

Latino Immigrant Civic Engagement in the Chicago Region

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“Civic Engagement”: There are many ways in which people participate in civic, community and political life and, by doing so, express their engaged citizenship. From volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one’s community, neighborhood and nation.”

At the very core of our society is the active participation of its members. It is a concept as old as our country. However, not all members of our society, particularly immigrants, have access to our more official form of participation, namely voting. As such, it is important that everyone have access to various forms of participation so that their voices can be heard and needs be met. This paper examines the civic participation of Latino immigrants in the metropolitan Chicago region, as well as the role of community-based organizations as facilitators for many Latino immigrants’ civic engagement.

Introduction

In the metropolitan Chicago region, as with other parts of the country, the growth of the Latino population is significant and truly noteworthy. From 1990 through 2004 the population of Latinos in the region grew by 95 percent, to comprise 20 percent of the region’s total population. During the same time period, the region’s non-Latino growth rate was only four percent.³ In 2004 one in five Chicagoland residents was Latino and Chicago had the third largest Latino population in the nation, after Los Angeles and New York. Most of the growth of the Latino population in the state was experienced in the six-county Chicago region. Ninety-two percent of the state’s Latinos were concentrated in metropolitan Chicago, compared to 62 percent of non-Latino Illinoisans who resided there, according to the 2000 Census.

Today, we know that the large majority (79 percent) of the region’s Latinos are of Mexican descent.⁴ Latinos of Puerto Rican origin comprise eight percent and South Americans four percent. Central Americans make up three percent of the region’s Latinos. Cubans account for one percent on the region’s Latinos and Latinos of other origins make up five percent.⁵

¹ The authors would like to thank Sylvia Puente for her review of the document and for her input.

² Definition from Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement’s website, <http://www.pacefunders.org/>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005 and <http://www.nd.edu/~chifacts/>.

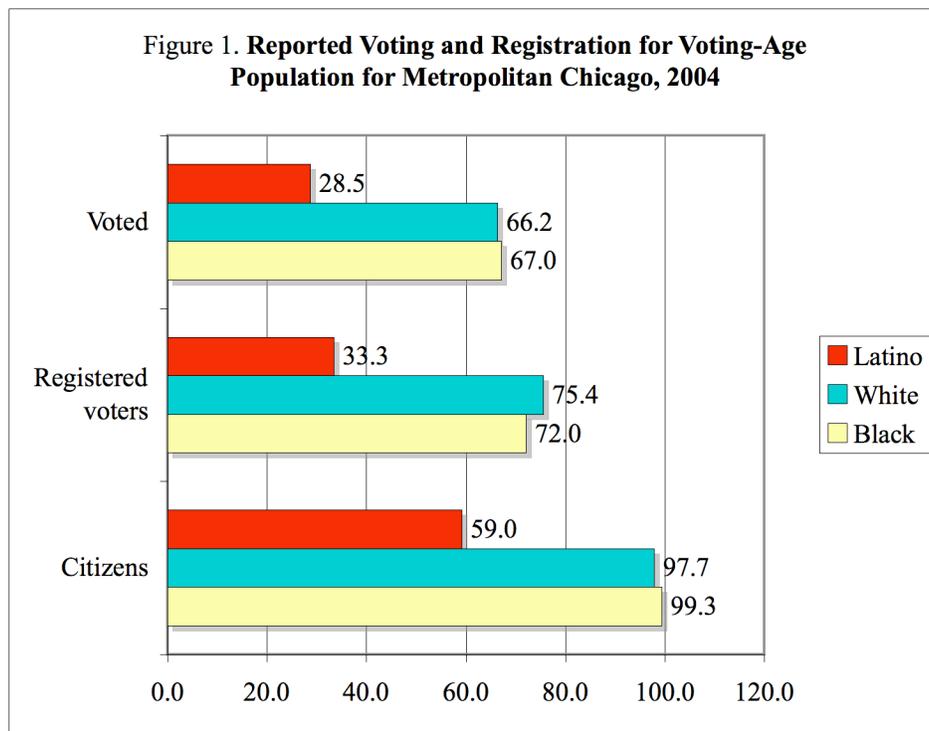
⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005.

⁵ “Other” category includes people identified only as “Hispanic” or “Latino.”

The growth of the Latino population cannot be discussed without examining the impact of immigration; a significant portion of the Latino growth from 1990 to 2004 was due to immigration, primarily Mexican immigration. In 2000, almost half (47 percent) of the Latino population in the six counties was foreign born.⁶ In DuPage, Lake, and Kane Counties, the majority of their Latino populations were born outside of the United States (51 percent, 53 percent, and 52 percent, respectively). The city of Chicago has rates similar to the region; 47 percent of the Latinos residing in Chicago were born outside of the United States.

Latino Voting Rates in Illinois

Although the Latino population is booming in terms of growth rates, they have low number of voters, which translates into limited impact on policy. Using voter registration and voting as one important measure of civic participation, we see that in Illinois, Latinos show significantly lower participation than Whites and African Americans. In the November 2004 election, less than 60 percent of Latinos in Illinois were citizens, which clearly lowered the number of Latinos who could vote.⁷ (See Figure 1.)



This was quite the opposite for Whites and Blacks whose majorities were citizens (98 percent and 99 percent, respectively). With less than 60 percent of the Latino population being citizens, it was not a surprise that only one-third (33 percent) of all Latinos in Illinois were registered to

⁶ R. Paral, T. Ready, S. Chun, and W. Sun. 2004. *Latino Demographic Growth in Metropolitan Chicago*. *Research Reports* v 2004.2. Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2004.

vote, whereas 75 percent of Whites and 72 percent of Blacks were registered. In terms of those that actually went to the polls, less than 30 percent of Latinos in Illinois voted, compared with 66 percent of Whites and 67 percent of Blacks. It is important to note that Latinos have voting rates similar to other groups; 86 percent of all Latino registered voters voted during the November 2004 election, compared to 88 percent of Whites and 93 percent of Blacks. Due to their citizenship status, however, many Latinos do not qualify to vote; less than one-third of Latinos in Illinois have their voices heard through voting. As such, it is imperative that Latinos, particularly immigrants, have their voices heard through other forms of civic participation.

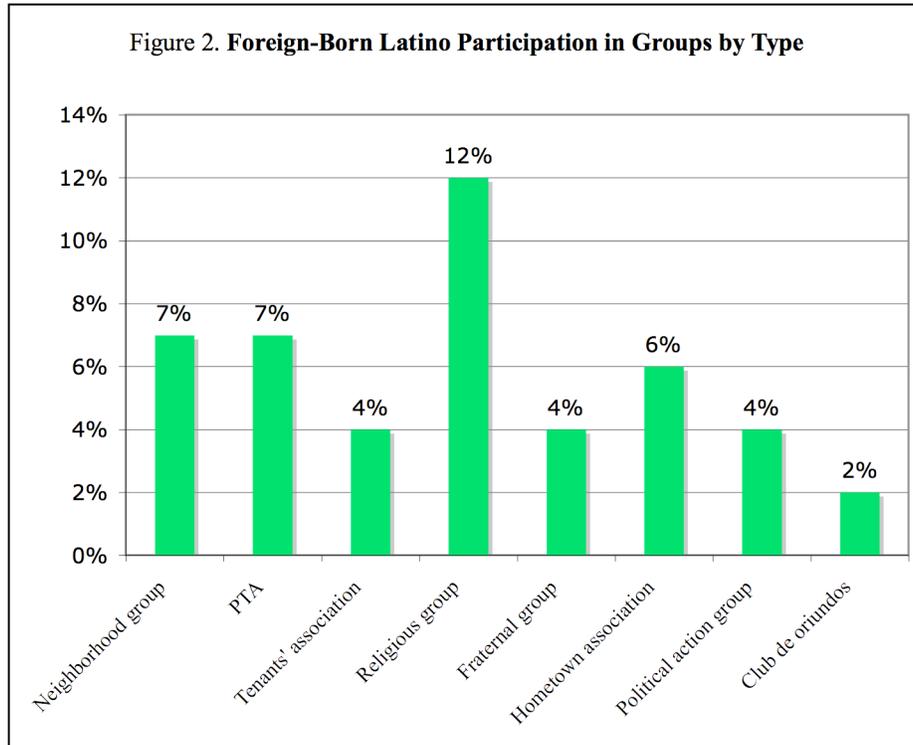
“Hay muchas personas que no están conscientes de eso, que pueden hacer algo por la comunidad, que tienen voz. Unidos podemos hacer muchas cosas, no solamente decir que quisiéramos que el barrio estuviera así y asá. Me gustaría que las escuelas públicas... [mejoraran]. No solamente decir, ¿cuándo va cambiar esto?, pero ser parte del cambio. Gracias al entrenamiento me di cuenta de eso. Sí podemos hacerlo [y] que si nosotros no lo hacemos, nadie lo va venir a hacer.”

Latino Immigrant Participation in Chicago Region

In the summer of 2003, the Institute for Latino Studies conducted an unprecedented survey of 1,500 Latino households in the Chicago region. This rich dataset examined many facets of their lives and will create a richer understanding of this population, which will then enable policymakers and social service agencies to serve them better. One area examined in the household survey was householders’ level of civic participation.

The sample in the study was representative of the Latino population. More than half (53%) of the survey respondents were foreign-born, who were the focus of this analysis. There were many types of civic involvement that the survey measures, such as membership in block clubs, Parent Teacher Associations, hometown associations, and religious organizations. Overall, the involvement in these types of activities was relatively low. The participants’ involvement was lower than Latinos nationally.⁸ However, similar to national trends, Chicagoland Latino immigrants participate at higher rates in religious (12 percent) and school-related organizations (7 percent).

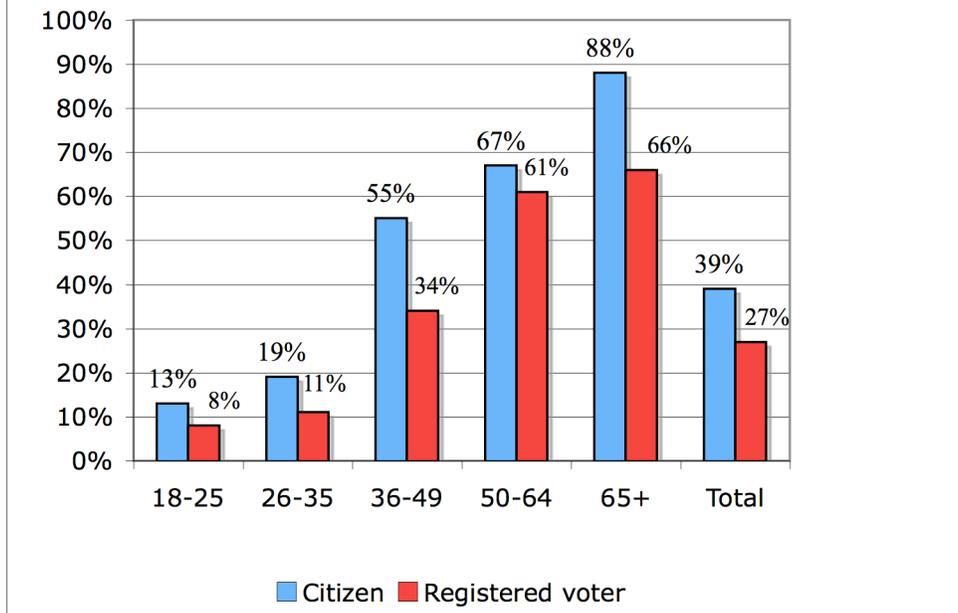
⁸ S. Boraas. 2003. *Volunteerism in the United States*. Monthly Labor Review (August 2003).



The percentage of foreign-born participants who were registered to vote was also low. Less than 30% of participants were registered to vote where they lived. When examining the levels of immigrants registered to vote by age group, we see that the older age cohorts, 50-64 and 65+ had higher rates of voter registration, 61% and 66%, respectively. However, the voter registration levels of the younger cohorts were significantly less. This is particularly true for those 18-24 and 26-35 years of age whose levels were 8% and 11%, respectively.

In Figure 3, we see that the younger age cohorts have the lowest rates of citizenship, which is to be expected. As such, it is understandable that they have the lowest rates of voter registration. However, the largest disparities between citizenship and voter registration are in the 36-49 and 65+ age cohorts.

Figure 3. Foreign-Born Latino Registered Voters and Citizens by Age Group



A significant relationship was found amongst the views of immigrant respondents and their levels of participation in activities. There was a significant relationship, for example, amongst those who have worked with neighbors on neighborhood issues and those who felt that people like them could make their community a better place to live ($r = .16$).⁹

There was also a relationship between people’s interest in politics and their memberships in specific types of groups, such as clubs de oriundos or clubs de paisanos ($r = .12$). Similarly, a relationship existed between people’s interest in politics and their working with their neighbors on neighborhood issues ($r = .12$). Furthermore, the more people believed that public officials cared about people like them thought, the more likely they were to work with their neighbors on neighborhood issues ($r = .12$).

“Porque antes solo era un residente más, un ciudadano más. Hacía mi vida normal, pero cuando participé en el entrenamiento, me di cuenta que soy parte importante de la comunidad. Todos somos una parte muy importante y tenemos que ser serviciales, comunicarnos, haber si faltan cosas y hacerlo el lugar perfecto, para vivir, para criar a nuestros hijos.”

⁹ The Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient ($r=.16$) was calculated using respondents’ feeling that people like them could have an impact in making their community a better place to live and if they and their neighbors worked on neighborhood issues together in the last two years. This relationship was significant at the 0.01 level. A perfect positive linear correlation would be 1.00, whereas a perfect negative linear correlation would be -1.00 .⁴

Reasons for Low Civic Participation

As with any population, there are various reasons for low levels of civic participation. Through a study conducted by the Institute for Latino Studies in the summer of 2004 on the development of Latino leadership, researchers identified specific challenges to Latino immigrant civic participation. These reasons were the following: Latinos' lack of trust and fear of being exposed; political indifference; lack of resources and time; limited English proficiency; and lower levels of formal educational attainment.

Since many of the communities in which these groups work include recent newcomers who are not familiar with U.S. systems, there is a need to gain their trust, in order for them to work with the organizations and take on issues of importance to them. This lack of trust is even more present for those who immigrated without proper documentation. Undocumented immigrants are more fearful of being exposed, due to the threat of being deported. As such, they are less likely to challenge the status quo or injustices, because they do not want attention brought to themselves or their status.

Some immigrants from Latin American countries, particularly Mexico, bring with them a viewpoint of political indifference deriving from experiences with local and federal governments in their home countries. During the Latino leadership study in the summer of 2004, many interviewees mentioned "political apathy" as a challenge to Latino immigrant participation.

*A veces los políticos no le hacen caso a los líderes latinos. A veces piensa uno que no le van a hacer caso, y [por eso] uno no se arrima.*¹⁰

Jose, 28-year-old leader, Father of 2

Due to limited finances, immigrants may have to work more than one job in order to make ends meet. In the metro region, for example, the median income for foreign-born Mexican householders in 1999 was \$40,700.¹¹ This was much less than the median income of non-Latino Whites in the region, which was \$60,128.¹² As a result, many people face time constraints to participate in outside activities, particularly if these activities do not provide financial resources to the family or immediate returns or wins. Limited financial resources then act as a hurdle to civic engagement for some.

Another major reason some Latino immigrants do not participate civically is limited proficiency in English. People's comfort level with English, particularly conversational English, can affect their participation levels, as the quote below indicates. From the interviewee's perspective, if one cannot speak English fluently, one might not feel comfortable or confident expressing oneself in front of an audience or policymaker.

¹⁰ Sometimes politicians don't listen to Latino leaders. Sometimes you think that they are not going to listen to you, and [so] you don't approach them.

¹¹ Paral, R. & T. Ready. (2005). *The Economic Progress of US- and Foreign-Born Mexicans in Metro Chicago: Indications from the United States Census*. University of Notre Dame, Institute for Latino Studies.

¹² Paral, R., Ready, T., Chun, S., & W. Sun. (2004). *Latino Demographic Growth in Metropolitan Chicago*. University of Notre Dame, Institute for Latino Studies.

[Un reto] es poder tener comunicación, el inglés. Si [uno] va a tener una reunión con un representante, se necesita el idioma, más estudio, conocimiento acerca de la ciudad [y los sistemas]. Todo lleva bastante tiempo; por eso no me considero completa, y aún son muchos pasos [que me faltan], también cosas [que tengo que aprender] como la computadora [y] el inglés.¹³

Alicia, 25-year-old leader, Mother of 3

Civic participation rates are higher among individuals with higher educational attainment levels.¹⁴ However, 66% of Mexican immigrants in the metro region have less than 12 years of schooling.¹⁵ The low level of formal education among Latino immigrants has been identified as a challenge by many interviewees from the ILS leadership study.

I only had a high school education, but felt that I had more sense than [policymakers]. I was still intimidated to face better-educated people.

Magdalena, 50-year-old leader, Mother of 6

Immigrant Stories

Mrs. Sandra Martinez. Mother of 2, Mexican, 31 years old

Sandra moved into a new neighborhood on Chicago's south side five years ago. Although she has lived in the U.S. for ten years, she only recently became engaged in community organizing trainings and movements approximately three years ago, when organizers invited her. She had many doubts as to what services were available and how to participate in community activities. Through the organization's trainings, Sandra became involved in the New Americans Initiative and the efforts for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants.

Prior to her involvement in the organization, Sandra was unhappy in her neighborhood and planned to move out. "No estaba contenta un poco antes de tomar parte en entrenamiento. Queríamos irnos a un lugar mejor. Empezamos a ver que no era lo que queríamos para nuestros hijos, pero después de conocer la organización creo que no era la mejor decisión. No huir, pero quedarnos para que cambie. Después platicando, mi esposo y yo dijimos, 'Pero podemos ir al fin del mundo y cada lugar va tener sus problemas. No hay un lugar perfecto.' Entonces vamos a quedarnos y involucrarnos, y ver lo que nosotros podemos hacer."

¹³ [One challenge] is the ability to communicate, the English language. If you're going to have a meeting with a Representative, you need to know the language, have more education, and an understanding of the city [and its systems]. All this takes time, which is why I don't believe my development [as a leader] is complete, and there are still steps [I need to take] and things [I need to learn] like computers and English.

¹⁴ Boraas, S. (2003). *Volunteerism in the United States*. [Monthly Labor Review](#).

¹⁵ Paral, R. & T. Ready. (2005). *The Economic Progress of US- and Foreign-Born Mexicans in Metro Chicago: Indications from the United States Census*. University of Notre Dame, Institute for Latino Studies.

Hay muchas personas que no están conscientes de eso, que pueden hacer algo por la comunidad, que tienen voz. Unidos podemos hacer muchas cosas, no solamente decir que quisiéramos que el barrio estuviera así y asá, me gustaría que las escuelas públicas... [mejoraran], no solamente decir ¿cuándo va cambiar esto?, pero ser parte del cambio. Gracias al entrenamiento me di cuenta de eso. Sí podemos hacerlo, [y] que si nosotros no lo hacemos, nadie lo va venir a hacer.

Sandra, mother of 2, 31 years old

Ms. Alejandra Gomez, Single, Mexican, 19 years old

Alejandra has lived in the U.S. for five years. She has been involved with a community-based organization for approximately one year. A speaker came to her high school and talked about a leadership program targeting undocumented student issues. There were a few reasons that moved Alejandra to become involved. First of all, the issues facing undocumented students directly affected Alejandra. Secondly, her major was justice studies because she likes to “fight for people’s rights.”

Before becoming involved with the organization, Alejandra was not aware of the issues affecting her. “I knew I was undocumented but I didn’t know what it was ... the Dream Act, the Student Adjustment Act. [Then] I found out.” Being part of the leadership trainings allowed Alejandra to see not only that she was not alone as an undocumented student, but that she could push for legislation. “I got to see I wasn’t the only one affected. I got to see others like myself and it inspired me. I felt that I was not alone as an undocumented student. I also developed leadership skills because I was shy before. Also, my English skills improved. I learned about U.S. government systems. I met people working in politics. I got to be on TV and was even interviewed. ... Most importantly, I’m informed now and know what’s going on with the Dream Act and similar policies.”

Alejandra feels more ready to help others. The program has had an exponential result in terms of how it touches people indirectly. She was able to reach out to people in two ways: she shared her enthusiasm for organization with people close to her and was also able to put what she learned into practice through her participation in public events and speaking with politicians about issues. “Of course, I always recommended it because of things I learned -- to be activist, develop as leader, reach out to other people, and network. It’s great for students who are interested in fields dealing with government. ... I recommend it to friends and family.” Alejandra believes that she helps improve her community, particularly by educating policymakers on issues affecting her community. “I’m helping my community behind the scenes. ...I’ve spoken with Alderman Manny Lopez and told him about my situation as an undocumented student. I’ve talked with [State Senator] Miguel del Valle. I went to Springfield ... I’ve spoken with [Congressman] Luis Gutierrez.”

Significant Victories

Through their civic engagement, Latino immigrants, as well as others, have had significant impact on their communities and the state of Illinois, which will benefit families today and in the years to come. One such example was the 2004 passing of *Illinois House Bill 60*, which extends in-state college tuition for undocumented students who have attended Illinois high schools for a minimum of three years. Also, in 2004 was the passing of the *Illinois New Americans Initiative*. It is a \$9 million, three-year citizenship acquisition program aimed at immigrants in the state. Additionally, the *Illinois Family Care program* was passed in 2004. This program is another major accomplishment that benefits 80,000 uninsured families.

It is through the work of non-profit agencies, some local and others not, that Latino immigrants' participation in civic life is facilitated. There were various ways in which organizations engaged community members. One way was by working on specific campaigns or issues impacting the community, such as driver's licenses for undocumented drivers or in-state college tuition for undocumented students. Another way was involving community members in specific local projects, such as increasing Local School Council nominations for local schools. Other organizations sponsored residents to attend traditional community organizing workshops, such as with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

Parting Thoughts: Need for Facilitating Organizations

Clearly, in order for Latino immigrants' voices to be heard, there is a need alternative forms of civic participation. As stated earlier, less than 60 percent in Illinois are citizens and only one-third of all Latinos over age 18 are registered to vote. Yet, the data from the Institute for Latino Studies' household survey in the summer of 2003 show that Latino immigrant householders are not involved at high rates. The Institute study on Latino leadership during the summer of 2004 found that there is a need for organizations to facilitate the civic engagement process. This need exists for various reasons: Latino immigrants' lack of trust and fear of being exposed; political indifference; lack of resources and time; limited English proficiency; and lower levels of formal educational attainment. In the end, the Latino leadership study found that engaged community residents, along with facilitating organizations, have significant impacts on their communities and society, just as our nation's forefathers had envisioned.

Appendix: Latino Immigrant Narratives

Sandra Martinez. Mother of 2, Mexican, 31 years old

Sandra moved into a new neighborhood on Chicago's south side five years ago. Although she has lived in the U.S. for ten years, she only recently became engaged in community organizing trainings and movements approximately three years ago, when organizers invited her. She had many doubts as to what services were available and how to participate in community activities. Through the organization's trainings, Sandra became involved in the New Americans Initiative and the efforts for driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants.

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Sandra learned how to educate politicians and members of the community about the issues of importance to her. Sandra states that her life has been different since participating in leadership trainings. “Porque antes solo era un residente más, un ciudadano más. Hacía mi vida normal, pero cuando participé en entrenamiento, me di cuenta que soy parte importante de la comunidad. Todos somos una parte muy importante y tenemos que ser [serviciales], comunicarnos, haber si faltan cosas y hacerlo el lugar perfecto, para vivir, para criar a nuestros hijos.”

As an immigrant community leader, Sandra faces challenges in participating with the organization she is involved. Two challenges are language and culture. “Primero puede ser el idioma un obstáculo para un líder latino y la cultura, por no haber nacido aquí. Los retos son muy diferentes porque la cultura es diferente. No solamente por la cultura americana pero por la diversidad que hay.”

Martin Rodriguez, Single, Mexican, 24 years old

Martin has lived in Melrose Park, a suburb of Chicago, for 9 years. He began his participation with immigrant-serving organizations about 2 years ago, when he was invited to join a youth pastoral group and participated in the leadership-training program. Part of his family is undocumented, although they came to the U.S. before he did: “han pasado por muchas dificultades. En [el] trabajo que he hecho en parroquias y la comunidad, las necesidades de migrantes son enormes. Mi deber como cristiano y como parte de esta comunidad es trabajar porque la dignidad de las persona, sobre todo de los migrantes, se respete más. El interés nace de ver injusticia y querer hacer algo acerca de ello. ... El servicio es un privilegio.”

Martin became more aware of the difficulties of other immigrant students as he interacted with them: “estaba yendo a la universidad y [estando] con jóvenes que tenían varios trabajos y [estaban] sin familia me impactó mucho. Yo siento que [tengo] todo lo que necesito, pero las personas con quien trabajo no tienen las mismas posibilidades. Cuando entré al grupo se me aclaró esto un poco más, viendo más allá de mi comunidad, en Estados Unidos y en general el tema de la migración es muy extenso. [Era] ver de manera más real el problema de la migración, ver a la persona con una cara, y ver que no es posible ser indiferentes a lo que está pasando. Esta información me dio crecimiento espiritual pero también aprendizaje de derechos humanos y dignidad de la persona.”

Being part of the organization, Martin’s group is connected with changes to legislation: “Como parte de la Coalición siempre estamos muy al tanto de las iniciativas de lo que está pasando. Estamos constantemente recibiendo noticias de lo que está pasando. Ellos llaman organizaciones a que se involucren—ellos nos dan información, por ejemplo lo de las licencias, de quiénes eran nuestros representantes, y cómo acercarnos a legisladores, cómo trabajar con ellos. Están en constante comunicación con nosotros y en base a lo que está pasando nos organizamos.”

Martin is convinced that his involvement in the organization has had an impact: “Un impacto es el poder cambiar a una persona o poder ayudar aquella persona. Si es una persona de la comunidad, [ayudarla] a conectarse o a cambiar o a resolver su situación. Lo poquito que yo hago, [...] es concientizar a una persona de la importancia del voto, conscientizarla a la importancia de su participación en una manifestación, de su apoyo a la comunidad. Para mi eso es un impacto, porque ya es una persona más y ya es un esfuerzo extra hacia el cambio de nuestra comunidad.”

Martin’s groups believes that “tenemos que unirnos y trabajar juntos para mejorar nuestra vida.”

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Alejandra has lived in the U.S. for five years. She has been involved with a community-based organization for approximately one year. A speaker came to her high school and talked about a leadership program targeting undocumented student issues. There were a few reasons that moved Alejandra to become involved. First of all, the issues facing undocumented students directly affected Alejandra. Secondly, her major was justice studies because she likes to “fight for people’s rights.”

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Alejandra thinks that her community may not be aware of many issues that can prevent action and initiative for change. “I don’t think my community doesn’t really care. It’s not that they don’t care, but they’re not as informed. They don’t see themselves as trying to change the community. It’s sad to say it, as minorities we’re in our little bubble -- afraid to go out there and improve our community. It’s a lack of education. ... “The community waits for somebody else to come and change [the situation]. They wait for something bad to happen, maybe shootings; then they start organizing to try to change things. But if it’s something small they don’t organize, they wait for someone else to try to change it.”

Eugenia Perez, Married, Mexicana, 70 years old, Mother of 10

Eugenia, a 70-year-old woman, has lived in Chicago for over 44 years. She became active in her community when she moved to the neighborhood and a representative from a neighborhood organization knocked on her door and informed her about the organization and the issues affecting her community. The representative wanted to hear her perspective on the community and any concerns or problems. After the visit, she became interested in the issues that affect her community and became active through local organizations.

Through her participation, Eugenia learned more about her neighborhood and creating change. “En [la organización] aprendemos diario, el vecindario estaba deteriorado, muchas ratas, todo estaba sucio. ... necesitábamos ayuda y no sabíamos como [recibirla]. Por medio de la organización comunitaria aprendimos a exigirle al gobierno, a la policía, a todos para que nos ayudaran.” Through her involvement with the organization, she learned more about her rights as a resident and was convinced that she could make a difference. “Por la participación en el programa [de liderazgo] aprendí que el gobierno, el concejal ... policías, todos están para ayudarnos a nosotros y podemos exigirles lo que está ahí para nosotros. Ahora sabemos como hablarles y como exigir. ... he aprendido que puedo hacer una diferencia.”

Eugenia saw the importance of unifying with others in the community as benefiting herself and her community. “Si tenemos que volver a empezar otra vez, tiene uno que seguir para que el barrio no se deteriore y la única forma es organizándose.” Although she is not as engaged now as in the past with the organization, she continues to contribute to the betterment of her community, by keeping empty lots and her neighborhood clean. She has spoken to and met with policy makers and legislators since her initial participation with the organization, learning about the issues from a community organization. She feels that community residents care about the community and that it has improved, for which she is happy living there.