2016

Understanding U.S. Racial Tensions in the 21st Century

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ITGS 120: Truth and Lies & Uncertainties

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Author's Note

Taylor Newquist is a freshman student at Eastern Washington University. This paper was presented at the 19th Annual EWU Research and Creative Works Symposium on May 18, 2016 in Cheney, WA and was submitted as an assignment for First Year Experience (FYE): Trues, Lies & Uncertainties (ITGS 120-03; Spring 2016)

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Abstract

This study takes a sociological outlook on the reasons Latin American immigrants migrate to the United States. The study will uncover the racist outlook and stereotypes Americans feel toward this particular immigrant group whether they be documented or undocumented. Using academic peer review sources, the study uncovers the factors that produce these negative attitudes towards this outgroup and sheds light on best practices to reduce racial tensions between them. Among these strategies include cracking down on extreme political rhetoric that incites prejudicial attitudes and potential violence.

Keywords: Racism, Chicana/o, Latino Migration, Push/Pull Factors

Since it's "discovery" America has been home to many different immigrant groups. Through the course of time a group from a different racial, religious, or social class came to America in search of freedom from their oppression, or a better life. The group that is newest to this system is often looked down upon and subjected to inequality. In today's current climate the main immigrant groups are based out of Latin American countries. We can see rises in aggression and hatred toward the Latino peoples from head figures in political parties, most recently from Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. To fully understand the racial tension with Latino people we need to be able to understand the push and pull factors of migrations of Latin American immigrants, and also the basis of race relations in the United States.

Firstly, the reasons that people choose to immigrate to the United States is essential to understanding the underlying racial tensions that currently exist in America. This allows us to see things from the Latino perspective, and portray the mindset of an immigrant. Most of the Latin American immigrants who migrate the U.S. do so out of necessity, not preference. Mexico has the largest amount of immigrants to the United States in recent years. As of 2013 there were roughly 34,038,599 million Mexican Americans (Ibarra,2015). There is an unequal economic policy between the two nations that strongly influences the current migration pattern. A 2008 study from the National Survey of Income and Expenditures showed that fifty million people in Mexico were affected by poverty, almost half of the entire population. "In the year 2009 current per capita income in the United States was US $45,989, which was 5.6 times greater than the corresponding figure for Mexico (US $8,143). Adjusted by purchasing power, the difference decreases but it is still large, since US income is 3.2 times larger than Mexican income"(Garza-Rodríguez, 2016, p.150). The amount of poverty in Mexico and the opportunity for greater

earnings is directly correlated to the number of immigrants both documented and undocumented in the United States. Six of the eight cities with the highest minimum wages are in the South West and West Coast. San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles all have minimum wages of $15/hour, Oakland is $12.25/hour, San Diego $11.50/hour, and Santa Fe is $10.84/hour. Not to mention that California boasts the highest state wide minimum wage at $10/hour. Working a 40 hour week of one job would give a before tax yearly salary of $19,200 over double that of the average income in Mexico. If the Mexican person migrating is working minimum wage in Mexico as well it would "increase her or his wage 22 percent by moving from the interior of Mexico to the Mexican side of the United States- Mexico border, and 315 percent by crossing the border"(Aguayo-Télles, 2011, p.119). Many of the immigrants from Mexico do work minimum wage jobs, and are coming to the United States for a chance to be able to afford the necessities to survive.
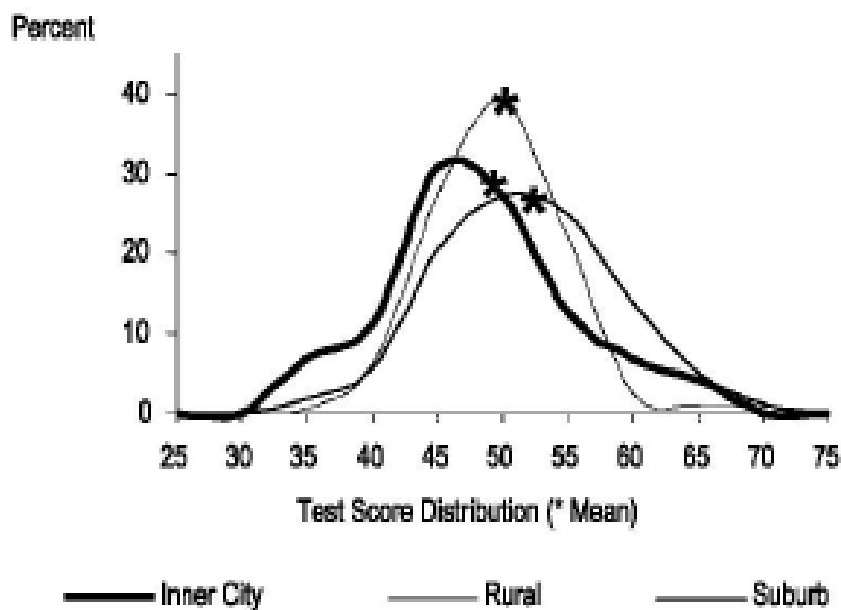
The next largest immigrant groups to the United States are Cuban and Salvadorian. People from these countries have been taken in by the United States as refugees fleeing from oppressive governments. In the 1960's, the war on communism had intensified and the emergence of the Cuban Missile Crisis opened the U.S. to Cuban refugees. The "U.S. Gov. left Cuban refugees unmarked racially to give the notion of them as good immigrants" (Brewer, 2008, P.4200). The government didn't give the Cubans a racial category so people could infer that they were white and not be stereotyped in the racial times of the civil rights movement. They referred to the Cuban refugees as "non-communist" so they would be better accepted into society. The Salvadorian civil war sent many people escaping the country in fear of death. The government supported military was commanded to kill anyone who was thought to be a rebel. People from these two nations would be subjected to violence initiating the migration to the

United States. They would much rather live in their home country, but were forced out seeking safety, walking right into racial prejudice in the U.S. that they didn't want to be a part of in the first place.

The different Latino groups migrate to the United States, and upon arrival they are subjected to both personal, and structural racisms that are commonplace in America. There is a long line of racial prejudice that was implanted into the seams of society before they get into the United States. Race as a social concept began as a way for different nations to claim superiority over another. Religion was first used to separate African people away from European because of Noah's (from the bible) cursed son Ham was banished to Africa, thus inferring that all Africans are descendants of Ham, and therefore inferior. From that point, a racial hierarchy was formed placing white Europeans at the top, but also separating them into three different groups. Teutonic, Alpine, and Mediterranean. Teutonic (Nordic) race was considered to be the master race and superior to the others (Omi, 2009). This concept of racial division was carried into American society to continue and justify the act of slavery. The eugenics movement gained popularity in the late 1800's, "scholars such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Francis Galton, and Arthur de Gobineau labored to identify and catalog racial differences and to establish a biological basis for why some races were superior or inferior to others"(Snipp, 2009, p.23). Scientific racism promoted and "confirmed" the racial biases that had already existed in the minds of many American citizens. Continuing into Jim Crow and separate but equal, the white population dominated the country. By the time of the civil rights act and going to present day, there has already been planted a hierarchy of white dominance. Additionally, having dominated American society since its inception, white families on average are handed down a larger inheritance of over $80,000 compared to the average black person of $8,000. When Latino people migrate to

America they are walking straight into this dominated society. As controlling the large majority

of the wealth in the nation predominantly white people tend to group together into "white"

neighborhoods that are the more suburban expensive areas, while the newly immigrated Latinos

are coming into inner city and poorer living situations. The opportunity in these areas is

considerably worse than the more wealthy areas, especially in the education system.

Figure 1. Distribution of Achievement Among Suburban, Rural and Inner City Subsamples

Percent

Test Score Distribution (* Mean)

━━━ Inner City ───── Rural ───── Suburb

This study shows the average test scores of students from inner city, rural, and suburban areas.

Although there are similar numbers at the highest point of the spectrum there is a large disparity

on the lower part. Nearly ten percent of inner city students scored an average of 35 percent on

tests, compared to around three percent of suburban students. "Approximately 5.7 percent of our

sample is comprised of dropouts, and the sample size for analyses of dropout status is 17,345

students across 1,288 schools. The dropout rates for inner city and rural adolescents are 8.4 and

6.1 percent, respectively, compared to 5 percent for suburban adolescents" (Roscigno, 2006,

p.2121). Inner city students have a much higher dropout rates from high school, additionally Latino students were second highest in dropout rate at 9.4 percent (Roscigno, 2006). The lack of education directly correlates to lesser jobs and financial equality for the remainder of their life, continuing to live in these low income areas and prolonging the cycle with their children.

Racism toward Latino and other groups on a personal level is also common in American society. There has been a strong push and influence by main stream media claiming that Latino immigrants come to "take jobs" of American people. Latino people are often portrayed as a nuisance and a problem in this sense and that takes place in many different aspects of society. Currently in the presidential race, the G.O.P. nominee Donald Trump has been pushing a highly racist and bigoted agenda against the Latino people. He infamously has declared a main objective of his campaign to build a wall on the Mexican border to keep out undocumented people from crossing into America and also deport the estimated 11 million current undocumented people in the United States today. Pushing rhetoric like, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people"-Donald J. Trump (Lee, 2015). He makes it seem as if the Mexican government is sending people over the border in truckloads to get rid of their undesirables. When as discussed previously the main majority of people crossing into the United States are Latinos looking for a better life, whether it be to gain financial security, or escape oppression. As successful as Mr. Trump's campaign has been it is clear that this kind of message of hatred toward the Latino people is resonating with a large portion of the American people. In a sociological sense modern day racism is driven into people's heads largely from the situation in which they grew up in. Racist ideals in the minds of friends and

family members, along with people in the community they grew up are much more likely to stick than someone who grows up in a non-racist household (Gallagher, 2009). Stereotypes run rapid through these areas to promote the racist agenda, and then when these people go out into social situations they have preconceived biases toward any Latino person they encounter.

In conclusion, many Latino peoples that migrate to the United States, do so out of necessity, not choice. They are driven from Mexico by the substantial difference in financial security available in the United States. They come out of fear of death as refugees from war torn nations, and oppressive governments. Once in the United States they are met head on with the structuralized racism that has formed itself over centuries of white dominance. While battling against this to try and get a foothold and find success in America, mainstream media, and political candidates are trying to force them right back out. Large groups of American people rally behind these ideas driven by the racism that surrounds their everyday lives. This racism is a clear lack of understanding and empathy for a group of people that are coming to a place of great opportunity.

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