
Immigration Phenomenon in the Emerald City

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No matter how high the United States government builds fences, immigration will continue. Early immigrants to the United States came from Western Europe. They came as cultural groups, changing the atmosphere of the place they made their home. During the period of industrialization at the turn of the 20th century, immigration patterns changed. Newer immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe trying to escape economic oppression and hoping to work in the U.S. with the long range objective of returning to their respective countries. The majority of those immigrants, however, stayed and made new lives in the United States. During World War II, the United States responded to a shortage of farm workers by creating the Bracero Program. It called for Mexican farm workers to labor in the fields of mainly western coastal states with the understanding that they would return to Mexico after the program was discontinued. Just as earlier European immigrants stayed, so did former Braceros in the middle of the 20th century. Later, primarily in the 1970s, more Mexicans crossed the border, generally for economic reasons. Other immigrants from Central America countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala also made their way to the U.S. because of wars in their own countries. The various historical phases of U.S. immigration raise questions

about continuing changes in immigration patterns and whether the United States is now witnessing a new phase of immigration.

The Study

Studies of immigration¹ in the U.S. have produced many theories and ambiguous conclusions. Most researchers have focused on adult immigrants and immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for many years. There has been minimal research on young people immigrating to the U.S. Of the existing studies about immigrant youth, the concentration has primarily been on their education and involvement in gangs.² For example, education specialist Angela Valenzuela³ and sociologist Robert C. Smith both focus on the experiences of immigrant youth in schools, not their lives in border society. Indeed, there have been very few ethnographic studies of undocumented Latino youth that emphasize their personal experiences in immigration, their life challenges, their strategies for becoming economically independent, and their integration into the Latino⁴ and local communities.⁵

The ethnographic approach to this study has several justifications. First, this study reflects my interest in immigration and Latino studies. Secondly, the goal has been to understand in detail the experiences and challenges of recent, undocumented immigrant youth. Another objective has been to discover how participation in a group focused on self-development, validation of cultural differences, and mutual support help young Latinos to adjust to life and to become socially connected in Eugene, Oregon.

Dr. Lynn Stephen, professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oregon, and I collaborated in collecting quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative portion of the study analyzes

the demographics of the city of Eugene and directs specific attention to immigration patterns, as well as to individual reasons for residency in Eugene. The qualitative (ethnographic) aspect of the study focuses on Juventud FACETA, a local youth group. In-depth interviews with seven young participants in Juventud FACETA took place over an eight-month period. Ethnographic methods used included observing the participants, as well as recording and analyzing the field notes.

Juventud FACETA is a group made up of young men and women from Mexico, Chile, and Central America, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-four. They come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds within their respective countries.⁶ The group is principally a support group for young immigrants who congregate once a week to discuss issues such as discrimination, racism, identity, and the growing hostility toward them and other immigrants after September 11, 2001. The group members also participate in recreational activities such as picnics and camping trips. Juventud FACETA is part of Amigos de los Sobrevivientes, a dwelling that helps survivors of torture and political oppression cope with daily life and overcome their trauma.

Overall, the intention of this study is to shed light on issues, such as racism, that some of these young immigrants face and to discover how these young people have integrated into U.S. society, in this case in Eugene, Oregon. The study is important because it focuses on a group never before examined, and it suggests ways to study other similarly overlooked groups.

Juventud FACETA Profile

The detailed look at the group members of Juventud FACETA

Name/ Characteristic	Cristiana	Leo	Jose	Ana	Beto	Eduardo	Patricia
Age at Migration	17	20	17	16	19	17	21
Year of Migration	1999	1999	2000	2001	2000	1998	1985
Level of Education prior to Migration	Some College	Some College	High School	Grade School	Some College	High School	College
Current Level of Education	GED	GED	GED	Obtaining GED	GED	Obtaining GED	BA
National Identity	Mexican	Guatemalan	Mexican	Mexican	Chilean	Guatemalan	Salvadorian
Ethnic Identity	Mixtec	Quiché	Mixtec	Zapotec	None identified	Quiché	None identified
Languages Spoken	Spanish	Spanish Some English	Spanish	Spanish Some Zapotec	Spanish	Spanish	Spanish English
Initial Use of Family Networks	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Current Use of Family Networks	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

that follows provides information about when each individual came to the US, age at the time of immigration, current and prior levels of education, national identity, ethnic identity, language spoken and use of family networks. These categories were chosen because they sketch an important ethnographic picture. The illustration of age and year of immigration demonstrates some important aspects of the present phase of U.S. immigration. Facts about the immigrants' educational exposure are included in the table because they point out how important education is in their lives. National and ethnic identity data and language data show the diversity of the group. Finally, information about family networks shows the transition from dependency to an independent lifestyle in Eugene.

Immigration Patterns of Juventud FACETA

The population of Oregon is mostly white, but the Latino population has increased in the past ten years. In the city of Eugene, the population is about 137,893. The Latino population is five percent or approximately 6,843, as reported by the 2000 U.S. Census. Many people in Eugene believe that the official number is low. There are likely to be more Latinos than reported because some people did not wish to be counted. Fear is one of the main reasons why immigrant people do not choose to fill out an official federal document, such as the census papers. Most immigrants see the census as a way to expose their undocumented status, making it easier for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to deport them. Another reason that those figures are low is the language barrier. Eugene is a city where English is the dominant language. It is not like the U.S. Southwest or East Harlem, where Spanish intertwines with English and sometimes predominates.

Thus, Latin American immigrants find it difficult to communicate with English speakers in the community, let alone participate in civic activities. For these reasons and others, federal statistics such as the 2000 U.S. Census, should be questioned.

Behind the census figures lie a multitude of life histories about Latinos immigrating to the United States. People immigrate to the United States for a variety of reason. Some come for economic reasons, basically to find decent-paying work. Others leave their countries because of repressive governments. Youths immigrate for these same reasons: to escape repression and to seek economic opportunity. Though the individual stories of the youths we studied varied, all shared immigration stories connected to these reasons.

Studies about immigration point out the importance of social and family networks in helping people to migrate.⁷ The immigrant's journey to the U.S., such as the one described by Ruben Martinez in his book *Crossing Over*, has typically involved connecting with family members in the United States and crossing over as an adult. Interviews conducted with Juventud FACETA members⁸ suggest that , for immigrant youth, family connections may have brought them to the U.S. and provided them with initial points of contact, but those same networks have also been sources of conflict, confrontation, and unhappiness. Many group members left their family networks to try to survive economically and socially on their own.

The story of Cristina is a case in point. She had connections with family members who were already residing in the United States, but that did not necessarily mean that they were automatically supportive. She was forced to work long hours, do house chores,

and pay rent. She reported that she consistently had only four hours of sleep. She did not feel she was getting the family support that she had anticipated before immigrating.

Cristina's story also revealed that she had been deluged with positive images of the U.S. prior to her arrival. She, along with a cousin, crossed the Arizona border near Agua Prieta (Dark Water). Before crossing over, she, like many immigrants, had images of prosperity and opportunity. She did not expect to be working as hard as she had been working in Oaxaca. In Cristina's case, her cousins bombarded her with unreal depictions about life in the U.S. that Cristina summarized:

They explained that in the U.S. you can obtain everything that comes your way, and you can send all the money you want back home. They painted it for me in all these colors and when I arrived here I didn't see any colors.⁹

One group member, however, had a different experience. Leo, a Guatemalan Quiché, immigrated by himself without any family connections in the U.S. He came because of his very difficult childhood and because of civil turmoil in his native country of Guatemala. Leo's youth was turbulent in many respects. Guatemala was in a state of civil war throughout the 1970s and the early 1990s, and Leo found himself in a war at home. His step-father beat and overworked Leo at the age of six. The abuse from his step-father became constant throughout his adolescent years. As time passed, Leo learned to be independent and found ways to overcome the turmoil. For example, at seventeen he started attending a college in the capital, Guatemala City. While in college, he became politically active, protesting against the government's repression of peasant

farm workers. Later, he became a government target because of his political involvement. Repression from his step-father, tenuous work, no means to speak out against government oppression, and lack of measures to be stable in life resulted in Leo's decision to immigrate to the United States.¹⁰

Experiences in Eugene, Oregon: Education, Isolation, Identity and Racism

As soon as most of the Juventud FACETA members made their way across the border, they found themselves isolated, not just from U.S. society, but also from their relatives. All shared experiences of abandonment and melancholic attitudes about life. Once the group members started to feel comfortable about living and knowing how to survive in the United States, they slowly became independent. With that independence came the question, why Eugene, Oregon?

Getting Educated

Eugene is currently the third largest city in Oregon and home to the University of Oregon. The educational opportunities available in such a community are well known, and they attracted some of the Juventud FACETA members. Except for one group member, all of the participants had some experience with higher education in their native countries.¹¹ After coming to the U.S., they did not want to lose that connection with education. Access to education was important for them to improve their chances in Eugene and to learn English, a key element in improving work opportunities. Ana, the one study participant who did not have the higher learning exposure, enrolled in courses as soon as she settled in Eugene.

The University of Oregon is home to the High School Equivalency

Program (HEP), which aids people who did not finish high school to obtain GEDs. Three of the seven members earned their GEDs through HEP. Others went to the local community college, Lane Community College (LCC), to learn the English language. Jose, who is a Mixtec and cousin of Cristina, said, “My experience at LCC was a beautiful experience. I met people from different cultures, and it felt good knowing that there were other people who spoke Spanish. I love to learn about many things, and I know that English and a GED is a necessity here. I think Eugene is a good place to study.”¹²

In all of the cases, the youth interviewed did not come from the poorest sectors of their societies. They came from poor, working-class, or lower middle-class families and usually had some education. They also had some networks and connections with people who helped them in the U.S. In most cases, however, these connections turned out to be unsupportive family members. Consequently, they came to Eugene because the city gave them the opportunity to acquire an education. However, despite having family and network ties in their initial years in the U.S., eventually life in Eugene presented them with a different reality—isolation.

Isolation, Invisibility--Creation of Juventud FACETA

Life in Eugene for members in Juventud FACETA has been, and continues to be, one of isolation and invisibility. Observation shows that for almost all members, daily life is structured like this: from work to home, then from home to school, and finally from Amigos de los Sobrevivientes to home. The Eugene community, as a result, does not notice this daily routine. For seven people, one way to overcome this invisibility was through participating in Juventud FACETA.

The creation of Juventud FACETA is due in large part to Patricia Cortéz, who is a Salvadoran immigrant. Juventud FACETA members refer to her as the “angel.” Patricia immigrated to the U.S. independently in her late teens. Patricia suffered tremendously in Los Angeles, California, where she worked three or four jobs simultaneously. She barely had time to sleep. On two occasions, Patricia was homeless, making church auditorium floors and city parks her beds. During the time when the sky was her roof, Patricia always had intentions to attend school. In El Salvador, she was an extraordinary student from elementary school through the early years of college. While residing in San Francisco, she connected with some people who had housing for her in Eugene, a factor that influenced her to move. One of the first things she did in Eugene was to enroll in English classes at Lane Community College. As time went by and she became more comfortable speaking English, Patricia wanted to create a support group for young immigrants because she felt that the struggles, isolation, and turmoil they face should not be issues confronted alone. Consequently, in early August 2002 she established Juventud FACETA.¹³

Over the past year, Juventud FACETA has helped its members overcome isolation and invisibility. One way has been through social connections to civic life. The group has enjoyed times at the park. They usually play a game of basketball and afterwards have a picnic. Outdoors events build confidence and encourage members to participate in the community, casting off the shadows of invisibility and isolation. With participation of members from Chilean, Guatemalan Quiche, Mexican Mixtec, and Zapotec cultures, Juventud FACETA has created a network of support, increased self-confidence, bolstered friendships, and advocated political activism

around immigration politics. Although the social connections of Juventud FACETA help its members overcome isolation, they still have concerns about identity, race, and hostility towards Latinos immigrants, especially in the wake of September 11, 2001.

Identity and Racism

In the United States identity labels shift as immigrants cross the border. Here, Latino is a commonly used term, and every label used south of the border disappears.¹⁴ Juventud FACETA member Jose, who is from Oaxaca, Mexico, ponders the treatment of indigenous people after crossing the border and living in the city. Jose asserts:

I come from an indigenous place. It is a place where people are humble. It is beautiful. When a person comes to this place, we question this person's reasoning. But we do not deny hospitality. In contrary, we help, we offer food, shelter. They are treated differently when they arrive in a city. They are rejected. When someone arrives to an indigenous place, they are welcomed with open arms; they offer what they have to eat and a place at their table. It is sad to see how an indigenous person is treated for who they are and their form of dress. The ideology of every person is different. They treat you the way you look, if you are dressed unsuitable to them. There [the city] if people see you wearing a sombrero, wear sandals, have dark brown skin, they are discriminated against [*sic*].

He acknowledges that experiences with racism in Mexico are the same in the U.S. Jose, accurately, sees that every person deserves respect. He also knows that in the United States and elsewhere, such respect is not the norm. Nonetheless, Jose views identity and race as very multifaceted, complex, and confusing. He said, as Professor

of Education in Harvard University Marcelo Suárez-Orozco did, that in Mexico he lucidly identified with his indigenous culture, which is Mixtec. North of the border, he realized there was no other alternative but to be labeled as a new Latino immigrant, making his Mixtec background secondary.

To counteract this concern, Juventud FACETA includes all ethnic, cultural, and national identities. Part of the philosophy of the group is to recognize and respect all cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Humbly, the group members state that they treat each other with dignity and respect. On several occasions, the weekly meetings have acknowledged a group member's background by having discussions about the person's culture, eating certain ethnic dishes, or showing a video about the person's native land.

Hostility After September 11, 2001

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, created fear in most people residing in the United States. Following September 11, 2001, the U.S. government passed initiatives to target immigrants, primarily people of Arab descent who were illegally in the U.S.¹⁵ Not only were the Arab immigrants targeted, but so were recent Latino immigrants. Group members from Juventud FACETA have also felt they were targeted as terrorist suspects.

Ana (who comes from a Zapotec background,) and is the newest member of Juventud FACETA, gave the most vivid descriptions of encounters after September 11, 2001. Ana was in Salem, Oregon's capital, working in the farm fields picking mushrooms. She stated that white-American women would look at her with suspicion and mistreat her in the workplace. Outside her workplace Ana confessed:

When I would walk to the store, I would always be afraid. Since I didn't have a car, I had to walk to the grocery store. I was always with fear; people would say that immigration [INS] was out deporting people on the streets that didn't have papers. The fear was due to the fact that I would see cars that appeared to be different, that looked as if they could be immigration.¹⁶

Times were difficult for her and the rest of the group members after the attacks in New York and Washington D.C. Two members, Leo and Eduardo, experienced racial profiling by Eugene police officers. Other members, too, experienced troubling occurrences in the workplace and feared losing their jobs.

Conclusion

Immigration has changed over time in the United States. Immigration has taken another turn, in which more young people are emigrating from Latin America. To understand this new phenomenon in immigration, we took an ethnographic approach to highlight conditions and experiences of participants in an immigrant youth group called Juventud FACETA.

Juventud FACETA member's experiences represent an important phenomenon in the field of Latino and immigration studies. First, all the members immigrated to the U.S. in their mid- to late adolescent years. Second, almost all of the members came with ties to higher education. And third, while in the United States, they became independent, breaking connections with relatives already settled in the United States. As undocumented immigrant youth, they have gained confidence, have overcome invisibility, and have been politically active in immigration rights.

While researchers have often concentrated on the experiences of recent adult immigrants, there is little research on the experiences of recent immigrant youth. In the state of Oregon there is almost nothing published specifically on recent immigrant youth. This study describes the experiences of some youth from this new wave of immigration and acknowledges major issues of adjustment about recent immigrant Latino youth in the United States. The hope is that other similar work can be done to give voice to the voiceless.

Notes

- ¹ In this analysis, the focus will be specifically on undocumented peoples from Latin America coming to the U.S.
- ² Waters, Tony, *Crime and Immigrant Youth*. CA: Sage Publications, 1999.
- ³ Valenzuela, Angela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- ⁴ In this research, the term “Latino” will be used because many scholars in this field of study think the term “Hispanic” accentuates the population’s connection with Spain.
- ⁵ Dr. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo advocated in her book, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*, for the importance of gender in the study of immigrants. I am arguing for the importance of studying youth immigration.
- ⁶ Data collecting was conducted over a three month period.
- ⁷ Massey, Douglass, *Return to Aztlan: the Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico*. CA: University of California Press, 1987.
- ⁸ I used pseudonyms for privacy reasons.
- ⁹ Interviewed by Dr. Lynn Stephen and Edwin Vega, 4/21/03 and 5/15/03.
- ¹⁰ Interviewed by Dr. Lynn Stephen, 6/26/03.
- ¹¹ Refer to profile page.
- ¹² Interviewed by Dr. Lynn Stephen and Edwin Vega, 4/22/03.
- ¹³ Interviewed by Edwin Vega, 7/21/03.
- ¹⁴ The broad application of the term “Latino” can erase other important ethnic, cultural, and national identity.

¹⁵ Akram, Susan M. and Johnson, Kevin R., *Race, Civil Rights, and Immigration Laws after September 11, 2001: The Targeting of Arabs and Muslims*. New York University Annual Survey of American Law, Vol. 58, 2002. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=365261>.

¹⁶ Interviewed by Dr. Lynn Stephen and Edwin Vega, 6/5/03.