

Housing Insecurity and Latinx Community Resilience in Small Towns in Mississippi

Silvinia Lopez Barrera¹, Diego Thompson²

¹First Institution, City, State Abbreviation

²Second Institution, City, State Abbreviation

ABSTRACT

During recent decades, rural communities in Mississippi have received immigrants from Latin America to work in agri-food industries and they have contributed to the diversity and well-being of small rural towns in Mississippi. However, like other immigrants working in the food system, Latinx immigrants and their families in rural towns often experience significant challenges such as social isolation, discrimination, and substandard housing conditions. On August 7th 2019, the U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) conducted massive raids in six small towns in rural Mississippi, resulting in 680 Latinx immigrants arrested, the largest single-state immigration enforcement operation in U.S. history. The raids and the detentions of Latinx immigrants significantly impacted six small towns located near Jackson (MS). This paper examines the effects of the raids and the Latinx community resilience in the affected small towns in Mississippi. It explores Latinx community-based responses to challenges related to housing insecurity, evictions, and avoidance of using public space due to fear of immigration authorities and discrimination. Methods include fieldwork mapping and semi-structured interviews with community leaders, activists, organizations working with the communities affected, and individuals affected by the raids and involved in community responses. Although community-based resilient responses can facilitate resources for Latinx families, findings suggest the need for a systemic design approach and governmental commitment to address precarious housing conditions (overcrowding and substandard) and access to public space ensuring Latinx community's agency and their right to participate and transform the towns and the places they inhabit. This study aims to encourage communities to develop grassroots resilient design responses to support immigrants in rural communities by trying to make communities in rural U.S. more inclusive, diverse, and welcoming.

KEYWORDS: Housing Insecurity, Community Resilience, Latinx, Immigration Raids

PAPER SESSION TRACK: Cities and (Im)migration

INTRODUCTION

During recent decades, rural communities in Mississippi have received immigrants from Latin America to work on chicken plants (Stuesse 2016). Latinx immigrants working in agri-food industries have contributed to the diversity and well-being of small rural towns in Mississippi. However, like other immigrants working in the food system, Latinx immigrants and their families in rural towns often experience significant challenges such as lack of access to basic resources, social isolation, substandard and precarious housing conditions, discrimination, and labor and human rights abuses (see Fink 1998; Striffler 2005; Stuesse 2016; Keller 2019; Mares 2019; Thompson 2021).

On August 9th 2019, the U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) conducted massive raids on chicken plants in six small towns in rural Mississippi, resulting in 680 Latinx immigrants arrested, the largest single-state immigration enforcement operation in U.S. history (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2020). The raids and the detentions of Latinx immigrants were carried out in Bay Springs, Carthage, Canton, Morton, Pelahatchie and Sebastapol, significantly impacting these small rural communities located near Jackson, MS (see Figure 1) (Fowler 2019). As multiple media outlets from Mississippi and the national media have shown, these raids had devastating consequences for these communities, especially for the Latinx families and communities in Mississippi, which are still struggling to overcome the social and economic crises created by the detention of their community members. In addition to the impacts from the raids, Latinx immigrants are struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic that is disproportionately affecting communities of color.



Figure 1: Map of the Mississippi towns affected by the 2019 Immigration Raids. Source: Author, 2021.

This study examines the effects of the raids on the Latinx communities of the six communities mentioned above that were directly affected, and also in Forest (MS), a minority-majority community near Morton (MS), where many Latinx families live. Previous studies (e.g., Grey et al. 2009; Sandoval 2014) in the U.S. examining the effects from large immigration raids in small rural communities (e.g., Postville in Iowa) have shown the negative impacts that these significant disruptions have, not only within the immigrant communities but also on the overall wellbeing of the communities affected.

Additionally, this research provides an insight on community resilience strategies developed to overcome the problems created by the raids, to facilitate resources for Latinx families, and to create inclusive and welcoming communities. Existing literature highlights the relevance of community resilience, showing that it is critically important to identify community responses after immigration raids (see e.g., Sandoval 2014) and/or other disturbances (see Thompson and Lopez Barrera 2019a; 2019b) affecting rural communities in historically marginalized places like rural Mississippi. The identification and/or adoption of community strategies to foster inclusion and better access to resources among Latinx immigrants will contribute to the work of scholars, activists, policy-makers, and/or community residents working on similar problems and contexts in the U.S.

1.0 METHODS

Methods include fieldwork mapping and semi-structured interviews with community leaders, activists, organizations working with the communities affected, and individuals affected by the raids and involved in community responses. In-depth interviews were conducted with a semi-structured questionnaire to community members affected by the immigration raids and activists and organizations that have worked directly with the Latinx communities on their recovery after the raids and responses to overcome their challenges. Using purposive snowball sampling strategy, we identified other key actors (Esterberg 2002, Neuman 2003) actively involved in matters and decisions about solutions to problems generated by the raids on the Latinx communities affected.

Data collected through semi-structured interviews includes effects of the raids on the Latinx communities and the local responses that have been developed to overcome social (e.g. discrimination, isolation, stigma, etc.) and structural challenges (e.g., legal problems, institutional discrimination, socio-economic challenges, housing challenges, eviction, etc.) faced by members of the Latinx communities affected by the raids. This methodology allowed to identify whether and how community responses have contributed to the empowerment of Latinx community residents (i.e. making decisions about locally available resources based on their needs and desires), which is a critical factor to be considered looking at social integration of immigrants and the overall community well-being in a long-term. Additionally, secondary sources were used to complement the data collected from interviews on the impacts of the raids.

The innovative approach used for the design of this research to look at the disruptions created within these Latinx communities of Mississippi affected by the raids and the responses that could improve their wellbeing and social equity, will generate an important precedent that could inform future studies or actions to address similar problems affecting immigrants and/or other minority groups in rural communities in the U.S.

2.0 THE DAY OF THE RAIDS: DISRUPTION ON EVERYDAY LIFE

The disruption of the U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) conducted massive raids on August 9th 2019 had immediate negative effects and long term consequences not only for the affected immigrants and their families but significantly impacted the entire communities in Bay Springs, Carthage, Canton, Morton, Pelahatchie and Sebastopol. Community organizers who assisted the immigrant communities immediately after the raids emphasized the significant trauma and economic disruption for the all the affected small towns, where suddenly over six hundred households lost their main income.

"It was horrible, horrible. In these communities, the five communities that were most impacted by the raids are very small. Those poultry plants are the major employers and they arrested six hundred and eighty some odd people. Just over six hundred families suddenly without the main wage earner and no way for that person to replace those lost wages. So economically, it was devastating. ...And it took- There are still some people in detention now. And it's been a long time, well over a year since the raid. A lot of people, a number of people have been deported. It's it was just devastating, devastating to those families and also devastating to the to the economy in general of those towns, because they those plants were not able to replace those workers right away." (community organizer)

One of the most significant disruption and long-term consequences of the immigration raids are the trauma inflicted in the children of the affected immigrant families. Community members, activists and organizers described trauma in children as one of the worst consequences. The raids took place while most of the children were in class on their first day of school. When children started to return home from school, they found out their parents had been detained and they did not have anyone to care for them. Community organizers and activists describe these extremely traumatic events for the children and their detained parents:

"...It was the first day of school of the new school year. The children went off to school in the morning and without knowing that anything had happen, they came home in the afternoon to find one or both of their parents gone. And not knowing when they might be back. It was extraordinarily traumatic for those children and for their parents as well, knowing that their kids were left home and not knowing, you know, who was going to be taking care of them..." (community organizer)

The communities and local organizations were unprepared for massive raids like this one, there was not experience in the state of Mississippi with large scale immigration raids. As a local educator describe the day of the immigration raids and the school release of the children:

"It was a very difficult day for the children, suffering, they did not understand what was going on. The children said 'my dad was working, my mom was working'...That day our goal was to make sure the majority of the children could go to a home where they had a familiar face, an aunt, an uncle, a babysitter...We didn't have a plan." (educator)

Therefore, there was lack of plans in place to address the emergency of the situation involving families and children being separated. Amidst the chaotic and disturbing situation, grassroots community organizations and local churches

rapidly started to assist the children and separated families trying to find family caregivers for the children while their parents were in detention. However, two years after the raids, parents of affected children highlight the trauma and sadness these events still have on their children.

3.0 LATINX HOUSING INSECURITY AND COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES

This section explores housing challenges of the Latinx community and community-based responses after the immigration raids. Housing precarity in the Latinx community are augmented by barriers to access to affordable and adequate housing.

3.1 Housing Precarity

Latinx low-income households often experience rental cost burden and barriers to access to adequate and affordable housing quality. According to the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Affordable housing is generally defined as housing on which the occupant is paying no more than 30 percent of gross income for housing costs, including utilities." [1] Like in the rest of the United States, the 30% rule that defines housing affordability represents housing rental cost burden for low-income households because the remaining 70% of the household income is usually not enough to cover for their living expenses including food, healthcare, education, transportation and utilities, among other everyday expenditures. [2] Studies on housing affordability in the United States show that low-income households that dwell in low quality housing conditions tend to pay more than 50 percent of their income in housing. [3]

According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies, in 2021 the state of Mississippi has the highest concentration of renters that are behind housing payment in the nation, 27percent of renter households in Mississippi owes rental payment and are at risk of eviction notices (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2021, 4-5). Additionally, at the national level, more than 50 percent of Latinx household renters are cost-burdened households spending 30-50 percent (or more than 50 percent) of their income to pay rent (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University)

The barriers to access to adequate and affordable housing in the Latinx community are interconnected with their immigration status and their limited access to resources, resulting on access to a limited and deteriorating housing stock with unsafe and unhealthy conditions expensive to restore and maintain by landlords. Because of the housing demand of Latinx renters, landlords are able to make profit from dilapidated properties and take advantage of the situation. As a community organizer explains:

"...The houses are old and semi-destroyed. For the landlords the immigrant population, that came into the towns to work on the chicken plants, has been a blessing because landlords keep renting rundown and unmaintained properties..." (community organizer)

Paradoxically, this precarious housing stock become the primary rental housing supply for low income residents that need access to affordable housing (see figures 2 and 3). Housing precarity in the Latinx households is affected by the marginalization of the community normalizing the 'invisibility' of the Latinx housing precarity from public debate.



Figures 2 and 3: Affordable housing units in the towns affected by the 2019 Immigration Raids. Source: Author, 2021.

According to community organizers, a great number of the Latinx community in the affected towns lives in mobile homes typically placed in trailer parks (see Figure 4). Is common to observe two or three families sharing a housing unit. According to community organizations that advocate for the Latinx community, immigrants who rent housing have very limited options for affordable housing. Undocumented Latinx immigrants are not eligible for any benefits of any of the housing assistance or subsidized programs. This reality gives them very limited options and are forced to rent dilapidated properties enduring substandard housing conditions. As a community organizer mentioned, the are many of these houses that expose serious environmental and health risks.

"...Our community live in what we called the "trailas"... many of these houses are dangerous environments for the health, especially on drink water...there are issues of lead contamination..." (community organizer)

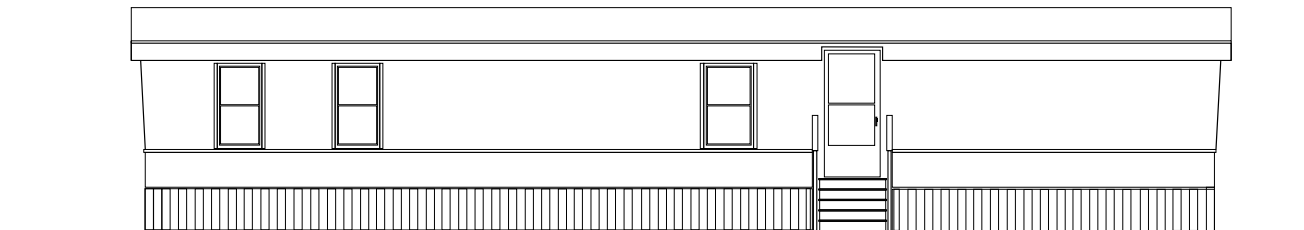


Figure 4: Mobile home units, typically rented by Latinx tenants, referred as "trailas" by the Latinx community. Source: Author, 2021.

3.2 Post-Raids Housing Adaptations: Community-Based Responses

Immediately after the raids, the Latinx immigrant community faced uncertainty and fear of deportation. Additionally, one of the major stresses for the Latinx community was to ensure access to basic housing and basic needs. For hundreds of Latinx households in the small towns where the raids took place, the immediate effects of the raids were the loss of jobs. In the majority of the Latinx families that were directly affected, their primary or sole income earner was detained and facing deportation. Additionally, there was a great number of families that were not able to return to work because of fear of detention. Although, many Latinx immigrants were not detained because raids did not occur during their shifts, they lost their jobs because their employers did not allow them to return to work. For families with both detained and non-detained family members, the raids represented a huge economic and financial disruption.

The loss of jobs and its financial disruption prompted a series of pressures on the housing situation of the Latinx community. In general, in any situation without a substantial safety-net, job loss is followed by household income loss. Next, the situation escalates to eviction notices and foreclosure notices. For the general population, there are subsidized housing programs that are able to assist renters to secure housing. However, the Latinx undocumented immigrants lack of access to any formal subsidies or housing assistance programs. Consequently, when Latinx undocumented immigrants are not able to afford their rent they are highly vulnerable to housing insecurity depending only on the landlord-tenant relationship. Community organizers have expressed that in the face of the raids some landlords made agreements with their tenants:

"...in the moment when everything happened, logically was a moment in which the landlords also collaborated...they made arrangements with their tenants. It is necessary to understand that our community doesn't live in 'casas señoriales' (fancy homes), is quite the opposite..." (Community organizer)

In the face of the impacts of the raids including family separation, involuntary displacement, income loss and financial burdens, community and grassroots organizations emerged to provide assistance to the affected Latinx families. A coalition of local organizations was formed with the support from organizations at the national level. This coalition coordinated efforts to provide legal assistance, access to basic needs and secure housing.

The local organizations quickly developed fundraising efforts and receive donations from all over the country to help Latinx families in need. These efforts allowed to provide temporary rent assistance funds to the families that were at risk of evictions. Temporary rent assistance was provided during 6 months after the raids to primary to households directly affected by the raids in two different ways: 1) to households that had family members detained, or 2) to households where family members had been detained and released with ankle monitors and consequently were not able to return to work.

"Many of those families are still living there, but without an income or without anything close to the income that they have before. And so if it had not been for the coalition and churches and individual donations that helped to get people's rent and utilities paid and kept food on the table for people, I don't know what would have happened to all those families. They would have been a real catastrophe. It was a catastrophe already, but it would have been unimaginable." (community organizer)

Although the rent assistance provided a fundamental solution for the recipient households, there were a great number of Latinx households that were not able to receive the rent assistance. These households involved family members who were not detained but they lost their job and income due to the raids. In many cases, the employers did not allow

workers to return to their workplace and Latinx workers experience fear of detention. Additionally, the rent assistance had a relatively short-term duration depending on the fundraised resources.

After six months of the raids, most of the resources were exhausted, and people with ankle monitors were still not able to return to work. These Latinx households and families were in precarious conditions of dependence and they had to adapt their housing solutions in different ways. One of the most typical housing adaptation strategies for Latinx families who were not able to afford the rent was to move with other family members or friends. Hence, this type of housing solution augmented the risk of overcrowding conditions on housing rental units that were already unmaintained.

"I know of people who have moved to others people homes because they were not able to pay their rent or because they don't have all the money for the rent. I know of people that have to share a house this way. A lot of families because of the same, because their father was detained or because their mother was detained because of the raids... or simply because now there is no place to work..."(Latinx community member detained by the raids and released with ankle monitor - translation by author)

Another effect of the raids on housing insecurity, was displacement of Latinx families from the affected small towns in Mississippi. According to community organizers, after the raids a great number of families left the state of Mississippi and relocated to other states where they had family members who could accommodate them.

"...A lot of people have left; a lot of people have moved to other states... but a lot have tried to find a way to continue subsisting."
(Latinx community member detained by the raids and released with ankle monitor - translation by author)

3.3 Housing Confinement and Public Space Avoidance

After the raids, the Latinx community was deeply traumatized. In addition to the struggle to access to adequate and affordable housing, the Latinx community experienced fear of using public space and access to basic service facilities. Community members expressed they avoided unnecessary exposure in public spaces, and they limited their presence to places they feel safe.

COVID 19 and the fear to immigration authorities exposed the Latinx lack of access to basic health care. Although, during the pandemic most of the Latinx workers were considered essential workers, they did not have any access to health care. The Latinx community was the first community affected by COVID-19 in the small-towns where the raids took place. A community organizer explained how the Latinx workers were considered essential labor during the COVID 19 lockdown and had to continue work in the chicken plants risking their health and wellbeing for the greater good.

"... the Hispanic community was the first affected in here. Because they had to continue to go to work. During the raids, they wanted to deport them from this country. During COVID they gave them a letter saying they were essential workers and if the police stopped them, they could show that letter because they must go to work... It is like a double standard, now with COVID they were essential...Because if they don't work there is no chicken in the table... So, hispanic community were the first ones that were infected..." (community organizer)

The post- raids avoidance of using public space due to fear of immigration authorities and discrimination was amplified by the public health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in the rest of the U.S, the barriers to access to adequate housing and health care became and continue to be critical issue for the Latinx community in Mississippi that endure overcrowding and substandard housing condition. As community organizers stated,

"I've heard the term "self-deport"...so I suppose in that way, lost their housing and they chose to leave...I also know many people who were confined to their home because of the trauma or fear now with COVID not having health care, housing becomes all the more important..." (community organizer)

"fear of presenting yourself to a to a medical facility and not knowing what's going to happen and then the ability to pay for it because you can't get insurance..."(community organizer)

The immigration raids of August 2019 traumatized families and worsened the existing difficulties the Latinx community endures on daily basis. In the towns of the raids, the Latinx community lack of access basic resources and were not prepared for a shock of the magnitude of mass immigration raids. In this context, grassroots community organizations emerged to provide short term emergence assistance and they contributed to expose the injustices, the trauma, and substandard living conditions the Latinx community was enduring in Mississippi.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Prior to the massive immigration raids, the Latinx community challenges were mostly concealed and absent from public debate in the state of Mississippi. The raids exposed and exacerbated the injustices the Latinx community were already enduring at the time of the raids; including their vulnerability to housing insecurity and evictions, their barriers to access

to basic services and their trauma and avoidance of using public space due to fear of immigration authorities and discrimination.

Although community-based resilient responses facilitated resources for Latinx families after the immigration raids, findings from this research suggest the need for a systemic approach and governmental commitment to address precarious housing conditions (overcrowding and substandard) and access to public space ensuring Latinx community's agency and their right to participate and transform the towns and the places they inhabit.

Finally, this study reveals barriers and the vulnerability of the Latinx community that could limit their community resilience and social integration in small towns in Mississippi. The extreme hardships and trauma caused by the massive immigration raids deeply impacted the whole community. As communities continue to experience the negative effects of immigration raids, it is important to develop grassroots initiatives that could allow communities not only to address their short-term needs but to thrive in the long-term future and to support immigrants in rural communities by trying to make communities in rural U.S. more inclusive, diverse, and welcoming.

REFERENCES

- Desmond, Matthew. 2016. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Esterberg, K. 2002. *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Fink, Deborah. 1998. *Cutting Into the Meatpacking Line: Workers and Change in the Rural Midwest*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Fowler, Sarah. 2019. *Where are my parents? School on standby to help children in aftermath of ICE raids*. August 08. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/08/08/ice-raids-mississippi-undocumented-workers-arrested-kids-worry/1952572001/>.
- Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. n.d. *Renter Cost Burdens by Race and Ethnicity*. Accessed November 2021. https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/ARH_2017_cost_burdens_by_race.
- . 2021. "The State of the Nation's Housing 2021." Accessed November 2021. https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard_JCHS_State_Nations_Housing_2021.pdf.
- Keller, Julie C. 2019. *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Mares, Teresa M. 2019. *Life on the Other Border: Farmworkers and Food Justice in Vermont*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Mark A Grey, Michele Devlin, Aaron Goldsmith. 2009. *Postville U.S.A: Surviving Diversity in Small-Town America*. Boston, MA: GemmaMedia.
- Migrant Legal Action Program. 2016. *Migrant Legal Action Program, Farmworker Housing*. Accessed August 22, 2018. <https://www.mlap.org/housing-1>.
- Neuman, W.L. 2003. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. New York.: Allyn and Bacon.
- Sandoval, Gerardo. 2014. "Immigrant integration models in "illegal" communities: Postville Iowa's shadow context." *Local Environment* 20 (6): 1-23.
- State of Mississippi Development Authority. 2014. "Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice."
- Striffler, Steve. 2005. *Chicken The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Stuesse, Angela. 2016. *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work on the Deep South*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Thompson, Diego, and Silvina Lopez Barrera. 2019. "Building collaborative governance and community resilience under socio-spatial rural disparities and environmental challenges." *Community Development Practice* 23: 8-16.
- Thompson, Diego. 2021. "Building and transforming collective agency and collective identity to address Latinx farmworkers' needs and challenges in rural Vermont." *Agriculture and Human Values* 38: 129–143.
- Thompson, Diego, and Silvina Lopez Barrera. 2019. "Community resilience and collective agency under significant changes in the natural and built environment: a community capitals framework approach." *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability* 24 (12): 1156-1177.
- U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. n.d. *Glossary of Terms to Affordable Housing*. Accessed February 23, 2021. <https://archives.hud.gov/local/nv/goodstories/2006-04-06glos.cfm>.

ENDNOTES

[1] U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development. n.d. *Glossary of Terms to Affordable Housing*. Accessed February 23, 2021, <https://archives.hud.gov/local/nv/goodstories/2006-04-06glos.cfm>.

^[2] Michael E. Stone, "Housing Affordability: One-Third a Nation Shelter-Poor," in *A Right to Housing: Foundation for a New Social Agenda*, ed. Rachel Bratt, Michael Stone and Chester Hartman (Philadelphia, PA : Temple University Press, 2006): 38–60; Michael E. Stone, "Shelter Poverty: The Chronic Crisis of Housing Affordability," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 20, no.1 (2004): 107–119; Whitney Airgood-Obrycki, Alexander Hermann, and Sophia Wedeen, "The Rent Eats First: Rental Housing Unaffordability in the US," *Joint Center for Housing Studies Harvard University* (January 2021): 1-36; Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 293-314.

^[3] Sung-jin Lee, Kathleen R. Parrott , and Mira Ahn, "Exploring Housing Challenges of Low-Income Minority Populations in the Southern United States," *Cityscape* (American Housing Survey, US Department of Housing and Urban Development) Vol. 14, no.1 (2012): 94.