Phoenix:
The Newest Latino Immigrant Gateway?1

EMILY SKOP
Department of Geography
Arizona State University

and

CECILIA MENJÍVAR
School of Justice Studies
Arizona State University

ABSTRACT

The increasing importance of Phoenix as a large urban conglomerate (it is the 6th largest U.S. city) located in a border state and as a receiver of native and immigrant newcomers both contribute to the growing Latino population in the city. The recent influx of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Cubans to the Phoenix metropolitan area has the potential to alter the sociocultural, political, and economic landscapes of this city, and begs the question of whether Phoenix is becoming the newest Latino immigrant gateway. Relying on qualitative, in-depth interviews with 60 recent arrivals over a 2-year period, this research introduces the immigrants and their geography: first, by focusing on patterns of immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area; and then by describing the immigrants’ novel patterns of settlement and residential behavior in the city.

Introduction

Once again American society is being transformed by a wave of immigration that began with the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. With the abolition of national quotas and the enactment of occupational and family preference measures, the numbers of immigrants from Latin America to the United States have increased significantly. Consequently, the U.S. Latino population has expanded over the past 3 decades and has become the fastest-growing minority.
Latin American immigration to and settlement in the United States is well documented (Bean and Tienda 1987; Frey 1995; Jones 1995; McHugh et al. 1997; Foulkes and Newbold 2000; and Menjívar 2000). In general, Latino immigrants appear to be geographically concentrated, with the vast majority living in California, Texas, New York, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. A portrait has emerged that defines these particular states as “gateways” for incoming immigrants. These are states, according to McHugh (1989), that have become key in the attraction and retention of large numbers of Hispanic immigrants.

Only recently has attention been drawn away from these “immigrant gateways” to the growing population of Latinos elsewhere in the United States. Allen (1998) observes that new Latino immigrants have begun to settle in many small cities and towns distant from traditional concentrations, while Stewart (1999) notes the transformation of Atlanta’s inner suburbs as a result of the rapidly growing immigrant population. Colloquial evidence, too, indicates that growing numbers of Hispanics appear to be settling in areas outside of recognized “gateways,” such as in cities of Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and the Carolinas. Our yearlong perusal of headlines from major U.S. newspapers (gathered via an e-mail listserv sponsored by the Center for Immigration Studies) suggests that more and more Latino immigrants are establishing themselves in novel areas.

Despite the fact that Phoenix is the 6th largest urban conglomerate in the United States and has been experiencing a remarkable rate of population and economic growth over the past decade, neither the popular press nor scholars have systematically examined contemporary Latino movement to the city. Phoenix has remained low on the radar screen in terms of discussion of its potential role as a destination for Latin American immigrants.

Studies of the Latino immigration to Phoenix do exist, but they tend to be limited and outdated. Themes in this research include: examining the presence of Mexican undocumented immigrants in the area as well as describing the origins, movement patterns, and
general demographic characteristics of this population in Arizona (Harner 1995); assessing the needs of the newly documented (Bracamonte 1990); and estimating the negative impact that undocumented migration has on health and education (Mendez and Esquier 1983).

These studies tend to assume that 1) all immigrants to Arizona are Mexicans; and that 2) this immigration is predominantly undocumented. Recently a special edition of The Arizona Republic (Hermann and Borden 2000) focused on the thousands of new Latino immigrants deciding to make Phoenix their home. But the article draws attention to illegal immigration from Mexico. In the article, the writers ask: “Look around: Is this west Phoenix or Nogales North? The Valley’s avalanche of mostly illegal immigration is aggravating the problems of poverty, crowding, crime, blight and friction between newcomers and established residents” (Hermann and Borden 2000).

Images about “the Mexican immigration problem” in the state have now become so popularized that the burgeoning non-Mexican Latino population in Phoenix has been ignored and potential contributions of these immigrants to their new communities disregarded. Changes in the ethnic and racial composition of Phoenix are transforming this city, and research is necessary for understanding the potential social, cultural, and economic impact and consequences of this transformation.

Therefore, the research that we report here is a first. It is an exploratory, descriptive examination of new Latino immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area. In describing patterns that we have uncovered, we use a comparative approach across nationality groups and include recent immigrants from Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Colombia, along with some new arrivals from the southern parts of Mexico. This paper essentially introduces the immigrants and their geography: first, by focusing on patterns of immigration to the Phoenix metropolitan area; and then by describing the immigrants’ novel patterns of settlement and residential behavior in the city.
Methods

In attempting to document new Latino immigration to Phoenix, this study relies on over 2 years of qualitative research. Because of our interest in a diversity of topics, the interview included questions concerning migration and work history, gender and interethnic relations, children and education, social networks, health, religion, and immigrants’ view of their future in the United States. During the first year of the project in 1998, we conducted 40 intensive interviews with immigrants in the Phoenix Metropolitan area. Additionally, we interviewed Latino community workers, business owners, and social service providers. These interviews provided us with a wealth of information concerning the everyday lives of our participants, and were able to tell us a great deal about the economic activities in which these immigrants engage, the interethnic relations between established immigrants and newcomers, the conditions of the neighborhoods in which these immigrants live, and interactions these immigrants have had with and within varying social spaces—including health, educational, and religious institutions. The interviews were complemented with participant observation in places where immigrants conduct their everyday lives, such as local stores, clinics and hospitals, churches, and restaurants.

This initial wave of the project was extremely helpful. However, we recognized that we needed information to gauge how the immigrants do over time, and several questions remained that could only be answered with further analysis. In particular, we wanted to articulate how length of residence affects employment patterns, social network formation, gender relations, neighborhood and school concerns, and patterns of geographical mobility, as well as changes in legal status. Generally, additional longitudinal data would provide a more developed understanding of the adaptation process. Thus, the study continued for a second year (and a third one, but here we are reporting only from the first 2 years).

In 1999, we conducted additional fieldwork and re-interviewed those immigrants we met the previous year. By the end of 1999, we contacted and re-interviewed half (20) of our initial participants, but we could not find the other half of the participants. These immi-
grants no longer lived in the same apartment complexes and did not keep in contact with neighbors and community workers. Because we did not use a snowball technique to contact our participants, most were unrelated to one another, and thus we had no sources of information from which to garner what happened to the individuals we could not locate. This high degree of mobility was not unexpected, given the precarious nature of most recent immigrants’ everyday lives, but within these constraints we were successful in locating half of the study participants. We will never know whether the émigrés moved to another part of the city, to another city entirely, or back to their home countries. But this is certainly one of the most telling aspects of our longitudinal research.

Since we could not contact the other half of our study participants in the second year of the study, we decided that our best strategy would be to interview 20 new participants, to add to the diversity of experiences. In the end, we had a total of 60 participants and 80 transcribed interviews, along with field notes and interviews with community workers and business owners. Thus, our study includes a rich representation of newcomers from the chief origin sources of Latin American migration to Phoenix (Table 1).

Table 1: National Origin of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>1</td>
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The vast majority of immigrants were less than 40 years old (Figure 1). This demographic portrait is generally reflective of the overall immigrant experience; migration usually takes place when people are in their 20s and 30s. The few older newcomers with whom we spoke generally arrived in the Phoenix metro area under extraordinary circumstances and as refugees.
Movement to the City

New Latino immigration to Phoenix includes immigrants enticed by jobs and opportunity; refugees; people displaced by war, ethnic conflict, and natural disasters; and secondary migrants coming from California. It is clear that heterogeneity and diversity define new Latino immigration to Phoenix. Some immigrants paid a coyote up to $2,000 to cross over the U.S. international border and a few had been caught by the border patrol, while others flew to their destination with no problem at all. Many newcomers were equipped with social networks, while others came to Phoenix knowing no one. Some migrated in large groups and were accompanied by wives and children, while others traveled alone. Some have little more than the clothes on their backs, while others have established successful businesses.

The major flow of new Latino immigration to Phoenix is strategic and involves individuals and families hoping to improve their circumstances. The factors that attract people of all backgrounds to Phoenix, including the metro area’s combination of jobs, weather, and growth, are the same factors that influence many new Latino
immigrants as well. Social networks and family ties work in classic fashion (Massey 1987; Menjívar 2000)—playing a vital role in creating and sustaining migration to the area—by providing connections and linking recent arrivals with information about labor conditions, educational opportunities, and other social resources. The majority of immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and southern Mexico arrive in Phoenix with the support of family members and/or friends already located in the area.

Cuban émigrés come to Phoenix in a highly institutionalized manner that has little to do with the geography of Phoenix or the émigrés themselves and is much more the result of decision making in the U.S. federal government and the policies of the Cuban Refugee Resettlement Program. Migration has been facilitated by two voluntary agencies, International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Catholic Social Services. As leading agencies responsible for the resettlement of refugees in the United States, Catholic Social Services and IRC work in partnership with the federal government to determine the location and placement of incoming refugees (Skop 2001). It is because both agencies support large offices in Phoenix that more than 2,000 recent refugees from Cuba have been resettled to the area.

An important element of the new migration to Phoenix includes secondary migrants from California. Many of those arriving reason that moving to Phoenix will provide opportunities that are harder to find in urban centers in California, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. Several of the migrants who came by land to the United States had already been in the Phoenix area on their way to California, and now have returned to look for better opportunities. These migrants feel that Phoenix is relatively safer and cleaner; they like the “smallness” and the “calmness” of this city in comparison to those metropolises from which they came. A few entrepreneurs see enormous growth potential in Phoenix, and decided to expand and/or move their businesses from California. Contrary to the idea that migrants move directly to their destinations in the United States and once there do not tend to move about, we spoke with migrants who were highly mobile and demonstrated substantial relocation after arrival in the United States—sometimes moving three or four times in just as many years before finally settling in Phoenix.
Settlement in the City

The recent influx of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, southern Mexicans, Colombians, Hondurans, and Cubans to the Phoenix metropolitan area has the potential to alter the sociocultural, political, and economic landscapes of this city, as the presence of these newcomers implies novel patterns of settlement and incorporation. In this section, we focus on the spatiality of new Latino immigration to Phoenix to give you an idea of the geographic distribution of these immigrants within the metro area.

As we began our research, we assumed that these groups—the Cubans, the Guatemalans, and the others—would be found in tight clusters, in distinct ethnic neighborhoods located centrally in the city of Phoenix, in similar fashion as migrants congregate in other U.S. cities. When we entered the field, however, we quickly realized that Phoenix is unlike other major centers of immigration, with neatly defined ethnic neighborhoods and abundant residential segregation. In talking with numerous community workers and business owners, and in visiting the immigrants themselves, we quickly realized that there is no such thing as a “Little San Salvador” or “Little Havana” in Phoenix. What we found instead were small groups of families and individual immigrants living together in apartment complexes scattered throughout the metropolitan area. Newcomers settle everywhere in Phoenix, and though some pockets are distinguishable (Figure 2), they in no way reflect ethnic concentrations in the traditional sense.

This dispersed pattern of settlement is primarily the result of how the metropolitan area is structured. The urban morphology of Phoenix prevents recent arrivals from concentrating in particular neighborhoods. As Dingemans and Datel (1995) found in Sacramento, the lack of a central city core and the abundance of affordable rental housing in all areas of the Phoenix metropolitan area ensure that recent arrivals will be scattered in neighborhoods generally indistinguishable along ethnic lines. Both suburbs and more densely populated areas of the city have become home for new Latino immigrants. Most of these immigrants are dispersed within mostly poor, heterogeneous neighborhoods that are not visibly Latino.
Cuban newcomers had a different reason for settling in particular apartment complexes and neighborhoods. These individuals and families have a well-developed web of community ties, formalized and supported with government funds that provide substantial help and orientation. According to Pedro, a reception and placement coordinator for International Rescue Committee, the process goes something like this: refugees arrive at the airport, are supplied with shelter and food for the first 45 days and are given a week-long orientation; this is followed by assistance with forms necessary to receive welfare and social security cards, a medical screening, and, finally, job placement. Supplemental assistance, including counseling, English courses, and school referrals, continue in the 3 months following the refugee’s initial arrival. Because of this systematic approach, as émigrés arrive in the city, they are placed in particular Catholic Social Services and IRC-sponsored apartment complexes.

Figure 2. New Latino Settlement in Metropolitan Phoenix.
scattered in and around the northern section of the metro area and thus initially appear to be more clustered than other newcomers with whom we spoke.

Many of the recently arrived immigrants with whom we spoke live in large complexes with 30 or more apartments (Figure 3). Typically, the immigrants reside in small apartments with less than 800 square feet of living space, but these immigrants’ housing arrangements and luxuries vary tremendously. Their housing experiences range from five people living in a dilapidated two-bedroom apartment, to a four-person family living in a spacious four-bedroom, two-story home with a pool.

New Latino arrivals have varying perceptions of their neighborhoods, and define the issue of safety differently as well. Several Cubans thought that their neighborhoods were not safe and commented on the danger of U.S. streets for women and children. They attributed this situation (or rather, their perception of it) to the vio-

Figure 3. Typical Apartment Residence of Interview Participants.
lence generated by drugs and alcohol and to the mix of so many different national groups.

In contrast, although most of the other immigrants expressed concerns about gangs, drugs, and violence—and lived in neighborhoods with high crime—they perceived their neighborhoods as generally safe. A Salvadoran woman whose husband was shot while taking a stroll in a nearby park, and also had items stolen from her front porch on numerous occasions, still believed that her neighborhood is “safe” and that the gunshots they often hear at night “come from far, very far away, not from where we live.”

As people usually evaluate their current situation through a bifocal frame of reference—their experience in the United States compared to what they left behind—these different views may be shaped by how these immigrants experienced crime before migration (Menjívar and Bejarano n.d.). Cuban streets were much safer compared to the daily violence that Guatemalans and Salvadoreans experienced during the many years of civil war in their countries.

In the second year of the project, we noted that there was a great deal of movement within the city from neighborhood to neighborhood. Approximately 50 percent of the study participants we contacted the previous year had moved to new locations. Their main reason for relocating was to move to what they “perceived” as a safer place. Most of the immigrants that did move to another neighborhood moved to areas that seemed more aesthetically pleasing to them. They saw this as a step toward their upward mobility, even though the move may have been only a few blocks down the road or to another poor community. This was especially true for Cubans—only one of the individuals we interviewed the previous year lived in the same apartment. Some Cubans moved into (or initially lived in) relatively more expensive housing, such as gated apartment complexes with swimming pools and other amenities. Javier, a social worker at Catholic Social Services, confirmed this hyper-mobility:

IRC initially places refugees in apartment complexes located nearby the agency’s central main office, so there is easy access to the agency. But refugees rarely stay in their initial settlements for long (no more than 6 months generally). We placed five or six families in an apartment complex 5 months ago, but they have already moved.
Once they find jobs and become familiarized with the city, most of the Cuban refugees relocate to new apartments and for many, eventually new houses. And they do not concentrate in any area of the city. (Interview conducted June 8, 1998.)

Conclusion

What we discovered in this exploratory research is a nascent, vibrant, and mushrooming new Latino community that includes not only Mexicans, but also Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Cubans, Hondurans, and Colombians. The experiences of the participants in our study provide an opportunity to view the complex mosaic of new Latino immigrants in the Phoenix metropolitan area, and to dispel notions about the homogeneity of the population.

The momentum inherent in the migration process has great implications for the future likelihood of Phoenix as an immigrant gateway. Our research indicates that Phoenix has reached a critical threshold and that Latino migration to the area is becoming self-perpetuating. The larger the community becomes, the more opportunities it offers and the larger the community becomes. We know that the best predictor of who is going to migrate is who migrated before (Durand and Massey 1992). The presence of friends and families will serve as connections that progressively draw more migrants. And migration is only likely to increase as social networks become institutionalized and serve to channel even more Latino immigrants to Phoenix.

Notes

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2We use pseudonyms in place of the real names of everyone we interviewed.
References Cited


