



**IMMIGRANTS  
BUILD AMERICA**

# Latin American Immigrants



**Hal Marcovitz**



#### About the Author

Hal Marcovitz is a former newspaper reporter and columnist who has written more than two hundred books for young readers. He makes his home in Chalfont, Pennsylvania.

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# IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

## Top Six Countries of Origin

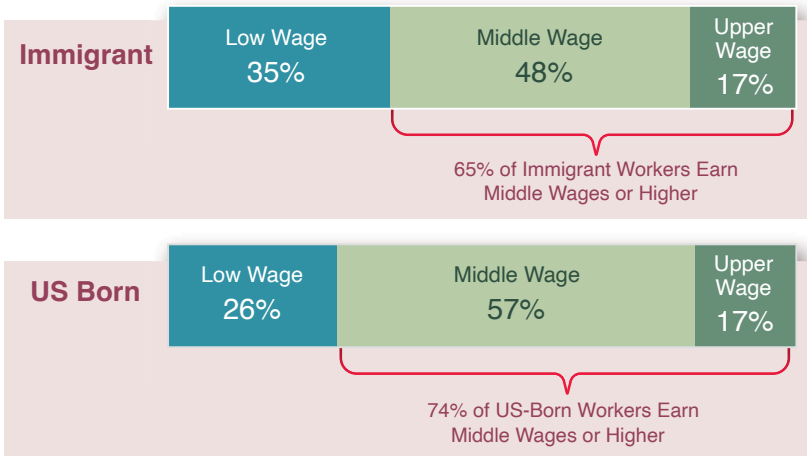
- Mexico: 24%
- India: 6%
- China: 5%
- Philippines: 5%
- El Salvador: 3%
- Vietnam: 3%



## US Immigrant Population

46.2 million, or 13.9% of total US population, in 2022

## Earnings: Immigrant Workers and US-Born Workers



# Helping to Build Vibrant Communities

The small city of Reading, Pennsylvania, can be found in the heart of what for centuries has been the home of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Members of the Pennsylvania Dutch community are the descendants of immigrants from Germany and neighboring nations who began arriving in America during the early years of the seventeenth century.

After arriving in America, these immigrants continued to speak German and maintained the lifestyles they knew in Europe. Even today, visitors to the region may hear longtime residents speaking with German accents and occasionally see members of the Amish community—Pennsylvania Dutch citizens who eschew modern conveniences and can be seen ambling along the road in horse-drawn carriages.

Many of the Pennsylvania Dutch immigrants were farmers. Over the centuries, the fields surrounding the city of Reading were largely devoted to growing mushrooms. In the latter half of the twentieth century, word spread throughout the Latino immigrant community that jobs were available on Pennsylvania Dutch farms. Immigrants from Mexico and the Dominican Republic flocked to Reading. Many farmworkers also came from Puerto Rico—the American territory in the Caribbean where Spanish is the native language.

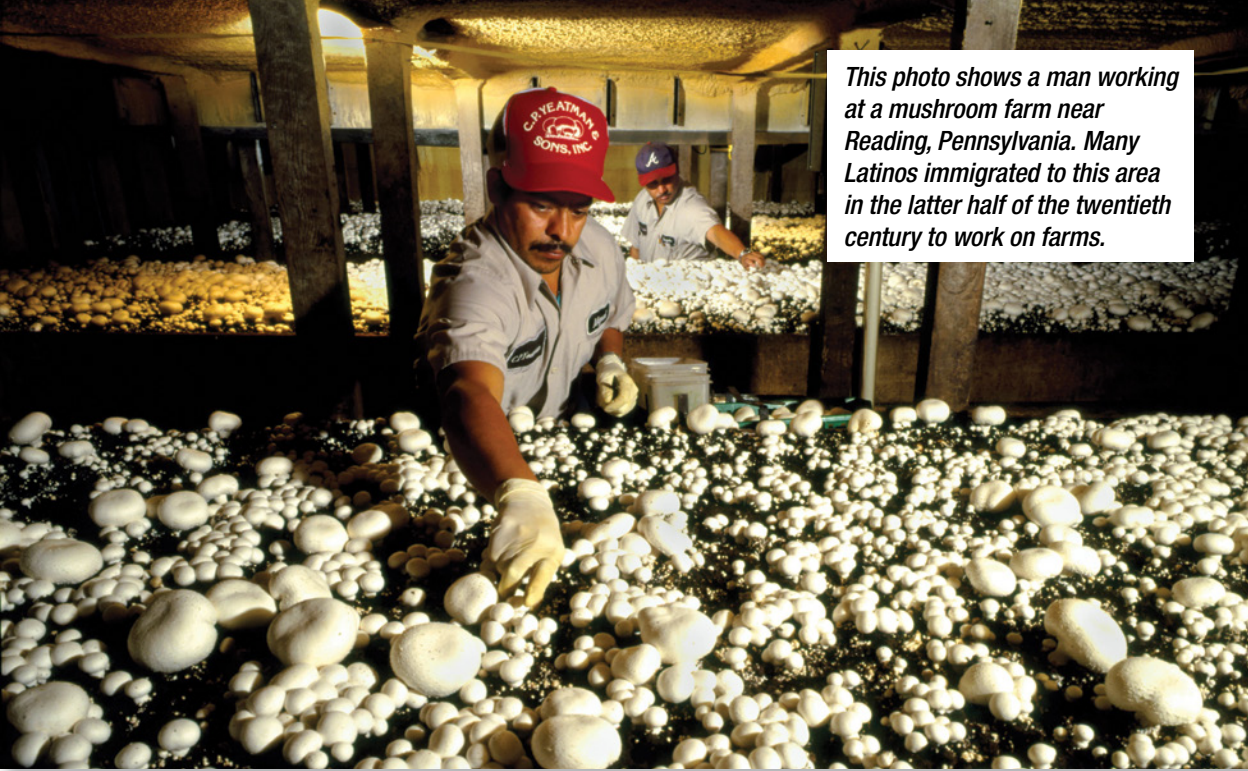
Today, Reading has a large, bustling, and diverse community of Latinos. In fact, the 2020 US Census found that Latinos now make up the majority of Reading's population. Sixty-nine percent of Reading residents have roots in Latin American countries. It is now more common to hear Spanish accents on the city's streets than it is to hear Pennsylvania Dutch accents.

Moreover, the city of Reading can certainly be regarded as a component of the "Rust Belt," which is the older Eastern and Midwestern US cities where factories have closed, leading to a downward trend in population as citizens leave for opportunities elsewhere. However, that downward spiral has not occurred in Reading, where the city's population has grown since the 2010 US Census. The current population is about ninety thousand—some seven thousand more residents than were counted in 2010.

## **Secondary Migration**

Although mushroom farming is still very much a part of the economy of Reading, most Latino immigrants who now make Reading their home are not farmworkers. Rather, they are service workers, business owners, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and members of other professions. In many cases, Reading was not the city where they found their first homes in America. For example, many members of the Dominican Republic community in Reading originally immigrated to New York City, which itself has a large community of migrants from the Caribbean island nation.

But the cost of living in New York City is very high, which is typical of big cities. Everything from rents to groceries to utilities such as electricity and water typically cost more in big cities than in smaller towns. Finding the high cost of living too much to bear, many Latino immigrants eventually look for homes in smaller communities. (Sociologists call this trend "secondary migration"—finding new homes in other cities after first establishing their homes in the cities of their arrival in America.) In the case of many immigrants from the Dominican Republic, their interests were drawn to Reading.



*This photo shows a man working at a mushroom farm near Reading, Pennsylvania. Many Latinos immigrated to this area in the latter half of the twentieth century to work on farms.*

Born in the Dominican Republic, Gregorio Zarzuela's path led him first to New York City. He found work in factories and restaurants but wanted to own a business—a small grocery store known as a bodega. In fact, he did buy a bodega in New York City but was forced to sell the store after a couple of years. The costs of running the store—stocking it with groceries, paying utility bills—were simply too high for Zarzuela to maintain a profitable business.

Zarzuela was aware that other immigrants from the Dominican Republic had moved to Reading. He made inquiries about the city and reached the decision to move there. Zarzuela bought a home in Reading in 2004. Soon after moving to the city, he opened a bodega. "Living in Reading is just too good," he stated in a 2006 interview.

"Business is slow, but [in Reading] you can live from it. Here I open at 7:30 a.m., and at 6:30 I head home to have a barbecue or make dinner. In New York, it was 6 a.m. to midnight. I love New York, but I can't go back."<sup>26</sup>

**"Living in Reading is just too good. Business is slow, but [in Reading] you can live from it."<sup>26</sup>**

**—Reading, Pennsylvania, bodega owner Gregorio Zarzuela**

## Big Cities Benefit from Immigrant Homebuyers

Small cities like Reading, Pennsylvania, have been revived by Latino immigrants, but much larger cities have also benefited from the same trend. Chicago is a typical example. Starting in the 1960s, Chicago—one of America’s largest cities—saw its population start to decline as residents fled to the suburbs. By the 1990s, Chicago’s population was reported at 2.7 million people, or some 760,000 residents smaller than it had been in 1960.

One of the Chicago neighborhoods hit hard by the population decline was South Lawn, where vacant homes and apartment buildings lined street after street. Richard Dolejs, an immigrant from Mexico and community activist who established a real estate sales business in South Lawn, recognized the trend. He persuaded local banks to write mortgages—bank loans that enable borrowers to buy homes—for newly arrived Latino immigrants. Dolejs recalls his conversations with local bankers: “We said: ‘Well, what about the Mexican community? We should apply to that group and try to bring them in.’” These actions helped those immigrants buy homes in South Lawn and other Chicago neighborhoods.

With time, Chicago’s population has stabilized. In 2020, the city’s population was recorded at virtually the same as its population in 1990.

Quoted in A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, “How Latinos Saved American Cities,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 2019. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

Today, the cityscape of Reading reflects the interests of the Latino population. Residents can shop at the Bravo Supermarket in town, where they can find groceries favored by Latino households. Many Latino households celebrate what is known as the “quinceañera”—the fifteenth birthday of a daughter, marking her passage into womanhood. The celebrations are formal, meaning the celebrant and her Latina girlfriends wear gowns. Many clothing stores in Reading sell gowns for the quinceañera. And there also are dozens of Latino restaurants in the city.

### **Saving the Cities**

Reading is a small city, but it is reflective of a significant trend that has occurred within many cities. For decades, the populations of many American cities had been declining. This was due mostly to the desire of city residents to move to suburban communities.

This trend led to many vacant apartment buildings, row houses, and other residences found in cities. And with fewer customers populating cities and fewer employees available to work for local retailers and manufacturers, many large and small businesses left the cities as well.

Starting in the 1990s, however, city populations started growing again. A.K. Sandoval-Strausz, a professor of history at Pennsylvania State University, explains that “the cities of the United States began a long decline after about 1950. That was the peak population for pretty much all industrial cities. . . . By the 1970s and 1980s, it looked like the big American city had simply come and gone.”<sup>27</sup>

According to Sandoval-Strausz, Latino immigrants are primarily responsible for the rebirth of many American cities. They have provided students for public schools where enrollment had declined. They have started new businesses that provide employment for city residents. They pay local taxes, enabling their city governments to fix streets, maintain utilities, and provide police for the protection of the citizens. “They begin to repopulate schools and churches, they save housing markets,” says Sandoval-Strausz. “They did things, without which the great urban recovery could not have happened. We’re talking about home construction, building maintenance, child care, food service and groundskeeping. These are all very Latino- and Latina-heavy industries.”<sup>28</sup>

“[Latinos] begin to repopulate schools and churches, they save housing markets. They did things, without which the great urban recovery could not have happened.”<sup>28</sup>

—Pennsylvania State University history professor A.K. Sandoval-Strausz

## Little Havana

Despite the high cost of living in big cities like New York, many Latinos do choose to stay. For example, the population of Miami has increased since 1990, when the number of city residents was recorded at about 359,000. The 2020 US Census reported Miami’s population at about 442,000 residents. Moreover,

**"I would prefer to die to reach my dream and help my family. The situation in Cuba is not very good."<sup>29</sup>**

**—Cuban immigrant Jeiler del Toro Diaz**

in Miami, Latinos are in the majority. More than 305,000 of the city's residents—about 69 percent—have roots in Latin American countries.

A majority of the Latinos living in Miami emigrated from Cuba or are the descendants of parents and grandparents who left the island. It is easy to see why Cubans have migrated to Miami. In escaping Cuba's poverty and repressive government, most migrants land first in Florida. There, they soon connect with relatives and friends already living in Miami. "I would prefer to die to reach my dream and help my family. The situation in Cuba is not very good,"<sup>29</sup> Cuban migrant Jeiler del Toro Diaz said shortly after he and other migrants reached a Florida beach in a rickety boat in 2023.

As the center of Cuban immigration in America, Miami has grown to reflect the culture of the Caribbean island. In fact, there

***There is a neighborhood in Miami specifically known as "Little Havana." It is named for Cuba's capital city, and features vibrant outdoor art.***



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