

# POLICY NOTES

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## As Georgia's Latino Population Grows, So Does the Need to Examine the Delivery of Governmental Services

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Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population in the United States increased by 58 percent. Unlike in past decades, when most Latino growth occurred in Florida, Texas, and California, this new growth was remarkable because much of it occurred in the southeastern states, particularly Arkansas, North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. In Georgia alone, the Latino population nearly tripled in the last decade to almost half a million.

The massive influx of Latinos to Georgia creates important policy challenges. The growth of Georgia's population (Latino and non-Latino), while stimulating the state's economy, is increasingly straining transportation, education, and other infrastructures. Because the changes to Georgia's population are so recent, policymakers and service providers in Georgia lack sufficient data regarding the needs of the Latino population in the state.

*The introduction of a new and sizeable minority group to the state has raised issues regarding the recognition of Latinos as a cognizable group and the facilitation of race and ethnic relations beyond black and white.*

A two-year study was undertaken to assess the needs of Georgia's new Latinos to aid policymakers in meeting these challenges (Atilas and Bohon 2002). Specifically, the study was designed to identify the most pressing needs of Georgia's Latino population; assess how well agencies (such as police and fire departments, social services, and schools) are prepared to meet these needs; examine how the needs of Latinos vary across counties; identify local policies that have been particularly successful in addressing the new challenges posed by a growing Latino population; and identify the problems that are related to immigration generally as well as the issues that are unique to Georgia. Key informants working with the Latino population were interviewed, and focus groups with new Latino residents were held (in Spanish) in six geographically and economically diverse counties with sizeable Latino populations: Hall, Whitfield, Liberty, Colquitt, Muscogee, and DeKalb Counties (see Table).

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The results of this study reveal the need for new policies regarding employment, transportation, housing, child care, health care, crime, community relations, and education. The most pressing needs of Latinos in Georgia pertain to transportation; housing; acquiring English language skills and obtaining needed information in Spanish; provision of interpreters in key service areas such as hospitals and schools; and information regarding their rights and responsibilities as employees, students, tenants, drivers, and Georgia residents. Urban counties generally have better transportation and housing infrastructures but also a higher incidence of consumer fraud and other crimes committed against Latinos. Rural counties have fewer Latinos who are not regularly employed.

**Table.** Latino Populations, by Study Site

|                   | Georgia Counties Selected for this Study |         |         |         |          |           |
|-------------------|--|---------|---------|---------|----------|-----------|
|                   | Colquitt                                 | DeKalb  | Hall    | Liberty | Muscogee | Whitfield |
| Total population  | 42,053                                   | 665,865 | 139,277 | 61,610  | 186,291  | 83,525    |
| Latino population | 4,554                                    | 52,542  | 27,242  | 5,022   | 8,372    | 18,419    |
| Percent Latino    | 10.8                                     | 7.9     | 19.6    | 8.2     | 4.5      | 22.1      |

Note: The numbers reflect populations as of April 1, 2000.



Across the state, low levels of educational attainment, especially high school completion, are common among Latinos. Regardless of whether or not they are foreign-born, Latino immigrants face discrimination in employment and housing and struggle with language barriers and adjusting to a different culture. Georgia's service providers have been responsive, but they often lack the funds to make necessary changes and to hire bilingual/bicultural staff. Despite these difficulties, several local areas have had some notable successes. Whitfield County has created an alliance with a Mexican University in order to provide bilingual/bicultural staff in the classrooms. DeKalb County has built day labor centers to protect and offer services to men who work occasional jobs. Hall County has started a public transportation service.

The findings of this research suggest that lawmakers and selected state agencies consider the following courses of action:

- Increase bilingual/bicultural staff in various agencies that provide housing, education, health care, and other essential services to Latinos to ease their transition into Georgia's economy, culture, and way of life.
- Provide job training (in Spanish and at low literacy levels) for unskilled Latino workers and formalize the day labor practices to protect both employers and employees.
- Encourage negotiations among businesses, the Department of Labor, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to regularize the work status of valuable employees who work without permits and perpetuate a black market of fraudulent documents.
- Reevaluate the Department of Transportation's requirements for obtaining a Georgia driver's license in order to reduce consumer fraud and legal noncompliance as well as ensure public safety on the road.
- Create and fund programs through the state government that promote the supply of affordable housing for workers.
- Fund the Cooperative Extension Service to expand its Basic Life Skills programs in housing, child and human development (including child care issues), nutrition, chronic disease, financial and credit management, and work preparedness to aid recent immigrants in their adaptation to Georgia.
- Appoint a task force under the auspices of the state government to examine Latino access to health care.
- Promote and fund programs for high school and college recruitment and retention of Latinos through the Department of Education and the Board of Regents to improve low levels of educational attainment among this group.
- Work proactively in promoting community relations to prevent backlash targeting Latinos, especially immigrants.
- Create a fund, through the state legislature, that can be used for the next 10 years to address all the needs identified here and those identified by the Governor's Hispanic Affairs Commission.

*Latino immigrants face discrimination in employment and housing and struggle with language barriers and adjusting to a different culture.*

*Colquitt County has obtained corporate sponsorship to run preschool programs for Latino children and recently built a migrant health clinic.*

## Select Sources

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