to thank Diane Austin, Thomas McGuire, Britny Delp, Margaret Edgar, Lindsey Feldman, Brian Marks, Lauren Penney, Kelly McLain, Justina Whalen, Devon Robbie, Monica Voge, Doug Welch and Victoria Phaneuf from the University of Arizona for providing a database of literature and support. Similarly, we would like to acknowledge Helen Regis, Carolyn Ware, Bethany Rogers and Annemarie Galeucia of Louisiana State University for their comments and feedback. Finally, we would like to thank Huizhen Niu, LSU AgCenter, for her assistance with GIS mapping.

Authors

Amanda D. Cowley, Louisiana State University

Mark J. Schafer, LSU AgCenter

<http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/communications/authors/MSchafer.htm>

Troy Blanchard, Louisiana State University



www.LSUAgCenter.com

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center

William B. Richardson, Chancellor

Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station

John S. Russin, Vice Chancellor and Director

Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Research Report #115 (275) 9/12

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