

**Suburban Chicago:
The Latino Capital of the Midwest**

By

John P. Koval

Chicago Community Trust Latino Research Collaborative

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Julian Samora Research Institute
Michigan State University
1407 S. Harrison Road
Suite 301 Nisbet Building
East Lansing, Michigan 48823-5286
Phone: (517) 432-1317 • **Fax:** (517) 432-2221
E-Mail: jsamorai@jsri.msu.edu
Web Site: www.jsri.msu.edu

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Abstract

The city of Chicago has been a classic example of urban immigration and absorption—a U.S. city populated, built, and run by immigrants. However, after years of White middle- and upper-middle-class dominance of suburban Chicago, Latinos are now at the forefront of the racial and ethnic integration of Chicago's suburbs. The majority of Latinos in metropolitan Chicago—as well as the five other largest immigrant groups—live in the suburbs. The city of Chicago is no longer the immigrant capital of the Midwest; today, it is suburban Chicago.

About the Author

Dr. John P. Koval is a retired associate professor of Sociology from DePaul University with interests in work, immigration, inequality, and globalization. Dr. Koval received his Ph.D. from the University of Oregon and worked on poverty and delinquency programs in Oregon before joining the Sociology faculty at Notre Dame and, later, chairing the Department of Sociology at DePaul. He has authored and coauthored several research reports for the Institute for Latino Studies including “Mexican Women in Chicago,” with Allert Brown-Gort and Timothy Ready, and “In Search of Economic Parity: The Mexican Labor Force in Chicago.” He edited and wrote several chapters for *The New Chicago: A Social and Cultural Analysis* (Temple University Press, 2006), a book dealing with urban change and globalization in Chicago within the past quarter century.

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Suburban Chicago: The Latino Capital of the Midwest

The history of immigration to the U.S. is a history of urban immigration with American cities serving as ports of entry. Chicago was, and remains, the quintessential example of an American city populated, built, and run by immigrants. While Chicago was quick to call itself the “City of Neighborhoods,” from early on it was actually a city of ethnic neighborhoods—which it still is—but now there is much more to the geography of Chicago’s immigrant population. This is true in particular with the suburbanization of Latinos, but it also holds true for the suburbanization of the majority of other recent immigrants.

For the longest time, “suburban” and “White middle- and upper-middle-class” were synonymous. This is no longer the case. The 2000 census confirmed that what might have once been thought of as a trickle is now a bona fide trend. To the surprise of many Chicagoans, the Census Bureau reported that the majority of metropolitan Chicago Latinos now live in the suburbs—and upon further examination, it turns out that the majority, the vast majority, of Chicago’s five other largest immigrant groups and their progeny—Indians, Filipinos, Poles, Chinese, and Koreans—also live in the suburbs (see Table 1). While Chicago’s Muslim community is large but multi-ethnic, thirty of its fifty mosques (60 percent)

Latinos are “the” story of the ongoing racial and ethnic integration and diversification of suburbia. The “Why?” of Latino suburbanization is, in all likelihood, similar to the pragmatic response that the infamous bank robber of the 1930s, Willie Sutton, gave to reporters when they asked him why he robbed banks: “Because that’s where the money is.” Latinos might well answer the “Why the suburbs?” question with a similarly pragmatic reply: “Because that’s where the jobs are,” and good schools, and safe neighborhoods. Partial evidence to support this hypothesis exists in the vast majority of Chicago Industries and industrial jobs, which are now found in the suburbs. These industries and jobs are heavily populated by Latinos, especially immigrant Latinos.

The Asian newcomers to the suburbs tend to mirror the characteristics of established suburbanites, because of selective immigration and the recruitment of Asians in health care, information, and high technology occupations. They are well educated, and tend to have good paying professional, executive, and managerial jobs. So, socioeconomically speaking, they fit in. This is not the case for Latinos.

Latinos neither fit the socioeconomic profile of traditional suburbanites or other suburban immigrant groups, nor do they fit the economic profile of their Latino co-ethnics who live in the city. White suburbanites, for example, are distinguished from urban dwellers by their generally higher education, white-collar occupations, and higher incomes. Suburban Latinos are lower in all three counts when compared to both urban White residents and suburban Whites. Interestingly, while they do not differ from their urban co-ethnics with respect to education and occupation, their median household income is markedly higher (by 43 percent) while still being significantly lower than other non-Latino suburbanites.

I. The Socioeconomic Landscape of Suburbia

The ongoing cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in suburbia is heavily accented by economics; that is, there is a wide urban/ suburban economic divide that holds for race, ethnicity, and native-born and foreign-born. Before exploring the nuances of these differences, consider the wide-scale socioeconomic canvas of metropolitan Chicago from an urban/suburban perspective as seen in Table 2 (page 2).

While household income varies significantly by race and ethnicity in both the suburbs and the city, the one constant is that suburbanites have higher household income than urbanites, both within and between each racial or ethnic group. Generally, the economic peaks and

Table 1
Suburban Chicago:
Its Racial/Ethnic Composition
(reported in percentage)

Race/Ethnicity	City	Suburbs	Total
White	18.1	81.9	100.0
Black	62.0	38.0	100.0
Chinese	43.3	56.7	100.0
Filipino	29.7	70.3	100.0
Indian	17.0	83.0	100.0
Korean	20.6	79.4	100.0
Latino	45.2	54.8	100.0
Polish	22.5	77.5	100.0
Muslim mosques	40.0	60.0	100.0

Data Source: IPUMS 2005-2007

are also found in the suburbs. So, a simple reality emerges: the city of Chicago is no longer the immigrant capital of the Midwest, suburban Chicago is. Welcome to the socio-demographic ripple effect of globalization and the internationalization of Chicago’s suburbs.

Because of their exceptionally large numbers—greater than the total of the five next largest ethnic groups—

Table 2

**Median Household Income
by Race/Ethnicity and Urban/Suburban**

Race/Ethnicity	Urban	Suburban
White Non-Latino	\$61,334	\$73,570
African American	\$30,294	\$46,563
Chinese	\$39,970	\$88,845
Filipino	\$61,726	\$86,012
Indian	\$68,161	\$88,717
Korean	\$41,488	\$70,833
Latino	\$39,970	\$50,850
Polish	\$48,686	\$69,821

Data Source: IPUMS 2005-2007

valleys in the city and the suburbs see household incomes rise and fall depending on the magnitude of the human capital of each group—especially education and occupation. This is much less the case for Latinos. The human capital of urban and suburban Latinos tends to be quite similar. Language facility, the quality of their networks, and the optimizing of their educational and occupational skill levels are likely the differences that make an economic difference.

II. The Native-born/Foreign-born Economic Divide

When it comes to income, Latinos and all racial and ethnic groups are far from being monolithic. Aside from household income differences between urban and suburban residents, a sizable secondary level urban/suburban economic divide also exists depending on place of birth.

In some instances, it depends on whether the group was actively recruited to the U.S. via H-1B visas because of their competence in the needed fields of health and technology, as seems to be the case with Filipinos and Chinese, or if they emigrated to the U.S. as a result of their individual initiative, like most Latinos and Poles. For Latinos, urban/suburban income differences probably rest on differences in language facility, citizenship status, and the resultant greater occupational options available to native-born Latinos.

III. The Geography of Latino Suburbanization

Just as Latinos are not equally distributed throughout Chicago's neighborhoods, neither is their density randomly distributed; that is, Latinos are not found in equal, or even near equal, proportions in all suburban communities. Latino population density ranges from a high in Cicero (84 percent) to a low in communities such as

Wilmette (1.1 percent) and Northbrook (1.8 percent)—an obvious economic link (see Figure I [page 3]).

So, while Latinos can be found in all of the counties surrounding Chicago and in almost all of Chicago's 293 varied municipalities, growth begets growth. For example, four of the seven largest suburban municipalities in metropolitan Chicago also have the four highest proportions of Latinos: Aurora, 37.8 percent; Elgin, 41.5 percent; Waukegan, 52.7 percent; and Cicero, 83.8 percent. In turn, small numbers of Latinos are found in the still agricultural portions of western McHenry, Kane, and Kendall Counties, as well as the southern portions of Will County.

The existence of high proportions of Latinos in the larger suburban municipalities is not surprising. These are the major growth communities in suburbia—and where there is growth, there are opportunities and jobs. For example, the three major industries in which the largest number of Latinos works are manufacturing, construction, and service. Population growth affects two of these three directly: it begets construction and housing growth as it also produces an increase in service jobs.

The map that follows identifies the twenty-five suburban municipalities with the highest proportion of Latinos, plotting the location of all ninety-three surrounding county municipalities with 20,000 or more residents and estimating their Latino proportions. Heavy concentrations of Latinos can be seen in the west-central suburbs as well as in the northern Cook County suburbs.

IV. Latinos and Work

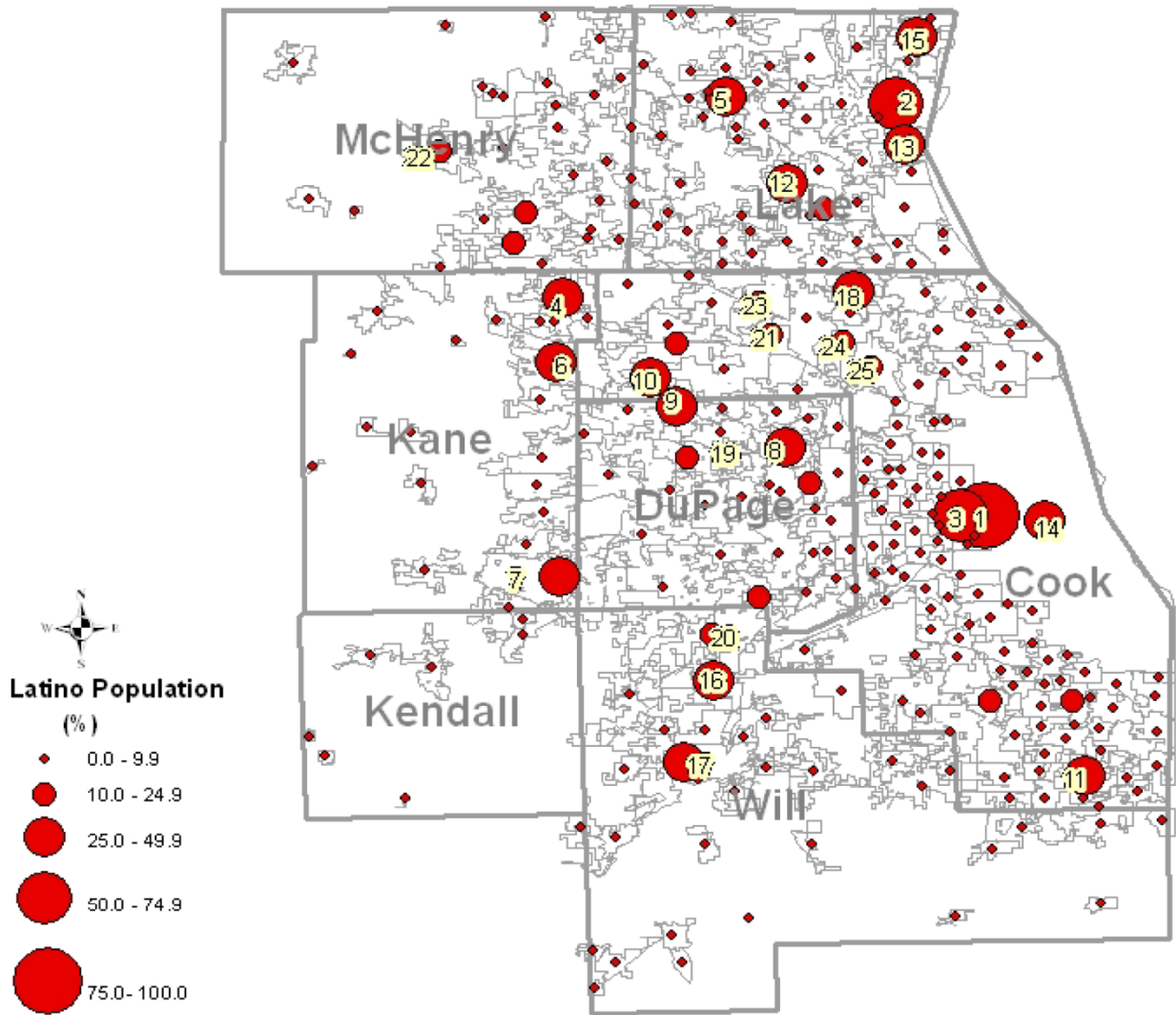
Even the most hardened anti-immigrant, anti-minority Chicagoan typically concludes his/her discourse about why Latinos "don't belong here," with "But I'll give them this, they're hard workers." And the data supports this observation:

Table 3 (page 4) shows that Latino households average more hours of work per week than White households—whether native- or foreign-born, urban or suburban. The differences, ranging between 28 percent and 34 percent more hours worked per week, are not small. The reason for this differential is apparently because Latinos have more employed members per household than do White households. Similarly, since there is very little difference in the level of education or occupation between urban and suburban Latinos, the 14 percent more hours worked per household by suburbanites may well account for the urban/suburban household income differences.

Collectively, Latinos tend to have low human capital, but this capital varies by native-born/foreign-born within

Figure I

The Twenty-Five Metropolitan Chicago Municipalities With the Highest Proportion of Latinos American Community Survey: 2005-2007



NO.	NAME	POPULATION	LATINO	LATINO (%)	NO.	NAME	POPULATION	LATINO	LATINO (%)
1	Cicero	83,149	69,646	83.8	14	Chicago	2,740,224	769,028	28.1
2	Waukegan	85,072	44,810	52.7	15	Zion	24,399	6,817	27.9
3	Berwyn	56,180	29,585	52.7	16	Romeoville	38,388	10,514	27.4
4	Carpentersville	38,337	18,856	49.2	17	Joliet	138,057	35,271	25.5
5	Round Lake Beach	28,845	12,992	45.0	18	Wheeling	35,718	9,060	25.4
6	Elgin	100,014	41,528	41.5	19	Glendale Heights	33,588	8,094	24.1
7	Aurora	176,413	66,769	37.8	20	Bolingbrook	69,661	15,328	22.0
8	Addison	37,655	13,724	36.4	21	Rolling Meadows	23,303	4,969	21.3
9	Hanover Park	39,230	12,684	32.3	22	Woodstock	21,842	4,288	19.6
10	Streamwood	41,258	12,738	30.9	23	Palatine	68,172	11,018	16.2
11	Chicago Heights	31,681	9,616	30.4	24	Mount Prospect	55,316	8,589	15.5
12	Mundelein	32,189	9,582	29.8	25	Des Plaines	59,518	8,523	14.3
13	North Chicago	28,559	8,355	29.3					

the Latino community and gender, which in effect results in four different Latino labor forces: (1) Native-born Latino males, while still underrepresented in professional, technical, executive, and higher-level administrative jobs, are found in larger numbers in

skilled blue-collar and service jobs; (2) Foreign-born Latino males, whether urban or suburban dwellers, work in food service, construction, unskilled manufacturing jobs, gardening and grounds keeping, and truck delivery services in exceptionally large numbers; (3) Foreign-born Latina women, both urban and suburban, are employed primarily in light industrial jobs, housekeeping and child care jobs, and food service jobs; and (4) Native-born Latina women’s occupational world is quite different, as they engage in a host of white-collar occupations, such as secretaries, receptionists, cashiers, retail sales clerks, and customer service representatives.

V. Latino Suburbanization: An Indicator of Upward Mobility?

Moving from the city to the suburbs has traditionally been more of an unspoken indicator about upward mobility than geographic mobility. For Latinos, this appears to be considerably more ambiguous. Every top has a bottom and this is surely the case when it comes to socioeconomic hierarchies and social mobility. So, does the suburbanization of Latinos represent upward mobility? The answer is “yes” or “perhaps.”

Within the context of the Latino community, the answer is a resounding “yes,” since suburban Latinos are at the top of the Latino economic hierarchy. Within the context of metropolitan Chicago, with its multi-ethnic/multi-racial strata, the answer is “perhaps,” or maybe even “no,” since Latinos, whether urban or suburban, are at the bottom of that hierarchy.

The same can be said when we look at the top of the top of the Latino hierarchy—college graduates and higher. Approximately 11.5 percent of suburban Latinos have a college degree or higher, and while well educated Latinos can be found throughout the suburbs, they tend to cluster in high-income, high-education suburban municipalities. For example, six of the ten communities that have the highest proportion of Latinos with B.A. degrees

Race/Ethnicity	Urban		Suburban	
	Native-Born	Foreign-Born	Native-Born	Foreign-Born
White Non-Latino	51.6	51.0	56.2	58.1
Latino	56.0	73.0	64.2	81.0

Data Source: IPUMS 2005-2007

and higher are among the fifteen communities with the highest household income in all of suburbia.

Northbrook, the third most affluent suburban community, is a case in point. It has the highest proportion of Latinos with B.A. degrees among all other suburbs (41.3 percent), while Naperville, the eighth most affluent community in suburbia, has the largest number of Latinos with B.A. degrees, nearly 1,500. Yet, while high numbers and proportions of the most well educated Latinos gravitate toward these elite communities, socioeconomically they are on those communities’ bottom rungs.

VI. Conclusion

Suburban Chicago, after decades of White middle-class and upper-middle-class dominance, is being integrated racially and ethnically, as well as being globalized culturally—with Latinos at the forefront of the change. While rich north shore suburbs are least affected—if at all—by immigrants and immigration, immigrant racial and ethnic groups tend to sort themselves out and are concentrated in suburban communities that most closely share similar educational, occupational, and income characteristics. Latinos tend to follow suit, but unlike well educated and highly paid Asian immigrants, the majority of whom live in the suburbs, Latinos are found numerically and proportionately in blue-collar, construction, and low-paying service jobs; and the larger the suburb, the greater the number and proportion of Latinos. While well educated suburban Latinos also sort themselves out residentially and tend to live in high-status suburban communities, they still tend to be at the lower end of the economic hierarchy in those communities.

The exceptionally large number of Latinos presently residing in the suburbs, coupled with their projected growth of 300 percent by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau) will, in all likelihood, have a profound effect on the educational, cultural, political, and economic character of metropolitan Chicago—and more likely a greater effect in suburban Chicago than in the city.