

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

*La migra* in 1980s Los Angeles:  
Exploitation, unemployment, and the legality of the INS raids

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By

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## Introduction

On September 14, 1979, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents detained and beat twenty-seven-year-old Mexican American Vietnam War veteran Roy Gonzalez during an immigration raid in San Jose, California. Aided by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), Gonzalez and his attorney charged in a suit that he was “the victim of excessive, illegal, and unjustified force and abusive language when he was detained during a raid at a food processing plant, where he was employed as an electrician.” INS agents, assisted by the San Jose Police Department, conducted this workplace raid where Gonzalez—a U.S. citizen—was “beaten as a result of the illegal and indiscriminate harassment of Mexican Americans and other Latino citizens.” Curiously, the immigration raid had been under way for almost an hour “when three immigration officers in plainclothes grabbed Gonzalez from behind, knocked him to the floor and handcuffed him.” At the time of the assault, he was operating heavy machinery and had earplugs on.<sup>1</sup> Gonzalez, an American citizen, had no idea what was going on and posed no threat, however, his legal status afforded him a certain privilege as opposed to others.

A later INS worksite raid in Boulder, Colorado tells a similar story. In late April of 1982, Jose Armando Morales—an undocumented worker—ran in a panic from *la migra* who conducted a raid on the Boulder Valley Poultry Farm where he worked. As he fled multiple INS agents, he ran from the farm into the main road where he was struck and killed by a semi-trailer truck.<sup>2</sup> Similar to San Jose years prior, MALDEF provided legal aid to Morales’s family. Later that week, members of El Comité—a local Hispanic organization—joined Chicana/os for a nighttime vigil

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<sup>1</sup> Frank del Olmo. “U.S. Citizen, Held in INS Raid, Sues: \$2.25 Million in Damages Sought from Agents, San Jose Police,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Feb 26, 1980, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/162752297?accountid=7285>.

<sup>2</sup> “Operation Jobs,” *Noticias del Comité*, vol. 2, No. 1, p. 16, April 1982, The Boulder County Latino History Project, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://bocolatinohistory.colorado.edu/newspaper/man-killed-during-immigration-raid-0>.

east of Boulder. These widely read instances of worksite raids provide insight into the political and social atmosphere of the time.

In the case of Roy Gonzalez, his experience of abusive language and wanton brutality by immigration agents demonstrates a blatant disregard for the law and highlights the racial profiling that underscored these raids. Jose Morales's fleeing from INS agents shows the extent of panic felt by Latino communities at the hands of *la migra*. Their stories indicate the targeting of legal and undocumented immigrants during the early 1980s. Immigration raids were not solely conducted in California. Nationwide, Mexican and Central American workers risked going to work and being caught by these agents or elected to stay away—sometimes causing business closures.

It is also important to consider the era's population shift. By 1986, the Associated Press reported that “from 1980 to 1985, the nation's Hispanic population jumped almost 16 percent, to 16.9 million [and] in the same period the United States population overall grew by 3.3 percent.”<sup>3</sup> In Los Angeles, anxiety seized many immigrant communities. For Central American immigrants, deportations often meant returning to the violent civil conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua or Guatemala. In a survey of America's major cities, labor union activist Dan La Botz maintained that immigration officers arrested over five thousand undocumented workers and deported four thousand with over 90 percent of arrestees being Latina/o.<sup>4</sup>

For several decades, U.S. citizens and policymakers have scapegoated and constructed Mexican and Central Americans as temporary workers rather than settled immigrants.<sup>5</sup> During the

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<sup>3</sup> AP. “U.S. Hispanic Population Fastest-Growing Sector.” *New York Times*, Jan 31, 1986, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/425761107?accountid=7285>.

<sup>4</sup> Dan La Botz, ed., “From the Archives: Immigration Raids Make Latino Workers the Enemy,” *Labor Notes* #40, Labor Education and Research Project, July 26, 2019, <https://labornotes.org/2019/07/archives-immigration-raids-make-latino-workers-enemy>.

<sup>5</sup> From the 1920s and into the 1930s, the U.S. experienced heightened nativism as Congress passed a series of restrictive quota laws to halt the flow of undesired southern and eastern European immigrants. The socioeconomic conditions of the Great Depression also soured American attitudes toward Mexican immigrant workers. As

Reagan Recession, illegal immigrants were blamed for the effects caused by the economic downturn. However, the netting of some five thousand undocumented workers in major cities could neither solve the problems of undocumented immigration nor unemployment. Why then the raids? To better understand the Los Angeles immigration raids, it is helpful to contextualize the restructuring of the American economy in relation to demographic change and high rates of unemployment.

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unemployment worsened, U.S. politicians and citizens blamed Mexican immigrants for taking jobs away from deserving Americans. To address these anxieties, city and state governments—supported by the federal government—initiated mass roundups and deportations of Mexican immigrants known as the Mexican Repatriation (1929-1937). As a result, agricultural growers turned from their reliance on Mexican contract labor to hiring “Oakies” and other displaced Americans looking for work. In California alone, over 415,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported with an estimated sixty percent of deportees being U.S. citizens. During the next period marked by the Bracero Program (1942-1964), both the U.S. and Mexican governments allowed temporary stay for Mexican migrant workers accommodating the U.S. wartime labor shortage. The INS granted 4.6 million agricultural contracts to workers between 1942 and 1964, and 69,000 contracts for railroad upkeep between 1943 and 1945. Undocumented migration increased despite the Bracero Program’s growth and became an issue between citizens who advocated for increased border control and agricultural growers who relied on braceros. In 1954, the INS began “Operation Wetback” that began the early militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and another mass seizure of undocumented migrant workers. The INS apprehended over one million Mexican immigrants—and some Mexican American citizens—through military style tactics around the Californian and Texan borderlands. Still, agricultural growers recruited undocumented Mexican migrant workers to bypass the bureaucratic complications of the Bracero program, therefore, reaping the benefits of cheap illegal labor while the consolidation of the border and mass deportations alleviated nativist fears. On December 31, 1964, the U.S. government terminated the Bracero Program. The progressive wave of the 1960s civil rights movement launched the next period of immigration policy. In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act—also known as the Hart-Cellar Act—that eliminated national origin, race, and ancestry as bases for U.S. immigration. During the 1970s, economic conditions like rising joblessness, high inflation, and wage reduction politicized immigration and resulted in amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1976. One major amendment deterred young citizen children from sponsoring their parents for naturalization and changed the age requirement to twenty-one. Another important amendment also applied the 20,000-per-country limit to the Western hemisphere. As an immediate result, legal immigration from Mexico dipped forty percent; and between 1968 to 1980, Mexican visas plunged from a limitless amount to 20,000 per year. This unprecedented collapse of legal visas happened at the same time as meteoric population growth and economic decline in Mexico. The era of undocumented migration had thus commenced. The near century migration from Mexico, and recently from Central America, continues whether as legal immigrants, braceros, or undocumented migrant workers. Established throughout the twentieth century, this reliance on the labor of Mexican and Central American immigrant workers has transformed the U.S. labor market into one that systemically demonstrates a demand for undocumented immigrant workers. For more, see “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program,” CA Govt Code § 8720-8723; Aristide Zolberg. *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Douglas S. Massey et al. *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2002); Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Rafael Alarcón. “La Política de Inmigración de Estados Unidos y la Movilidad de los Mexicanos (1882-2005),” *Migraciones Internacionales* 6, no. 1 (2011), 185-218. [doi.org/10.17428/rmi.v6i20.1064](https://doi.org/10.17428/rmi.v6i20.1064).

## **Immigrants in a Changing Economy**

To better understand how immigration arose as a hot political issue, the surveyal of the period's economic upheaval must first be put into context. For Los Angeles specifically, the immigration issue and the subsequent worksite sweeps benefit from bringing labor and economics to the forefront. The restructuring of the national and local economy, union decline and wage compression, as well as employers' preference for exploitable undocumented labor are factors that broaden our understanding of immigration in a global city during these years. As gripping and revealing as the stories of the INS raids are, it is crucial to remember they emerged from an array of legal battles, broader economic changes, and public perception. Therefore, this investigation does not solely focus on those impacted by the INS raids but also explains the conditions in which they happened. Before discussing those affected by these worksite sweeps, we must first contextualize the restructuring of the garment industries, high rates of unemployment, and legal suits brought against the INS to provide a fuller examination of illegal immigration in Los Angeles.

Better known as the "Reagan Recession" in the United States, the years from 1979 to 1984 saw high rates of inflation and unemployment as well as crises in the financial sector. However, the Los Angeles economy did not see meaningful gains in employment until 1987. Many working-class families struggled as the United States underwent an economic shift. Throughout these years, the economic recession was blamed on undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrant workers. Because of the high rates of unemployment and uncertainty surrounding the American economy, the INS was empowered to conduct aggressive and racially discriminative raids in worksites that mostly employed Latino immigrants. Indeed, INS officers often violated detainees' fundamental constitutional rights while conducting these raids. At worst, the raids expressed a deliberate political effort to terrorize Latino communities.

Considering this, it is critical to examine why the raids are typically associated with Reagan and the Republican Party. Reports on the tactics used by immigration agents when conducting worksite raids in California are traced back as early as 1972 during the Nixon Administration.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that their tactics existed in both Democratic and Republican administrations. Under the Reagan administration, however, the federal government consolidated the INS and funneled resources designed to deport many more undocumented workers than before.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the 1980s immigration raids should be discussed largely in terms of a broader context of economic crises rather than partisan politics.

The restructuring of the American economy began long before the Reagan Recession. Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, the American manufacturing sector which produced durable goods like glass, rubber, steel, and automobiles significantly decreased in size.<sup>8</sup> As the Los

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<sup>6</sup> “¡Basta Ya!, vol. 3, no. 4.” *Los Siete de La Raza*, The University of Arizona Library Digital Collections, June 1972, accessed October 31, 2020. <https://content.library.arizona.edu/digital/collection/p15399coll5/id/36>.

<sup>7</sup> The Carter administration began the modern militarization of the border and the expansion of the INS, however, the Reagan administration brought it to new heights. Congressional funding for the INS jumped dramatically from \$283 million in 1978 to \$807 million in 1988. Sixty percent of the increases in congressional funding went directly to the INS enforcement division and the U.S. Border Patrol obtained extensive sophisticated military equipment and detection systems. For example, the Reagan administration added 278 advanced night-vision scopes—that included large tripod mounted “starlite” scopes and vehicle-mounted infrared telescopes with remote-imaging capabilities—in contrast to the seven added to the already owned fifty-nine under the Carter administration. Additionally, two detention centers in El Centro, California and Port Isabel, Texas were expanded as three new centers in Florence, Arizona, San Pedro, California, and Oakdale, Louisiana were constructed. In an effort to cut costs, the INS began to contract private security firms to provide guards for their detention centers—contracts that raised the issue of the legality of giving authority to private security guards over detainees who were public charges. Furthermore, the INS enlisted their detainees to provide labor at their detention facilities for less than a dollar a day. INS detention policy also changed during this period. The INS long-standing policy to avoid “needless confinement”—the practice of releasing undocumented immigrants while their cases pended barring a threat to national security—came to an end in July 1981. Under Reagan, detention and confinement was used as a correctional means to deter undocumented immigration that harshly affected Haitian and Central American refugees seeking political asylum. To meet demands, the INS used private-contract facilities under emergency conditions and state and local jails to hold their detainees. Overall, the unprecedented levels of resources and money given to the INS, the use of jailing as a deterrent for asylum seekers, and the advancement of an immigration agency as a makeshift prison bureau comprise the legacy of the Reagan administration’s hardline position on immigration detention. For more, see Timothy J. Dunn. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*. Austin: The Center for Mexican American Studies and the University of Texas Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> For more, see Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison. *The Deindustrialization of America*. New York: Basic Books, 1982; Edward Soja, Rebecca Morales and Goetz Wolff. “Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles.” *Economic Geography* 59 (1983): 195-230; Jefferson Cowie. *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

Angeles economy started to recover around 1986, manufacturing employment continued to decline. Still, productivity levels increased, despite the sector's decline as a 1987 Bureau of Labor Statistics review highlights that the "factory work-week and overtime hours both remained relatively high."<sup>9</sup> As a whole, California did not see employment gains until early 1987 when unemployment leveled off at 6.6%.<sup>10</sup> Reports about nationwide joblessness and inflation reveals a country in deep economic upheaval. Simultaneously, the Los Angeles manufacturing sector increasingly grew dependent on low-wage immigrant labor to produce in the garment and furniture industries.<sup>11</sup> This increasing reliance on cheap immigrant labor stoked xenophobic anxieties among financially struggling Americans.

Put together, the influx of Mexican and Central American immigrants into the United States and the economic crisis precipitated a revival of nativist attitudes and political rhetoric. For these immigrants, this new xenophobia arose at an especially bad time. Not only were they trying to adjust to a new life and culture, but they also had to do so in the midst of deep economic upheaval. The recession of the early 1980s created a heightened awareness of undocumented workers due to the social and economic consequences that resulted from high rates of unemployment and increasing inflation. American workers suffered most from 1979 to the recession's peak in December of 1982, when the national unemployment rate reached 10.8 percent—the highest since the Great Depression. The process of deindustrialization wiped out thousands of jobs in the manufacturing sector and while the jobless rate slowly receded over the

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Employment Situation during 1986: Job Gains continue, Unemployment dips*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1987), 5, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1987/02/art1full.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Oswald Johnston, "January Unemployment is Stable at 6.6% Economy Starts 1987 Off Strongly with 448,000 New Jobs Reported." *Los Angeles Times (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*, Feb 7, 1987, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/newspapers/january-unemployment-is-stable-at-6-economy/docview/292546515/se-2?accountid=7285>.

<sup>11</sup> For more, see Alan J. Scott. *Metropolis: From the Division of Labor to Urban Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; Frank Levy. *Dollars and Dreams*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987.

next few years, the unemployment rate fell below 6% only in September 1987.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, mass immigration from Central America gave rise to a perceived uncertainty over the number of jobs available to working-class Americans.

At this time, political instability and brutal violence caused by civil wars triggered an influx of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Guatemalans to the United States. Throughout the 1980s, over 215,000 Salvadorans sought asylum and emigrated to the United States; an additional half million would do so over the next two decades.<sup>13</sup> Legal permanent residency was granted to many of them but, at the same time, hundreds of thousands reverted into undocumented status when they were denied asylees status. Like El Salvador, Guatemala experienced a prolonged civil war which similarly initiated a mass exodus of asylum seekers during the following two decades. Guatemalan immigrants arriving before 1982 qualified for permanent residency under IRCA (1986) but those continuing to flee civil conflict were denied. In Nicaragua, migration was closely connected to lethal violence and economic strife. The Nicaraguan mass exodus that began in 1979, more significant than from any other Central American country, was associated with “declining incomes and rising violence” among other macroeconomic conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Central American immigrants fled to the U.S. mainly because of violence and war but they also sought economic opportunities due to the mass structural economic change that had devastated certain regions.<sup>15</sup> Their neighbors to the north also experienced something similar. In 1982, the

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<sup>12</sup> “Richard C. Auxier, “Reagan’s Recession,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, Dec 14, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2010/12/14/reagans-recession/>.

<sup>13</sup> Marta Tienda and Susana Sánchez, “Latin American immigration to the United States,” *Daedalus* vol. 142, no. 3 (2015), 53, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00218](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00218).

<sup>14</sup> Steven E. Alvarado and Douglas S. Massey, “In Search of Peace: Structural Adjustment, Violence, and International Migration,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 630 (2010), 153-154, doi:10.2307/20743991.

<sup>15</sup> In 1954, President Jacobo Árbenz was removed from power in a coup d’état and a U.S.-sponsored counterrevolution reversed agrarian reforms, curtailed urban labor and peasant organization, and reinstated military rule. The effects of the reversal of agrarian reform along with the new regime’s rapid modernization of Guatemala increased internal migration from rural Guatemala to department capitals. Modernization into the 1960s brought rapid growth and

Mexican debt crisis and the devaluation of the peso devastated the economy and caused widespread unemployment. Particularly hit the hardest, numerous Mexicans living in rural areas flocked to the U.S. because the new economic structural adjustments produced falling incomes and large income gaps.<sup>16</sup> As a result, many Mexican and Central Americans deemed the treacherous journey to *el norte* necessary to their survival. Newly arrived immigrant workers took labor intensive low wage jobs because they offered higher wages than those of their native countries. Indeed, the majority of Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants were young, poor, and uneducated. In Los Angeles, many employers often preferred the labor of immigrant workers over citizens and permanent residents because of the fringe benefits and low pay they could offer to them.<sup>17</sup> Hence,

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created new jobs in the cities but simultaneously further displaced indigenous farming communities whose land was taken over by foreign estates and was also used for new infrastructure. Additionally, increased unemployment and wage reductions in rural and urban Guatemala worsened during this time and spurred migration within and out of Central America. From the late 1960s into the 1970s, state violence and repression escalated as the military controlled government clashed with rural workers, students, and other organizers. The state responded to protest and organization with military force and paramilitary death squads targeting activist priests, peasant leaders, many others and their families. By the early 1980s, the Guatemalan and Salvadoran military forces were initiating far-reaching massacres in rural indigenous areas suspected of supporting guerilla organizations *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG) and *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). In the Guatemalan Northern highlands, military forces under General Ríos Montt massacred thousands of indigenous peoples and destroyed their villages. Military conscription in state or guerilla forces also convinced young men and their families to flee their native country; moreover, Salvadorans and Guatemalans escaped to Mexico in large numbers. The 1982 Mexico debt crisis, however, made finding work in Mexico increasingly difficult. As a migration buffer zone for the United States, Guatemalan and Salvadorans voyaging through Mexico also experienced brutality and harassment by law enforcement and sexual violence particularly towards women. For Central Americans, the journey to Los Angeles and the broader United States was the result of a long history of interregional and transnational migration; ultimately, it developed from an array of socioeconomic conditions and violent civil conflict that endangered their lives. In Los Angeles, many Central American immigrants used their experience working as domestic caretakers, nannies, and factory workers in Guatemala's cities to find work in their new home. For more, see Ana Raquel Minian, "Offshoring Migration Control: Guatemalan Transmigrants and the Construction of Mexico as a Buffer Zone," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 1 (2020), 89-111. <http://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz1227>; Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla. *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001; William Deane Stanley, "Economic Migrants or Refugees from Violence? A Time-Series Analysis of Salvadoran Migration to the United States," *Latin American Research Review* 22, no. 1 (1987), 132-154. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2503545>; Steven P. Wallace, "Central American and Mexican Immigrant Characteristics and Economic Incorporation in California," *The International Migration Review* 20, no. 3 (1986), 657-671. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2545710>.

<sup>16</sup> Alvarado and Massey, 153.

<sup>17</sup> In 1980, Sheldon Maram, Stewart Long, and Dennis Berg published a report on the characteristics and conditions of Mexican and Central American immigrant workers employed in the Los Angeles garment and restaurant industries. Solely focused on the role of Latino immigrant workers in specific local areas, their study revealed the extent of these industries' dependency and exploitation of their workforce. First, their data demonstrated that the garment industry provided an overwhelming majority (71 percent) of undocumented respondents with their first job in the United States.

many of them took entry-level positions in the garment and agricultural sectors that relied on high turnover rates and exploitative working conditions to produce profits.

### **The Illegal Immigrant Narrative**

In the 1980s, the popular narrative on illegal immigration held that undocumented immigrant workers flooded the labor market and stole jobs from deserving Americans. This historic nativist rhetoric stretches well back into the nineteenth century. There is a clear distinction, however, between American restrictionist attitudes toward legal and illegal immigration during the 1980s and those of the early twentieth century. Distinguished historian of immigration policy Edwin Harwood succinctly explains that after World War II, “widespread public support for America’s cold war commitments to defend the Free World and the nation’s unparalleled postwar economic prosperity” helped weaken anti-immigrant sentiment. Additionally, hard line xenophobic understandings of immigrants—regarding racial and religious prejudice—began to decline, primarily among the well-educated.<sup>18</sup> Conceptualizations of economic and social instability caused by migrants can also escalate feelings of prejudice toward particular immigrant groups. Anti-immigrant sentiment also varies along class lines. Certainly, the perception that undocumented immigrants stole secure jobs belonging to native-born blue-collar workers

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Second, county officials—in charge of enforcing labor laws—found verified or apparent overtime wage violations among 82 percent of undocumented garment workers. Third, the data suggests high turnover rates and low rates of unionization among all garment workers—regardless of immigration status. These findings confirm the exploitative and unappealing nature of garment industry work. By and large, undocumented immigrant workers dealt with poor wages, fringe benefits at best, and rampant overtime violations. This 1980 report demonstrates the garment industry’s dependency on a large number of new employees and exploitative working conditions to maintain its work force and profits. Evidently, employers not only preferred undocumented immigrant workers for this reason but, more notably, needed them. For more, see Sheldon Maram et al. *Hispanic Workers in the Garment and Restaurant Industries in Los Angeles County: A Social and Economic Profile*. La Jolla: University of California, San Diego, Program in U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1980.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Harwood, “American Public Opinion and U. S. Immigration Policy,” *The Annals of the American Academy do Political and Social Science* 487 (1986), 204.

potentially shaped ideas of competition in the labor market. In a recession, these perceptions—either true or false—are often expressed in public opinion on issues surrounding immigration.

Still, various factors shape American public opinion on immigration. Key among these aforementioned reasons are those connected to economic anxieties and concerns about a changing social order.<sup>19</sup> Attitudes surrounding immigration depend partly on media portrayals of immigration issues and the influence of political debate. Even so, historian Elliot Barkan suggests that those less directly affected by immigration are often primed by “cultural anxieties and group identifications”; the rhetoric of political leaders may also contribute to the scapegoating of undocumented immigrants.<sup>20</sup> Nationalistic anxieties over the perceived loss of shared cultural values and the changing makeup of racially homogenous neighborhoods tend to sway the opinions of those indirectly affected by immigration.

Nonetheless, scholars consider the specific economic factors that can influence public attitudes. Elliot Barkan, for example, notes that the scholarship on public opinion and immigration suggests that restrictive immigration stances arise from material concerns, pessimism about the national economy, and beliefs about immigration’s negative consequences for jobs and taxes.<sup>21</sup> The complex relationships between economic motives and negative views of immigration may change over time.<sup>22</sup> Although economic crises and debates surrounding immigration may

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<sup>19</sup> For more, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955; Natalia Molina, *How Race is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014; Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America’s Immigration Disaster*. New York: Random House, 1995; Vernon M. Briggs Jr., *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Elliot Barkan, “Return of the Nativists? California Public Opinion and Immigration in the 1980s and 1990s,” *Social Science History* 27, no. 2 (2003), 232. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40267808>.

<sup>21</sup> Barkan, 234.

<sup>22</sup> For a more nuanced survey on this subject, see Bruce Cain, Jack Citrin, and Cara Wong. 2000. “Ethnic context, race relations, and California politics,” San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California; Jack Citrin, Donald P. Green, Christopher Muste, and Cara Wong. “Public opinion toward immigration reform: How much does the economy matter?” Berkeley: Chicano/Latino Policy Project, 1995.

complement each other, these scholarly investigations broaden our understanding how nativist attitudes on immigration evolve.

More critically, the examination of 1980s American public opinion on immigration reveals a unique awareness of the nation's dependency on undocumented workers. Popular national magazines and newspapers with their widespread readership are particularly useful. These sources help show the inconsistency between immigration policy and American public opinion. Until the Great Depression, there had been very little public concern over Mexican immigration to the United States. Because of the nation's expanded postwar global responsibilities during and after World War II, restrictionist immigration policies loosened due to a wartime labor shortage. As the government undertook a liberalization of immigration policy, restrictionist public attitudes regarding legal immigration likewise changed. In the 1980s, financial stability and concern over the American economy deepened anxieties over immigration rather than religious prejudice. Bigotry did not go away but these surveys show Americans' ambivalent feelings toward legal and illegal immigrants in relation to their economic well-being. Although public opinion polls shed light on the views of everyday Americans, they tend to be unreliable sources. Simply put, they do not accurately reflect the motivations of voting blocs or other political groups.

That being said, Gallup polls and other public opinion surveys taken during the 1980s highlight this issue's complexity. This is best demonstrated in a June 1984 Gallup survey that reported "61 percent of the public agreed that immigrants improve our culture with their own cultures and talents" however, "59 percent also agreed that many immigrants wind up on welfare and raise taxes for Americans."<sup>23</sup> Public opinion on immigration may change over time but the rhetoric remains fairly consistent. For example, the coupling of immigrant women's alleged hyper

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<sup>23</sup> Harwood, 207.

fertility with their perceived abuse of welfare has been a mainstay of anti-immigrant rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> Because of these purported social ills, it is important to consider the makeup of local economies when discussing both legal and illegal immigration. Interestingly, another 1984 public opinion survey ranked illegal immigration as a low priority issue of less concern to respondents than unemployment, inflation, and the threat of nuclear war.<sup>25</sup>

In relation to high unemployment rates, these Gallup polls also underline how Americans perceived the role of undocumented labor. In June 1984 the Gallup poll reported that “61 percent of those surveyed agreed that immigrants take jobs from U.S. workers, but 80 percent also agreed that many immigrants work hard and take jobs Americans do not want.”<sup>26</sup> Public opinion polls demonstrate an awareness of the benefits of illegal immigration, but these polls also disclose an understanding that the economy’s well-being often relies on undocumented workers. Curiously, these findings underscore Americans’ sympathetic view of immigrants’ plight when they are

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<sup>24</sup> Federal and state lawmakers have consistently coupled immigration with welfare in their efforts to stop the “invasion” of immigrants. Both legal and undocumented Latino immigrants have been blamed for California’s fiscal crises. For example, many state policy makers have used research studies that confirm higher fertility rates among immigrant women to advocate for population control. During the 1970s, social analysts used the high fertility rates of Mexican origin immigrant women to advocate for stricter anti-immigration laws and inhumane public health initiatives like forced sterilization. This trend continued through the 1980s and into the 1990s where fertility rates acted as statistically verifiable cause for the state’s population increase and depletion in resources. During this period of heightened Californian anti-immigrant sentiment, nativist attitudes toward Mexican and Central American immigrants centered on fiscal and cultural decline similar to the backlash of European emigrants in the early 1900s. By ascribing the depletion of state resources on immigrants and their families, anti-immigrant coalitions in California successfully advocated to eliminate free social services that allegedly attracted undocumented immigrants to the state. Proposition 187—the most restrictive and widely known initiative—prohibited undocumented immigrants from using public services like non-emergency healthcare, welfare, and public-school education. Advertised as the “save our state” initiative, its supporters maintained its necessity to stop the “illegal alien invasion” taking place throughout California. Indeed, in a 1993 letter to President Bill Clinton published in the Los Angeles Times, Governor Pete Wilson discussed his plan to curtail immigration flow and cautioned readers to “make no mistake, our quality of life is threatened by this tidal wave.” For a comprehensive examination on the rhetoric and politics of Latina immigrant women, sterilization, and welfare, see Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women’s Reproduction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008; Virginia Espino, “Woman Sterilized as Gives Birth: Forced Sterilization and Chicana Resistance in the 1970s,” in *Las Obreras: Chicana Politics of Work and Family*, edited by Vicki L. Ruiz, (Los Angeles: University of California Chicano Studies Research Publications, 2000) 65-82; *No Más Bebés*, directed by Renee Tajima-Peña (2015; USA: Public Broadcasting Service), Web.

<sup>25</sup> Harwood, 208.

<sup>26</sup> Harwood, 208.

considered as individuals rather than in the aggregate—particularly when they know specific undocumented individuals or their related circumstances.

### **Labor in Los Angeles**

This inconsistent dependency on undocumented labor was quite noticeable in Los Angeles. Unprecedented growth of the Latino population coincident with major job loss and the restructuring of the economy resulted in an immigrant labor group that was unable to elevate itself financially. Legal and illegal immigrants found themselves in a low labor position characterized by the unique intersection of gender, legal status and race. Often times, immigrants' exploitable position in the labor market presented opportunities for companies to cut costs at the expense of other ethnic groups. In a study of Los Angeles hotels and restaurants, migration scholar Roger Waldinger found a strong preference for immigrants over African Americans among employers.<sup>27</sup> Employers found undocumented workers more docile and believed they would work harder for less for fear of deportation in contrast to African Americans as one employer expressed:

We have had a bad experience with black employees. They don't accept responsibility. We have a lot of problems with black employees saying, "you guys owe us and who cares if we broke this rule." In some of my interviews with Latinos, I ask, "is it a necessity (the job), because they need money?" And they say "yes." "But you have to sweat with *ganas*." I wouldn't approach it that way with blacks.<sup>28</sup>

Racial stereotypes played a key role in establishing the labor hierarchy relevant to hotel and restaurant employer preference.<sup>29</sup> The preference for exploitable and subservient workers over

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<sup>27</sup> Roger Waldinger, "Who Makes the Beds, Who Washes the Dishes? Black/Immigrant Competition Reassessed," in *Immigrants and Immigration Policy: Individual Skills, Family Ties, and Group Identities*, eds. Harriet O. Dulup and Phanindra V. Wannara, (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1996), 278.  
[https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/waldinger/articles/BC\\_14.PDF](https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/waldinger/articles/BC_14.PDF).

<sup>28</sup> Waldinger, 281.

<sup>29</sup> Some might blame Latino immigrants for increased jobless rates among African Americans and other ethnic groups. This assumption of job competition has been used to rationalize anti-immigration policy in an effort to rally African American support among other racial cohorts. Opponents have cited a loss of social benefits and political power among the reasons to halt Latino immigration flow into the United States. This can be seen as an incomplete and, at worst, a

those who demanded decent working conditions and fair wages was expressed by garment and manufacturing employers. Up to this point, immigration policy implicitly empowered employers who depended on cheap immigrant labor, yet immigrants were largely blamed for the declining economy. In the 1980s, preference for exploitable labor fueled the perception that undocumented workers caused a decline in union strength and wages.

This widespread perception shifted blame onto undocumented workers and away from the broader economic factors. Upon further examination, it is clear that the restructuring of the Los Angeles economy—already set in motion by the 1970s—better explains the decline in union participation that ultimately begat wage reductions. Because of the dominant presence of Latina/os in the manufacturing labor force, many attributed declining wages to immigrants. Clearly, their majority population in the sector indicates demographic change. This data, however, does not support the idea that the arrival of immigrants brought about falling wages. According to one Department of Commerce report, in “1950, Hispanic immigrants represented 2.9 percent of all manufacturing employees in the region, but by 1990 they represented 30.8 percent.”<sup>30</sup> As the number of available well-paying jobs in durable goods industries plunged, they were replaced by low skilled labor-intensive work in the textile, furniture, and apparel industries. Because of these industries’ susceptibility to market fluctuations, between “1969 and 1988, manufacturing firms employing 500 or more persons dropped by 18%, even as the number of small firms, defined as those with 1 to 49 employees, increased by 15%.”<sup>31</sup> The practice of subcontracting, popularized

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nativist assumption. Labeling immigration as the main source of black and other ethnic minority groups’ disadvantage in the labor market rules out many other significant factors that explain inequality in Los Angeles. For more, see Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Census of Population and Housing 1990: Public Use Microdata Sample*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1993), <https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/D1-D90-PUMS-14-TECHM.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Morales and Paul M. Ong, “The Illusion of Progress: Latinos in Los Angeles,” in *Latinos in a Changing U.S. Economy: Comparative Perspectives on Growing Inequality*, eds. Rebecca Morales, Frank Bonilla, (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 59.

within high technology firms at first, eventually spread throughout the downtown Los Angeles manufacturing garment district.<sup>32</sup>

As this decline of the garment industries worsened due to reductions in firm size and unstable employment, these manufacturing jobs were largely filled by immigrants with few job skills. While the manufacturing sector restructured, labor organization weakened. Urban and political geographers Edward Soja, Rebecca Morales, and Goetz Wolff found that from 1973 to 1983, the percent of all Los Angeles manufacturing unionized employees fell from 32% to 21%.<sup>33</sup> Due to this decline in union membership and the industry's subcontracting practices, both workers' negotiating power and wages fell. As the national average wage for production workers rose by 3 percent between 1967 and 1982, real average hourly wages for the same workers in Los Angeles fell by 8 percent.<sup>34</sup> The reduction of stable employment and the increased demand for an uneducated low-skilled labor force paved the way for exploitable immigrant labor.

Examining the wages paid to immigrant labor reveals the extent of their exploitation. In 1980, recently arrived immigrants were exploited at a greater rate than their native-born counterparts as almost 51 percent of males earned less than four dollars an hour while only 12 percent of other workers received this low rate of pay. Similarly, 75 percent of recently arrived female immigrants in that same year earned less than four dollars an hour while only around 27 percent of their non-immigrant counterparts were paid at that rate.<sup>35</sup> Los Angeles had started to visibly become increasingly reliant on cheap legal and illegal immigrant labor.

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Soja, Rebecca Morales, and Goetz Wolff, "Urban Restructuring: An Analysis of Social and Spatial Change in Los Angeles," *Economic Geography* 59, no. 2 (1983), 221. doi:10.2307/143613.

<sup>33</sup> Morales and Ong, 60-61.

<sup>34</sup> Morales and Ong, 61.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, *Census of Population and Housing 1990: Public Use Microdata Samples*.

Reports on attitudes surrounding immigration generally overlook how minority groups perceive this issue. In the past and to a certain extent in the present, Latina/os were often portrayed as a monolithic group. In reality, the U.S. Latino population has grown to be an incredibly diverse political body. Studies on Mexican Americans' conceptualizations of the 1980s immigration issue demonstrate how the population viewed undocumented immigrant workers. In the 1980s, tensions between positive feelings of cultural kinship and the negative feelings of direct and indirect economic fears characterized Mexican Americans' attitudes toward undocumented immigrants.<sup>36</sup> Similar to the perceptions that non-Mexican American blue-collar workers felt, Mexican Americans' economic status played an important role in terms of public opinion. Additionally, generational differences have divided Mexican Americans on issues relating to racial equality and women's rights.

The same is true for immigration. Later generations of Mexican Americans are more likely to adopt unfavorable perspectives on undocumented workers like reduced support in local politics and less empathy toward their struggle. First and second-generation Mexican Americans generally express solidarity with undocumented immigrants. Their social and economic conditions tend to resemble those of the undocumented which in turn reinforces the common kinship felt between the two groups.<sup>37</sup> While the economic upheaval of the early 1980s affected the entire American workforce, particular minority groups felt the effects hardest.

Certainly, a sizeable portion of Mexican Americans and Chicanos shared the same view that undocumented workers had "stolen" jobs from hardworking and deserving Americans. Indeed, job competition was seen as an important problem caused by the influx of Mexican and Central

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence W. Miller, Jerry L. Polinard, and Robert D. Wrinkle, "Attitudes toward Undocumented Workers: The Mexican American Perspective," *Social Science Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1984), 488, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42861656>

<sup>37</sup> Miller et al 486.

Americans into the U.S. Within the Latino community, concerns over the high rates of unemployment, rather than racial or religious prejudice, shaped attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. Gallup polls from the late 1970s and early 1980s indicate that while Americans acknowledged the need for low-cost illegal immigrant labor, similar studies focusing on Mexican Americans suggest this minority group shared those concerns as well.<sup>38</sup> The findings of scholars who have examined Mexican Americans' perceptions of illegal immigration clash with erroneous assumptions regarding the political homogeneity of Latinos in the U.S.

Insights of illegal immigration varied among more affluent Mexican Americans versus those belonging to the working class. In fact, Mexican American respondents frequently cited cheap labor as the primary benefit provided by undocumented immigrants regardless of education, income, or generational differences.<sup>39</sup> This suggests a greater awareness of the role of undocumented immigrants in the United States but, more critically, highlights their position as exploitable workers in the labor market acknowledged even by "legal" Mexican immigrants. For Mexican Americans and other minority groups, the economic threat posed by undocumented immigrant workers most often informed their attitudes toward immigration reform and the influx of Mexican and Central Americans into the U.S throughout the 1980s. Simultaneously in the judicial system, legal scholars have suggested that periods of economic stress and high unemployment influenced the legal system's "restraint" mode in analyzing the constitutional rights of undocumented immigrants.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Miller et al, 492.

<sup>39</sup> Miller et al, 487.

<sup>40</sup> Cheryl L. Marsh, "Brief Encounters of the Alien Kind—Challenges to Factory Sweeps and the Detentive Questioning: *I.N.S. v. Delgado*," *Southwestern University Law Review* 15, no. 3 (1985), 475, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/swulr15&i=483>.

## Litigation against the INS

During the early 1980s, numerous court decisions reflected a sharpening legal conflict between INS tactics and constitutional rights.<sup>41</sup> Under the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, immigration officers could interrogate any person believed to be unlawfully residing in the country on their right to remain in the U.S. The act broadened INS officers' statutory enforcement powers to seek out and arrest those who remained in the country illegally. Regarding workplace raids and questioning methods, INS tactics egregiously violated fourth amendment rights. So much that in November of 1974, officials from major Mexican American political organizations met with President Gerald Ford at the White House to discuss the enforcement of immigration law. Representatives from MALDEF and MAPA (Mexican American Political Association) urged President Ford to propose new "guidelines and procedures to protect the constitutional rights of Mexican American citizens and the human rights of Mexican nationals" detained by the INS.<sup>42</sup>

Early on, Mexican American legal and political organizations sought to maintain a dialogue on the preservation of constitutional rights and the dignity of workers when enforcing immigration law. MALDEF and similar education-litigation coalitions led numerous landmark cases on behalf of working-class Mexican Americans and undocumented Mexican immigrants. In *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce* (1975), the Supreme Court unanimously determined that a roving patrol car violated the Fourth Amendment when stopping a vehicle on the basis of the driver having the appearance of Mexican ancestry. In what became a watershed case in the history of Chicanos and

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<sup>41</sup> Undocumented immigrants, too, were protected by the rights afforded by the Fourth Amendment. See *United States v. Barbera*, 213 F. Supp. 923 (S.D.N.Y. 1963); *Babula v. INS*, 665 F.2d 293 (3d Cir. 1981).

<sup>42</sup> "Ford and Spanish Speaking Leaders Meet in Washington," *Readex: Hispanic American Newspapers*, November 20, 1974, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.csun.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANASP&docref=image/v2%3A11D362738781B67E%40EANASP-11DA6132064BF428%402442372-11D900F1AA90F518%405-127BE271066F01D0%40Ford%2BAnd%2BSpanish%2BSpeaking%2BLeaders%2BMeet%2BIn%2BWashington>.

Mexican Americans, the court ruled officers must have reasonable suspicion to interrogate people beyond their ethnic makeup. In this case, the court held that the power of Congress to regulate immigration “cannot diminish the Fourth Amendment rights of citizens who may be mistaken for aliens.”<sup>43</sup> Here, the rights of citizens are inextricably linked to undocumented peoples.

These same standards extended beyond Border Patrol and to the INS. In 1982, the ACLU of Northern California and MALDEF filed a class action lawsuit—on behalf of workers and businesses belonging to the International Molder's and Allied Worker's Local Union No. 164. The case challenged immigration raids jointly conducted by INS agents and the U.S. Border Patrol. The raids took place at various workplaces in areas surrounding San Francisco where immigration agents believed undocumented Mexican immigrant workers were employed. MALDEF and the ACLU specifically contended that the warrant used to raid the Petaluma Poultry Company authorized the INS to inspect rather than seize. However, the INS used this inspection warrant to enter the PPC with the intent to seize undocumented immigrants without any reasonable inquiry that must occur beforehand, thus, invalidating their initial warrant.<sup>44</sup> The ACLU and MALDEF successfully demonstrated that the warrants manipulated by the INS allowed them to unlawfully enter worksites at their discretion—violating the protections afforded by the Fourth Amendment.

Later in 1984, *International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, AFL-CIO v. Sureck* further outlined the constitutional viability of factory sweeps. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit viewed these sweeps as seizures recognized under the fourth amendment. As such, the court demonstrated how the “sweeps did not comply with the reasonableness standard required by

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<sup>43</sup> *United States v. Brignoni-Ponce* 422 U.S. 873 (1975)

<sup>44</sup> *International Molders' & Allies Workers' Local Union No. 164 v. Nelson* 102 F.R.D. 457 (N.D. California 1983)

the fourth amendment for detentive questioning.”<sup>45</sup> Here, the court ruled in favor of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union—which represented thousands of Latina garment workers—and directed the INS to obtain individual suspicion as to each person detained when conducting detentive questioning.<sup>46</sup>

These court cases uncovered rampant violations of constitutional rights when conducting worksite raids and cast doubt on the legality and effectiveness of the raids themselves. If the INS raids were even slightly effective in counteracting the influx of Mexican and Central American immigrants into the U.S., the court’s case-by-case rulings would accurately support and even streamline their tactics. However, the steady increase of the Mexican and Central American population in California as well as the low numbers of deported individuals suggested a clear need for an undocumented immigrant labor group in the state.

Issues concerning proper warrants and unreasonable searches and seizures underlined the racial profiling and constitutional violations inherent to INS tactics. Considering the contentious legality regarding worksite sweeps, the Supreme Court ruling on *Delgado v. INS* (1984) broke away from the aforementioned rulings from the lower courts.<sup>47</sup> From January to September of 1977, the INS conducted widespread factory sweeps in Southern California in search of undocumented workers. Employees of the Southern California Davis Pleating Company in

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<sup>45</sup> Cathy Ann Pohl, “The Requirement of Individualized Suspicion: An End to INS Factory Sweeps- International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, AFL-CIO v. Sureck,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 59, no. 4 (1983), 1070, <https://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cklawreview/vol59/iss4/8>.

<sup>46</sup> Pohl, 1084.

<sup>47</sup> *INS v. Delgado* questioned the INS’s method of carrying out factory sweeps and whether or not these factory sweeps violated the fundamental rights of factory workers—that is to be secure against unreasonable seizures as guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment. The court ruled in favor of the INS. First, the court held that the INS factory surveys involved here did not result in the seizure of the entire factory workforce for the complete duration of the surveys, thus disqualifying it from an unlawful search and seizure. Second, the court held that the individual questioning of respondents by INS agents regarding their citizenship did not count as unreasonable search within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment—that is, that the questioning of respondents by the INS was conducted in a voluntary basis rather than detentive.

Downtown Los Angeles charged the INS with illegal detainment. During the sweep, around thirty to forty INS agents entered the worksite; some guarded the exits while others roamed the facility questioning employees about their legal status. In this case, the INS maintained, at all times, the factory's employees were free to walk around and continue their work, thus avoiding any unreasonable search and seizure under the fourth amendment.<sup>48</sup> By stationing agents at each door of the factory and displaying immigration badges, the INS clearly made a show of force in relation to seizure under the Fourth Amendment—certainly the blocking of exits by law enforcement indicates some form of detainment.

In sum, *INS v. Delgado* unveiled the reasoning of the Supreme Court on what counted as consensual answering of questions versus detentive questioning. Because of the intimidating nature and questioning by the INS in its factory sweeps, the court's opinion also included a unique dissent co-written by Justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall. Partly opposing the majority opinion in *Delgado*, Justices Brennan and Marshall concluded that past rulings on similar cases actually "compelled the conclusion that respondents were unreasonably seized by INS agents in the course of these factory surveys."<sup>49</sup> They maintained that "respondents felt constrained to answer the questions posed by the INS agents, even though they did not wish to do so."<sup>50</sup>

Justices Brennan and Marshall undeniably disagreed with the opinion that the employees of the Southern California Davis Pleating Company consented to voluntary questioning. They concluded their testimony was indicative of a people subjected to "wholesale interrogation under conditions designed not to respect personal security and privacy, but rather to elicit prompt answers from completely intimidated workers."<sup>51</sup> The Supreme Court's decision to deny constitutional

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<sup>48</sup> *INS v. Delgado*, 466 U.S. 210 (1984)

<sup>49</sup> *INS v. Delgado*, 466.

<sup>50</sup> *INS v. Delgado*, 466.

<sup>51</sup> *INS v. Delgado*, 466.

rights to the employees of the downtown Los Angeles manufacturing company was hotly contested. The two justices expressed their concern at the end of their dissent: “Nothing could be clearer than that these tactics amounted to seizures of respondents under the Fourth Amendment.”<sup>52</sup> The unlawful and racially discriminative manner in which the INS conducted its raids was also captured by newspapers of the time.

### **Targeting the Workers**

On the ground, reporters looked into how the INS raids affected everyday workers. Their investigations revealed multiple perspectives on the issue of mass immigration from Mexico and Central America throughout the Reagan Recession. In their reporting, *The Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers shared common themes of fear about deportation, individual immigrant struggles, and the economic impact from the raids. Scholars and the general public can conceptualize everyday immigrant anxieties and hopes for the future by examining these newspaper reports and other popular media. In the 1980s, mass media coverage of the raids served to warn Latina/o communities whether they should avoid specified areas. Such reports played a role in magnifying the visibility of worksite and public raids. Heightened media attention could also be used by employers who sought to intensify the fear of deportation in a bid to strengthen their control over their own immigrant workers. Equally consequential, these raids also diverted attention from more plausible causes of the nation’s economic decline.

These raids emphatically misattributed responsibility for hard economic times onto Mexican and Central American communities rather than on broader economic factors and domestic policies. As a top immigration service official said, the raids will “open those jobs the

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<sup>52</sup> *INS v. Delgado*, 466.

illegal aliens hold to people who are in this country legally.” The idea that there are only a certain number of jobs available to Americans and that undocumented immigrants minimize that amount has been hotly contested for decades.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, mass deportations can potentially decrease job opportunities for all people in certain economic sectors by forcing factory and business closures. In addition, the deportation of undocumented immigrants can indirectly push further automation of factory work. Ultimately, consumer population, mechanization, and broad governmental policy are some of the numerous factors that better shape the number of jobs available for all peoples living in the U.S. An investigation of 1980s periodicals suggests that the nation’s severe economic crises would be solved neither by appealing to anti-immigrant advocates nor by terrorizing vulnerable segments of working-class people in Los Angeles.

These raids visibly affected local businesses in the downtown Los Angeles area where undocumented immigrants worked low wage service jobs. In their bid to free up jobs, INS agents gathered information to raid businesses suspected of employing undocumented immigrants. INS

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<sup>53</sup> In a November 1975 conference regarding the Rodino Bill H.R. 8713—a hardline illegal alien bill—immigration advocate Father Ramon Gaitan spoke out against this legislative bill whose first iteration was defeated in California and New York for its unconstitutionality. Addressing widespread charges of how illegal immigrants harm the U.S. economy, Gaitan and other advocates brought up many important points that are relevant today as they were forty-five years ago. He raised the issue of large corporations’ need to search for the best sources of cheap labor and raw materials that usually result in the shuttering of American factories and plants to resettle in a different country. A large number of goods sold in the U.S. are manufactured in foreign countries because of this reason. Indeed, the assemblage of products sold in this country by American based corporations increased during the 1970s and 1980s. Over the decades, it has manifested in the form of established maquiladoras along the U.S.-Mexico border where companies capitalize on a cheaper labor force while also attaining certain tax advantages. Considering the decline of unions and the accusation of undocumented workers acting as “scabs”, advocates like the United Farm Workers—once heavily anti-immigrant—recognize that the tactics of agribusiness and similar industries in maintaining divisions of labor that cause union and strike breaking rather than illegal immigrant workers. As a matter of fact, these divisions are further enforced by government agencies like the INS, local law enforcement, and sometimes private security. Many people also correlate the decline of unions to illegal immigrants. Like permanent resident and citizen workers, undocumented immigrant workers also recognize attacks against working people. In the past and into the present, many unions have taken the successful steps to educate and organize undocumented immigrant workers alongside “legal” workers. These factors have drastically reduced the number of jobs and the number of well-paying jobs available to Americans far more than any undocumented immigrant could. For more, see “Legislative Acts/Legal proceedings,” *Adelante* (Topeka, Kansas), December 7, 1975. *Readex: Hispanic American Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.csun.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANASP&docref=image/v2%3A11C77F0CA958B481%40EANASP-11CBE18C91F37198%402442754-11CBD38A1D5B7CD8%408-120F0780AF104F3B%40Legislative%2BActs%252FLegal%2BProceedings>.

administrators often received tips from disgruntled former employees and informants that facilitated their own investigation to determine what areas would yield the largest numbers of detained illegal immigrant workers. In February of 1982, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on INS deputy director Omar G. Sewell's supervision of multiple raids who targeted small restaurants and other retailers in Little Tokyo. INS officers arrested students and workers who overstayed their visas—capturing the largest ever number of illegal Japanese aliens in the county's history.<sup>54</sup> Because of the location of these raids, Sewell assured the *Times* that the INS was not specifically targeting Japanese immigrants, nonetheless, the raids caused a panic in the community. After the raids, hundreds of seemingly illegal immigrant workers “refused to report for work in Japanese businesses, forcing many of them to close.”<sup>55</sup>

Unquestionably, the targeting of local businesses in neighborhoods like Little Tokyo intimidated low wage workers while failing to provide well-paying jobs for citizens like the INS promised. In this instance and like many others, INS agents captured low wage workers such as waiters, line cooks, and busboys who did not meet the criteria for employment-based green cards. In reality, the actions of immigration officers often harmed the local economy. In fact, when the news of the Little Tokyo raid spread, a restaurant owner in Hollywood also reported that twelve out of his forty-five employees failed to show up for work in the days following the raids.<sup>56</sup>

Worksite raids also disrupted farm work in the Central Valley. For centuries, immigrants have tended to the fields of Fresno and Delano to provide Angelenos with fresh produce. In a 2017 *Los Angeles Times* article recognizing individuals impacted by the raids, Joe Del Bosque, a 67-

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<sup>54</sup> Charles P. Wallace, “Immigration Raids Panic Little Tokyo: Dozens of Shops, Restaurants Close,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Feb 6, 1982, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/153049613?accountid=7285>.

<sup>55</sup> Wallace, “Immigration Raids Panic Little Tokyo.”

<sup>56</sup> Wallace, “Immigration Raids Panic Little Tokyo.”

year-old from Los Baños, recounted many instances of the raids that happened in the cantaloupe farms he used to help manage in the 1970s through the 1980s. Federal government planes flew overhead looking for work crews and soon enough, green-colored INS vans appeared causing farmworkers to panic and run. Farms would lose fruit because they didn't have enough people to pick. According to Del Bosque said, "INS would come with their vans and circle the fields and then capture as many as they could."<sup>57</sup> Immigration officers targeted vulnerable and essential workers to boost their numbers of detained undocumented immigrants. Ultimately, the raids proved ineffective as Del Bosque recalled many workers returned within a few days.<sup>58</sup>

Commenting on these immigration sweeps, many African Americans seemed to perceive them as public spectacle rather than a practical government solution. In May 1982, Los Angeles INS Deputy Director Jerry Sewell commented that some "132 jobs paying \$4 to \$5 hourly were made available by the raids."<sup>59</sup> As a direct result of the INS raids, applications flooded companies from workers seeking to fill the newly vacated positions. Despite this slight bump in available jobs, many local residents expressed feelings of frustration over the effectiveness of these factory sweeps. The Black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* dispatched reporter Chico Norwood to gauge the black community's response to the latest batch of Los Angeles raids. Overall, many Black Angelenos believed the INS raids would not benefit them partly due to the low wages offered by these newly available positions and employers' preference for and dependency on undocumented labor. Questioning the effectiveness of the INS, local resident Winston Fraser deplored its

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<sup>57</sup> Ruben Vives, "Illegal Immigration: Return of the Workplace Raid?" *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 15, 2017, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/1858374585?accountid=7285>.

<sup>58</sup> Vives, "Illegal Immigration: Return of the Workplace Raid?"

<sup>59</sup> Chico C Norwood, "INS Raids: Will they Help or Hinder Black Community?" *Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)*, May 06, 1982, <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lapl.org/docview/565397280?accountid=6749>.

operations, stating that “about 30 percent of the people arrested had the correct papers [and] another third have gone back to their jobs.”<sup>60</sup>

Others expressed frustrations about the economy and tied it to President Reagan. Henry Anderson, another local resident, voiced his dissatisfaction with the administration. Anderson perceived the raids as “publicity stunts to improve [Reagan’s] standing with the public.”<sup>61</sup> Civil rights leader Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr. lamented that conceptualizations of illegal aliens have been “used to systematically discriminate against certain non-European immigrants” who are here to “make an honest day’s work.”<sup>62</sup> Comments made by the black community suggest a greater awareness of the immigrant struggle in the face of short-sighted government solutions. California Senator Alan Cranston questioned the intent of the raids, implying that they “cynically pit the jobless against the jobless along racial, ethnic, and immigrant lines.”<sup>63</sup> Cranston’s condemnation of the raids echoes the opinions of the black Angelenos interviewed by the *Sentinel*. Both understood that the immigration sweeps were merely a way to divide the working-class along racial and ethnic lines.

While the INS conducted worksite raids throughout Southern California, they also sought to intimidate Mexican and Central American immigrants through other means. In 1982, the INS attempted to recall an estimated 70,000 illegal Mexican immigrants protected under the “Silva letters.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the INS tripled the number of immigration agents assigned to factory raids

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<sup>60</sup> Norwood, “INS Raids: Will they Help or Hinder Black Community?”

<sup>61</sup> Norwood, “INS Raids: Will they Help or Hinder Black Community?”

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Chavis Jr., “Immigration in Los Angeles.” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-2005), Nov 16, 1989. <http://ezproxy.lapl.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.lapl.org/docview/565533053?accountid=6749>.

<sup>63</sup> Norwood, “INS Raids: Will they Help or Hinder Black Community?”

<sup>64</sup> The Immigration and Naturalization Service issued “Silva” letters because of a lawsuit filed by Refugio Silva in response to the 1962 Cuban Refugee Program that provided federal assistance to Cuban refugees. By 1971, 600,000 Cuban refugees received services like medical care, financial aid, resettlement aid, and child welfare services. The plaintiffs challenged U.S. quotas on immigration from Western Hemisphere nations and successfully argued that immigrant visas given to Cuban refugees unfairly limited spots that would be available for Mexican and other Latino immigrants. In 1977, a federal court in Chicago ordered the INS to issue these “Silva letters” to Mexicans wanting to

in an administrative restructuring. Despite the bolstering of immigration officers, this decision only raised the number of persons picked up by INS agents from eighteen per day to fifty and was viewed by Angelenos as being essentially symbolic.<sup>65</sup> This small increase in detained immigrant workers did little to preserve American jobs and hardly affected the local immigration population.

Unsurprisingly, it served more as an act of aggression meant to terrorize immigrants in local Los Angeles communities. The INS's objective was explicitly laid out in this administrative restructuring—to showcase the added strength of immigration agents rather than take fundamental steps toward immigration reform. The actions taken by the INS demonstrates the uncertainty that Latina/o immigrants lived with in the years leading up to comprehensive immigration reform. On the one hand, the INS conducted factory sweeps and bus raids throughout local neighborhoods. On the other hand, it repeatedly attempted to undermine the legal status that safeguarded Mexican and Central American immigrants.

Numerous INS operations designed to net large numbers of undocumented workers failed to produce support for hardline immigration policy in Los Angeles. In reality, these raids freed up low wage jobs at best and targeted already vulnerable workers at worst. Fifty-five-year-old Maria Jaramillo was twenty years old when she left Mexico for Los Angeles in 1981. After learning about the raids on the news, she said she spent the next five years wondering when immigration officers would storm the downtown garment district factory where she worked. Jaramillo recalls the precarious nature of being undocumented at the time: “They would always come to the factories

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enter the country as permanent legal residents. When the program ended in 1981, legal Mexican entries plummeted from 101,000 and hovered between 55,000 to 60,000 through 1985. For more see, Douglas S. Massey et al., “System Assembly: A History of Mexico-U.S. Migration,” in *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an era of Economic Integration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002: 24-51.

<sup>65</sup> “Fear among the Migrants,” *The Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, Jan 19, 1982, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/152994358?accountid=7285>.

around there, but for some reason they would never come to mine...you know, luck was on my side.”<sup>66</sup>

The uncertainty of employment and anxieties surrounding many Americans’ financial well-being empowered the INS in its mission to return the highest number of well-paying jobs lost to undocumented workers to U.S. citizens. Indeed, a top immigration service official declared at the beginning of Operation Jobs in 1982 they were not “going after the busboys but rather after those jobs where [they] believe there is a demand among legal workers.”<sup>67</sup> Comments like these portrayed undocumented immigrants as working good paying jobs, but in contrast, most undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants worked jobs that most Americans recognized as low wage and labor intensive.

## **Conclusion**

Contextualizing the INS raids of the early 1980s along economic and legal terms reveals more than just the ambivalent dependency of the Los Angeles economy on undocumented immigrants. This fuller examination highlights the human cost of the raids in the face of the broader restructuring of the local and national economy, litigation over violations of constitutional rights, and high rates of unemployment. Notwithstanding, the humanitarian crisis that resulted from decades of U.S. intervention in Central America also played a key role in mass migration from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. These raids suggest a different legacy of the early 1980s Reagan Recession—one that spotlights the tragic mishandling of the issue of illegal

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<sup>66</sup> Vives, “Illegal Immigration: Return of the Workplace Raid?”

<sup>67</sup> Evan Maxwell, “Raids Will Target Illegal Aliens in Desirable Jobs,” *The Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), April 23, 1982, <https://libproxy.csun.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.csun.edu/docview/153080618?accountid=7285>.

immigration and its misconceived solutions. This brand of political theater callously ignored the real and drastic costs resulting from misdirected blame.

Today, many immigrants who lived through the 1980s look back at instances of being captured by or narrowly escaping INS agents. Pablo Alvarado, director of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, recalled the story of a man at a day laborer site who was in the middle of getting his blood drawn as part of a county HIV test program when immigration officers pulled up in white vans: “He ripped the needle from his arm and ran.”<sup>68</sup> These local and nationwide raids tell a story of fear and exploitation—most importantly, they are an account of how blame was misdirected onto an exploitable and vulnerable working-class people.

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<sup>68</sup> Vives, “Illegal Immigration: Return of the Workplace Raid?”

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