

Facades of Fear: Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances and Mexican Rental Housing Preference in the Suburban New Latinx South

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, Mexican communities have bypassed historic, urban ethnic enclaves in the West and Southwest to settle in suburban areas of the southern United States. Nowhere is this spatial “Latinization” phenomenon more acute than in small towns such as those in Gwinnett County (metropolitan Atlanta), one of the foremost frontiers of new immigrant destinations in America. Coinciding with the growth of Mexican communities in these regions have been a string of local Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances (AIHOs), all of which have positioned states like Georgia to become national pioneers of immigration surveillance and a regional enforcement model for neighboring states and metropolitan areas across the Sun Belt. The culmination of these adverse effects of detainment or deportation for violating AIHOs has required Mexican residents to create or reshape residential built environments covertly. These often unsanctioned practices represent political resistance and survival modes that clash with the traditional image of White, suburban America.

This article investigates how reactionary municipal anti-immigrant policies, fomented by the rise of largely undocumented Mexican immigrant communities, transform the rental housing typology of suburban Atlanta. Ethnographic data are triangulated from nearly 150 in-depth interviews, participant observation, and longitudinal content analysis of local English and Spanish-language news outlets and municipal policy documents since 2000. Research findings illustrate how immigrant coping mechanisms manifest across various intergenerational and mixed citizen status Mexican communities to transform their housing and navigate their daily lives. In a 21st century America defined by exponential Latinx growth, this emergent case study of Gwinnett County illustrates the spatial residential adaptation challenges Mexican immigrant populations face when settling in suburban geographies unprepared for seismic influxes of undocumented immigrants.

Introduction

Housing access and affordability play a discernible role in immigrant settlement (Ley and Tutchener, 2001; Rosenbaum et al., 1999). Apart from satisfying a basic need, an immigrant's ability to secure adequate housing serves as a key indicator for how they interpret the local climate of newcomer receptivity (Alba, Logan, and Stults, 2000; Boccagni, 2014; Jargowsky, 2009). While homeownership for undocumented Mexican immigrants remains elusive, Mexican immigrants have found new ways to rent and essentially transform housing typologies in small cities, towns, and unincorporated jurisdictions in the metropolitan periphery, such as those in Gwinnett County, Georgia.

Simultaneously, outer suburban areas have become popular, affordable host places for new immigrants and longstanding urban migrants to work. Over the past 20 years, Latinx communities (majority ethnic Mexicans) are bypassing historic, urban ethnic enclaves to settle in suburban areas—especially in the South—where the largest increase in the U.S.-Latinx population has rapidly reshaped the built environment. These transformations range from repurposing vacant storefronts to decorating housing with murals, Spanish signage, and vibrant colors (Odem and Lacy, 2009; Smith and Furuseth, 2006, 2004). In fact, a majority (more than 50 percent) of the Mexican settlement in the South since 2000 was not the result of direct immigration from Mexico, but rather internal migration from urban Mexican hubs. Of 18 metropolitan areas designated by the Brookings Institute as a “Latino/Hispanic Hypergrowth Destination” in 2002, 10 of the top 12 were in the U.S. South (Suro and Singer, 2002).¹

Demographic shifts in Gwinnett County have had an obvious effect on intergenerational overcrowding on the region's Mexican community. Gwinnett's shift into an immigrant majority (largely Mexican) population has been a constant concern for extant White populations for well over a decade, many of whom repeatedly surveil compliance with local zoning ordinances. These concerns stem from Mexican immigrants' impressions of native White residents monitoring local-level zoning enforcement on density (overcrowding), parking, and yard or facade maintenance violations. Strict conceptions of homemaking dictated by White populations have fueled nativist tensions resulting in a protective (often exclusionary) suburban Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances (AIHOs).

Previous studies have illustrated that Mexican immigrants in the South were “secondary internal migrants” relocating from historical centers of Latinx settlement such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2000; Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2001) to southern suburbs. These secondary internal migrants relied on their sense of social life, community, and spatial patterns—in essence, “reservoirs of social capital”—from their previous border communities to transform small southern towns into what would eventually be termed the Nuevo South (Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2005).² However, the struggles for Latinx newcomer communities

¹ The top 10 southern “Latino/Hispanic Hypergrowth Destination” areas include (in order of Hispanic population growth): Raleigh/Durham, Atlanta, Greensboro, Charlotte, Orlando, Nashville, Fort Lauderdale, Sarasota, Greenville, and West Palm Beach.

² The term “Nuevo South” is a post-Reconstruction image of the “New South” through a Hispanic lens. The term has gained prominence in scholarship about Latino migration since 2000. However, the dichotomy of “Old South” versus “New South” or “Nuevo South” has not eased racial tensions, which have become far more complicated now than ever before.

to adapt to inadequate housing first took root in urban areas. Light's study about Mexican growth in Los Angeles between 1980 and 2000 illustrated how ordinances requiring maximum square footage on minimum-sized land plots and local rules concerning home occupancy and yard maintenance made home-sharing and ownership virtually impossible (Light, 2006). This element is foundational for Latinx immigrants in Gwinnett, many of whom have roots in historical other parts of the U.S.

Settlement patterns in the U.S. South also reveal that Mexican immigrants' experience in adapting to American society in Los Angeles, Houston, or Chicago must be recalibrated to account for a different political and physical environment than previous settlement locations. Many of the factors that "pushed" Mexican immigrants out of historical centers of Latinx communities included the transformation of large cities into sites of finance, technology, and hyper-gentrification. These factors allowed traditional inner-city Mexican enclaves to become zones of exclusion, leading some to relocate to suburbs in search of new opportunities.

For Gwinnett County, Latinx newcomer housing challenges differ from urban centers for a host of reasons. First, southern counties like Gwinnett are the breeding ground for anti-immigrant policies. Whereas urban centers boast a robust network of immigration and housing advocates, these remain sparse and overextended in the South. Second, the suburban settings create a diffuse condition, where Latinx settlement is difficult to pinpoint without the specific districts or corridors easily identified in urban centers. Third, undocumented immigrants concerned for their protection in these new locations struggle to develop the same migrant networks that flourish in areas with longer-standing generations of Latinx migrants (Massey, 1987). Conversely, the absence of a well-established Mexican residential district in southern metropolitan, suburban, and exurban areas, coupled with plummeting retail property values, has provided both Mexican and non-Mexican families a welcome opportunity to settle in the suburbs.

This article analyzes elements of intergenerational residential rental adaptation by Mexican-origin populations in Gwinnett County. In this suburban environment, a home acts as a window into ethnic majority-minority interactions that occur amidst a culture of collective and individual fear about which populations lay claim to where and how people live. For Mexicans in Gwinnett, fear is reproduced through municipal (city- and county-level) policies regulating and challenging their predisposed cultural norms about overcrowding and family size, beautification and maintenance, excessive parking, and other commonplace zoning elements at the parcel level. These actions by Mexicans threaten the aesthetic mores of a native White middle-class in Gwinnett and perpetuate negative claims directed toward Mexican immigrants in the United States.

Literature Review

Spatial Assimilation

Numerous scholars have explored how Latinx segregation in multiethnic metropolitan areas declines when African-American segregation is lower and when other minority groups grow faster than African Americans (Frey and Farley, 1996; Light and Farley, 2004; Logan, Stults, and Farley, 2004; Massey and Denton, 1993; South, Crowder, and Pais, 2008), as well as the differences in

Latinx access to predominantly White suburbs (Lacayo, 2016; Logan, Alba, and Leung, 1996). In Gwinnett, homeownership is a vehicle for what Massey and Denton call “spatial assimilation.” *Spatial assimilation* is the process in which immigrants move out of distressed, segregated neighborhoods (Drever, 2004) to non-immigrant, White communities, thus shedding their immigrant behaviors in exchange for acceptance by the dominant White community.

Spatial assimilation theory (Massey and Denton, 1985) posits that new immigrants tend to detach from ethnic clusters the longer they are in their host county, slowly spreading out across center-city districts and dispersing into other parts of the region. The theory adapts a spatial lens to general theories about immigrant assimilation, where immigrants become upwardly mobile, eventually undergoing a process of economic, cultural, and social restructuring that mirrors the native population (Alba and Nee, 1997; Gordon, 1964). Understanding neighborhood selection and segregation is also useful through Alba and Logan’s lens of “place stratification,” which theorizes that neighborhoods become stratified by the opportunities and resources they offer (such as housing, healthcare, or education). In turn, these opportunities and resources directly correlate with the lives of non-native newcomers to those areas (Alba and Logan, 1993). However, the assumption that living in better neighborhoods consistently improves residents’ lives has been challenged, especially among Latinx and Black immigrants (South, Crowder, and Chavez, 2005). This pattern is cause for exploration, considering that immigrants settle (at least initially) in low-quality neighborhoods.

Housing Adjustment and Barriers to Social and Economic Adaptation in Georgia

Atilés and Bohon’s study about housing adjustments and barriers to social and economic adaptation, which applied Morris and Winter’s model among Georgia’s rural Latinxs, found that housing is a lynchpin for successful incorporation (Atilés and Bohon, 2003). Any deviation from this could lead to downward assimilation. Contrary to popular belief, Atilés and Bohon find that the dilapidated residential conditions of Latinxs in Georgia are not a cultural preference. While some Latinxs can save money to buy (or share) a home in a subdivision, the majority adapt to a transient lifestyle, frequently moving to access what available residential options they can afford due to “satisfaction constraints” (Ibid). These satisfaction constraints include living in dense, overcrowded apartments or renting single rooms without common space access.

In fact, Atilés and Bohon find that Latinxs in Georgia aspire to a typical American way of life but face barriers to that lifestyle. The lack of affordable options and housing stock, or the lack of a particular unit size (three bedrooms or larger), creates a critical impediment for Latinxs to be welcome in American society. This housing challenge poses a significant barrier as the U.S. South is often the second, third, and intended final stop for long-term settlement aspirations of growing Latinx families looking for ample space and scarce entry-level employment opportunities in major cities.

Assimilation Processes and Housing in Gwinnett County

Immigrants in the 21st century still struggle to acclimate to American society. Natives to Gwinnett County assert that providing services to immigrants drains the distribution of non-immigrants in the county. The county’s current cycle of demographic change shows that native White residents

would rather flee the county as new residents arrive (Kruse, 2013). The majority of this second wave of “White flight” has increased the population of outlying areas, including Hall and Barrow counties. A true poly-cultural future for Gwinnett is only possible when members of different cultures understand that the maintenance of language and cultural traits is not an impediment to adjustment. “Assimilation will occur in Gwinnett, but painful divisions will exist for a while. I think we are doing fairly well with assimilation, but gangs worry me. Also, it feels vaguely immoral to have so much of our hard labor done by immigrants,” wrote a resident of Duluth in an op-ed in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Watts, 2005).

To understand the housing adaptation practices of Mexicans in Gwinnett, it is necessary to extend the theoretical frameworks of assimilation to areas where anti-immigrant sentiment is rampant. Morris and Winter’s model for housing adjustment and adaptation (1975) posits that people who lack basic civic services are at higher risk of deviating from typical housing standards.³ This increased risk stems from a dearth of outreach programs that would otherwise help newcomers adapt to the laws and policies of new areas. The absence of such has been especially difficult for Mexican immigrants from rural areas that continue to maintain livestock herding practices while simultaneously breaking health code violations unknowingly.

Morris and Winter propose five norms of the American housing ideal (space, tenure, structure type, expenditures, and quality of neighborhood) that influence housing conditions. The authors find that families respond to deficits in their lifestyle and neighborhood through residential mobility, residential adaptation, or family adaptation—without the guarantee of improved satisfaction over any of these elements.⁴ In suburban areas, Morris and Winter’s theories corresponded to residential choice, where Mexicans are creating often unsanctioned residential shelters (unpermitted houses or additions) to make-up for a lack of official policy responses. Policy responses through AIHOs have only made Mexicans more fearful and invisible.

Influence of Immigration Policy on Fear and Housing

The absence of an established Mexican settlement community in Gwinnett has manifested in dispersed settlement patterns throughout the county. Without the geographic anchors proposed by earlier sociological models, Mexican residential options in maturing suburbs have been driven by two factors: (1) access to affordable and available options for rental housing and/or homeownership (Smith and Furuseth, 2004) and, according to this research, (2) the ability to keep a low profile amidst growing anti-immigrant (specifically anti-Mexican) sentiment from local jurisdictions. The need to stay in the shadows transcends the binary categories of homeowner or renter. While the initial perception among Mexicans in Gwinnett was that rental housing was less restrictive, a wave of housing-related ordinances in Gwinnett has proved this false, especially among unauthorized Mexicans. Mexican respondents in my study felt that, when available,

³ Morris and Winter’s model for housing adjustment and adaptation does not focus specifically on immigrants. It is useful in understanding the processes behind residential assimilation and extends the segmented assimilation model into dwelling preferences. The population versatility of the model allows for understanding Mexican residential preferences.

⁴ See also Wilson’s *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* for analogous work on African-Americans (1997).

renting an apartment was a less discriminatory process than purchasing a house, largely due to not having to apply for a mortgage.

However, where Mexicans see their residential location behavior through the lens of economic mobility, financial security, and family sociability, extant (non-immigrant) populations see this same behavior as demonstrating ethnic self-selectivity (Gordon, 1964) or self-segregation.⁵ According to Pooley, Atlanta's Hispanic segregation has surpassed White-Black segregation in the peripheral counties (2015). Between the period of 2000 and 2010, Gwinnett was listed as "diversifying." This was a major step for Gwinnett, which, as we saw earlier, was "Majority White" and "Segregated-White" 10 years prior. By 2010, areas of Norcross and Peachtree Corners—two cities in Gwinnett County—were listed as "Majority Hispanic" and "Segregated-Hispanic." Between 1990 and 2010, the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area's (MSA's) index of dissimilarity between Whites and Hispanics rose from 35 to around 50 over the 20-year period (Logan and Stults, 2011).⁶ "It's the way you see them cluster in trailer parks, in subdivisions, in certain parts of the county. I have to assume they do it for solidarity since it's hard to imagine [that] generations of families all want to live so close to each other," said Tanya, a White business owner who was born and raised in Duluth but now lives in Hall County. "I moved away from Gwinnett because things started to look run-down—not what I was used to growing-up here, when there was still space" (personal interview 2018). The sheer growth of Mexican immigrant communities in Gwinnett came with an assumption that the potential for homeownership signaled economic mobility. What was unclear was the precarity of mixed citizenship families to find adequate multi-family rentals, let alone single-family homes.

Research Design

Research Focus

This article investigates the conditions and processes that allow ethnic Mexican populations to either reshape or adapt to existing suburban ethnic residential spaces in Gwinnett County (greater Atlanta). On the one hand, the boundaries of legality are explicitly altered in ways that make Mexican practices illegal, forcing them to cope with potential deportation. On the other hand, Mexicans draw upon both spatial and economic resources that often fall outside of legal boundaries (many times unbeknownst to them, such as earnings from working in informal economies). This article interrogates the constraints and/or opportunities Mexican populations encounter when reshaping rental housing to fit their needs. These questions are especially pressing in new immigrant destinations like Gwinnett County, Georgia, that force unauthorized immigrants to live what Chavez calls "shadowed lives" (Chavez, 2012).

⁵ The work of Milton Gordon was a turning point between the "classic assimilation theories" of the Chicago School (1920s) and more recent "new assimilation theory" by Alba and Nee.

⁶ Index of dissimilarity is the percentage of households needed to move for each neighborhood to reflect the overall ethnic composition of the region's MSA.

Data Collection

Ethnographic fieldwork employed three qualitative approaches. Ethnography is a standard practice best defined by an approach “grounded in the commitment to the firsthand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting based on participant observation” (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). I contextualized my case study research with data triangulated from 150 in-depth, semi-structured and informal (unstructured) interviews with both documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants across multiple generations as well as planners, policymakers, designers, and staff from civil society organizations. I also conducted a longitudinal content analysis of local and national English and Spanish language print news outlets, archival materials from community organizations, and municipal policy documents between 2000 to present. To respect and protect the identity of Mexican-origin people, full names were never taken during data collection. I have used pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and security of my respondents by altering defining characteristics by several rounds to de-identify my respondents while still maintaining similarities in themes (e.g., age, job, region of the county).

I also relied on unobtrusive participant observation of naturally occurring social settings at a micro (residential parcel) level. These observations moved beyond the traditional insider-outsider binary that Mayan calls “observe as participant,” where participation is a secondary task to observation (Mayan, 2016). While living in Gwinnett County, my residential observations included common areas of predominantly Latinx multi-family buildings, accepting invitations to the homes and apartments of ethnic Mexicans to celebrate birthdays, religious events, and social gatherings, and volunteering at social service events tailored to Mexican residents of mobile home parks. I took written notes and recorded visual changes through permitted photography, two key sources of data that provided insight into their residential choices, range of activities, and aspirations for unmet needs.

Target Population

I opted to study ethnic Mexican immigrants because they are the largest continuously growing (via natural increase) Latinx sub-population and the largest ethnic minority population in Gwinnett County. The 16 cities within my selected county-level case study of Gwinnett have experienced rapidly changing demographics over the last 20 years. As such, a parcel-level analysis was necessary to contextualize a design-oriented study across the county. My data reveal processes of spatial change with regards to rental housing and reveal the political realities and level of immigrant receptivity where Mexican immigrants have settled. This is especially important in formerly rural (now suburban) areas of Atlanta, where the political strength of small, incorporated cities is a relatively recent development. From the 1996 Olympics to the influx of Fortune 500 companies, Mexican immigrants have played a key role in greater Atlanta’s emergence as a “global city” (Massey and Capoferro, 2008).

Limitations to Research

Gwinnett is an excellent case study because it is in many respects a unique exemplar of Mexican and Latinx migration to previously undeveloped suburban areas around southern cities in the

United States. In lieu of the generalizability often found in large-scale quantitative studies, my intention was to conduct deep research about an under-studied physical and sociological phenomenon: immigrants' perceptions of the nature and use of space and the built environment in Mexican immigrant, Mexican-American, Latinx, or other immigrant suburban communities in the United States. I do not purport that Mexican immigrants in suburban Atlanta are broadly representative of Mexican immigrants specifically or Latinx immigrants nationwide. This caveat satisfies Bryman's claim that the goal of case studies is to "generalize to theory rather than to populations" (Bryman, 2016). Because I view planning as a place-based policy, the ability to extract salient features from one case and export them to another presents considerable constraints for replicating parity in population demographics, governance structure, and geography.

While some scholars have generally explored how Latinx immigrants have transformed the U.S. South (Odem and Lacy, 2009), others have focused on the key metropolitan areas that have flourished alongside greater Atlanta: Nashville (Winders, 2013), Charlotte (Smith and Furuseth, 2006); or rural areas in North Carolina (Marrow, 2011) and Arkansas (Guerrero, 2017; Schoenholtz, 2005). The need for construction workers during the 1996 Olympic Games made greater Atlanta a key catalyst for Latinx growth in other larger southern cities. Clearly additional research about the adaptation experiences of Latinx immigrants in new destinations—including those beyond urban areas in the U.S. South and elsewhere—is essential to the future of demographic change in the United States. Lessons from this research provide an entry point to understanding the experiences of immigrants in other cities. This is especially critical given Gwinnett County's reputation for creating the template for immigration policies to take root in neighboring states and Sunbelt cities (Le, 2017; Rose, 2018; and Ye, 2017)

Site Context

Metropolitan Atlanta

As the largest urban center in the South, metro Atlanta's profound demographic changes trace back to the 1980s (Barreto and Segura, 2014; Odem and Lacy, 2009; Smith and Furuseth, 2006)—and to the early 1900s for a historical subset of the Mexican population (Adelman and Jaret, 2010; Weise, 2015). The first significant wave of growth came between 1980 and 1995, when Atlanta's Latinx population grew 130 percent, making Georgia the third-largest state for migrating Latinxs (National Council of La Raza, 2010). While the labor boom of the 1996 Olympics is often credited as the key event in the rise of Atlanta's Latinx population, the key labor anchor for sustaining Latinx (specifically Mexican) migration was meatpacking plants (particularly chicken processing plants). Agricultural industries began to sprout in peripheral rural (now suburban) areas such as Gwinnett and Dekalb Counties, soon accounting for 50 percent of the service sector jobs in the region (Kim, 2016; Kochhar, Suro, and Tafoya, 2005).

Gwinnett County

Located an hour from a large urban metro area and within the Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell MSA, Gwinnett is a suburban area linked to a central city (Atlanta) rather than a suburb or exurb independent of a larger city (see exhibit 1). Gwinnett County is equally representative of a

county with high levels of Mexican migration as it is representative of a county with rapid urban development. What was once a primarily rural county of approximately 356,000 people in the early 1990s is now a nearly 1 million population county in the U.S. South with the most radical shifts in Mexican immigrant demographics, boasting a 185-percent increase in Mexican growth between the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Censuses alone (U.S. Census 2000; 2010). Unlike other large Mexican centers in the West, Mexican immigrants in Atlanta moving straight to suburbs such as Gwinnett in the absence of urban Mexican enclaves that never existed in central Atlanta, a pattern that challenges traditional theories about metropolitan immigrant settlement.

Exhibit 1

Incorporated Cities and Towns (16) and Unincorporated Areas of Gwinnett County



Source: Gwinnett County (2018)

Policy Context

Policy-based anti-immigrant sentiment in Gwinnett is one consequence of what is now a critical mass of Mexican and other Latinx populations across the county. Before 2000, policymakers viewed Mexican migration to the area as a one-off circumstance—not as a sustained pattern. During that time, policies such as California's Proposition 187 (largely targeted toward that state's large unauthorized Mexican immigrant population) set the stage for exclusionary local policies at every governance level (state, county, and municipal).⁷ A decade later, a new wave of more legally sophisticated anti-immigrant policies that increase cooperation with the federal government, restrict driver's and business licenses and employment opportunities, champion English-only strategies, and regulate housing aesthetics took root in urban and suburban areas such as Gwinnett across the U.S. South. Some municipalities served as pioneering policymakers that laid out a basic framework for other municipalities to develop in specific ways. Others served as followers, balancing critiques of following in anti-immigrant footsteps with the veneer of inclusive,

⁷ Proposition 187 (known as the Save Our State initiative) was ballot initiative intended to prohibit unauthorized immigrants from using basic civic and social services provided by the State of California, such as non-emergency healthcare and public education. California voters passed the initiative in a referendum on November 9, 1994.

harmonious community agendas. When taken together, greater Atlanta represents a regional vanguard for controlling ethnic settlement and fomenting an “architecture of fear” (Ellin, 1997).⁸

While local anti-immigrant policies reverberated across the nation, areas that were becoming immigrant gateways felt the biggest push.⁹ Many policies have been used to restrict or discourage settlements of Mexicans and other new immigrants from engaging in culturally-informed changes such as religious iconography, vibrant paint colors, and the maintenance of front yards. These policies exist to maintain a highly-regulated, generic low-density suburban housing aesthetic, especially in more recent planned-unit developments with strong home-owners associations.

These Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances (Atiles and Bohon, 2003; Guzman, 2010; Steil, 2015) range from policies for overcrowding, maximum occupancy, and family make-up definitions aimed at limiting population density to policies that regulate beautification, absentee landlords, and parking.¹⁰ Others seek to verify renters’ legal status or to curb residential street vending. As county, state, and federal courts continue to challenge the legality of AIHOs and similar policies, my findings suggest that occupancy ordinances have become the primary means to control immigrant settlement.

Longtime Gwinnettians are divided on the tools and goals for regulating their built environment. Although some longtime residents view zoning laws (a form of government control of private property) as unconstitutional, others feel they are necessary to preserving the spatial integrity of Gwinnett. “Many of the zoning laws are unconstitutional. Who are you or any judge to tell me how to use my property?” wrote William Davidson of Snellville in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. “If the punishments were to become as draconian as my neighbors want them, people would fight these laws, and they’d be stricken” (Davidson, 2007). Today, many of these original ordinances passed in the last decade exist as immigrant federalism becomes a substitute for lack of more stringent immigration reform.¹¹ In 2017, legislation enacted related to immigration increased by 110 percent to 206 laws, compared with 98 laws the previous year. Lawmakers in 49 states enacted 206 laws and 263 resolutions related to sanctuary policies, refuges, housing, education/civics, and in-state tuition for a total of 469 (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). The situation is further complicated by Georgia’s adherence to state land-use planning programs, which dictates local government powers. State-level lawmakers in Georgia set guidelines and establish incentives (based on state interests) for local governments to meet (Klein and Meck, 1998). The result leads to uneven goals that serve universal state interests, which undermine local contextual interests and the particular needs of diverse residents as demographics change.

⁸ Ellin’s theory about the “architecture of fear” posits how society’s preoccupation with fear permeates home design, gated communities, retail centers, and zoning regulations.

⁹ See also the nationally significant anti-immigrant ordinances in the following small cities: Farmers Branch, TX; Valley Park, MO; and City of Escondido, CA, with the most notable being in Hazelton, PA.

¹⁰ Over 100 counties across the United States had established AIHOs by the time of the last decennial census (2010) (Guzman, 2010).

¹¹ Immigration federalism is the policy movement that transfers what was traditionally under federal authority to a local level (see Steil and Vasi, 2014; Su, 2008, 2010; Varsanyi, 2010). Within the context of immigration and this specific research, immigration federalism primarily deputizes local law enforcement agencies with federal powers to deport undocumented immigrants.

Findings and Analysis

In January 2007, the Gwinnett Opinions section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* asked its readers a profound question: “Do you favor [a new] immigration ordinance?” The multitude of responses illustrated that Gwinnettians blamed immigration as the root of the county’s problems.

The diverse household arrangements of Mexican immigrants have disrupted the traditional suburban residential lifestyle. To save on housing costs and establish their social footing while working low-wage jobs, Mexican immigrants share apartments, extended-stay motel rooms, or single-family homes with relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Atilas and Bohon call this phenomenon *camas calientes*, where beds are used in shifts on a nightly or weekly basis.¹² According to Atilas and Bohon, *camas calientes* are “indicative of Latino immigrants’ dissatisfaction with their current housing and desire for living conditions closer to the American housing norms” (2003). That is, Mexican immigrants are seeking an “American dream,” despite not being able to fully afford it. To reconcile this obstacle, they accept rental overcrowding as a necessary price to pay for attaining a semblance of the detached American suburban single-family house norm.

At times these relatives are immigrants coming directly from their native home areas in Mexico (same village or state) or from another part of Georgia or the United States. Combined with the looming housing crunch, it is not uncommon to have 15–20 people sharing a one-bedroom apartment and up to 30 sharing an entire house—where everyone shares the same bathroom. Whereas this type of overcrowding is apparent in large urban centers, the opposite has been true for suburban areas until the last 20 years, when Mexicans and other Latinx immigrants have tilted the scales of density and population control in areas that lack the basic civic and physical infrastructure to support it.¹³

According to the Atlanta Region Plan, “as new families move to the region, they often have to make a choice between housing that is affordable and a commute that is manageable” (Atlanta Regional Commission, 2016).¹⁴ A dearth of available, affordable housing forces Mexican immigrants to resort to hazardous, unsanctioned, and sub-standard living arrangements. Compared with other adjacent rapidly urbanizing counties such as Fulton, Dekalb, and Cobb counties, in 2016, Gwinnett rental housing commanded the largest gross rent at \$1,036 per month with the smallest per capita income (\$26,060) (personal interview, Lejla Slowinski, 2016). The story is different for homeowners, where Gwinnett’s median owner cost (\$1,572 per month) is on par with its neighbors, despite its housing supply not being as robust as neighboring Fulton or Dekalb counties (Ibid).¹⁵ While housing availability and affordability rightfully demand much attention, housing type is increasingly a salient factor for housing choice amongst Mexican immigrants. Over time, municipalities have responded to the by-products of unsanctioned residential changes through a series of Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances (AIHOs), primarily focused on curbing

¹² Initially planning and zoning officials relied on arcane bordello laws to control occupancy (Guzman, 2010).

¹³ The extreme housing challenges Mexicans face in Gwinnett County are homologous to the slums, tenements, and shantytowns Irish and Italian immigrants faced in urban centers over a century ago (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927).

¹⁴ In Gwinnett, 54.6 percent of renters pay 30 percent or more of their income toward housing (personal interview, Lejla Slowinski, 2016).

¹⁵ In 2015, Gwinnett had 301,824 housing units (Insurance Information Institute, 2017).

overcrowding through parking density and residential maximum occupancy limits that specify “blood relatives” in housing codes.¹⁶

Housing Type: Mobile Homes

Latinx communities in general—and Mexicans specifically—have one of the lowest homeownership rates of any minority group in the country (Lee, Tornatsky, and Torres, 2004). Consequentially, they rent at a higher rate than every other minority group. While Mexicans in Gwinnett overwhelmingly preferred owning over renting, the lack of affordable housing options made it difficult to purchase single-family detached homes in areas where they felt comfortable or could afford them. Despite their stigma of poverty, trailers have become detached dwelling alternatives to large apartment complexes and extended-stay motels for families with children—even in the most deplorable conditions (see exhibit 2). Trailers in Gwinnett County are small, and most are in bad condition with leaky roofs due to haphazard construction. Sometimes they are just as expensive as extended-stay motels, and the landlords don’t care about making repairs,” said Patty, who lives in a trailer park in Buford with her four children.¹⁷ “They are small, but you feel like you have your own house. That’s worth it even though we get charged so much. We don’t have many options” (personal interview, 2017).

Exhibit 2

Makeshift Trailer Park in Loganville with Excess Items in Front Yard



Source: Author

¹⁶ “Bloodline” or “blood relative” are definitions that define immediate family as parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren, brothers, and sisters. These definitions are used to control maximum occupancy among inter-generational immigrant families.

¹⁷ For Mexicans in Gwinnett, their monthly rent for trailers ranges from \$450 (for a rural trailer in Braselton) to \$900 for the urban trailers in Norcross, Buford, and Lawrenceville.

As mobile home parks have grown, so too has the fear of landlords harboring unauthorized immigrants and the potential for Mexicans to be harassed. “Mexicans here live in fear, but they still manage. Some of them can afford houses from the bank. Others live in trailers or rent rooms with other friends, family, or strangers. We’re afraid to go outside,” remarked Alejandro from Snellville.

At one mobile home park in Lawrenceville, high density necessitated that Mexican immigrants gather nightly to socialize in the back of a strip mall parking lot amongst trash bins and boxes. Instead of a proper park or plaza, Mexican men would gather around discarded car seats or other makeshift furniture (see exhibit 3). “Some of us work as mechanics; we’re always on the lookout for used car parts in junkyards. In the end, we really just want a place to take a break and catch-up with each other after a hard day,” remarked Pedro, a roofer who lives in Lawrenceville.

Spaces for gathering and socializing outside of dwellings are integral to the civic life in any city; for Mexicans in Gwinnett, spaces for socializing doubled as spaces for survival. Persistent poor living conditions made these gatherings a nightly event. I often attended multiple gatherings at different locations across the county several times a week. Amidst general topics about family life in Gwinnett or back home in Mexico, these makeshift spaces served as a community ledger/forum—a fount of information and resource sharing about new zoning laws and anti-immigrant policies, day laborer opportunities, and housing availability options for transient single-men looking to gain their footing. “This is where I get all of my information on how to survive every way—right here,” stated Santiago, a mechanic in Norcross.

Exhibit 3

Nightly Gathering Space for Mexican Men from Local Trailer Park in Lawrenceville



Source: Author

Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinance: Parking Density Restrictions

While the pooled resources of Mexican families provided an entry-point into makeshift housing that would otherwise be unattainable, the phenomenon increased the number of cars parked on the previously desolate suburban streets of planned unit developments. “It doesn’t matter to me how many people live in that house, but it does matter how many cars are parked outside. You’d [think] like it was a used car lot. That’s no way to live—for us or them,” said Jennifer, a neighbor of one such Mexican home (personal interview, 2017). “Code violation fines didn’t do much to help. They just paid the fines without changing their bad habits. I called the code enforcement office, but they weren’t equipped to come by every day—they had a stack of similar violations all across the county.” The persistence of non-Mexican residents led the City of Norcross to pass an ordinance that allowed a maximum of four cars to be parked at a driveway at any given time (see exhibit 4). Similar to maximum occupancy provisions for the overcrowding laws, additional cars would need to apply for a special circumstance variance permit from the city.¹⁸

Exhibit 4

Excessive Parking in Two Single-Family Homes in Norcross



Source: Author

¹⁸ In Cobb County, a crackdown on excessive parking in majority Mexican communities limited the number of parked cars in a driveway, using the same measure for per person sleeping space inside the house (390-square feet).

Valeria, a housekeeper who rents a trailer with 12 others on Jennifer's block, said that many of the cars are construction trucks from crew members who live 2 to 3 hours away in more rural areas. She says they do not all live at the house, but they stay there to start their construction work early in the morning to avoid battling traffic. Valeria also mentioned that driving at night is less stressful than during the day when unauthorized Mexicans worry more about being stopped by police. "Not every county is this harsh, but every Mexican knows Gwinnett is not kind," said Valeria (personal interview, 2017). "I know many of these guys because I'm friends with the woman who owns the house—she's from my village in Michoacán. Most of the time, they use one truck, and the others leave theirs parked here during the day. They are not trying to cause any harm. They are just trying to survive," she said.

The city managers of multiple Gwinnett municipalities cited excessive parking as one of the top three building code violations in cities like Lawrenceville and Lilburn, along with overcrowding and unpermitted additions. In their view, an increase in code enforcement across the county (at both county and municipal levels) has shed light on the need for more resources to educate and inform new Americans about suburban zoning policies. "Mexican residents may not cut grass for a month, or maybe they'll park on the grass instead of the driveway. This shows me that education is an important element of code enforcement. It's just a different culture," said one manager. "There's an expectation here of American ways versus other ways. Neither way is right or wrong, it's just there's an expectation—and with that, an expectation from voters to enact policy to curb this" (personal interview, 2017).

Residents that filed complaints urge Gwinnett County code compliance officers to issue citations, check mail, and run license tags of parked cars (tagged and untagged) in the driveway. However, inspectors agreed that it is difficult to manage privacy and citizenship issues with code infractions amongst Mexican families. The rise in parking-related violations has caused many large, non-Mexican families to leave Norcross for other parts of Gwinnett, where parking code compliance laws remain non-existent.

Housing Type: Unpermitted Housing Additions

Mexicans who cannot access housing through formal homeownership strategies are resourceful—they create their own. This should come as no surprise, given the population's access to construction skills and materials (Grillo, 2013). Mexican men relayed how easy it was to build an additional room on the front side of a home or in the back. These additions were either for themselves (usually single men) or for a member of their family.

In denser areas, additions are usually unpermitted and constructed hastily. Raw plywood and a window without proper shutters clearly marked the original house from the addition. The Georgia heat necessitated ventilation in the form of an air conditioner. One Mexican renter in Auburn told me that sometimes poor White families call on his construction worker friends to build additions to their homes. "It's not because they are trying to be nice, it's because they need the money, and we know we need the housing," he said (personal interview, 2018).

The phenomenon of informal or unpermitted second units has received more attention in the slums of underdeveloped nations than in developed countries. Recent scholarship has examined this movement in incremental housing in the United States as a “stealth reinvention of single-family housing” (Mukhija, 2014; see also Mukhija and Monkkonen, 2006; Ward, 1999; Ward, 2014). While a majority of this region has focused on California (Wegmann and Mawhorter, 2017) and suburban areas (Wegmann, 2015), less attention has been paid to other parts of the United States, such as the southern states.

In other cases, house additions were built for a friend who was the principal homeowner or renter—as an effort to bring in more rent and to lessen the costs per head of the homes’ Mexican inhabitants. “Housing can get so expensive, adding to an existing house makes it possible for us to add another person and lower the rent for everyone—including the new person. The landlords know we do this—but they pretend they don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know if this is them being nice, or if they just don’t want to deal with the problem,” said Javier, who shared an unpermitted addition with his brother from Mexico City (personal interview, 2017). “The interior of these units is extremely bare bones, with makeshift lighting and electricity; sheets are used as curtains, and aluminum siding provides little insulation from the cold or rain. “Still, this is an improvement from where I come from in Guerrero,” said Javier.

In less dense parts of the county, housing additions that I saw were permitted and done with care. They were painted to match the existing clapboard siding or brick of the original home (see exhibit 5). Air conditioners and other utilities were hidden to maintain a neater look. The only signifying marker of the addition was a door. In Buford, a city official remarked that garage conversions tended to be the most common unpermitted additions because they are easier to fly under the radar when code inspectors review a complaint from neighbors. “Sometimes they put the door on the side of the house instead of the front, or plants around the door to conceal it, but the neighbors always catch on” (personal interview, 2017). A closer look into the residential resourcefulness of Mexicans led me to concentrations of warehouses subdivided into housing units across the southern parts of the county, such as Snellville and Loganville. Windows have been installed in the rolling grills (garage doors), formal doors are preceded with short stair entries, utility meters, and silver house numbers.

The rise of unpermitted housing additions in Gwinnett County catalyzed Loganville, a small city on Gwinnett’s southern border, to adopt a local policy that unlawfully restricts access to basic utility services (including gas, water, and electricity) by requiring customers to produce valid identification, such as a U.S.-issued photo ID or social security number (Shahshahani and Madison, 2016).¹⁹ In June 2018, Project South—a regional advocacy organization based on the Southern Freedom Movement—issued a press release that stated “such policies are not mandated by state laws and likely violate federal laws due to their discriminatory nature on the basis of race,

¹⁹ Besides Loganville (Gwinnett County and partially Walton County), additional cities in the South that restrict utilities to authorized immigrants and citizens include Augusta, Calhoun, (Georgia); Auburn, Florence, and Phenix City (Alabama); Clermont, Cocoa, Green Cove Springs, and Groveland (Florida); Anderson, Camden, and Rock Hill (South Carolina); Dunlap (Tennessee); and Forth Worth and Temple (Texas).

color, and national origin” (Project South, 2018).²⁰ The policy overwhelmingly impacts Mexican immigrants in Gwinnett by violating the provision of necessities of life included in the Privacy Act and the Federal Housing Act.²¹ Furthermore, it necessitates that unauthorized immigrants remain “underground,” thereby risking their own safety when filling the gaps in their own utility resources (e.g. space heaters for properties that have provided electricity, but not gas). “These cities are engaging in illegal conduct by cutting off access to essential utility services and effectively denying immigrants the necessities of life,” said Azadeh Shahshahani, Legal & Advocacy Director of Project South (Ibid.).

Exhibit 5

Addition to a Brick-style Ranch Home (re-use of garage)



Source: Author

Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinance: Bloodline Policy (“Defining Family”)

Planning and zoning officials in Gwinnett, Cobb, and Fulton counties have experimented with enforcing policies that curb occupancy limits, overcrowding, and rental to unauthorized immigrants as a way to quell daily complaints from native, non-immigrant populations.²² How housing ordinances affect immigrants has engendered a heated debate over immigration policy to the local, suburban level. Existing suburban communities have responded by encouraging local governments to pursue enforcement on housing and zoning ordinances. For some municipalities,

²⁰ The Southern Freedom Movement was a collective of organizations (civic, social, faith-based) that contributed to the watershed moments of the 1950s–1960s civil rights movement.

²¹ The United Nations Human Rights Council and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognize access to basic utilities as inextricably linked to the right to life and human dignity. Anything less is an act of discrimination and a violation of an individual’s human rights.

²² One zoning inspector in Duluth estimated that 98 percent of code compliance complaints were about immigrants (Odem, 2008). Zoning inspectors in Gwinnett County cited 200 complaints a year about immigrant-focused overcrowding in single-family subdivisions (Guzman, 2010).

this has meant a revision (tightening) of existing regulations. It has meant the proposal and passage of new ordinances under an innocuous “quality of life” guise for others. Section 105-345 of Lilburn’s Code of Ordinances explicitly states:

- (a) One person or two or more persons related by blood or marriage with any number of offspring, foster children, stepchildren, or adopted children subject to the maximum occupancy limitations and not to exceed two roomers or boarders; or
- (b) Two single parents or guardians with their dependent children, including offspring, foster children, stepchildren, or adopted children living and cooking together as a single housekeeping unit; or
- (c) A group of not more than four persons not related by blood or marriage living and cooking together as a single housekeeping unit (City of Lilburn, 2017).

Maximum occupancy of a single-family home was calculated by the total square footage of a home (including finished basement area).²³ Maximum occupancy ranges from three people for a dwelling up to 1,000 square feet to 10 people for a dwelling over 4,000 square feet. Not surprisingly, this general ordinance and its definition of “family” (viewed as a code word for immediate blood relatives) sent shockwaves of fear and anger across the Mexican and other Latinx communities in Gwinnett. Local municipalities bolstered their code enforcement departments with more employees to issue citations; others reorganized code enforcement offices to move them from planning and building and safety departments to police and sheriff departments with more authority. Penalties were established for egregious and habitual violators through fines that range from \$100 to \$2,000 per day of violation and jail time (at minimum 60 days and up to 6 months) per violation (Odem, 2010).²⁴ While municipalities in Gwinnett cited a proliferation of blight, including unsustainable population density, poor housing conditions, fire hazards from makeshift heating due to lack of utilities, threats to public health, and increases in transients and crime, they could not provide empirical evidence that these problems were caused by unauthorized immigrants. As housing ordinances grew stricter in policy and specificity, it was difficult for Mexicans based in Gwinnett to see them as anything more than a clear exercise of racial and ethnic profiling to control Mexican suburban settlement. “I don’t think they’re being honest,” said Sara Gonzalez, former president of the Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. “They are targeting Latinos—the flavor of the month” (Kaplan and Li, 2006). In 2017, large protests as part of the national “Day Without Immigrants” movement were comprised of hundreds of predominantly Mexican and other Latinx immigrant communities in Plaza Fiesta (Chamblee, GA).

In 2009, for the first time in nearly 25 years, Gwinnett County decided to amend its original 1985 Zoning Resolution (a resolution containing a pre-existing definition of family). Gwinnett’s 1985 Zoning Resolution defined family as “One or more persons related by blood, marriage, adoption, or guardianship; or not more than three persons not so related who live together in a dwelling unit...or not more than two unrelated persons and any minor children related to either of them”

²³ Maximum occupancy only accounts for the number of adults (over the age of 21). It does not account for children or youth.

²⁴ Cobb County commissioners eventually reduced the penalty from \$100 to \$25 a day.

(Gwinnett County, 1985). The 2009 revision focused on the steps needed to obtain a variance (Special Use Permit) if a household (broadly defined) consisted of “groups of more than three persons who are not related by blood or marriage” and the housing unit allows for at least eighty square feet of sleeping space per occupant as well as a minimum of 1,200 square feet of paved parking (Ibid). Approval of variance required a family to document unnecessary hardship or the inability to live in a smaller group (three or fewer) because it is cost-prohibitive.

Following on the heels of their counterparts in nearby Cherokee County, former Gwinnett County Commissioner Bert Nasuti urged code enforcement employees to revise their current “eight people per household” (locally known as the “eight-is-enough” rule) ordinance to be more like Cherokee County’s recently passed ordinance.²⁵ Aware of the issues that caused criticism in neighboring counties, Gwinnett code compliance officials analyzed utility records and parking density. Citing that zoning compliance complaints were the primary issue in his district, Nasuti said, “My goal is to target people who violate the law. It won’t matter if your name ends in a vowel” (Chidi and Pickel, 2007). Previously, code inspectors gave Mexican residents the benefit of the doubt when they all claimed familial relationships. Warnings were rampant, but citations were rare. After Nasuti’s proposal for a revised housing ordinance, code enforcement officials began issuing citations to homeowners. Complaints nearly doubled across the county.²⁶

Conclusion

Anti-Immigrant Housing Ordinances (AIHOs) in Gwinnett County have directly affected the security and reception of Mexican immigrants in new suburban gateways. These AIHOs range from regulating overcrowding and family size to stringent standards for parking and beautification. However, amidst their fear of local law enforcement, Mexican immigrants struggle to cope with inadequate housing infrastructure. For some cities in Gwinnett, they simply cannot keep up with the adequate provision of housing for Mexicans and other vulnerable communities. For others they actively neglect opportunities to build multi-family units to discourage Mexican settlement.

Mexican immigrants have coped with inadequate housing infrastructure by living in overcrowded suburban housing, mobile home parks, or building makeshift housing. In fact, how Mexican immigrants adapt to housing in suburban areas like Gwinnett may be viewed as a response to a traditional White middle-class that is threatened by a loss of power and population. In suburbia, this threat results in discriminatory policies. The adoption of AIHOs is used as a planning tool to oppress and control the built environments of Mexicans, despite claims to neutral motives for these policies.

A key consequence of AIHOs has been the irreparable damage that has been done to already estranged tensions between the Mexican community and policymakers in the suburban

²⁵ The “eight people per household” ordinance was passed in 2005. It requires 75 square feet of sleeping space for the first resident and at minimum 50 square feet of sleeping space for each additional resident (for a maximum of eight, regardless of familial relation). Gwinnett’s area allocation in square footage was proportionately higher than Cobb’s in every way (sleeping space and total living space). The proposed revision to the ordinance was to find a more efficient way to enforce the ordinance.

²⁶ From January to July 2006, Gwinnett County received 248 overcrowding complaints and issued 20 citations compared to 145 complaints and 4 citations issues during the same period last year (Feagans, 2006). Gwinnett County’s tally of complaints and citations made it the leading AIHO suburban Atlanta county.

municipalities where they live. Zoning regulations are unfamiliar territory for the Latinx community in the United States, especially in suburbs, which tend to have stricter regulations to protect the traditional suburban ideal of low-density, manicured detached homes. The problem is not overcrowding for the sake of being a nuisance, but rather the lack of will and interest for suburban counties like Gwinnett and others to build affordable housing at a rate that is proportionate to the amount of construction and service-sector labor needed to sustain the lives of more affluent residents. The idea that Mexican immigrants will relocate to other areas and commute to their jobs in Gwinnett is fallible; it neglects to acknowledge another one of the county's looming livability problems: access to adequate transportation. Without fair access to and availability of housing, low-income Mexican immigrants will never become part of the civic life of Gwinnett.

Overall, my experience in Gwinnett County demonstrated, convincingly, that Mexican immigrants influence the built environment in dramatic ways. Yet, we find drastic, problematic shortcomings in the policy realm's ability to adequately understand and react to this reality of the ethnic condition. In Gwinnett, Mexicans have an over-arching sense that local government is either grossly unaware of or resistant to their needs or is deliberately hostile. Planning is complicit in this hostility, even if it is not the most dominant agency creating anti-immigrant policy like their local law enforcement of federal policy counterparts. As new waves of Mexicans continue to settle in Gwinnett and surrounding counties and states, future directions for research must pay close attention to smaller, rural areas unprepared for seismic influxes of Latinx newcomers.

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