

To Count and be Counted: Latinos and the 2010 U.S. Census

Project Description

Objectives

The Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund, in collaboration with the Princeton Center for Migration and Development, the Program in Latin American Studies, and the University Center for Human Values will hold a public forum focusing on the role of Latinos in the forthcoming 2010 Census. The event will take place on Wednesday, September 30, from 3:00 to 6:00 PM at Princeton University. The purpose of the forum is to promote dialogue and discussion about various positions taken by community leaders, representatives of Latino organizations, academics, and the public at large in relation to the implementation and effects of the 2010 Census on Latino individuals and families. In light of continued indifference and even hostility towards Latinos on the part of political figures and agencies, should Latinos be encouraged to boycott the 2010 Census as a gesture of defense and protestation? Should they, on the contrary, insist on being counted to make their presence known, demand justice, and advocate for immigration reform? These are the main questions the forum will broach.

A Population at Risk

Latinos in the United States—more than half of whom trace their origins to Mexico and Central America—tend to be poor and young. Approximately 5.4 percent of white families draw incomes below the poverty level but 15 percent of Latino families do. One third of Latinos are under the age of 18 and more than half are under 30 years old. The vast majority of first-generation Latinos are steadily employed in vital sectors of the economy such as agriculture, construction, the hospitality industry, landscaping, and other services. Although they toil hard and receive low wages, they constitute, from the point of view of employers, a highly desirable labor force. Immigrant children, by contrast, show signs of downward mobility. About half of Latino youngsters never complete high-school, let alone college. Girls and young women in the same population exhibit some of the highest pregnancy rates in the country. Latino youngsters are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than their parents and they constitute the fastest growing population behind bars.

Especially troubling in this troubling landscape are the unprecedented levels of hostility experienced by undocumented Latinos at the hands of the Department of Homeland Security in the post 9/11 era. Mexicans and Central Americans have been especially affected by massive deportations and confinement in detention centers where they are treated as threats to national security. The criminalization of immigrants has resulted in the separation of husbands from wives and mothers and fathers from children. Stranded after their parents'

removal from the U.S., thousands of youngsters now reside in detention centers where they must wear prisoner uniforms. Approximately three million children brought as minors to this country by unauthorized immigrant parents now languish without prospects in education and employment given their undocumented status. Having grown up in the United States, speaking only English and being fully American in terms of culture, many of those youths have been deported to countries they can't remember and where they do not belong. The harsh character of treatment against Latinos, especially the undocumented, is likely to usher in higher levels of marginalization and deviance. Neglect of and hostility against the Latino Community is thus threatening the formation of a new underclass. The proposed forum will take stock of that reality.

To Boycott or not to Boycott

More than a neutral procedure to assess the magnitude of the national population, the U.S. decennial Census is fraught with political, economic, and social implications. Historically, it has been a critical mechanism for the allocation of public resources. Especially affected are government agencies in states, cities, counties and municipalities characterized by the concentration of ethnic and racial minorities. Given their vulnerable status along almost every social dimension, Latinos experience an urgent need to be counted. Nevertheless, given the acute degree of harassment and marginalization that they have experienced in the post 9/11 era, many Latinos are likely to shun the Census for fear of detection, as a gesture of resistance against the draconian policies implemented by Homeland Security, or as protestation for the lack of immigration reform. In other words, *many Latinos simply do not want to be counted if they can't be treated as a population that counts.*

Latino advocates, community organizations and even some political figures are being forced to take sides in this debate. Some are involved in mobilization efforts to boycott the 2010 Census as a way to denounce abuses against Latinos and in order to protect those here without proper documentation. Others are concerned that a boycott, by further pushing Latinos into the shadows and away from social integration will cause more damage than good. It is at the crux of this exchange that *To Count and be Counted – Latinos and the 2010 Census* seeks to find common ground. By bringing together advocates, representatives of community organizations, academics, public officials, and members of the press we hope to generate constructive dialogue and give visibility to the challenges facing Latinos. The purpose of the forum is not to promote a particular point of view but to encourage dialogue and thoughtful analysis of the origins of discontent and possible avenues to increase the quality of life in the Latino community. Our main conviction is that attending to the concerns of Latinos is an indispensable requirement for strengthening the nation as a whole. It is in that spirit that the forum will take place.

Structure and format

The three-hour forum will be divided into two panels, each one hour and 20 minutes long, divided by a short recess. The first panel will center primarily on issues of Latino social

representation and political participation as well as public recognition of the issues Latinos face. Popular misconceptions will be addressed on the basis of facts and research. The second panel will focus more concretely on political action, including the benefits and disadvantages of a boycott. Alternative avenues for mobilization and effective dialogue with public figures will be explored.

Each panel will include the participation of three distinguished speakers, including activists, academics and public officials. Brief presentations on the part of the panelists will be followed by a general discussion. Questions from members of the audience and the press will be given extensive attention. We hope to summarize the conclusions reached at the forum and to make them widely available through the public media and the Internet.