

# Latino Immigration

by Dr. Manuel A. Vásquez

*The following is an excerpt from the November 3, 2009, address on Latino Immigration in the South of Dr. Vásquez to the People on the Move Conference sponsored by JSRI on the Loyola University campus.*

The widespread devastation and dislocation produced in New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina is a reality *sui generis*, producing a population shift that has few parallels in U.S. history. In what follows, I will summarize some of the key findings of the emerging literature on Latinos in New Orleans.

Immigration from Latin America to New Orleans is not new. In fact, there were two relatively established Pre-Katrina Latino communities. One consists of Nicaraguans who came to the city as early as 1905, following the establishment of the Louisiana Nicaragua Lumber Company in the city. The other is composed of Hondurans who arrived starting in the 1920s, through connections with the United Fruit Company, which has been based in New Orleans since 1901. The Nicaraguan community expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, as two new waves of immigration came, one as a reaction to the Sandinista Revolution (1979) and another in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

population increased by 45 percent, while the African-American population decreased by 10 percent (Lee et al., 2008). Sociologist Elizabeth Fussell, who has conducted the most detailed and rigorous studies of the Latino influx into the city, estimates that 9.6 percent of Orleans parish is now Latino.

Who are these new Latinos in New Orleans? Fussell uses the term “Hurricane Chasers” to describe them, since they are a mobile “rapid response labor force” that came to fill the growing demand in the construction sector, as the city began to rebuild.

Forty-four percent of the immigrants that Fussell surveyed were Mexicans, 21 percent Brazilians, 14 percent Hondurans, 12 percent Guatemalans, and 7 percent Salvadorans. She also found that these five national Latino groups exhibit significant commonalities: they tend to be “younger, more often single, and less embedded in a social network than other immigrants” (Fussell, 2009a and b). However, Fussell also found important differences among these groups, as reflected in Table 1.

While there are many differences worth highlighting in Fussell’s data, Brazilians are the group that best embodies the “rapid response” labor force label. They are younger and more likely to be single men than both Mexicans and Central Americans, who are more likely to use their long-standing community networks in the region and the New Orleans to bring their families. This is particularly the case for Central Americans: they are far more likely than the other two groups to have siblings who are also migrants. The duration of the Brazilians’ current trip is also much shorter; this may be because a more than one third of these immigrants have their work papers. Thus, they have more flexibility to move in response to changes in the job market. The fact that a greater proportion of Brazilians are authorized to work, together with their higher levels of education, may explain why they earn far more than Mexican and Central Americans. Fussell also hypothesizes that Central Americans and Mexicans often rely on established networks to secure employment, a fact that may

**Table 1: Profile of Three Latino Groups in Post-Katrina New Orleans**

	Mexicans	Central Americans	Brazilians
Age	29.8	2.4	28.2
Years of Formal Education	9.1	7.2	9.7
Single	73.7	42.9	77.8
Sibling a Migrant	47.4	57.1	33.3
Duration of Current Trip (years)	4.0	4.0	1.6
No Documentation	94.7	92.9	66.7
Manufacturing/Construction	100%	92.8%	88.9
Weekly Wages	\$668.53	\$551.00	\$859.11
Monthly Remittances	\$1,282.35	\$576.92	\$859.11

Adapted from Fussell (2009b: 463)

The 2000 census reported 15,000 Latinos in New Orleans, about 3.1 percent of the city’s population (485,000). Most scholars agree that the census severely under-counted the New Orleans’s Latino population (Donato et al., 2007). In the aftermath of Katrina, *The Times-Picayune* estimated that approximately 100,000 Hispanics came to hurricane-affected communities in the span of four months after Katrina. By 2007, the city’s Latino

# in New Orleans

limit their job prospects. In contrast, Brazilians operate for all intents and purposes as their own contractors. As Fussell (2009a: 389) put it, Brazilians (and Mexicans to some extent) are “more likely to be unencumbered by ties to any pre-Katrina New Orleans conationals.” This “freedom” from the moral and financial obligations that accompany ethnic labor networks enables them to look for better paying jobs.

The Latino community in New Orleans has not only grown rapidly but is also becoming highly differentiated. The big question now is whether the “hurricane chasers” will settle permanently in the city. This is a crucial issue, in light of the shifting racial configuration in post-Katrina New Orleans. The changing racial composition of the city may be what was behind Mayor Ray Nagin’s desire, expressed in October 2005, to keep the city from being “overrun with Mexican workers” ([www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5221123](http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=5221123)). A few months later, in January 2006, Nagin asserted that New Orleans should remain a “chocolate city” ([www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706\\_nagin\\_transcript.html](http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706_nagin_transcript.html)). While many Hispanic groups criticized Nagin’s comments, some believed that the mayor reflected more widespread sentiments among New Orleans residents.

The results of Fussell’s survey in Table 2 give us a sense of the future of the Latino presence in the Crescent City.

The majority of Nicaraguans and Brazilians say that they intend to stay in New Orleans for more than a year or permanently. Here the contrast with Mexicans may reflect the proximity of their home country, which makes it somewhat easier to go back and forth. The scholarly literature tells us that the longer immigrant single men stay in a particular place, the more likely they are to bring their families from their countries of origins or to form new ones. Thus, the future of the Latino community in New Orleans will depend on the sustained availability of jobs as the city’s reconstruction continues in the midst of a national economic recession.

For the full text of the address of Dr. Vásquez, see the “Reports” section of the JSRI website at [www.loyno.edu/jsri/reports/index.htm](http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/reports/index.htm)

Table 2: How Long do Latinos Plan to Stay in New Orleans (in %)

	Mexicans	Nicaraguans	Brazilians
12 months or until work ends	27.3	23.4	17.5
More than a year/permanently	38.5	55.3	66.7
Don’t Know	34.3	21.3	15.9

Adapted from Fussell (2008)

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