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Chicago Latinos Will Shape Region's Economic Competitiveness ***Three in five new Chicago workers are Latino, new census data reveal, but American Dream remains out of reach for most***

EDITOR'S NOTE: A companion research brief and full-length working paper are available on an embargoed basis. Request a copy through Sara McElmurry (contact info above). After the embargo lifts, materials will be available online at <http://latinoedbeat.org/research/>.

CHICAGO – December 15, 2010 – Three in every five new workers in metro Chicago's labor force were Latinos over the past decade, as the region struggles to shift from manufacturing to knowledge-based industries, according to analysis of fresh census data. Since 1980, Chicago's count of Mexican-origin workers has quadrupled.

"To resurge on a globally competitive level, Chicago's Latino workforce must become less blue-collar," said Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum. "Latinos have been long-lauded for their tremendous work ethic. But they're becoming a workforce majority faster than they're closing stubborn education achievement gaps."

A new study shows that local Latino workers are hitting a "blue-collar" ceiling, with at least 40 percent of US-born Mexican-Americans working in the same low-paying, low-skilled industries as their Mexico-born immigrant counterparts—a trend that, like frustrating Latino high school drop-out rates, has not changed over the last decade. The study, done by Chicago's DePaul University, was released today by the New Journalism on Latino Children (NJLC) project.

"With the surge of Baby Boomers moving into retirement, we're not only seeing an unprecedented shift in the makeup of the regional workforce, but also an unparalleled incongruity in skill sets," said John Koval, senior research fellow at DePaul University. "Latinos are entering the workforce in record numbers, but they arrive with low levels of education, leaving or dropping out of mediocre high schools."

Unable to Break Through a "Blue-Collar Ceiling"

The report's analysis of the 480 occupations identified by the US Census Bureau illustrates how Mexican immigrants are perpetually overrepresented in the minimum-wage food service, diminishing construction, and rapidly-shrinking manufacturing industries. Foreign-born Mexicans currently account for more than 65 percent of the region's Latino workforce.

However, the industrial landscape is strikingly similar for these immigrants' US-born counterparts, poised to comprise a growing proportion of Metro Chicago's workforce in 20 years' time as nearly 400,000 Latino youth, currently under the age of ten, enter the working world. While native-born Mexican-Americans, particularly female workers, work in a less-confined occupational world than their foreign-born peers, overall data shows little change in industrial concentrations over the last decade. In 2000, more than 53 percent of foreign-born Mexican men and nearly 40 percent of US-born Mexican-Americans worked in the manufacturing, food service, and construction industries. In 2009, those numbers held steady, at 51 and 40 percent, respectively.

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The new report links wage gaps to this intergenerational immobility, with the region's white males earning \$10 for every \$7 earned by a US-born Mexican-American male. While local Latinos contribute billions of dollars to the regional economy each year, the disparity has important implications for Metro Chicago's future tax base – and for the Social Security checks of retiring boomers.

“We are in this together”

“There's no denying the Latino work ethic. Despite the fact that many earn minimum wage, Latinos still contribute billions to our local economy and tax base each year. Imagine how Latino earning potential could skyrocket if we started to close education and occupation gaps,” said Sylvia Puente, executive director of the Latino Policy Forum. “We are in this together. Unless Chicago's workforce becomes better educated, more agile and productive, our future retirees will face declining pensions and deteriorating human services.”

While Latinos are part of an emerging minority-majority in the local workforce, just one in 10 has completed, at minimum, a bachelor's degree—a trend set in motion as early as kindergarten, where previous NJLC research has shown Latino students are already cognitively behind their peers by as much as six months. As cognitive foundations get laid between birth and age 5, advocates link increased access to quality early childhood education to improved academic—and professional—outcomes for Latino youth.

“The workforce gaps revealed in this study are set in motion before Latino children enter kindergarten,” said Bruce Fuller, a University of California professor who advised the project. “Chicago's economic competitiveness will continue to decline until young workers display more agile cognitive and social skills. We know quality education early on is a key piece of the puzzle.”

Researchers point an opportunity to buck mobility trends by improving access to quality early childhood education for the nearly 200,000-plus Latino children, currently under the age of five who are poised to enter Metro Chicago's workforce in 20 years' time. But just one in every three Illinois Latino children is enrolled in preschool, versus two-thirds of their peers, according to previous NJLC research. Enrollment disparities are linked to lack of open slots in Latino communities, cuts in government funding, and linguistic barriers. Nationally, the share of Latino four-year-olds attending preschool fell between 2005 and 2009, from 53 to 48 percent.

The 2010 Census confirmed that Latinos are now the second-largest ethnic group in Illinois, accounting for more than 16 percent of the population. In Metro Chicago, that number rises to 22 percent. The population skews young: Nearly 20 percent of the region's native-born Latino population is under the age of five. If adequately prepared for high-skilled jobs, these Latino youth will replace Chicago's aging Baby Boomers who will be leaving the labor force over the next 25 years.

About New Journalism on Latino Children

The New Journalism on Latino Children project brings together researchers, journalists and local leaders to enrich civic understanding of the Latino community and the role of quality education. The project is led by the University of California's Institute of Human Development and supported by the Education Writers Association and Chicago's Latino Policy Forum, with funding from the McCormick Foundation.

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