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## A Fighting Presence: The Invisibility vs Visibility of the Latinx Population in the United States

The Latinx population has a unique position in the United States. It is a group that is rapidly growing, yet its representation is disproportionate to its breadth. A large part of this continuous growth is due to immigration, yet in the U.S. today, there is quite a bit of heat surrounding this topic. There are many policies and laws, both on the federal and state level, that make it difficult for immigrants to come into the United States. Further, when an undocumented immigrant does make it into the U.S., they face incredible difficulties: limited choices in the job market, unable to gain health care, difficulty obtaining higher education, often unable to get driver's licenses, and unable to obtain financial security.

All this, in turn, renders a great deal of the Latinx population invisible on a few accounts: underrepresentation of the population, physical invisibility as many Latinxs must live under the radar, and a result of the drive for Latinxs to assimilate fully to U.S. culture. On the flip side, there are a couple distinct forms of visibility of the Latinx population: a hypervisibility through the eyes of U.S. citizens about immigration, and a more positive effort toward visibility through small local endeavors to highlight Latinx culture and uplift their voices. In this paper I present some explanations for the invisibility of the Latinx population and then the same for their visibility.

Before exploring some explanations of the Latinx community's visibility, it may be beneficial to be aware of some statistical realities for Latinxs in the United States. The Latinx population is the largest minority group in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>, and is one of the fastest growing due to

both immigration and in-state births. As of 2018, the Latinx population in the U.S. is 58.95 million, a 65% increase from 2000<sup>2</sup>, though the overall population increase in the U.S. was about 10% in that same time frame<sup>9</sup>. Some of the places with the greatest increase of the Latinx population between 2000 and 2018 is in the southern region of the U.S.—Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama were the third, fourth, and fifth highest growth states respectively. North Carolina is the state with the ninth highest growth with a 164% increase<sup>2</sup>.

The foreign-born Latinx population has tended to migrate more towards rural areas in the South. Immigrants in larger metropolitan areas tend to live more in the suburbs than the central cities<sup>10</sup>. For all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., the median household income was 63,179 U.S. dollars in 2018, though Latinx households had a median income lower than the national average median income<sup>2</sup>. Further, the Latinx population is the ethnic group most likely to work without health insurance as of 2018.<sup>2</sup> Additionally the median weekly earnings for full-time wage and salary workers is the lowest for the Latinx population as of 2018<sup>2</sup>. The Latinx population tends to be pretty young, the dominating age group in 2018 being in the early to mid 30's<sup>2</sup>. Though the Latinx population is rather young, “their educational progress has flattened. Latino [*sic*] students are the least educated of all ethnic/racial groups”<sup>10</sup>. The percent of latinx persons who completed a bachelor's degree or higher age of 25 or over was 31.5% between 2014 and 2018<sup>9</sup>. In summary, the Latinx population may be the largest minority, but it is generally younger yet less educated, poorer than the national average, is one of the fastest growing in part due to immigration, and is generally residing in more rural or suburban parts of southern and weastern regions of the U.S.

Now with this contextual knowledge, I will discuss the ways in which the Latinx population is rendered invisible. Part of this invisibility comes from how the Latinx population is represented and viewed by the United States. One issue that has cropped up for some young Latinxs is the classification of Latinx as a race or ethnicity. The U.S. Census Bureau categorizes this group in the population as an ethnicity, not a race, which for some young Latinx persons indicates a lack of formal recognition of their group being negatively racialized in the U.S. They have faced racism yet have not been recognized by the government as a racial minority, and this “may lead to the social marginalization of this group as they perceive themselves to be an invisible racial minority in official efforts to enumerate”<sup>10</sup>. Just as racial groups are judged based on their race, Latinx persons are judged in the same way in the United States, yet are not considered a racial group which, as mentioned, causes unequal considerations given to the Latinx population compared to racial groups.

Another important factor that affects the incorporation or visibility of the Latinx population is legalization status. Living without formal citizenship means living without a driver’s license, social security number, health care, and much more, which makes it incredibly difficult to be upwardly mobile in the United States. In addition, with the strict immigration laws in the U.S., living without formal citizenship means living a life in fear of deportation which in turn creates a need to make oneself invisible. Invisibility then becomes almost an intentional and cognitive action for the Latinx population—invisibility becomes a means of survival.

Another cause of Latinx invisibility is a leading voice from the United States telling Latinx persons to assimilate by adopting U.S. culture and dropping their own<sup>3</sup>. There have been state policies which help fuel this assimilation agenda. An English-only movement, which was

revived in the 1980's, helped to pass laws mandating English to be the "official" language in over 30 states<sup>10</sup>. This policy creates difficulties for Latinx persons, especially those who are foreign-born. It can affect their ability to get work, and it especially affects young school-aged Latinxs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (or ESSA) passed in 2015 did help to recognize English learning students and helped to increase programming for such students. The ESSA made it so school testing of English learning students were evaluated more on their actual knowledge of the subject rather than their English comprehension. However, this law was rather flexible for states and many would not put in any efforts to assist English learning students<sup>5</sup>. In these states the message was still clear: assimilate.

However, while the message for the Latinx population is to assimilate, the U.S. in many ways makes it impossible to do this, especially for immigrants. One factor is the policies mentioned—preventing immigrants from getting drivers licenses, making it difficult to get a job and education—no matter how long someone has been in the U.S. This leads to the resulting disparities seen earlier in the Latinx population—they are generally less educated despite their young age as much of the population is undocumented. It is especially difficult in the Trump era as his policies have been overwhelmingly anti-immigration, which causes more people in the U.S. to fall in line with this message<sup>1</sup>. This creates a greater stigma about immigrants and about the Latinx population in general, foreign-born or not, which leads to a form of "hypervisibility" in the eyes of U.S. citizens<sup>10</sup>. But while this fact leads to a sort of hypervisibility on the mental and cognitive level of the U.S. citizens, it also leads to the physical invisibility as well, since the Latinx population is forced into the shadows in order to not get zeroed out.

While the hypervisibility of the Latinx population is one negative way Latinxs are seen, there are also more positive examples of their viewed presence. There have been some policies and initiatives aimed to assist their presence in the United States. For example DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) was an attempt made by the government to help incorporate young undocumented Latinxs in the U.S. and make it possible for them to access things like new jobs, driver's licences, and health care. At least short term, it was found that DACA did help alleviate some of the challenges facing some young undocumented Latinxs in order to gain economic and social incorporation. However, it was found that some of these benefits tended to be felt most by those with higher education and greater community/family support and resources<sup>4</sup>. It was also found that while DACA helped make it possible for young Latinxs to get into school it in no way helped them with financial aid or the costs of attending college<sup>7</sup>.

On this cost issue, there was a bill in Colorado passed in 2013 called Advancing Students for a Stronger Economy Tomorrow (or ASSET) which reduced the tuition for state public universities for young undocumented Latinxs. While this helped in some ways, it did not alleviate their legalization status in any way so it was still difficult for young Latinxs to continue to be upwardly mobile<sup>7</sup>. This in a way shows the opposite problem of DACA, though similar to DACA it provides only short term solutions. Furthermore, this is only an example of an initiative in one state rather than a national initiative.

While policies on the federal level have made it hard for the Latinx population and have set a tone of pushing this population to the sidelines, there have been local efforts in some places to help bring the Latinx population out of the shadows and into a more positive light. One small example is a local coffee shop in Durham North Carolina named Cocoa Cinnamon that works

with Little Wave Roasters whose mission is to be inclusive of all persons and encourage diversity, including the Latinx community<sup>8</sup>. While this is a very small scale local effort, initiatives like these can help to bring the Latinx population out into the forefront and allow them to be seen in a more positive light.

The root issue that causes the invisibility and hypervisibility of the Latinx population is the racism they face, despite being considered an ethnic group. This is the result of the systematic racism that leads the policies and general culture of the United States. This triggers continual attacks on the Latinx population and inevitably prompts Latinxs needing to hide themselves from view and attempt to disappear into U.S. culture. While this is all true, there are some attempts on the local level to bring the Latinx population out of the shadows and bring awareness to their difficult position.

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