

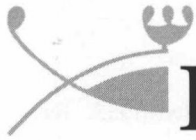


# LATINO IMMIGRANTS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE U.S. SOUTH

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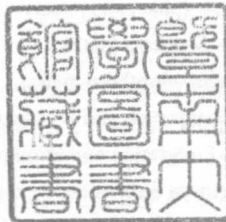
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# Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South

EDITED BY MARY E. ODEM  
AND ELAINE LACY

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# Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South

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AND CLARE LEE

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This collection grew out of a conference on Mexican immigration to the U.S. South that took place in Atlanta, Georgia, in May 2004. The conference was a collaborative effort of the Mexican Consulate in Atlanta and four universities in the Atlanta area: Emory University, Georgia State University, Kennesaw State University, and the University of Georgia. The scholarly gathering brought together Mexican and U.S. immigration scholars to discuss and share research about the recent and massive shift of Mexican immigration to new destinations in the Southeast. We were participants in the conference and edited the conference proceedings, which were published by the Institute of Mexico in Atlanta under the title *Mexican Immigration to the U.S. Southeast: Impact and Challenges*. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of the organizers and participants in this conference, especially Dr. Remedios Gómez-Arnau, the Mexican Consul General in Atlanta; Dr. Arthur Murphy of Georgia State University; and Lucila Ruvalcaba of the Institute of Mexico.

With the encouragement of editors at the University of Georgia Press, we've produced a revised and expanded collection of articles that focuses more broadly on Latin American immigration to the U.S. South. The volume includes a number of articles from the conference proceedings that have been extensively revised, plus three new chapters and an expanded introduction. We thank Nicole Mitchell and Derek Krissoff for their support and for sharing our enthusiasm about this project. We are grateful to Jennifer Reichlin and Deborah Oliver, whose careful editing has improved the clarity and flow of the individual chapters and the volume as a whole.

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And finally, we owe a big thanks to the contributors to this volume. They endured several rounds of revision and cooperated with our numerous suggestions and demands. We learned a great deal from their research on Latin American immigration in various southern contexts.

Elaine Lacy  
Mary E. Odem



# Introduction

MARY E. ODEM AND ELAINE LACY



In the last decade of the twentieth century the South became a major new immigrant destination in the United States. Largely bypassed in the last great wave of immigration to this country (1890–1920), the region is now home to millions of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This collection of essays examines the migration and settlement of the largest group of foreign-born newcomers to the U.S. South—those from Latin America. Globalization and economic restructuring in both the United States and Latin American countries have led to the mass migration to the southern United States of peoples from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and elsewhere in Central and South America.

In towns, cities, and suburbs throughout the Southeast, one now finds Mexican *panaderías*, *tiendas*, and restaurants, Colombian bakeries, Spanish-language newspapers and radio programs, Latino nightclubs featuring a variety of Latin music, and December processions in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Apartment complexes and mobile-home parks in the region are home to immigrants from Maya villages in the Guatemala highlands, urban neighborhoods in Mexico City, Lima, and San Salvador, and rural towns throughout Mexico and Central America. The mass migration of Latin Americans to the U.S. South has triggered an unprecedented series of changes in the social, economic, and cultural life of the region and inaugurated a new era in southern history. This multidisciplinary collection of essays explores these transformations in rural, urban, and suburban areas of the South from the late 1980s to 2008. Based on a variety of methodologies and approaches, the chapters present in-depth analyses of how immigration from Latin America is changing the U.S. South and how immigrants are adapting to the southern context.

The South has long been thought of as a distinct region in the United States, one with its own customs, political style, social relations, and cultural and religious traditions. The region's distinctiveness, many believe, was rooted in its history of slavery, secession, and defeat in the Civil War. After the war the South continued to follow a separate historical path marked by uneven economic development, rural poverty, and an entrenched system of white supremacy and

racial segregation. Since the 1960s the region has undergone sweeping transformations in its racial laws and practices, politics, and economic conditions brought about by the civil rights revolution and significant economic development and investment.

The pervasive changes have led many scholars and observers to ponder whether the South is, in fact, still a distinct region. Some argue that the region has been so thoroughly incorporated into the American mainstream that it is no longer useful to talk about “southern distinctiveness,” while others point out that the South continues to differ from the rest of the nation in noticeable ways, such as higher levels of political conservatism, evangelical Protestantism, and poverty.<sup>1</sup> The chapters in this book do not settle the question of “southern distinctiveness,” but they do illuminate one of the significant ways the region has been changing in recent decades. Learning how immigrants are adapting to life in the South and how southerners are reacting to the new immigration will contribute to the discussion of the changing nature of southern identity.

The South has been defined in different ways, depending on whether one is talking about the Old South, the Confederacy, the Jim Crow South, the Deep South, or the South as delineated by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. For purposes of this volume we define the South as those states that share a history of slavery and the legal institution of racial segregation and its undoing by the civil rights movement. Because of our interest in new immigration states we omit Texas and Florida, for they have a longer and different history of Latin American immigration. The remaining ten states—Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Kentucky—included only small populations of Latinos prior to the 1980s, made up mostly of Cubans who had fled their country’s revolution and Puerto Ricans. Beginning in the 1980s in Georgia and North Carolina, and in the 1990s for most other states, Latino numbers skyrocketed in the South, driven largely by mass immigration from Mexico, Central America, and South America (figure 0.1 and table 0.1).

Several studies have examined the rise of Latino populations and their impact on the South. The first edited collection on this theme, Arthur Murphy, Colleen Blanchard, and Jennifer Hill’s *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South* (2001), explores the incorporation of Latinos in key sectors of the southern economy and addresses developments in Texas and Florida as well as new immigrant destinations in Georgia and North Carolina. *Latinos in the New South: Transformations of Place* (2006), edited by geographers Heather Smith and Owen Furuseth, analyzes the ways in which Latino immigration is reshaping urban and rural places in the region, with a particular emphasis on North Carolina and Tennessee. The first book-length study of Latino immigrants in

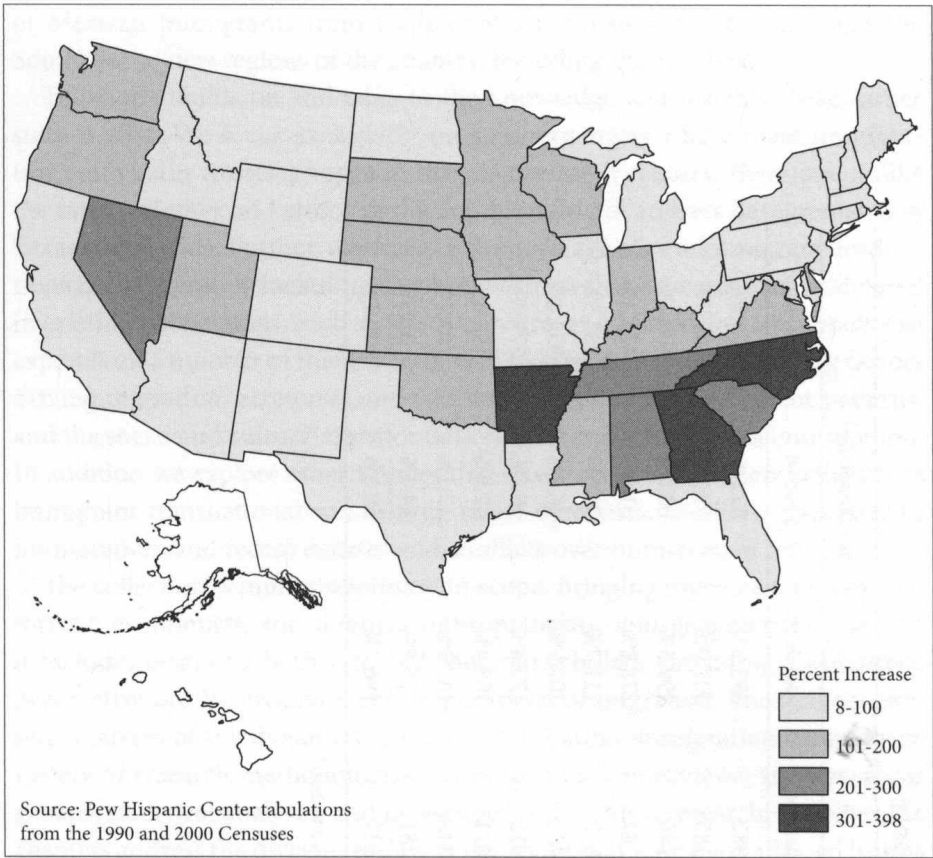


Figure 0.1. Hispanic Growth by State, 1990–2000.

the South, Leon Fink's *The Maya of Morganton* (2003), explores the changing face of labor and labor struggle in the North Carolina poultry industry.<sup>2</sup>

Recently published studies of the impact of globalization on the U.S. South also have addressed the theme of immigration. James Cobb and William Stueck's *Globalization and the American South* (2005) includes broad overviews of Latin American and Asian immigration to the region, while *The American South in a Global World* (2005), edited by James Peacock, Harry Watson, and Carrie Matthews, presents case studies of immigrant newcomers, from Mexican farmworkers in the rural South to Japanese professionals in North Carolina's Research Triangle.<sup>3</sup> Articles about Latino immigration to the region have also appeared in several collections that explore the new geography of immigration in the United States at the national level. For example, *New Destinations* (2005), edited by Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León, examines the dispersion



Table 0.1 Hispanic Population in Southern States, 1990–2006

State	Hispanic Population			% Change (+)		
	1990 census	2000 census	2006 survey	1990–2000	2000–6	1990–2006*
North Carolina	76,745	378,963	597,382	393.8%	57.6%	678.4%
Arkansas	19,876	86,866	138,283	337.0%	59.2%	595.7%
Georgia	108,933	435,227	696,146	299.5%	60.0%	539.1%
Tennessee	32,742	123,838	187,747	278.2%	51.6%	473.4%
South Carolina	30,500	95,076	148,632	211.7%	56.3%	387.3%
Alabama	24,629	75,830	111,432	207.9%	46.9%	352.4%
Kentucky	22,005	59,939	83,015	172.4%	38.5%	277.3%
Virginia	160,403	329,540	470,871	105.4%	42.9%	193.6%
Mississippi	15,998	39,569	46,348	147.3%	17.1%	189.7%
Louisiana	93,067	107,738	123,281	15.8%	14.4%	32.5%
Total South	584,898	1,732,586	2,603,137	196.2%	50.2%	345.1%

\* States are ranked by total growth in the Hispanic population from 1990 to 2006.

Source: U.S. Census, 1990, 2000, 2006 American Community Survey

of Mexican immigrants from traditional settlement areas in Texas and the Southwest to new regions of the country, including the Southeast.<sup>4</sup>

This book builds on and adds to the knowledge and insights these earlier studies offer. We focus exclusively on southern states where mass immigration from Latin America began in the late twentieth century; therefore, unlike the other volumes on Latinos in the South we do not address developments in Texas and Florida. Further, we broaden the coverage of new immigrant destinations in the South by including chapters on areas that have not been addressed in existing publications, such as South Carolina and Mississippi. This book also expands on a number of themes addressed in existing studies, including factors driving migration, economic and cultural incorporation, settlement patterns, and the social and cultural transformation that results from mass immigration. In addition we explore other themes that have received less attention, such as immigrant transnationalism, shifting racial dynamics, southern responses to immigration, and recent debates and conflicts over immigration reform.

The collection is multidisciplinary in scope, bringing together essays by historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers. Further, it includes essays by both U.S. and Mexican scholars, providing a binational perspective on the processes and implications of migration. The authors present analyses of the dynamics and impact of Latino immigration using a rich variety of research methodologies—ethnographies, interviews, surveys, focus groups, statistical analyses, and newspaper and archival research. Together the chapters address the diverse regions in the South that have been affected by this demographic change, including rural areas, small towns, medium-size cities, and large metropolitan areas.

Contributors explore a range of topics related to immigration in the various places where immigrants have settled: ethnic and racial tensions among poultry workers in rural Mississippi and forestry workers in Alabama; the “Mexicanization” of the urban landscape in Dalton, Georgia; the costs and benefits of Latino labor in North Carolina; the challenges of living in transnational families; Catholic religious practice and community building in metropolitan Atlanta; and the creation of Latino spaces in rural and urban South Carolina and Georgia. Before we delve further into the central themes and arguments of the book, it is useful to examine how the South became a major new immigrant destination.

### *Emergence of the South as a New Immigrant Destination*

Historically the South did not attract immigrants in large numbers until the late twentieth century, largely because of its slower pace of industrial development

and the presence of a large number of poor blacks and whites who provided a steady pool of low-wage labor. During the last great wave of immigration to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, small groups of immigrant workers from Europe and China settled in the region, but the vast majority headed to urban areas in the Northeast, Midwest, and West to become part of the industrial workforce, and to areas of expanding commercial agriculture such as the Southwest to work as farm laborers.

Since the 1980s, however, economic restructuring and growth and new immigration policies have drawn Latin American immigrants to the South in ever increasing numbers, turning the region into the most rapidly growing immigrant destination in the country. Economic globalization has contributed to the transformation of the southern economy, leading to the decline of some industrial sectors and expanding economic investment in others. Global competition has caused plant closings and layoffs in the steel, textile, and apparel industries as production has shifted to lower-cost areas in Southeast Asia, China, and the Philippines. At the same time, domestic and foreign corporations have been drawn to the South because of the relatively low taxes, cheap nonunion labor and significant government subsidies provided to attract investment. Foreign automobile makers (Mercedes, Honda, Hyundai) have built factories in Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In addition, poultry, pork, and seafood processing plants have opened throughout the rural South. The poultry-processing industry in particular has flourished in the region; nearly half of all poultry processing in the country is now concentrated in Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and North Carolina. Southern cities such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Greensboro, and Charlotte have become important locations for commercial banking and financial industries, high-tech research and manufacturing, and biomedical research. Many of the country's largest corporations now have their headquarters in the Southeast, including Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Bank of America, and Federal Express. Rapid population growth accompanied business expansion in southern cities, creating high demand in the construction and service industries and consequently a demand for low-wage labor.<sup>5</sup>

Economic globalization and neoliberal policies have also led to the restructuring of Mexican and Latin American economies, and created conditions that increased international labor migration. Driven by a complex set of social and economic forces, migration between Mexico and the United States has gone on continuously since the early twentieth century except for a brief hiatus during the 1930s. Mexican migration in recent decades has been shaped by neoliberal restructuring of the Mexican economy that began in the early 1980s. Pressured by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. government, Mexico embarked on a program of neoliberal economic reform that opened the

country to full participation in the global market economy. Led by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the Mexican government dismantled trade barriers, lowered tariffs, phased out subsidies, eliminated restrictions on foreign business ownership, and privatized state enterprises. President Salinas sought to institutionalize these reforms in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was signed by the governments of United States, Mexico, and Canada in 1994.<sup>6</sup>

NAFTA furthered the economic integration of Mexico and the United States and fostered transportation and communication networks between the two countries. The treaty's free-market policies, however, displaced workers and farmers in record numbers through the downsizing of government bureaucracies and state enterprises and land consolidation and capital-intensive production in rural areas. Mexican manufacturing suffered from the termination of tariff protections, and Mexican agriculture was damaged by the flood of cheap American food products into the country. Economic pressures mounted with the devaluation of the Mexican peso in 1994, resulting in lowered wages and increased unemployment. The subsequent economic crisis sharpened the need for income and credit throughout Mexico, in middle-class as well as poor and working-class households, and encouraged out-migration not only from traditional sending states but also from new sending states.<sup>7</sup>

In Central America globalization and economic restructuring along with political violence and unrest led to mass international migration during the 1980s and 1990s. U.S. and to a lesser extent European investment supported the expansion of agricultural exports and industrial development in Central America, particularly in Guatemala and El Salvador, which created new job opportunities but also led to the widespread displacement of small farmers and indigenous communities, prompting both internal and foreign migration. During the 1980s El Salvador and Guatemala were torn by civil wars as right-wing governments engaged in violent repression of labor unions, peasants, activist organizations, and indigenous communities. With the support of U.S. military aid and training, both El Salvadoran and Guatemalan military forces assassinated suspected militants and carried out large-scale massacres in regions thought to support guerilla forces. At the height of the violence, thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled their home countries, many heading for the United States. Deteriorating economic conditions in the aftermath of war combined with neoliberal economic restructuring in the 1990s created high levels of unemployment and underemployment and prompted large-scale migration from Central America.<sup>8</sup>

As economic destabilization pushed increasing numbers of Mexicans and other Latin Americans into the migration stream, changes in U.S. immigration

policy, principally passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, contributed to a major shift in the destinations of Mexican and Central American migrants from traditional destinations in Texas and California to new U.S. locations.<sup>9</sup> IRCA's key features included stronger border controls, new sanctions on employers who hired undocumented immigrants, and the legalization of immigrants who could demonstrate that they had resided and worked in the United States for at least five years. Under IRCA approximately 3 million immigrants gained permanent legal residence. Of these, 2.3 million were Mexicans; the remaining 700,000 included immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, Colombia, Haiti, and several other countries. Free to move about the country, increasing numbers of newly legalized immigrants left the crowded job and housing markets in California and the Southwest to pursue better opportunities elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

The new border controls under IRCA also had an impact on the geography and nature of Latin American immigration. The beefing-up of border enforcement diverted migrants from traditional crossing points in California (San Diego) and Texas (El Paso) to more remote desert regions in Arizona and New Mexico. Instead of stemming the flow of illegal immigrants, the new policies actually encouraged undocumented workers to stay for longer periods in the United States or to make the move permanent in order to avoid the now more costly and dangerous border crossings.<sup>11</sup>

The southeastern United States became a magnet for immigrant workers in the 1990s because of plentiful jobs for unskilled and semiskilled workers, a lower cost of living, and the relative absence (at the time) of anti-immigrant sentiment. Faced with a shortage of laborers, employers in the carpet, food-processing, and construction industries recruited Latino immigrant workers, initially from Texas and California and later directly from Mexico and Central America. The agricultural industry used both recruiters and temporary work visa programs to draw immigrant workers to the Southeast.<sup>12</sup> In Atlanta the construction trades relied heavily on the recruitment of skilled and unskilled workers from Mexico and Latin America to complete the numerous building projects for the 1996 Olympic Games.

By the late 1990s chain migration facilitated employer recruitment efforts. Once migrants from a certain sending area in Latin America concentrate in a new receiving area in the United States, a migration stream develops that channels further migration to the same location. As an immigrant community grows, it develops resources and social networks that ease the process of settlement and adaptation for new migrants.<sup>13</sup> Many migration channels have been established between sending communities in Mexico and Central and South America and receiving communities in the Southeast.



Together, economic globalization, new immigration policies, labor recruitment, and chain migration have produced a rapid and dramatic rise in Latin American immigration to the Southeast. Largely as a result of this migration, the Latino population in the region grew exponentially during the 1990s. The census reported Latino growth rates of between 300 and 400 percent for North Carolina, Arkansas, and Georgia, between 200 and 300 percent for Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama, and smaller but still significant growth rates for other southern states between 1990 and 2000 (see table 0.1). In comparison, at the national level, the Hispanic population grew from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000, a growth rate of 58 percent.<sup>14</sup> The dramatic growth of the Latino population in the Southeast has had profound social and economic consequences for the region.

Reflecting ongoing Latino migration, census estimates in 2006 reported continuing high Latino growth rates throughout the Southeast, with North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee leading the way into the twenty-first century. By 2006 the population of Latinos in the ten southern states had increased to a total of over 2.5 million, their numbers ranging from 46,348 in Mississippi to 696,146 in Georgia. Latino migrants continue to settle in a variety of localities throughout the Southeast. Many have moved to small towns and rural areas to work in agriculture and food-processing, while others have settled in metropolitan areas, with the greatest number in the sprawling Atlanta metro area (467,418 in 2006). Latinos have also concentrated in North Carolina's urban areas along the I-85 corridor, with 133,959 in Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill, 126,608 in Charlotte, and 114,120 in Greensboro–Winston-Salem as of 2006. Smaller but still substantial numbers of Latinos have settled in other southern cities, including Greenville, Birmingham, and Nashville (table 0.2).

Latino newcomers comprise a diverse group in terms of nationality, family status, socioeconomic background, race/ethnicity, and legal status, among other characteristics. Unlike traditional Latino immigrant destination areas, where one group initially dominated the immigrant community (such as Puerto Ricans in New York City, Mexicans in Los Angeles, and Cubans in Miami), Latino immigrants in the South come from a variety of countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean. The largest national group by far is Mexican, but the population also includes many Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Colombians, and Dominicans (table 0.3). Except in Virginia and Louisiana, Mexicans comprise over 60 percent of the total Hispanic population in the ten states, and Central Americans, mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, make up the second-largest group of Latinos everywhere but Virginia (where Central Americans outnumber Mexicans) and Kentucky (where Puerto Ricans outnumber those of Central American origin). South Americans from

Table 0.2 Hispanic Population, Selected Southern Metropolitan Areas, 1990–2006

Metro Area	Hispanic Population			% Change (+)		
	1990	2000	2006*	1990–2000	2000–6	1990–2006
Atlanta, GA	57,169	268,851	467,418	370.3%	73.9%	717.6%
Birmingham, AL	3,989	16,598	30,981	316.1%	86.7%	676.7%
Charlotte, NC	10,671	77,092	126,608	622.4%	64.2%	1086.5%
Greensboro-Winston-Salem, NC	7,096	62,210	114,120	776.7%	83.4%	1508.2%
Greenville-Spartanburg, SC	5,120	26,167	50,280	411.1%	92.2%	882.0%
Nashville, TN	7,665	40,139	72,664	423.7%	81.0%	848.0%
Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC	9,019	72,580	133,959	704.7%	84.6%	1385.3%

\* The 2006 data correspond to the revised metro-area definitions adopted by the OMB in 2003.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey

Table 0.3 Origin of Hispanic/Latino Population, Ten Southern States, 2006

State	Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban	Dominican Republic	Central American	South American	Other
Alabama (Hispanic pop. 111, 432)	63.8%	7.7%	4.8%	0.1%	13.6%	4.0%	5.9%
Arkansas (Hispanic pop. 138,283)	75.9%	1.9%	0.5%	0.5%	11.9%	2.1%	7.2%
Georgia (Hispanic pop. 696,146)	65.4%	7.4%	2.7%	1.3%	12.6%	6.1%	4.7%
Kentucky (Hispanic pop. 83,015)	67.2%	8.2%	7.7%	0.3%	6.3%	4.3%	6.1%
Louisiana (Hispanic pop. 123,281)	40.8%	6.6%	7.1%	1.7%	21.8%	5.9%	16.1%
Mississippi (Hispanic pop. 46,348)	65.6%	4.8%	2.6%	0.8%	13.8%	3.2%	9.3%
North Carolina (Hispanic pop. 597,382)	66.6%	7.5%	1.8%	1.2%	13.2%	5.0%	4.8%
South Carolina (Hispanic pop. 148,632)	63.0%	10.1%	1.7%	0.4%	11.6%	7.8%	5.4%
Tennessee (Hispanic pop. 187,747)	67.5%	6.9%	1.7%	1.0%	12.0%	4.3%	6.7%
Virginia (Hispanic pop. 470,871)	25.1%	10.9%	2.7%	1.2%	31.4%	18.3%	10.5%
Total (Hispanic pop. 2,603,137)*	57.8%	7.8%	2.7%	1.1%	16.3%	7.6%	6.8%

\* Total Hispanic population in 2000 in these ten states was 1,732,586.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey

Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela also contribute to the expanding Latino population in the South.

The region's Latino population includes legal residents, U.S. citizens, temporary workers, and undocumented immigrants. Some have migrated to the South from other regions in the United States, while others have arrived directly from Mexico, Central, and South America. They come from rural areas and small towns in Latin America, as well as major metropolitan areas like Mexico City, Caracas, Bogotá, and Guatemala City. A large number migrated without family members, leaving children, spouses, and parents in their home countries. Single male migration is especially common in the early stages of labor migration, but over time greater numbers of women and children have joined the migration stream to the South. Immigrants come from regions that have been sending migrants to the United States for generations and from new sending areas in Mexico and Central and South America.

## *Chapters and Main Themes*

### IMMIGRANT TRANSNATIONALISM

Latino immigrants in the South exhibit a range of migration patterns. Depending on a variety of factors—legal status, income, purpose for migrating, location of the nuclear family, and conditions in the homeland—migrants may live and work in the United States for several years before returning home, circulate regularly between their home towns and the United States, or settle for an extended period if not permanently in this country. Whether they are circular migrants, temporary workers, or long-term residents, most engage in various kinds of transnational activities that connect them to their countries of origin. Contrary to popular perceptions, theirs is not a simple story of leaving one country for good and settling in another, abandoning their former lives. As several authors demonstrate in this book, many immigrants develop strong social, economic, and/or familial ties in both places of settlement in the U.S. South and places of origin in Latin America. Transnational linkages are not new to today's immigrants, but technological developments in travel and communication have greatly facilitated their ability to sustain strong relationships with families and community members who live thousands of miles away.

In chapter 1 Elaine Lacy analyzes patterns of migration and settlement among Mexican immigrants in South Carolina, based on extensive field research and semistructured interviews with two hundred migrants. She finds that many Mexican immigrants in South Carolina lead transnational lives: even as they