

A Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Perspective on The Current Global Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how various U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous populations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the economic, health, social, and political impacts. Combining a review of scholarly literature on Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous populations in the U.S. with a reading of news reporting around how they've been affected by the pandemic, I discuss issues of labor production, health disparities, and migration. First, I outline literature that analyses the economic migration of the Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous to the United States. Next, I draw on recent media reporting to explore health disparities within this ethnic group prior to COVID-19. Third, I provide research notes on how the COVID-19 has affected U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous essential labor production in the meat, poultry, and agricultural industries. Finally, I close by reflecting on Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous experiences of and perspectives on the pandemic.

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Introduction

On March 13, 2020, my research and teaching situation changed, due to rapid increase of COVID-19 cases in the United States. The lockdown forced me to rethink the next stage of my research, and I decided to start compiling a list of primary articles and media soundbites on the topic of COVID-19. Being isolated from my university, teaching, students, and field research, I was brought back to my hometown of Oxnard, California, to assist my parents in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The city of Oxnard has a large Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population, which is mostly essential farmworkers and domestic workers. After much reflection on how I still could conduct research during this rapidly changing pandemic, a light bulb clicked, which led to changing my academic interest to focus on the sociological and political effects of COVID-19 within these Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous communities.

According to Social Ecology scholar Mike Davis: “The current pandemic expands the arguments capitalist globalization now appears to be biologically unsustainable in the absence of a truly international public-health infrastructure” (Davis, 2020 p. 14). The COVID-19 pandemic is the largest health crisis in the last 100 years (Barry, 2005; Davis 2020). According to Ed Yong:

In the first half of 2020, SARS-CoV-2—the new coronavirus behind the disease COVID-19—infected 10 million people around the world and killed about half a million. But few countries have been as severely hit as the United States, which has just 4 percent of the world’s population but a quarter of its confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. (Yong, 2020 p. 1)

By November 2020, the U.S. was recording over a million new cases each week. I began to wonder: Why does the United States have the most coronavirus cases and deaths? And how has it affected the various people-of-color and colonized communities? There are many obvious reasons why the United States has become a hotspot of the COVID-19 pandemic. One is that the current presidential administration failed in preparing and delivering a plan to handle and provide a solution to the pandemic. However, this political and social issue goes beyond the simple spread of a virus, encompassing the broader capitalist infrastructure (Klein, 2010; Harvey 2014; Davis, 2020), including the lack of health care, inadequate social programs, and economical inequalities. These overlapping, multiplying failures have caused COVID-19 to spread like wildfire in the United States (Matthew; 2015; Wingfield, 2019).

In this article, I examine how the various U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous populations have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on academic works on labor and migration, and the media archive I have been developing since the start of the pandemic, I will focus on the economic, health, social, and political impacts for this ethnic population. The main themes I address are labor production, health disparities, migration, and various other related social problems. I aim to show that the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on these populations is not happenstance, but a result of broader ideological forces, movements and political structures. The article proceeds as follows. First, I will outline literature that analyses the economic migration of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous people to the United States. Next, I will draw on media sources to provide an account of health disparities within this ethnic population prior to COVID-19. Third, I offer research notes on how the COVID-19 have affected U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous ‘essential’ labor production in the domestic, meat and poultry, and agricultural

industries. Finally, I close by reflecting on Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous experiences and perspectives of the pandemic.

U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Population Economic Migration to the U.S.

The historical geography of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous labor migration to the United States identifies links between economic and health inequalities (Soja, 1989). According to the 2010 census, 50.5 million of the nation's 308.7 million inhabitants are of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous origin (Ennis, Rio-Vargas, Albert, 2011). In 2017, this ethnic group had grown to over 60 million people, and it's possible that the outcome of 2020 census data collection could show the population has increased to over 70 million (Bustamante, Flores, and Shah 2019; Hayes-Bautista 2004; Hayes-Bautista 2017). The Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population have continually crisscrossed the imposed U.S./Mexico Border for survival, but especially in response to the demands of capital labor (Acuna, 2005; Gonzalez, 2004; Valdes, 2011; Gonzalez 2006; Valdes, 2000). For most of the 20th century, various Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous groups migrated to North America due to need for work and the quest for a better life (Gonzalez 2006; Acuna 2005; Valdes, 2000). As a result, massive labor migration of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous workers occurred to the Midwest, the East Coast, the Deep South, the Far West, and Pacific Northwest (Valdes, 1990; Gonzalez, 2004; Acuna, 2005; Valdes, 2011). However, the United States government enacted public policies that deported and marginalized these groups, forcing them to live in poverty and unequal living and social conditions (Hurtado and Sinha. 2016). By the mid 20th century, various social movements emerged to struggle against this political repression and promote their civil rights (Garcia, 1989; Molina, 2006).

By the 1980s, a new wave of civil wars and political repression emerged in Central America, which led to large migrations from El Salvador and Nicaragua to North America (Gonzales, 2011). Accordingly, it changed the demographics of the Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous cultural and social experience in the United States. During the last decade of the 20th century, new neoliberal policies emerged in Latin America, which led to the development of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) (Gonzalez 2006; Acuna 2005). The political outcome of these free trade agreements forced a new wave of massive migration and immigration settlements from Mexico and Central America.

In the early 21st century, the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population faces new economic and political challenges, which has led to the continuation of health disparities and the lack of quality health care (Gonzales, 2013). Meanwhile, the increase of the Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population has been used to create a culture of fear between the elite class and poor Anglo/Euro American groups, and has led to the construction of new anti-immigrant policies and economic inequalities. As a result, HR 4437 (2005-2006) and Arizona SB 1070, became the harshest anti-immigrant laws developed in first two decades of the 21st Century (Gonzales, 2013).

U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Population in Failing Health Care System

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population has been in the frontline of ‘essential work’. According to Jens Manuel Krogstad, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Mark Hugo Lopez:

Hispanics are more concerned than Americans overall about the threat the COVID-19 outbreak poses to the health of the U.S. population, their own financial situation and the day-to-day life of their local community. The spread of the coronavirus has the potential to hit many of the nation's nearly 60 million Latinos particularly hard. Although the Latino unemployment rate dipped at the end of 2019 to a near record low, many Latinos work in the leisure, hospitality, and other service industries – and they are less likely to have health insurance (Krogstad, Barrera, and Lopez, 2020 p. 1)

The Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population are still struggling from the 2008-2010 Great Recession. Angela L. Palmer-Wackerly et al. argues that this group has been dealing with various health issues well before the COVID-19 pandemic (Palmer-Wackerly, Chaidez, Wayment and et al., 2019). Likewise, according to Palmer-Wackerly et al., “The Latinx (Hispanic) community faces an array of negative health outcomes within the United States. The three leading causes of death for U.S. Latinx people are cancer, heart disease, and unintentional accidents,” (Palmer-Wackerly, Chaidez, Wayment, and et al., 2019 p. 1). These scholars have shown that health disparities have long been a major social problem within the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous communities.

Another major factor in Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous health outcomes is the failed United States health care system, which has been struggling to provide quality social services for citizens to live in a healthy environment (Hayes-Bautista, et al, 1988; Hayes-Bautista, 1997; Barr, 2019; Marmot, 2015). Medical health scholars, David E. Hayes-Bautista and Paul Hsu, recently prepared a report for the UCLA Health: Center for Study of Latino Health and Culture, in which they argued that health disparities and lack the health care for the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous

population was a pre-existing social problem prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hayes-Bautista and Hsu 2020). They state:

In California, Latinos are about twice as likely as non-Latinos to have no health insurance. Although the Affordable Care Act (ACA) put a significant dent in the percentage of Californians without health insurance, nonetheless from 2008 to 2018 the percentage of Latinos without health insurance remained twice that of other groups. (Hayes-Bautista and Hsu 2020 p. 1)

In a follow up argument, Tessa K. Novick, Katherine Rizzolo, and Lilia Cervantes show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting weaknesses within the United States health care system (Novick, Rizzolo, Cervantes, 2020). In this political context, it is not surprising the COVID-19 pandemic has swept almost unchecked within the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population.

Essential U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Domestic Workers

The combination of mass economic migration, U.S. demand for cheap labor capital, the securitization of borders, and the exclusion of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous peoples from access to adequate healthcare and social services has reached a crisis during the pandemic. During the Covid-19 lockdown, this group has not stop working due to being mostly ‘essential domestic workers’ (Krogstad and Lopez, 2020; Morin, 2020; Lopez, and Rodo, 2020). Maanvi Singh and Mario Koran note that “Latinos make up a large proportion of what is now considered the “essential” workforce of grocery store staff, restaurant workers, caretakers, cleaners and delivery workers, and are putting themselves at the frontlines of the pandemic” (Singh and Mario Koran p. 4). These workers have become high risk to contract COVID-19, due to the need for essential items

like food and other services for the massive United States population, particularly during the economic lockdown that occurred from mid-March to late May of 2020.

News media has reported widely on this population's vulnerability to contracting the virus. On May, 22, 2020, *ABC News Nightline* broadcast a special news report, which focused on how the Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population of Chicago, Illinois was dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a follow up, on July 17, 2020, *CBS News* Reporter Maria Elena Salinas hosted a one-hour news special that contextualized how COVID-19 pandemic has affected the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous essential working-class population (CBS News, 2020). A few days later, on July, 22, 2020, *ABC News Nightline* conducted a special news report hosted by Byron Pitts, which examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has been a hardship for the various Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous working-class communities in the United States. These mainstream news reports are primary examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic has become a social, political, labor, and health problem among this this population, particularly those working in the highly exposed and underpaid meat, poultry and farming industries.

Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Meat and Poultry Industry Workers

The meat and poultry industries have always been high-risk for Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous workers due to harsh conditions, visa vulnerability, and the lack of health safety inside processing plants (Wallace and Chen 2006). From mid-March 2020 to July 2020, however, the meat and poultry industry had a massive COVID-19 outbreak, which affected the majority of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous workers (Gamboa, 2020; Waltenburg MA, Victoroff T, Rose CE, et al., 2020; Hernandez, 2020). For instance, in early April, 2020, Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous meat

processing workers Saul Sanchez, 78, Eduardo Conchas de la Cruz, 60 and Tibursio Rivera Lopez, 69, died of coronavirus working at the JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, which caused this plant to shut down temporarily for cleaning and the testing of workers (Gamboa, 2020). According to NBC News reporter Suzanne Gamboa: “The deaths of at least three Latino employees from coronavirus at a Greeley, Colorado, meat plant are raising alarms about the safety of workers and the vulnerability of the nation’s food supply” (Gamboa, 2020 p. 1). To follow up, on June 10, 2020, Fort Worth Star-Telegram reporter Kristian Hernandez reported that a large number of U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Meat Processing workers Covid-19 cases emerged at the Quality Sausage Co., plant in west Dallas, Texas (Hernandez, 2020). Hernandez stated:

Immigrants and refugees are being disproportionately affected by the coronavirus, especially in states where meat processing plants have reported outbreaks, according to a recent study. As of June 9, at least 92 meatpacking plant workers have died in the U.S. Activist say up to 80 of workers at these plants are undocumented. (Hernandez, 2020 p. 1)

A month later, NBC News Reporter Suzanne Gamboa, reported that the Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous meat and chicken processing workers were the group most disadvantaged by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gamboa, 2020; Waltenburg MA, Victoroff T, Rose CE, et al., 2020). According to Gamboa: “Latino workers at meat and chicken processing plants have been the hardest hit by coronavirus, accounting for 56 percent of cases reported in plants in 21 states, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported” (Gamboa, 2020 p. 1). Simultaneously, Waltenburg et al., published a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) on Covid-19 cases among Meat and Poultry Processing Workers and Facilities from April to June 2020, which supported the growing evidence that workers of color were most affected the most by COVID-19.

Essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous Farmworkers

Like meat and poultry workers, the vulnerability of Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers to exposure to COVID-19 led to widespread concerns about the nation's food chain. According to reporter Yvette Cabrera: "As strawberry-picking season kicks into high gear in April and May, farmworker advocates fear that a lack of worker safety protections, combined with a lack of access to health care and crowded living conditions, could lead to a major COVID-19 outbreak in farmworker communities across California" (Cabrera, 2020 p. 2). As a result, there were many reports that farmworkers were the largest working-class group at high risk to contract COVID-19. For instance, essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers from the Yakima Valley in the state of Washington, have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (McCarty, 2020; De La Rosa, 2020; Shapiro, 2020; Wiltermuth, 2020). The Yakima Valley has become a major COVID-19 hotspot, due to the various outbreaks in the agricultural fields and processing centers (McCarty, 2020; Shapiro, 2020; Wiltermuth, 2020). According to Emily McCarty:

Yakima County has the highest per capita rate of COVID-19 infections on the entire West Coast, a distinction the community leaders blame on a slow response from the governor and state and local officials to demands for stronger health and safety protections for agricultural workers. The Central Washington county has a 26.5% positive rate among those tested; the state's average is 6%. (McCarty, 2020 p. 1)

In response, various essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers from seven produce warehouses conducted a strike from mid-May to mid-June 2020, due lack of COVID-19 prevention health resources and hazard pay for their sacrifices to work (Associate Press, 2020; McCarty, 2020; De La Rosa, 2020; Hoang, 2020).

During the month of June 2020, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis blamed essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers with the recent massive growth in COVID 19 cases in the state of Florida (Woods, 2020; Zaragovia, 2020; Ceballos, 2020). According to Chang, Conarck and Contorno (2020, p. 1): “Public health experts and aid groups are challenging Gov. Ron DeSantis’ assertion this week that migrant farmworkers are driving Florida’s record surge in COVID-19 cases—noting that state help with testing, face masks and educational outreach has been late to reach agricultural communities”. The reality is that Governor DeSantis failed to prevent the spread of this virus in Florida, due to his lack of concern and reluctance to provide testing during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a couple of months prior, organizer Gerardo Reyes from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, on CNN reporter’s Chris Cuomo news show, warned DeSantis that the slow response to the COVID-19 pandemic will increase the cases among the state farmworkers population (Cuomo CNN Prime Time News Show, 2020; CBS Sunday Evening News, 2020). Three months later, organizers from Coalition of Immokalee Workers conducted a follow-up interview with MSNBC that highlighted the large number of essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers in Florida that were impacted by Covid-19 (MSNBC, 2020). Moreover, Florida had become a major recent sunbelt hotspot, alongside the states of Texas and Arizona, due to lack of state government policies that would prevent the spread of Covid-19 among the state’s population.

On June, 25, 2020, 188 essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers on H-2A visas living in the migrant camp Villa Las Brisas in Oxnard, California tested positive for COVID-19 (Rode, 2020; ABC 7 New Staff, 2020; Bravo, 2020; Brest, 2020; Wenner, 2020). Ventura County Star Newspaper reporter Erin Rode stated: “By July 7, a total of 204 people out of 216 had tested

positive at the dorm-style facility that houses up to five farmworkers in each room. But 154 workers who previously tested positive were released Tuesday after remaining isolated for the required time and remaining symptom-free” (Rode 2020 p. 1). To date, this was largest COVID-19 outbreak that had affected essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers in the United States. On a different note, during month of August, three critical mainstream news report emerged to focus on the affected of farmworkers in the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, on August 8, Victoria Knight, NPR reporter, provided a critical assessment on how Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Knight, 2020). A day later, NBC Nightly News hosted Lester Holt with correspondents Gadi Schwartz and Guad Venegas, conducting a news segment on how Covid-19 was affecting the essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers population. (NBC Nightly News, 2020). Finally, a few days later, on August 14, correspondent Schwartz conducted a second segment on essential farmworkers and COVID-19 health resources in the Central Valley of the state of California (NBC News, 2020). These reports showcased how essential Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous farmworkers had been impacted the most by COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The health, economic and social effects of COVID-19 on the U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population make clear how the U.S. state has not provided all workers equal access to social and health services. The pattern of the virus’s spread shows how the state forces various poor peoples to leave their home to work in unsafe environments. This large ethnic group is at the highest risk to attain COVID-19, due to being in frontline and ‘essential’ occupations, such as meat and poultry processing or agricultural—industries in which many people work in dangerous

conditions, with pre-existing health issues but without health insurance. And the past few months demonstrates how this current health and economic crisis is using political scapegoating on this ethnic population: these people must work, as they are ‘essential’ to the economy, but if they get sick while on the job, they are to blame for the virus’s spread.

This pattern of infection cannot be separated from the broader politics of immigration in the U.S. As I discussed, Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous peoples have long been forced to migrate to the U.S, fleeing civil wars and seeking economic opportunity. The U.S. state treats them, on the one hand, as criminal, as a danger to society, deserving of incarceration and the application of harsh immigration policies. This situation has left many millions of people in precarious positions within the U.S., eking out a living in some of the poorest working conditions. On the other hand, however, as the policy response to the pandemic has revealed, they are also, simultaneously, considered ‘essential’ workers within the national economy, working in the fields and meat processing plants that provide the nation its food. This leaves them doubly vulnerable to the virus: not able to stay safe at home, but forced to work in often exploitative, always low-paying, unskilled work, and without healthcare.

The upcoming presidential administration needs to provide social, health, and economical programs to this ethnic population, in order to change the direction of the COVID-19 global crisis. A strong national plan of action to combat COVID-19 will challenge the current political and social climate of the ongoing presidential administration. Finally, a fully united U.S. Mexican and Latina/o Indigenous population will help provide organic problem-solving solutions to

contend the current COVID-19 crisis, and to lead to a better quality of life for their community's social, economic and environmental settings.

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