

A Wake-Up Call: Latino Youth Speak Out About Arizona SB 1070

Introduction

Latino* youth are living in a divisive and anxiety-inducing environment produced by growing antagonism toward immigrants and the hostile national debate surrounding Arizona SB 1070,[†] which legitimizes the use of racial profiling. Federal inaction on comprehensive immigration reform has opened the door wide to a barrage of state and local measures that target immigrants, generating anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment. As a result, many Latinos, whether they are recent immigrants or third-generation citizens of the United States, are feeling under attack. This is particularly true for Latino youth, who are the least likely to be immigrants. The overwhelmingly majority of Latino youth—92%—are U.S. citizens.

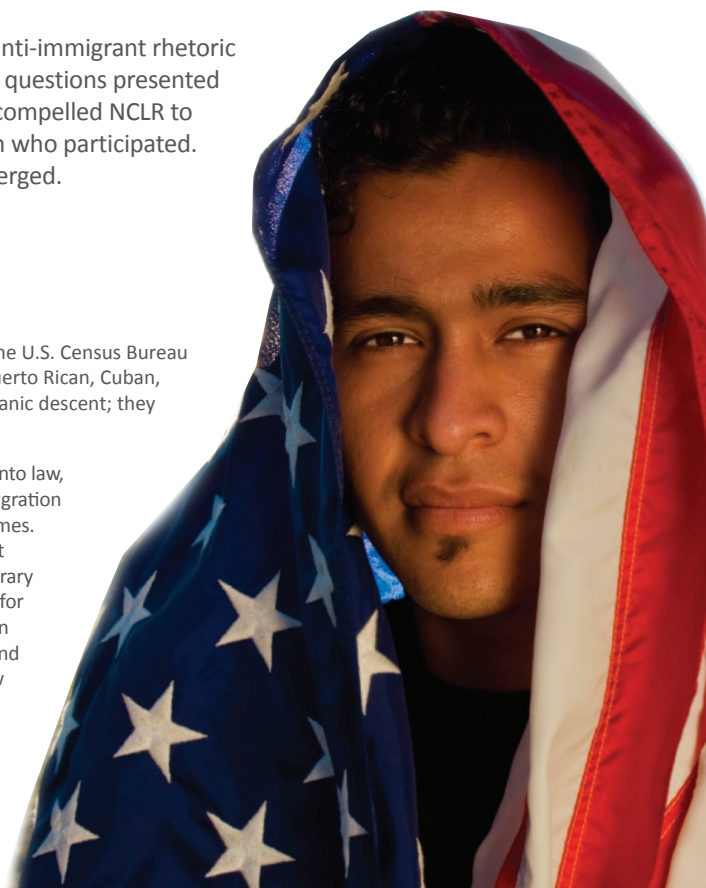
In July 2010, researchers at the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) held a forum with 150 youth attending a national leadership development program, the *Líderes* Summit, at the 2010 NCLR Annual Conference to talk about their experiences with discrimination and stereotyping. The youth present at the forum represented 20 states and ranged in age from 14 to 25. By a show of hands, the majority were second-generation college students. The session was designed to solicit feedback for an upcoming NCLR research report on Latino youth's perceptions of how they are viewed by others.

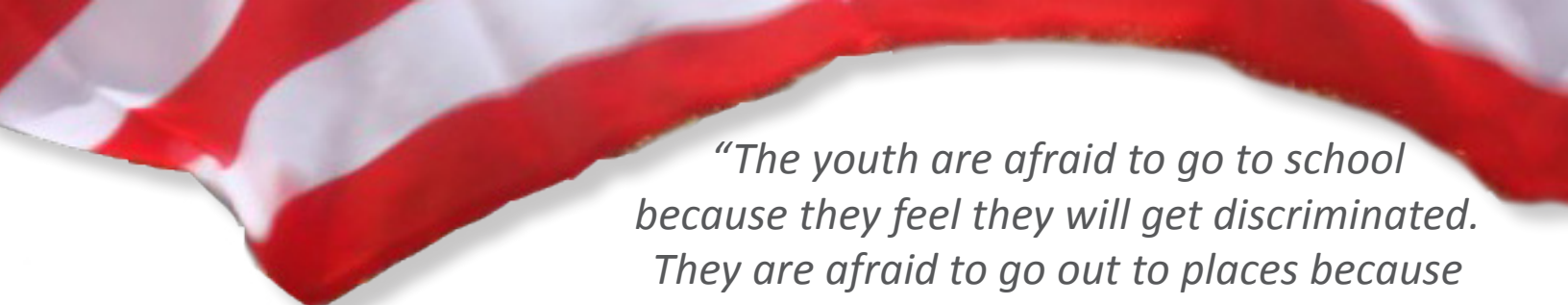
To promote a two-way dialogue, NCLR researchers first presented the preliminary findings of focus groups with Latino youth in four different cities, emphasizing the common experience of discrimination and stereotyping, and then asked the youth to break into small groups to discuss their thoughts about the research. The participants were given handouts with two main questions: 1) What are your thoughts about the stereotyping and discrimination of Latino youth? 2) How has the way you feel or act changed since the Arizona law passed? After a short discussion, some of the groups reported on the outcome of their conversation. In addition, NCLR collected written reflections from 48 youth who returned their handouts.

This dialogue brought to light the significant impact of anti-immigrant rhetoric on Latino youth. The intensity of their responses to the questions presented to them and the nature of their comments on SB 1070 compelled NCLR to publish this summary, along with quotes from the youth who participated. The quotes are organized by the major themes that emerged.

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† On April 29, 2010, Arizona's governor, Jan Brewer, signed SB 1070 into law, which would have required police officers to verify a person's immigration status and compelled immigrants to carry their documents at all times. In response to several lawsuits, a U.S. district court judge ruled that these provisions of the law could not be implemented. The temporary injunction is expected to be reviewed by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on November 2, 2010. Similar legislation has been introduced in 22 states. NCLR is among leading civil rights, labor, and faith organizations that have rallied to boycott Arizona until the law is permanently repealed, overturned by the courts, or superseded by federal comprehensive immigration reform legislation.





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Anxiety about Increased Racial Profiling and Discrimination

The main theme expressed by youth during the dialogue and in the written comments was anxiety that SB 1070 will lead to increased racial profiling and discrimination of the Hispanic community across the country. Research on the local enforcement of immigration laws has shown that arrest rates for Latinos increase significantly after implementation.¹ Similarly, there is increasing evidence that Latino youth, especially males, are frequently stopped and questioned by law enforcement and school security. One participant at the session commented that discrimination “is unjust and makes me as a Latino feel like less of a person.”

“The youth are afraid to go to school because they feel they will get discriminated. They are afraid to go out to places because they feel they will get stopped by a cop.”

“ ‘Reasonable suspicion’ could mean that you have weeds in your street and they can ask for your papers.”

“They [immigrants] were getting targeted. Now it is openly legal...”

“Now people are uncomfortable and are scared to go out. I’ve been upset because things have been changing and my people are getting arrested.”

Concerns That More States Will Adopt Similar Laws

The youth were extremely concerned about potential copycat laws in their own states. Some expressed intense anxiety about the possibility of more laws like Arizona’s. In recent years, state and local governments have passed or attempted to pass numerous anti-immigrant laws. Often a proposal in one state will set off the introduction of identical legislation in many others. In August 2010, at least 22 states were considering legislation similar to Arizona’s.²

“Some felt it didn’t affect them because they weren’t from Arizona...[others felt that] even though it’s only one state it could spread to other states and we should care about it...I’m from California. It affects us because we’re immigrants and we’re Latinos.”

“Yes, because you think if it happened there that means it can happen anywhere and anytime and the worst part is that we don’t know if it’s going to be the same as that one [SB 1070] or worse, so we don’t know what to expect or when to expect it, so we just have to live con miedo y esperar lo peor [with fear and await the worst].”

“The Arizona situation needs to be stopped. It is like a plague; once it’s established and becomes terminal, then it will spread to other areas of the country...”

“We are just afraid it will come to Oklahoma. It would be really bad and sad as well.”

Worries about Family and Friends

Some youth stated that they are not worried about how the law would impact them but are concerned about how their family and friends would be affected. Many Latinos live in mixed-status families, meaning that individuals in the household have different immigration statuses. Although 92% of Latino children are U.S. citizens, 58% live in families with at least one parent who was born outside of the United States. While the majority of the participants in the session were second-generation Latinos, they may have a parent, an aunt, or a cousin who is undocumented. This experience is common for many Latino youth.



“The families are scared of traveling and they’re paranoid, whether they are legal or illegal. It influences your family and friends and everyone around you. It’s just upsetting to hear about how they get everybody together and just deport them.”

“It has gotten more difficult, not only with Latino youth, but adults/elders, all Latino ages.”

“Our feelings have changed since the law in the way that we thought just because we were born in the United States, this law will not affect us, but then we think about our families and friends and we know they are the ones that will be affected.”

Changes in Behavior

In the discussion and written comments, youth described changes in the everyday activities and future plans of Latino families. Some reported that they and others they know are preoccupied with the events in Arizona, spending more time talking about it and becoming involved in activities to organize against the law. Others stated that many are afraid of being targeted if they go to Arizona—or even stay in the United States—and are altering their travel plans or considering moving.

“The neighboring states and people that live in communities around Arizona felt that they were more hesitant to go on vacations or go to [Arizona] for recreational purposes because they thought they would be stopped on the streets just by being there.”

“Way before [the law] people [in Oklahoma] were all packed up and ready to move. They think it’s unfair...”

“It is more stressful. It has changed the way of living. It is the only subject that has been brought up.”

“Can’t travel and families are paranoid [legal or illegal] because it will impact your family.”

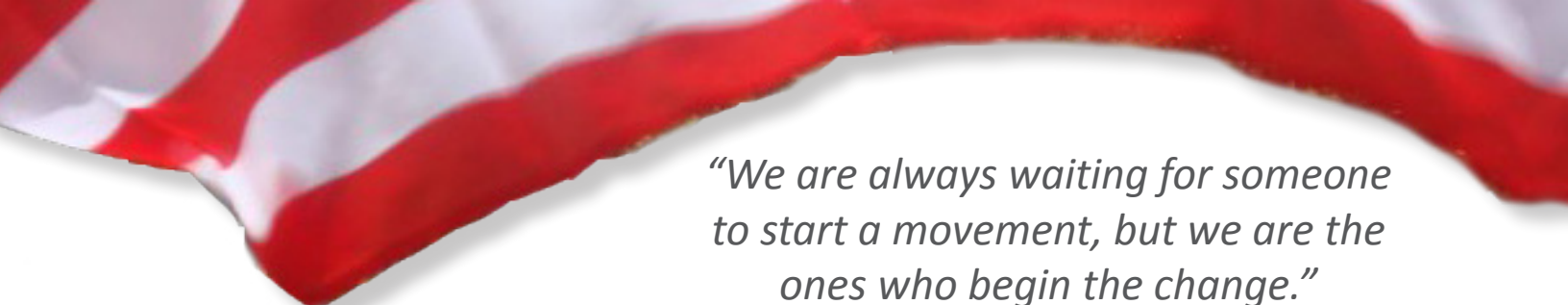
Frustration and Discouragement

Many Latino youth have participated in marches for comprehensive immigration reform and followed the political debate for several years. The immigration debate is important to them whether or not they are U.S. citizens. For Latino youth with undocumented family members or friends, immigration reform would mean an end to their fear of possible separation from their loved ones. In addition, the negative tone of the immigration debate has unleashed anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment felt by all Latinos. For undocumented youth, comprehensive immigration reform is directly linked to their ability to go to college and stay in the United States. Their comments reflect their frustration with SB 1070 as a setback in the slow progress toward comprehensive immigration reform, the potential for change in the national anti-Latino and anti-immigrant rhetoric, and their own future.

“The law disappoints a lot of undocumented students from going to college. Like if I can’t go to college, well then why should I try?”

“I think things have become more difficult...For the undocumented students, it is really discouraging. It makes us feel unwanted and hated. For me, I try to be more careful. It makes me feel frustrated and discourages [me] from continuing school.”

“We were moving to find a solution with immigration and then [when] SB 1070 started we took 1,000 million steps back.”



“We are always waiting for someone to start a movement, but we are the ones who begin the change.”

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Betrayal of American Values

The youth expressed their disappointment in the passage of SB 1070, stating that it is a violation of justice, a value they associate with the United States. They defended immigrants and questioned the constitutionality and fairness of Arizona’s law by calling upon the American values of justice, freedom, and opportunity.

“It [the law] stops the respect. I hate the law, I feel it is inhumane, especially in a country where freedom is sought. It instills a common fear in immigrants no matter where they are because they are what police are looking for. There are many other immigrants that overstay their visas and don’t get caught because they are lighter.”

“It makes people lose hope for justice being served in the U.S.A.”

“I understand that people who come here and do harm to the country should go out, but people who want to come and have an education and a better life should have the opportunity to have their citizenship and stay here.”

Taking Action and Resolving to Overcome Challenges

Some youth expressed their resolve to overcome challenges presented by SB 1070, such as through political activism. Others voiced a need for youth to organize among themselves. They felt that the law could bring the Latino community together and used the phrase “wake-up call” to refer to SB 1070 as a galvanizing event.

“I’m from Phoenix, Arizona so you can definitely tell that things have changed. Everyone is participating in the rallies and getting people to vote. We’re not really fearful because we’re going to the rallies. We’re like we’re not going to back down.”

“We are always waiting for someone to start a movement, but we are the ones who begin the change.”

“It has been a wake-up call. Now, the Latino community has become stronger and closer to one another. The Latino community has to take action to move forward and overcome this barrier. Now we know that we need to stand up for ourselves and show others that we are the future leaders.”

“It’s made the Latino community come together to fight. It has made our community even stronger!”

“Us, the youth, are the ones who started the walk [the Trail of Dreams]; we should do something again.”

Conclusion

Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, such as SB 1070, affect the daily lives of Latino youth. Through this forum, youth shared with us their frustration over anti-immigrant sentiment, their concern that family and friends might be stopped by law enforcement, and their increased drive to become politically active. They also expressed a sense of anxiety and discouragement—a cause for alarm. Young people in general face challenges in maintaining a positive attitude and staying on the path to success, but in the wake of SB 1070 Latino youth have concerns that extend beyond the daily stresses of growing up.

Their comments must be understood in the context of a larger national environment that is promoting division and insecurity. In recent years, Latinos have felt the stinging impact of growing anti-immigrant sentiment. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Latinos spiked dramatically from 2003 to 2007. In addition, the number of hate groups targeting Latinos has increased.³ General discrimination is a significant issue for Latino youth. In a national poll of Hispanic voters under age 29, 83% consider discrimination to be a problem for them personally.⁴ In another survey of young Latinos, 38% reported that they, a relative, or a close friend have been the target of ethnic or racial discrimination.⁵ Policies such as SB 1070 only serve to reinforce feelings of exclusion and vulnerability.

However, the youth who participated in this forum spoke passionately about their roles as leaders and their commitment to working for the realization of American values such as fairness and respect for diversity. Several commented that SB 1070 is a wake-up call for youth to become more engaged.

Indeed, Latino youth represent a vital and rapidly growing segment of our future leaders, workers, and voters. Hispanic children account for 22% of children under age 18, and by 2030 they are projected to make up nearly one-third (31%) of the child population.⁶ According to Democracia U.S.A.'s analysis of U.S. Census data, 500,000 Hispanics will turn 18—making them eligible to vote—every year for the next 20 years.⁷ These bright and energetic young people can lead the way to an inclusive and united nation. Instead of adopting the negative tone of the immigration debate, Latino youth remain hopeful that our nation can live up to our most cherished values—justice and equality. Our leaders should heed their call to transcend the divisive rhetoric of the immigration debate and focus on practical solutions.



Endnotes

- ¹ A. Elena Lacayo, *The Impact of Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act on the Latino Community*, Issue Brief 21 (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2010), http://www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/the_impact_of_section_287g_of_the_immigration_and_nationality_act_on_the_latino_community (accessed August 26, 2010).
- ² Campaign to Reform Immigration for America, “State and Local Elected Leaders for Immigration Reform,” http://act.reformimmigrationforamerica.org/cms/sign/elected_officials (accessed August 27, 2010).
- ³ WeCanStopTheHate.org, “Hate Flashpoints,” <http://www.wecanstopthehate.org/flashpoints> (accessed August 20, 2010); and Heidi Beirich, “The Year in Nativism,” Intelligence Report 137 (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, Spring 2010), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/spring/the-year-in-nativism> (accessed August 20, 2010).
- ⁴ Democracia Ahora, “National Study of Young Hispanics,” http://democracia-ahora.org/national_study_of_young_hispanics_signup (accessed August 20, 2010).
- ⁵ Pew Hispanic Center, *Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2009), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/117.pdf> (accessed August 20, 2010).
- ⁶ Patricia Foxen and Mark Mather, *America’s Future: Latino Child Well-Being in Numbers and Trends* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2010).
- ⁷ Democracia Ahora, “National Study of Young Hispanics.”