



2007

El Barrio: Latino Relationships in North Philadelphia and Impacts on Puerto Rican Businesses

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Abstract

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Keywords

Urban Studies, Philadelphia, Latino

Disciplines

Social and Behavioral Sciences | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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“With the presence of racism, we [Latinos] cannot achieve anything in Philadelphia. We will remain in the same situation if racism and tension among us does not end. Racism is the superior thing here in Philadelphia. It is what defines the negative situation among Latinos. We have a huge problem with identity...”

-Jaham, a Venezuelan Grocery Store owner in the Golden Block



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Fall 2007
Urban Studies 400
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North Philadelphia is not only a cultural haven but also a center of great Latino tension. Hispanics are divided politically; yet do not realize that these tensions are slowly tearing the community apart. Community leaders and residents do not publicly address the issue and are often hesitant to talk about it. With an already divided community and a fast growing community of new immigrant businesses owners, how are Puerto Rican businesses affected by these changes?

The aim in doing this thesis is not only to better understand how Latinos in North Philadelphia interact with one another but to also understand why so many Puerto Rican businesses have closed and if they have been pushed elsewhere due to any Latino tensions. Through interviews with community leaders and residents as well as various trips to North Philadelphia, I will attempt to understand what factors influence tensions among Latinos and establish the link between Puerto Rican businesses.

Contents

Abstract	2
Preface	4
Introduction	5
Brief History of Latinos in Philadelphia	6
Literature Review/Theoretical Framework	9
Methodology	15
Data	17
Analysis	24
Conclusion	34



I. Preface

As a half Puerto Rican, half Cuban woman who spent much of her life visiting family in Puerto Rico and who traveled to Cuba, my only understanding of negative relationships between Latinos stemmed from my grandmother's perspective in the Bronx. As the only Latina adolescent in my neighborhood in Chevy Chase, Maryland, I was unfamiliar with Latino relationships and the struggles that small Puerto Rican businesses owners must face in impoverished neighborhoods. Now a senior at the University of Pennsylvania and only thirty minutes away from a predominately Latino community in North Philadelphia, I felt it was my chance to truly witness and analyze these relationships, shed light on social issues in the *barrio*, and understand Latino tensions and their subsequent impacts on Puerto Rican businesses.

My grandmother is a Puerto Rican native who came to New York City searching for a better life and to escape the ubiquitous poverty in Puerto Rico. Working in factories to pay her way through college my grandmother seems to have achieved the "American Dream." Almost everyone in her neighborhood in Spanish Harlem was Puerto Rican in the 1950s, 60s and, 70s. Many of these individuals owned successful *bodegas* (small corner grocery stores) in the neighborhood. Puerto Rican flags hung from almost every apartment window and Tito Puente's music seemed to silence the sounds of horns and crime in the city streets. When Dominicans began entering the neighborhood in the 1980s and 1990s, my grandmother's demeanor and comfort level drastically changed. When Dominicans started opening up *bodegas* and entering the fruit trade, many Puerto Ricans felt threatened, fearing that their personal businesses would be compromised. As

businesses began to turn-over and the city's demographics slowly changed, some Puerto Ricans' fear manifested into dislike for Dominican culture. My grandmother and her Puerto Rican neighbors still feel threatened by the presence of new Latino immigrant groups, fearing that they will take away more jobs and bring more crime to the neighborhood. My grandmother refused to get my mother a birthday cake from the local bodega on her street corner because "Dominicans made it." Although my grandmother's conclusions about other Latino groups are completely absurd, she is the reason why I chose to formulate this research question and is the individual who acknowledged that Latinos in the United States are not united...

II. Introduction

Once upon a time in a *barrio* far, far away...

...Far from Penn's campus, far from Center City and very far from the trendy Olde City, there lived a community of Latinos in North Philadelphia faced with many social issues. The blaring salsa music in the Golden Block, two streets of Latino businesses between 5th and Leigh Streets, serves as a brief distraction for the crime and violence in the neighborhood. Vibrant cultural murals created by Taller Puertorriqueño, allow outsiders to perceive the neighborhood's inhabitants as happy individuals who have made the crime and devastation into a home. Many Latinos are unhappy with the neighborhood they live in and are looking for a way to economically develop the neighborhood so Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, and other South American immigrant groups can live together in harmony and one day become immune to the crime.

Philadelphia has maintained its reputation as an immigrant haven due to the influx of European immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries to Latino immigrants who have entered the city seeking greater economic opportunities. Historically, immigrants have been responsible for the revitalization of Philadelphia- opening businesses, contributing to the economic growth of the city, participating in the workforce and spreading cultural ideas and practices. As groups climb up the social and economic ladder, newer immigrants are faced with greater obstacles and typically reside in the low-income neighborhoods older immigrant groups once claimed. In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Puerto Ricans searching for greater economic opportunity moved to North Philadelphia and established the *barrio*, an area with a traditionally large concentration of Puerto Ricans. Slowly Dominicans, Colombians, Mexicans and Guatemalans all of whom were also hoping to achieve the “American Dream” made Philadelphia their home as well. While much is known culturally about each Latino immigrant group in North Philadelphia, little is known about the collective relationship between these individuals.

Through interviews and interactions with community members in North Philadelphia, I will attempt to understand how Latino groups interrelate in the *barrio*. I will discover the root causes of racial tensions and analyze how these tensions impact Puerto Rican small businesses. What are the relationships between Latino groups in the *barrio*? How have these relationships (both negative and positive) in North Philadelphia impacted small Puerto Rican businesses?

III. Latinos in Philadelphia

Puerto Ricans have deemed Philadelphia home even before 1989. Merchants, cigar makers, and political exiles seeking to escape the Spanish colonial rule over the

island came to Philadelphia by steamship in the late 1800s. At the time, many Puerto Ricans worked on the railroads, in canning jobs, and as farm workers (Whalen, 9, 2006). When Puerto Rico became a United States colony in 1917, an even greater influx of Puerto Ricans legally migrated into the city (Whalen, 8, 2006). In the years after World War II, Philadelphia became the city with the third-largest Puerto Rican community and had been shaped by its Caribbean residents' cultural institutions and community organizations (Whalen, 9, 2006).

Mexican immigrants entered Philadelphia in the 1910s and 1920s from Mexico and Texas to work in construction and agricultural industries. In the 1970s, a small portion of Mexicans established businesses in Philadelphia. Another wave of Mexican immigrants entered Philadelphia from Mexico in the 1990s to perform service work and began opening businesses around the city. From 1998 and onward, Mexicans from Mexico and New York entered Philadelphia and have established an enclave in South Philadelphia (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

Before 1990, there were very few Dominicans living in Philadelphia, however the community experienced an enormous growth when many left New York in search of affordable housing and safer neighborhoods (Philadelphia Historical Society). In the 1990's, Dominicans began establishing *bodegas*, travel agencies, money houses and other businesses in North Philadelphia. Many of these immigrants were later reunited in Philadelphia with family members from the Dominican Republic who were also searching for a better life (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

Among the oldest Latino groups in Philadelphia, Cubans have been linked to the city from the 18th and 19th century and onward through trade. The majority of Cubans

who entered Philadelphia in the 19th century were pro-independence exiles, merchants, cigar makers, students and traders. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuban exiles entered the city to study, although a large portion relocated to Florida to reunite with family members. Many Cuban social and cultural groups remain active in Philadelphia although the Cuban population has declined (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

To escape terrorism and violence in their native country, many Colombians immigrated to Philadelphia, the first wave beginning in the 1960s. Due to changes in the 1965 Immigration Act, some Colombians intermarried with other Philadelphians and established Colombian enclaves in Olney and Feltonville. A second wave of Colombian immigrants entered the city in the last ten years to escape the corruption and violence in Colombia and to seek greater educational opportunities as many other Latinos had done before them (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

The percentage of Central American immigrant groups in Philadelphia was relatively small before the late 1970s and 1980s when political conflicts, civil war and United States interventions in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, made life insufferable(Historical Society of Pennsylvania). Since the 1990s, more Central Americans have entered Philadelphia seeking “permanent” and temporary opportunities, many of whom are refugees or asylum seekers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

The smallest group of Latino immigrants in Philadelphia is South Americans. While privileged South American revolutionaries, merchants and scholars visited Philadelphia in the 18th and 19th century, a very small percentage has called Philadelphia home after the Nationality act of 1965. Colombians, Bolivians, Venezuelans, Paraguayans, and Uruguayans have settled in Philadelphia after the 1990s due to

globalization and political instability in their native lands (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

II. Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

How do established immigrants groups feel when newer immigrant groups move into “their” neighborhood? *Power-threat* is an interesting sentiment, coined by Oliver (2003) as “the threat of loosing one’s social privilege and anger as the size of a proximate subordinate group increases” (Oliver, 568). According to Deux, these emotions often result in a need to preserve one’s own identity by moving out of the neighborhood due to threat. Deux states that Latino groups fear that outsiders group them into the same category as other Latino groups and they in turn must break-away. (Deux, 128). Power-threat is an interesting theory which can explain the migrations of individuals in and out of low-income neighborhoods.

Root Causes of Latino Tension

Much tension among Latinos has manifested politically. Author Jose E. *Cruz’s Identity and Power: Puerto Ricans Politics and the Challenge of Ethnicity* explains how Puerto Ricans have isolated themselves politically from other groups especially in the 1970’s and the reasons behind this isolation. Although Cruz’s research on the Puerto Rican community was based in Hartford, Connecticut, many parallels can be drawn between the urban Puerto Rican community in both Philadelphia and Hartford specifically in regards to deindustrialization and demographic changes. With the loss of manufacturing jobs in urban industrial areas, changes in demographics, political reform and changes in business patterns, Puerto Ricans were able to organize as a group and

facilitate political action (Cruz, 156). Before the migration of other Latinos into urban centers, Puerto Ricans competed with African-Americans, forming what is defined by Cruz as “identity politics,” or a group or alliance of ethnic individuals united across political lines (Cruz, 156). The emergence of Puerto Rican political organizations in the 1970’s in Hartford, encouraged Puerto Ricans to use the electoral process, focus on mainland issues, address daily, urban issues and exemplify leadership within the community. One similarity between Hartford and Philadelphia addressed by Cruz is that of Puerto Rican political isolation and exclusivity that defined the 1970s: “The existence of a distinct ethnic enclave facilitated political mobilization but did not prevent the development of social and political connections with other similarly concentrated groups” (Cruz, 159). It is evident today according to many leaders and residents, that this political isolation continues to occur in North Philadelphia.

Tensions among Latinos in Philadelphia not only stem from political disagreements and isolation but also from a changing labor force and newer immigration patterns. Puerto Ricans in the 1960s did not want to work in the same industries as newer Latino immigrants because they felt their American citizenship should exempt them from low wages. A 1969 study by Virginia Seplowin provides national information about immigrant success rates and Puerto Rican attitudes towards work and society while Whalen (2001) speaks specifically about Puerto Rican responses to other Hispanics in Philadelphia communities. According to Seplowin, mainland Puerto Ricans in the United States have been known to “reject job training” based on pride: “They often do not know how to cope with urban bureaucracy: ignorance, fear, or pride keeps them from utilizing the, albeit constrained community services. Their ‘strangeness’ triggers hostility and

rejection on the part of the city dweller; vested interest exploits that difference”(Seplowin, 8). Although Seplowin is not specifically referring to the Philadelphia Hispanic community, she makes it clear that this was a common trend among urban Puerto Ricans. Whalen, who studies the history of the Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia from the 1960s-late 1980s, states that mainland Puerto Ricans in the 1970s were jobless because they insisted on being paid the minimum wage, unlike many newer immigrant groups who were illegal and were desperate for jobs regardless of the pay: “So if a Mexican is working for fifty cents an hour and the Puerto Rican is working, he wants five dollars an hour, so they’re going to give the Mexican [the job]. That’s why you see Puerto Ricans on the street without work (Whalen, 229). Puerto Rican joblessness and Mexican employment has caused some tension among the Puerto Rican community, many feeling as though they have been robbed or kicked out of the labor market (Whalen, 229). Although these sources both describe tensions in the Latino community caused by joblessness and immigration, neither Whalen nor Seplowin form a direct correlation between these tensions and the relocation of Puerto Rican businesses and movement out of the *barrio*.

Stereotypes about Latinos, specifically Puerto Ricans have been a large part of Latino culture in Philadelphia but have not affected Puerto Rican businesses. An interesting case study by Goode (1998) presenting comparisons between the Korean and Puerto Rican community in North Philadelphia reveals how stereotypes impacted the support of businesses in Philadelphia. Stereotypes about Puerto Rican incompetence and laziness continue to linger in North Philadelphia today especially reinforced by their Latino counterparts.

In Philadelphia, mainstream discourse, Koreans and Puerto Ricans collectively fall on different sides in the pluralistic/racialistic discourse of middle class dominated institutions. Korean success is exaggerated and ethnicities as a reflection of a culture of hard work and family values, while Puerto Rican “failure” is racialized and attributed to the immutable immorality or the underclass (Goode, 2).

Movement out of the *Barrio*

Some sources suggest that Puerto Ricans were forced to move out of Philadelphia neighborhoods not because of tensions with other Latinos but due to gentrification and deindustrialization. Cohen, who conducted his research about the Philadelphia Hispanic community after the decline of the manufacturing industry, believes that deindustrialization was the cause of Puerto Rican isolation from other groups, while Whalen (2001) sites the gentrification of Spring Garden as a major factor behind the relocation of Puerto Rican stores. Presenting gentrification through a series of narratives Whalen (2001) is able to convey how Puerto Ricans felt as though they were physically pushed out of the neighborhoods due to increases in housing prices. According to Cohen, thirty-five percent of Puerto Ricans were displaced due to deindustrialization, resulting in ethnic isolation and violence: “Puerto Ricans also demonstrated ethnic solidarity among themselves. At the time of our fieldwork, a number of violent incidents in the city considerably heightened both awareness of Puerto Ricans and tensions between them and others in the city” (Cohen, 242). It becomes clear that tensions arose *after* the closing of many businesses and was not cause for the actually closing of these Puerto Rican businesses.

Although many Puerto Rican *bodegas* have closed in the past thirty to forty years, it is necessary to see how these businesses shaped the community as well as how the

community was affected by the closings of small businesses. Miguel Angel Vazquez's study entitled *Factors Determining the Selection of Food Stores Among Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia*, provides information from the 1960s about how Puerto Rican *bodegas* in Philadelphia positively impacted the Latino community. The most obvious reason for selecting [Puerto Rican] *bodegas* was the "availability of all kinds of Spanish food products" (Hernandez, 53). Other reasons include credit granted, Spanish spoken, close relationships with owners, the close proximity to people's homes, the welcoming of food stamps and the low prices. Close relationships between Puerto Rican women and bodega owners were reinforced due to cultural ties. Money lending and the acceptance of food stamps, which is rare today, were both major factors in determining the success of Puerto Rican *bodegas* and the development of close relationships between owners and patrons. When shopping and interacting with the owner of a bodega, patrons could feel as though they had stepped back into Puerto Rico: "This seems to be a common practice between bodega owners and customers in Puerto Rico." (Hernandez, 56). The disappearance of many of these *bodegas* due to competition from larger supermarkets, gentrification and the opening of Dominican *bodegas* has influenced the early movements of Puerto Rican communities out of the *barrio*.

The success and ability to have a small business financed in the United States is directly proportionally to the owner's educational attainment level. Mainland Puerto Ricans often experience difficulty financing their small businesses as compared to other immigrant groups. This information is necessary to assess how small Latino businesses flourish and if there is competition as a result of successful businesses in the *barrio*. A 2000 study from the *Quarterly Review of Economics & Finance*, by Yolanda Ruiz-

Vargas explains how Puerto Rican small businesses in the United States are financed as well as competition with other immigrant groups. Today, both mainland Puerto Ricans and native Puerto Ricans are inadvertently competing with immigrant groups due to low investment return potential. Education plays a vital role in determining how successful a small business will become. Puerto Ricans in urban settings like North Philadelphia have statically lower educational attainment levels than other immigrant groups, impairing their ability to have successfully financed businesses : “About 42.9% of the immigrant business owners have completed college or have earned an advanced degree, in comparison with 35% of Puerto Ricans and 14.3% of mainland Puerto Ricans. This supports the notion that education is an important determinant in funding across groups. Also immigrants have a tendency to organize their businesses as corporations compared to other groups” (Ruiz-Vargas, 5). Unfortunately, “Small Business Financing Sources between Immigrants and Natives in Puerto Rico,” Does not specify who constitutes “immigrant groups.” The reader is unaware if “immigrants” in the study who are competing with Puerto Ricans are Latinos or non-Latinos.

Today, Korean businesses in Philadelphia and New York City have slowly become work environments for Latinos, specifically Mexicans and Ecuadorians. To present the theme of negative Latino relationships, it is necessary to use New York City as a case study as the Latino population there has experienced tension for years. Dae Yong Kim’s journal article entitled “Beyond co-ethnic Solidarity: Mexican and Ecuadorian Employment in Korean-owned Businesses in New York City,” makes a poignant claim that Latino relations in the workplace are beneficial to both groups. While he does not provide information on inter-Latino relations, the information is applicable to

Korean businesses in Philadelphia which now have predominate Latino workers (Dominicans in the case of West Philadelphia): “On the one hand, ethnic employers can make use of a large pool of cheap co-ethnic workers, while co-ethnic employees, on the other hand, can capitalize on reciprocity, on-the-job training, managerial and supervisory positions, and future self-employment” (Kim).

IV. Methodology

This project was an attempt to shed light on the Latino community in North Philadelphia, to better understand Puerto Rican businesses and to comprehend interactions between different Latino groups specifically those of low socio-economic backgrounds. The first step in conducting research was the acknowledgement that negative relations among Latino groups exist in North Philadelphia. *Philadelphia Inquirer* articles from the late 1990s were able to identify tensions among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans, Mexicans, and South Americans by describing root cause of tensions and information about small Puerto Rican businesses in North Philadelphia.

The most important method used to obtain research on Latino relationships and their subsequent impacts on Puerto Rican businesses was to venture into North Philadelphia and target specific neighborhoods with large Latino concentrations. The use of Philadelphia Neighborhood Information System was critical in locating Hispanic neighborhoods as well as familiarizing myself with the economic, social, and demographic information in each neighborhood. Hunting Park, Kensington and the 7th Councilmatic District were all identified as regions with very high concentrations of

Latinos. The main site of my research was the area in and around the Golden Block, including Erie Avenue from 12th street to 5th street and 5th and Lehigh streets.

My core research was derived from interviews with Latino community leaders, North Philadelphia residents, Latino activists in Philadelphia and Hispanic business owners. I was able to interview former councilman Angel Ortiz, a Philadelphia resident of thirty years and a strong supporter of Latino unification in the city; Dominic Vitiello, a Penn professor very familiar with North Philadelphia; Bill Salas, the president and founder of HACE (Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises), a non-profit organization which strives to provide economic development and neighborhood stability in Philadelphia; Danilo Burgos, President of the Dominican Grocer's Association who is directly involved with the bodega community in Philadelphia; Roberto Santiago, Executive Director of Concilio with extensive knowledge about the Puerto Rican and Dominican community; Jaime Figueras, a Cuban refugee and current staff member at Concilio who was able to share his experience as a member of one of the smallest Latino groups in Philadelphia; Nelson Diaz, a judge and Latino activist in the 1970s and 80s; Councilwoman Maria Quinones Sanchez' staff members who are also Puerto Rican and residents of North Philadelphia; and several business owners in the Golden Block including a Dominican Laundromat owner who asked to remain anonymous and a Venezuelan restaurant owner named Jaham, who has witnessed violence and tensions first hand in the *barrio*. I often presented business owners with national statistics from the Pew Hispanic database, to grasp how national issues compared to North Philadelphia as well as the individuals' reactions to the data.

I made several journeys to North Philadelphia to conduct interviews and take pictures, making conversation with many Latino residents on the bus and train on my way to the *barrio*. I ate at several restaurants to understand relationships between owners and their staff. At Pura Vida for example, a Guatemalen-owned restaurant about a mile south of the Golden Block on 6th street and Fairmount Ave I was able to converse with kitchen staff.

V. Data

Background and Demographics

To provide necessary information about the *barrio* it is necessary to define the *barrio* and its barriers. Former city councilman Angel Ortiz, who has worked hard to unify the Latino community for twenty years, defines the traditional *barrio* as “the area from 8th and Gerard to Kensington up to the boulevard (5th street) and a little farther northeast. District seven is where the Latinos are. We worked hard to create the *barrio*, a place where Latino merchants could freely open businesses.”

The Neighborhood Information System and the Neighborhood Base from 2000, present the Seventh Councilmanic District as one with a growing Hispanic population. In 2000 in Kensington, the percent of Hispanics in the *barrio* was 42.70% as compared to the city at 8.50%. The Hispanic population net change from 1990-2000 was 66,659 as compared to the city at 39,735. Many social conclusions can be formed based on this data, specifically high poverty rates and lower educational attainment levels as compared with the rest of the city: about 35.39% of the population had income below 100% poverty level in the year 2000, as compared to the city at 22.15%.

The Latino population as a whole has increased significantly in the past three years in Philadelphia while the Puerto Rican population has decreased slightly. Potential reasons for this finding are also directly related to gentrification, higher educational attainment levels, and the wider professional job availability outside Philadelphia. The American community Survey from 2006 showed that the percentage of Dominicans in Philadelphia increased from 0.3% to 0.6% between 2005 and 2006 while the Mexican and Puerto Rican community decreased from 0.9% to 0.5% and 3.0% to 2.7% within the same period of time (American Community Survey, 2006). Today in Philadelphia, there are a total of 268,417 Latinos. There were approximately 38,983 Mexicans in 2006; 166,632 Puerto Ricans; 6,341 Cubans; and 56,461 “Other Latinos,” primary South and Central Americans according to the American Community Survey.

Hunting Park, a residential neighborhood in North Philadelphia has a very large Hispanic community. While the Neighborhood Information System does not specify which Hispanic groups are prominent in the neighborhood, it is evident that a large Latino population thrives in the community. In the year 2000, the neighborhood was approximately 56.83% Hispanic as compared to the city at 8.50%. 71.28% of residents in the neighborhood were below the poverty line in 2000 as compared to the city at 41.95%. It can be deduced from the Neighborhood Information System data that North Philadelphia, especially neighborhoods like Hunting Park, is a relatively low-income neighborhood with a large Latino population.

Political Involvement

Hispanic political involvement plays a critical role on how different Latino immigrant groups interact .A 2006 national poll from the Pew Hispanic Center Database

measured Latino political unity. While the majority of Latinos nationally believe that Latinos are working together to achieve common political goals, a large percentage believe that Latinos are not working together politically. In 2006, 58% of American-born Latinos felt that Latinos were working together politically, while 34% disagreed, 8% didn't know and 1% refused to comment. 62% of the foreign-born Latino population believes that Latinos are politically unified while 29% stated that they are not, 7% don't know, and 2 % refused to comment (Pew Hispanic).

National issues like illegal immigration seem to have caused some minor divisions among the Latino population in the continental U.S. A report from the Pew Hispanic database by Roberto Suro from August 16, 2005 entitled "Attitudes towards Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Surveys among Latinos in the U.S. and in Mexico," polls Latinos in the United States and their opinions towards immigration policies as well as the impact of new and sometimes illegal immigrant in their communities. Many of the opinions expressed in the report demonstrate an overall sense of unity among Latinos in the United States. According to the national study, 80% of Latinos believe that immigrants today "strengthen the United States because of their hard work and talents" while only 14% revealed that immigrants are actually a burden on the United States economy as they take jobs "housing and health care" (Pew Hispanic). Interestingly, foreign-born Latinos strongly agree (89% in favor vs. 5% opposed) that immigration is a positive phenomenon, while native-born Latinos are more divided on the topic of immigration (65% in favor vs. 25% opposed). While this data represents national opinions on this topic, it is important to note that there is limited information on Latino sentiments towards immigration in North Philadelphia. All interviewees refused to

provide their personal opinions on the subject of immigration even when presented with these statistics...

Priorities

Immigration is not a major priority for many Latinos in the continental United States as compared to other social and urban issues. According to Robert Suro's study "Attitudes towards Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Surveys among Latinos in the U.S. and in Mexico," the majority of both native and foreign-born Latinos (92% and 95% respectively) agree that education, the economy (94% for both groups) and crime (81% and 86%) are more pertinent today than immigration.

As later stated in the "discussion/analysis" section, Latinos in North Philadelphia are concerned with the economic status of Latinos in Philadelphia, poverty rates, health-care and most importantly crime and drugs in the neighborhood rather than tensions within the Hispanic community and immigration.

Identity

How do different Latino groups identify themselves? According to the 2002 National Survey of Latinos, 54% indicate that they identify themselves in terms of their or their parents' country of origin while 24 % identify themselves as "Latino" or "Hispanic," and about 21% say they are American.

In Philadelphia: All subjects, both community leaders and residents identified themselves in terms of their parent's country of origin. Although everyone interviewed was Latino, many believe that because newer immigrant groups are moving into the neighborhood, it is necessary to identify oneself by his/her country of origin to network,

form relationships with other community members and demonstrate pride for one's cultural background.

Latino Discrimination

Although many Latinos in North Philadelphia, according to a variety of interviews believe Latino tension is not a main issue among Hispanics as compared to education, the economy and health-care, the majority of Hispanics, (83%) report that discrimination by Hispanic against other Hispanics is a problem. According to the 2002 National Survey of Latinos, 47% of all Latinos (nationally) believe that discrimination against Hispanics is a *major* problem. This discrimination stems from a variety of different factors: "Latinos are most likely to attribute this type of discrimination to disparities in income and education, though a substantial number also feel that Latinos discriminate against other Latinos because they or their parents or ancestors are from a different country of origin" (Pew Hispanic).

In North Philadelphia: Although national Latino/Latino discrimination is primarily based on disparities in income and education, many residents in North Philadelphia, especially around the Golden Block, along Erie Avenue, and in Hunting Park are generally equal in educational and economic status, therefore encounter little discrimination along economic lines. Although negative tension and the exchange of negative stereotypes about certain Latino groups exist, the wide majority of Latinos do not prevent other Latinos from entering their stores or eating at their restaurants.

Many Central Americans and Mexicans, the majority of whom reside in South Philadelphia, rarely interact with other Hispanic groups. According to Marcos, a Mexican kitchen worker in Pura Vida, a Guatemalan restaurant in Northern Liberties claims that

every low-income Mexican that he knows works in either construction, in a restaurant as a chef or as a busboy, or performs menial labor with other Mexicans and Central Americans. He claims that neither he nor any of his friends or family have ever been discriminated against by another Latino in Philadelphia because “there is no time for discrimination” and the only people that he knows are in the same “situation” as he and his family. He is only in contact with other Mexicans.

Hispanic-Owned Businesses

Latino-owned businesses in Philadelphia are completely different from national Latino businesses. Hispanic Monthly, a monthly newsletter from the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce from August 2004, stated that (at the time) there were approximately 500 *bodegas* (small grocery stores) in the city, approximately 350 of which were members of the Dominican Grocer’s Association. Out of 299,705 firms in Philadelphia, 3,837 are Hispanic owned according to a statistical brief from 2006 entitled “Hispanic-Owned Businesses: Reaching New Heights” from the Pew Hispanic Center.

While many businesses in North Philadelphia are primarily Puerto Rican and Dominican owned, nationally the percentage of Mexican businesses has increased significantly. According “Hispanic-Owned Businesses: Reaching New Heights,” Mexican-Americans own more businesses than other Latino group in the United States. 49.1% of Hispanic-owned firms and businesses in the United States are Mexican owned, 20.9% are South American or Central American, 12.1% are Cuban owned, 6.1% are Puerto Rican owned and 6.0% are owned by “Other Hispanics.”

When presented with the statistics above, several bodega owners looked baffled. Although they would not tell me their names, two Dominican men around Erie Avenue

told me that Mexicans “don’t own a lot of stores here because they work in other industries and many of them are in South Philadelphia”. Mexicans do however frequent Dominican-owned *bodegas* as many owners have introduced new products which serve a growing Central American and Mexican community.

What are Latinos businesses in North Philadelphia like? In the Golden Block, there is a sense of formality among the businesses. Five Dominican crowded hair salons line one side of the street side by side while restaurants and art galleries line the other side. There are a few nightclubs and one or two bars in the neighborhood as well as some free clinics. All of these stores look well established and full. There are two furniture stores both owned by Puerto Rican men, one of whom has been in the neighborhood for fifty years and founded the 5th Street Merchants Association in the 1970’s to turn the neighborhood into a Latino businesses haven. He is impressed with the way the block has transformed and how everyone is “working together.” All of the restaurants and food shops are informal with only a few small tables for clients and large displays of empanadas, exotic juices and a variety of different seasoned meats. All in all, the Golden Block is well-organized with a continuation of many stores and a plethora of clients.

Latino businesses, specifically small *bodegas* outside of the Golden Block are completely different from businesses inside the Golden Block. *Bodegas* in North Philadelphia are randomly dispersed, often in abandoned areas. A few Blocks past Erie Avenue where there is little activity and blight, there are many small businesses which are relatively informal selling a variety of different products often out of residents’ homes. One commonality between small informal Latino businesses outside of the Golden Block is that they function like pawn shops, buying gold and silver from

customers. One hand-painted sign on the side of a corner store read: “I sell cds and guitars. I also buy gold and silver.” (See appendix).

Very few non-Latinos frequent Latino businesses or stroll around the Golden Block. Outsiders and Whites are perceived by many residents in the community as clients of the illegal drug trade and are rapidly approached by sellers upon arriving in the neighborhood. Even as another Latina, I was perceived as “white,” making me victim to a multitude of questions about drugs and which ones I would like to purchase. Residents that I spoke to on the street told me that it is common for whites to be questioned about their presence in the *barrio* because they are rarely there to shop.

Tensions in Philadelphia exist among Latinos but do not affect business as gentrification does. Tensions in Philadelphia among Latinos form across political lines.

VI. Discussion/Analysis

To really understand the impacts of Latino relationships on Puerto Rican businesses in North Philadelphia, it is necessary to obtain interviews from a variety of different sources; those who live in the community and those who strive to improve the community. Unfortunately it was hard to obtain candid interviews from many South American immigrants due to issues of illegal immigration and a desire for anonymity. I was welcomed by many store owners initially in the *barrio*, excited to help a Penn student, but when the topic of Latino tension arose, there was a ubiquitous silence which impeded my efforts. While some acknowledged that there was tension in the Latino community, others tried to stress that the community remained united. The variety of opinions that I received in conducting my research, exemplify disparities between community leaders and residents; those who are privileged living outside the *barrio* and

those who live at street level. Overall, each interview was helpful in constructing ideas about changing businesses patterns as well as how the Latino community as a whole has progressed and combated social issues.

Preserving Puerto Rican Culture Visually

Puerto Ricans have non-violently displayed their pride and asserted their presence in North Philadelphia neighborhoods through vibrant murals. While many community groups and art associations are responsible for creating these murals, they have become an essential and historical element of the Puerto Rican experience in the *barrio*. Interestingly, there are only a few murals with Dominican flags and cultural symbols even though there is a strong Dominican presence in North Philadelphia.

The sign welcoming individuals into the Golden Block is somewhat ironic. Lined with every Latin American flag, the brightly colored mural only displays a Puerto Rican cultural and historical scene. Dressed in plena outfits, a distinct and folkloric Puerto Rican dance, individuals roast a pig over a fire and play typical Puerto Rican instruments. Although the Golden Block is trying to appeal to a variety of different Latinos, the large mural conveys that the area has a Puerto Rican majority and that the businesses in the area target the Puerto Rican community. Moreover it is a symbol of the preservation of Puerto Rican culture rather a condensation of many Latino cultures.

The “Willie Torres Gym” (see picture in appendix) off of Erie Avenue and 5th Street, resembles a home. A mural of a Puerto Rican flag with a professional, Puerto Rican boxer consumes the entire building in the midst of a residential neighborhood. The large flag and large boxer could be interpreted as a symbol of Puerto Rican strength as well as the owner of the gym’s person pride. Unfortunately the gym was closed when I

visited the neighborhood several times so I was unable to inquire if it was a gym where a Puerto Rican boxing league practices or if the owner was just especially proud of his Puerto Rican heritage.

Political Tension

Tensions in Philadelphia form across political lines. After much discussion about his own personal involvement with the Latino community, community leader and former Councilman Angel Ortiz, a Puerto Rican originally from New York, revealed that Latinos were historically often divided politically which had in turn, caused animosity towards the Puerto Rican community. Political tension had stemmed from issues of citizenship and issues regarding illegal residents' inability to participate in the political process. He believes that Puerto Ricans are today very involved in electing officials and campaigning for other Latino candidates in the city. Newer immigrants like Mexicans, Dominicans and Colombians in North Philadelphia long for representation and citizenship to vote for other Latino leaders. Ortiz stated that Puerto Ricans in North Philadelphia [traditionally] were perceived as uninvolved in the political process and did not use their natural citizenship "wisely."

According to Bill Salas, President and Founder of HACE (Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises) non-Puerto Rican Hispanics resent Puerto Ricans for their ability to vote: "Mexicans and Dominicans are completely jealous of Puerto Ricans because they can vote. Many Mexicans and Dominicans [in Philadelphia] are undocumented and have to constantly struggle to obtain a political and social voice. Puerto Ricans have the ability to greatly impact the face of Philadelphia but many have other priorities." Salas' opinions regarding Puerto Rican involvement in politics reveals

that many Puerto Ricans today are not as involved as they could be in electing city officials while Ortiz presents a more historical perspective about political problems which he claims have been solved and overcome by the Puerto Rican community.

Violent Tension

Violent tension exists among Latinos; however incidents are often isolated and not reported. Danilo Burgos, President and Founder of the Dominican Grocer's Association stated that Latinos have ganged up on other Latinos especially in predominately Hispanic high schools. In Edison High, a predominately Hispanic school, several violent incidents of racial tension surfaced when Puerto Ricans and African-Americans ganged up on Dominican students in 1999. Danilo claimed that it is common for African-Americans and Puerto Ricans to gang up on other Latino groups especially in high schools: "They feel that because they have been here the longest that they can form alliances and assert some sort of authority."

One of the only Latinos who actually admitted that there was violence and racism towards Latinos [from Latinos] was Jaham, the Venezuelan restaurant owner in the Golden Block. He believes that tension is tearing the community apart:

Spanish:

People don't make things an issue unless it is a poor population: you don't hear that there were 40,000 Argentineans or rich Venezuelans deported or twenty Paraguayans responsible for selling drugs on the street. You hear about illegal Mexicans, dangerous Puerto Ricans and Dominicans on the streets threatening people for money and selling drugs. "White-trash" people in Kensington...Have you ever been there? Constantly think that Latinos are all bad. We're not all bad, some of us are trying to make a respectable living. The first murder this year happened outside of my house. I opened the door and a dead Dominican woman who had been shot was lying at my feet. The same Puerto Rican man tried to break into my house twice. Do you think this is coincidental? Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of *Boriqua* [Puerto Rican] friends, but until racism stops, nothing will ever get solved...

Jaham's opinions are different from those of community leaders because he is living at street level and must face the violence daily. While I cannot judge the opinions of community leaders, many of them do not live in the *barrio* and do not encounter this direct tension between Latino groups.

The Role of Stereotypes

Stereotypes do not directly impact Puerto Rican businesses but do impact relations among Latino groups. They are often unintentionally expressed among residents. Many community leaders such as Roberto Santiago, the Puerto Rican President of Concilio, believe that stereotypes about Latinos have always been a way of “poking fun” at someone else in a harmless and inevitable way while others such as Nelson Diaz, a judge and an activist have stated that many common stereotypes have heightened racism: “One of the most prevalent stereotypes about Dominicans is that they are strongly and intensely involved in the drug trade and use their *bodegas* as a means to sell drugs. Puerto Ricans are considered violent and dangerous in neighborhoods, while Mexicans are viewed as hardworking and overly-emotional alcoholics.” While Mr. Diaz and Mr. Salas both claim that these stereotypes have never prohibited them from interacting with different Latino groups or frequenting specific businesses, some Latino business owners feel differently.

Jaham, a Venezuelan restaurant owner in the Golden Block, refuses to support Dominican businesses because he disapproves of their involvement in the drug-trade. He claims that all of his Puerto Rican friends also refuse to frequent Dominican owned *bodegas* for the same reason. When I stopped at a bodega owned by an older Puerto

Rican man around 7th and Erie to ask him about his experience in North Philadelphia and provided him with an explanation of my senior thesis project, he told me that it would be wise to only interview Puerto Rican *bodegueros* (bodega owners). He insisted that I would find myself in a “dangerous” situation if I talked to any Dominican small business owners in North Philadelphia, particularly the Dominican bodega owner across the street from him. While I don’t know if he actually believed that all Dominicans are dangerous or if he was competing with the bodega owner across the street, the tone of his voice suggested that he wanted outsiders to support small Puerto Rican stores as many in the neighborhood had already closed.

Rebecca Willems, a Hunting Park resident and self proclaimed “Newyorican,” or as she defined it, “a Puerto Rican from New York City,” claims that she has no problems with any non-Puerto Rican Hispanics. She subtly and unintentionally revealed however, that the presence of newer Latino groups have influenced her decision to relocate. Upon moving into the neighborhood four years ago with her young son, she felt completely safe. Her block was comprised of mostly whites, a few African Americans and some Puerto Ricans. Recently, though, she stated, “More and more Mexicans and Dominicans are moving in and are picking on my son. They make a lot of noise, are *dirty*, and leave trash all over my lawn. Some of them claim different blocks to sell drugs and try to threaten me but I’m not scared, I’m annoyed...and all the Mexicans want to do is go home and get drunk. I’m now considering moving.” The interviewee also explained that many of her Puerto Rican neighbors have moved northeast as a result of demographic changes in North Philadelphia neighborhoods. While Willems explicitly stated that she has no problem with other Latinos, her sentiments regarding her neighborhood’s

changing population reveal the contrary .It is important to note that not all Hispanics in North Philadelphia form stereotypes about other Latino groups.

A Dominican Laundromat owner off of Erie Avenue, whose name shall remain anonymous, claims that he is friends with all of the Latinos in the neighborhood. Neither he nor any of his friends have ever said anything negative about another Latino group: “Puerto Ricans paved the way for us. They have been nothing but kind to us and I have never competed with any Puerto Rican business owner. We all were one time in the same situation. Most of my friends are Puerto Rican.”

Willem’s story is an exhibition of “power-threat,” a feeling that her own power in the neighborhood is compromised by the present of new immigrant groups in North Philadelphia which gives her the urge to want to relocate. Rebecca represents a small percentage of Puerto Ricans who actually move out of North Philadelphia simply due to the presence of other Latino groups. It is important to note statistically that Puerto Ricans remain the highest percentage of Latinos in North Philadelphia. Although many like Willems are moving out of the *barrio*, the main reason behind most relocation is because of higher educational attainment levels and the financial ability to search for a better life.

Puerto Ricans have recently been able to advance due to higher educational attainment levels. Many Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia are college educated and are working professionals who moved outside of the city limits to send their children to suburban schools. This movement has not been caused by negative tensions in the neighborhood but rather the ability to become educated and afford rents in safer neighborhoods.

Latino Priorities

The majority of Latinos in North Philadelphia believe that crime, education and drug use are bigger issues than relations among Latinos. Latino race relations in North Philadelphia do not seem to be a major priority for many North Philadelphians as compared to issues of homelessness, crime, education and teen pregnancy. Juanita Ramos, an elderly Puerto Rican North Philadelphian who works for councilwoman Maria Quinones Sanchez, became irate and frustrated when asked how she felt about other Latino groups in her neighborhood: “Why are you so concerned about this issue? Don’t you realize that our girls are always pregnant, our schools are terrible and people are constantly being shot? Why don’t you do your project on homelessness in Philadelphia?”

The drug trade has also instilled much fear in Latino residents. Ramos, like many other low-income Latinos, is looking for a way out of the *barrio*. She claims that the drug situation is so grave in North Philadelphia that she often is afraid to leave her house or walk around after dark. Ramos believes that Latino tension does not impact her thoughts on this matter of drug-dealing and crime, “Living here is worse than living in Iraq. Black, white, Dominican or Asian...I don’t care who you are I just want you to stop selling drugs.” Ramos does not care who is committing crimes, she just wants to violence and drugs to be eliminated from her neighborhood.

Dominican Businesses

Dominicans have often been dubbed responsible for rehabbing North Philadelphia and have not competed with other Latino businesses. Latino community leaders like Roberto Santiago of Concilio, believe that Dominicans are responsible for rehabbing many areas of North Philadelphia by constructing *bodegas* in previously decrepit areas. According to the President of the Dominican Grocer’s Association, Danilo Burgos, the

purchasing of Puerto Rican *bodegas* by Dominicans has contributed to the harmless movement of Puerto Rican businesses. “In history there has always been an underclass. Puerto Ricans get money, get educated, sell their stores to new immigrants and move on. Dominicans have taken the abandonment and blight have created something out of it. Hey, someone’s gotta do it.” It is clear that Danilo embraces the traditional American immigrant dream and believes that all Latinos will one day advance.

Dominicans have been successful in North Philadelphia, not only for rehabbing many areas but also because of many business owners’ prior experience in New York City: “Dominicans initially came directly from the Dominican Republic. They didn’t speak English, were constantly picked on and were escaping a very corrupt government and had little experience establishing American businesses. Puerto Ricans, Whites and African Americans often taunted them because they couldn’t communicate and weren’t used to urban life in Philadelphia. Today, a large percentage of Dominicans are coming from New York City where they previously owned *bodegas*. They can speak English, can deal with conflict and know how to successfully run a business.” Organizations like the Dominican Grocer’s Association provide services and advice to all small *bodegueros*, the majority Dominican, helping them obtain funding, and preventing stores from closing due to code violations. According to Burgos, Dominicans have been very successful and will continue to make North Philadelphia a more prosperous place without directly competing or challenging other Hispanic businesses.

The Role of Gentrification

Puerto Rican businesses are and were directly challenged by larger supermarkets and have been forced out of areas like Spring Garden due to gentrification rather than

racial tension. One of the most important questions asked for this research question was “Where Puerto Rican businesses pushed out of the *barrio*?” “Push” suggests a forceful movement to do uncontrollable forces. Puerto Rican businesses weren’t physically pushed out of traditional neighborhoods but were left with no option when housing and property values increased due to **gentrification**. This migration from urban centers due to urban rival movements in the 1970s was heightened politically; government officials strategically attempted to keep neighborhoods “safe” by significantly raising housing prices. Spring Garden was a haven for Puerto Ricans up until the 1970s when residents could no longer afford to remain in the neighborhood and were moved into urban poverty.

An expert from Carmen Teresa Wahlen’s *Puerto Rican Workers and Postwar Economies*, expresses the hardships that Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, specifically in Spring Garden faced:

Now they don’t want Puerto Ricans in those areas, like 17, 18, Wallace, Mount Vernon, Green, all those streets. They don’t want Puerto Ricans, that’s why they build all them houses, they renew all them houses and then they rent the apartments for six, seven, eight hundred dollars. Puerto Ricans don’t have that much money to pay for apartments. So this is the way they take them out (Wahlen, 230).

Many subjects, like an elderly Puerto Rican woman who lives in Hunting Park, claim that they are still feeling the affects of gentrification and are frustrated with the increase in housing prices in other areas of Philadelphia. In addition to gentrification, competition from larger supermarkets has challenged many Puerto Rican businesses. Cousins, a very successful supermarket with various locations in North Philadelphia and Camden accepts food stamps, offers a variety of coupons, bargains, and contains a variety

of Hispanic products which are not always available in smaller stores like *bodegas*. Many would rather shop at Cousins especially if they are interested in purchasing produce at lower prices. The root causes of Puerto Rican business closings are not racial tensions. Tensions, however, are the aftermath of the closings of many businesses.

Conclusion

Immigrant groups are resilient. Upon their arrival, many concentrate in low-income areas, working the most undesirable jobs to better their children's future. Many Puerto Rican businesses which are now Dominican-owned were purchased not because Puerto Ricans were incompetent business owners but because many Puerto Ricans have achieved higher education attainment levels and are able to move out of North Philadelphia and farther Northeast. A large percentage of Puerto Ricans have paid their dues in the *barrio* and ready for a change, passing their stores on to newer immigrant groups and searching for a better life.

The relationship between Latinos in North Philadelphia, neither negative nor positive, is responsible for pushing Puerto Rican businesses out of the *barrio*. Today, racial and political tensions although they exist among Latinos, have not impacted the way Puerto Rican business operate and have not determined how successful Puerto Rican small businesses have become. Many Puerto Rican businesses closed due to gentrification, competition with larger supermarkets or because owners could afford to move out of the *barrio* into safer suburban neighborhoods.

Tension among Latinos exists but is only expressed among certain residents and community leaders. An individual's perception of Latino tension is relative to his or her distance to the *barrio*.

Latinos in North Philadelphia are not completely unified despite each individual group's attempt to preserve its culture; particularly through murals. Unfortunately in a low-income area where many individuals are below the poverty level, interactions and negative relationships between Latino groups are *not* priorities. Residents want to get through a day without crime, without a poor education system and without drugs while community leaders are strongly focused on economic and neighborhood development in these neighborhoods. Although there have been isolated incidents of violent racial tension, much tension among Latinos is caused by the lack of political involvement and will not be rectified until residents collectively realize that the lack of political involvement and isolation of different Latino groups is actually affecting representation and ultimately a chance for a better life.

Perhaps in the future all Latinos in North Philadelphia will achieve high educational attainment levels and will be able to transform the *barrio* into a safe, cultural haven, bringing tension and political involvement to the forefront. Until this occurs, North Philadelphia will continue to be regarded by the rest of Philadelphia as simply a *barrio* far far away...

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Data

American Community Survey: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

Neighborhood Information System: <http://cml.upenn.edu/nis/>

Pew Hispanic Data Base: <http://pewhispanic.org>

Appendix: Golden Block Welcome Mural



Appendix 2: Small store outside the Golden Block

