

EXPLORING THE CONDITIONS THAT HAVE LED TO A RISE IN MEXICAN  
IMMIGRATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN LIBERAL, KS

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This paper seeks to explore the socioeconomic conditions among Mexican immigrants and emphasize the factors that have bred the rise of immigrant entrepreneurship—despite the political and economic systems being against their favor. It will do so via interviews and photographs.

How is it that a group of illegal, politically undesirable, and socially unsolicited people—with a history of adversity—rise to become an economic engine to the most powerful country in the world, the United States? Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the country—the following chart illustrates the remarkable rise since the 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Their impact on our communities and nationwide is indisputable; immigrants contribute to the United States' economy and have shaped the American social landscape. However, recent political rhetoric seeks to degrade immigrants—particularly Mexican immigrants—and strongly underscores negative stereotypes and connotation. It is important to recognize and understand the role Mexican immigrants play in our society. I plan to examine the complex role of immigrants, society, and economics through the lens of a community—Liberal, KS— in which these factors have become particularly indivisible and emphasize the factors that have bred the rise of immigrant entrepreneurship. So I propose the following: we should be aware of these immigrant's stories, struggles, and triumphs in order to know them as people—not simply as a “Mexican immigrant worker.” Then we can begin to understand their significance and impact in our communities.

Kansas is a state that has experienced a strong influx of Mexican immigrants, specifically in the southwest. This steady increase dating back to the 1980s is largely due to the meat processing plants in Dodge City, Garden City, and Liberal—which require massive amounts of cheap labor.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the Hispanic communities have settled and become an

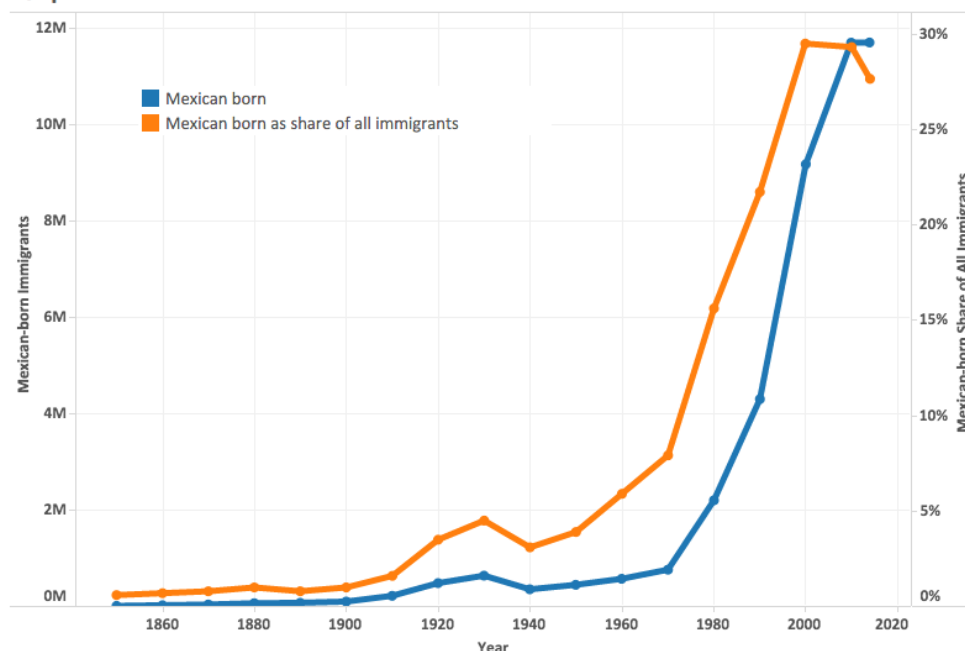
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1. Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, “Mexican Immigrants in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, March 17, 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states/>.

2. Janet E. Benson, “Garden City: Meatpacking and Immigration to the High Plains,” *Changing Face*, July 1996, <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/cf/more.php?id=157>.

integral part of the area, to the point of creating minority-majority towns. While there is much immigration and economics research done in southwestern Kansas, there is still a need to recognize the individual identities as real people in these communities. I attempted to do this by interviewing nine Mexican immigrants who have worked in popular industries and are now business owners in Liberal, KS, and photographing them in a way that reflects broader immigrant sentiments—simultaneously putting a face to “the Mexican immigrant laborer.” These interviews placed the individual in a context that emphasizes the many facets there are to this growing immigrant social issue.

**Number of Mexican Immigrants and Their Share of the Total U.S. Immigrant Population, 1850-2014**



Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub  
<http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>

**Figure 1.** Chart showing the remarkable rise of the Hispanic population in the United States since the 1800s. SOURCE: Migration Policy Institute, <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>.

These interviews revealed a few common trends among the selected immigrants—prior unfavorable conditions in Mexico, a feeling of uncomfortable or painful displacement once in the U.S., and the desire to supersede their current living standard—regardless of age, gender, or class.

Some conditions were a little more “unfavorable” than others. Many were part of an agricultural family who earned a living by working in the fields. Some lived and worked in more urban areas, taking up a variety of jobs. And one was abandoned and homeless. However, for the most part, they could all agree on the difficulty to attain a better standard of living. The need to improve varied from individual to individual. Jose Ortuño,<sup>3</sup> who graduated high school and worked in restaurants, could not find a promising job in his native Mexico City. For Ramon Ruiz,<sup>4</sup> it was his turn to head north and join his six siblings, who after a childhood of growing up motherless and struggling to feed one another decided there was no better option. These immigrants did not leave Mexico for lack of a desire to work, they left because they had a desire to work and Mexico could not provide the means.

In fact, when asked if they would have stayed in Mexico had they found work equivalent to that of the U.S., most of the interviewees said yes—especially towards the beginning of their journey in the United States. After all, it is *el país de uno*—one’s own country. For most, simply getting into the U.S. was a struggle on its own. For example,

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3. Jose Ortuño, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author, February 20, 2016.

4. Ramon Ruiz, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author, January 5, 2016.

Octaviano Nieblas<sup>5</sup> walked for days across the desert and Maria Aguilar<sup>6</sup> swam pregnant across the Rio Grande. But once within the border, the struggle continued. The top struggle and obstacle for the interviewees overall was the language barrier and culture shock. How do you manage in a foreign country when you have close to nothing and can't communicate well enough to even order at a fast food restaurant? But the humiliation and discrimination was worth the opportunity for better work.

Still a popular immigrant destination around the time many of the interviewees crossed into the U.S., was California. While some of the interviewees did begin their journey in California, some started in Texas, and a few in Kansas. Smaller rural towns have become more popular throughout the years, in contrast to the attraction of metropolitan coasts in the past. In the case of Liberal, Dodge, and Garden City, it is due to the prosperous industries of the meat packing plants, oil field, and trucking. The allure of a stable job in these areas is so great, that entire Mexican villages have begun to migrate there. It can begin through one family member who marks the path, settles, is successful, and later encourages family and friends to join him. These communities tend to settle with the purpose of being productive and working hard.

The emphasis on working hard was repeated ceaselessly over the course of the interviews. All of the immigrants professed the importance of hard work. For Maria

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5. Octaviano Nieblas, "Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS," Interview by author, February 19, 2016.

6. Maria Aguilar, "Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS," Interview by author, January 5, 2016.

Ontiveros,<sup>7</sup> it meant staying alive. She worked throughout her childhood to survive, both before and after being abandoned at the age of nine. In fact, all of the interviewees claimed to have worked throughout their childhood—even as young as five years old. They had helped in the fields, done household duties, or in family owned businesses. Nancy Moreno,<sup>8</sup> at the age of 10, was in charge of her six year old sister and would bring her along to work as she picked lettuce and tomato in the fields.

Which is why it makes sense that these immigrants would keep seeking to improve their occupations. The interviewees now own their own businesses or are pursuing higher entrepreneurial efforts. However, they all have experience in or are currently employed in the popular industries around Liberal—National Beef Packing, the oil field, or trucking. It is clear, simply by noting the sheer numbers of the Hispanic population, that immigrants are fueling the Liberal economy. However, they are not only doing so through being employees. Liberal has witnessed a rise of immigrant owned businesses throughout the past two decades. What caused the rise? The interviewees, who are part of these growing group, all have different businesses but share a common interest—family. Whether it be to provide a better standard of living, to work with family, be closer to family, or all of the above. Family was the primary motivation for creating a business among this immigrant group. Eva Felix emphasizes how important it was to her to own her own business. She

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7. Maria Ontiveros, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author. February 20, 2016.

8. Nancy Moreno, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author. February 20, 2016.

states that laboring so hard for someone else is no life at all.<sup>9</sup> Her motivation only grew after becoming a single mother of two. For Octaviano and Rita Nieblas, their car dealership allowed them the opportunity to see their children grow, because according to Rita, “you don’t see your own kids if you live inside that plant.”<sup>10</sup>

Immigrants have given rural southwestern towns life. They provide steady supply of labor and their businesses invite growth. And they are here to stay. After asking the interviewees whether they would consider moving back to Mexico, all of them said no. For the most part, these immigrants have lived in the United States a majority of their lives and become citizens. Some held the view that if Mexico had little to offer them then, now it has nothing. Especially due to the violence caused by the drug cartel wars throughout Mexico, which reached its height in 2013. It is common opinion that those who work *derecho*—or work through legal means—and succeed, are targeted by those who don’t. Mexico has transformed for many and is not the homeland they left behind. Especially if one has worked hard to built a successful life in the United States. While the immigrants are proud of their culture and origins, it is clear that they have worked to establish themselves in the U.S.—while maintaining that identity.

Many Mexican immigrants in Liberal, KS, are actively economically and socially engaged in their communities—contrary to the popular belief that immigrants tend to work in low-wage labor and become occupationally stagnant. Not only do they contribute

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9. Eva Felix, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author, February 19, 2016.

10. Rita Nieblas, “Mexican Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Liberal, KS,” Interview by author, February 19, 2016.

to the already standing economy and work force but are creating jobs and becoming employers themselves. It is important to be aware of the political and social environment we find ourselves in—even if it seems not to directly apply to us. For many, the negative dialogue in regards to Mexican immigrants, both in the political and social sphere, is just background conversation. For more than 11.7 million people and their families, it can be life changing. Which is why it is so important to “put a face” to the Mexican immigrant and realize the role and impact they have in our communities as the following photographic essay does. Mexican American biographer Thomas H. Kreneck expresses this idea most fittingly: “the history of Mexican Americans . . . does not have to be only the account of faceless laborers, classes, and gender as reflected in the statistics . . . and demographics.” There needs to be “a sense of the ‘human dimension’ . . . [so that] the individual be given proper credit.”<sup>11</sup>

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11. Kreneck quoted in Jorge Iber, “The Early Life and Career of Topeka’s Mike Torrez, 1946–1978: Sport as Means for Studying Latino/a Life in Kansas,” *Kansas History* 37 (September 2014): 179.



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