

A Literature Review of the Participation of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. Workforce and in
the Washington, D.C. Region and a Case Study of Immigrant Day Laborers in the Washington,
D.C. Metropolitan Area

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The Participation of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. Workforce and in the Washington, D.C.

Region: A Two-Part Literature Review

Literature addressing immigrants and their participation in the U.S. Economy is vast, and to do a comprehensive review of it would be an unwieldy task. Literature on immigration can be written in the context of sending and/or receiving countries or it can be written from an international standpoint, and literature can examine the topic through policy, education, economy, human rights, and cultural and societal consequences. Therefore, in an effort to narrow the focus of this paper to issues of North American relations, the first part of this literature review will consider work that concentrates specifically on Mexican immigrants and their participation in the economy of the United States. Works with a focus broader than this will be considered only to the extent that they include relevant conclusions and perspectives regarding immigrants and their involvement in the U.S. economy. The second part of this literature review will examine work which is regionally focused in the Washington, D.C. area, and will summarize as often as is possible available data specific to Mexican immigrants in the region.

The parameters under which the discussed works are approaching the subject will also be noted (i.e. does it consider all immigrants? Does it focus on Hispanics in general or specifically Mexicans? Does it distinguish between legal and illegal immigrants? Etc.). Part one of this literature review is structured to consider first works that are foundational to the study of the topic and general or broad in their approach, second to consider works more topically focused on immigrants in the economy, and third to discuss specific case studies focusing on Mexican

immigrants and their participation in the U.S. economy. Finally some reflections will be offered on the shortcomings of the examined literature. It should also be noted that many works discuss both general concepts and specific implications, often using narrowly focused research to illustrate more general concepts. Works of this nature will be placed according to where they are thought to offer the most illumination, but their utility to specific and/or general aspects of study in the topic will be noted. Part two of the literature review is structured to first consider works focusing independent studies focusing on the Washington DC region, second to consider data published by the US Census Bureau specific to the DC region, thirdly to consider other miscellaneous regionally focused works, and finally, a brief consideration of shortcomings in the regional literature.

PART I: FROM GENERAL FOUNDATIONS TO SEPECIFIC CASE STUDIES

1. Foundational Works

The following works establish one or more concepts key to understanding the participation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. economy and offer us a general picture of the larger forces at work and the terms and principles important to their understanding. One such broadly focused work, while it does not explicitly concentrate Mexicans, nevertheless lays necessary groundwork for understanding Mexican immigrant participation in the U.S. economy. The book *Ethnic Economies*, by Ivan Light, who has authored many works on immigrants in the economy that are also included in this literature review, and Steven J. Gold (2000), offers a general examination of the economic role played by immigrants and ethnic minorities. The authors approach the topic through a discussion of the phenomenon of what they call “ethnic economies,” which they define as “coethnic self-employed and employers and their coethnic employees,” adding that “whatever is not part of the ethnic economy belongs to the general labor

market” (Light and Gold 2000: 4). The book includes discussions of the informal sector, the illegal enterprise sector, economic mobility, cultural and social capital, ethnic solidarity, hiring and referral networks, cultural and geographical space, ethnic neighborhoods, and even more explicitly relevant to this literature review, a discussion of the “new economics of migration,” a concept key to understanding modern immigration issues.

Further discussing ethnic economies, but narrowing focus to examine specific dynamics of ethnic economies in labor markets, Thomas Bailey and Roger Waldinger’s essay “Primary, Secondary, and Enclave Labor Markets: A Training Systems Approach” (1991), explains what the authors call the “enclave effect,” which, they assert, “is characterized by an external, informal training system that shapes the employment relationship and increases the availability and quality of information for workers and employers.” Paired with the above studies of ethnic participation in the economy, *The Service Economy: a Geographical Approach* (1996), by Sven Illeris, while it does not offer specific information about immigrants, is nevertheless valuable for its in-depth look at the service sector of the economy, which is of much importance to Mexican immigrants in the U.S. Focusing on the service economy in a broad macroeconomic context, Illeris’ book defines the intricacies of the service economy, offering a general and a more technical understanding of an economic sector which in the case of the U.S. employs a disproportionately large number of Mexican immigrants.

Offering work that is more immigrant-focused, the oft-cited Douglass S. Massey’s work is extremely valuable in understanding basic dynamics of international labor migration. In his essay “*Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration*” (1990), Massey argues that employment growth stimulates migration, which in turn stimulates further migration, a process he dubs “cumulative causation.” Dynamics of internal migration, he

argues, naturally selects “those with the greatest endowment of human capital,” leading to higher economic growth and labor demand in receiving areas which in turn contributes to more migration. Work that Massey has authored with Jorge Durand as part of the binational Mexican Migration Project is also valuable in order to understand certain aspects of the participation of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. economy. *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*, a collection of essays edited by Durand and Massey (2004), offers data collected by the Mexican Migration Project. The work is useful in its analysis of trends among returning migrants and first time migrants, in which it observes that Mexican migrants who continue to return to the U.S. participate overwhelmingly in the labor force (Massey and Durand 2004: 11). The book compiles information on the economic sectors in which they tend to work, with particular attention given to the agricultural sector.

Also worthy of mention under this heading are government data sources, which while they can not be defined as focused “literature,” nevertheless offer essential country-specific economic data and statistical information on demographics, migration patterns, population fluctuations, and border crossings, made available by various government organizations of both the United States and Mexico. Various government departments such as Mexico’s National Institute of Geographical Statistics and Computer Science and the United States Census Bureau publish their findings online or in official documents available to the public. Even more relevant is the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service’s *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, published every year. Mexico’s National Institute of Migration under the Secretary of Government also publishes a yearly report on migratory statistics.

2. Works Topically Focused on Immigrants in the Economy

The following works are more narrowly focused in topic and examine, in one way or another, immigrants and their participation in the economy. Valuable because it draws from many studies to offer generalizations about Mexicans in the U.S. labor force is the essay “Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Control Policy,” by Wayne Cornelius. An immigration scholar who is a leading authority on Mexican migration to the U.S., Cornelius has authored multiple works immigration issues. While his essay focuses on the militarization of the U.S. border with Mexico, Cornelius briefly but effectively examines the participation of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. labor market in broad terms. While he does so in order to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of border enforcement strategies, his conclusions offer important points for understanding the dynamics of Mexican immigrant participation in the U.S. economy on a macro level. Cornelius determines that “if the current border enforcement strategy were succeeding, we should see tighter labor markets resulting from shortages of undocumented immigrant workers in those industries where employers have come to rely on them. There should also be upward pressure on wage scales in industries and regions where undocumented immigrants have previously clustered. None of these predicted labor market effects has materialized thus far. (Cornelius 2001: 676)” He cites data showing that during the tightening of border enforcement during the 1990’s, the percentage of undocumented immigrant farm workers increased continuously, as did the number of Mexican nationals employed in construction work and low level service sector jobs such as domestics, food service, cleaning, and building service. He also cites several studies by economists that show that tougher border enforcement has not translated into upward pressure on wages for immigrant workers.

More focused is Virginia Parks' book, *Geography of Immigrant Labor Markets: Space, Networks, and Gender* (2005), which examines social networks and what it refers to as "immigrant niches." Parks argues that social networks contribute to the segregation of immigrants from other workers in the labor market, thus perpetuating the ethnic division of labor. Parks cites Roger Waldinger's *Still the Promised City?* (1996) in arguing that "as one worker extends a hand to friends and family, and they to others, job information spreads broadly through an ethnic network while channeling members narrowly into a few jobs" (Parks 2005: 1). Parks' work also examines how residential segregation effects their employment in niche jobs and ethnic labor market segmentation overall. While it offers no specific data on Mexican immigrants, the conclusions it offers can obviously be applied to the Mexican experience.

Tackling the issue of immigrant self-employment, the recent study by Steven J. Gold, Ivan Light, and M. Francis Johnston, entitled "The Second Generation and Self-Employment," (2006), discusses research on immigrant entrepreneurship, examining models of second-generation self-employment and offering specific data on second generation mobility. Gold, Light, and Johnson use as a starting point previous studies that found that the immigrants have higher rates of self-employment than natives and that self-employed immigrants earn more and offer greater human capital than immigrants working in existing non-immigrant run jobs. The authors note that this literature has failed to examine if the same is true in the case of second-generation immigrants, and through an examination of data on second generation immigrants in New York and Los Angeles, the authors seek to determine if self-employment is a similar trend among the second generation. Their conclusion holds that second generation immigrants, including Mexicans, show "consistent patterns of generational increase in self-employment"

(Gold, Light, and Johnson 2006: n.p.). However, they note regional differences in rates of self-employment and also differences between self-employment rates in different immigrant groups.

More narrow in focus is a study by Roger Waldinger, entitled “From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City” (1996), which examines urban economy and political structure and how it affects the receiving and absorption of immigrants in both New York and Los Angeles, the two U.S. cities with the highest population of immigrants. Waldinger concentrates on comparing and contrasting the two sectors of urban economy that employ the most immigrants: the production sector, which he examines through the apparel industry, and the services sector, which he examines through the hotel industry. Waldinger analyses the wages within each industry and their fluctuations over time to illuminate the differences between the cities by comparing and contrasting their differing experiences with immigration.

3. Specific Case Studies of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. Economy

The following case studies offer specific examinations of the participation of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. economy from a variety of different perspectives. Some of these studies choose a particular aspect of Mexican immigrant participation in the U.S. economy and then offer a very narrowly focused in-depth look at the topic, and thus their utility in the overall study of the subject is rather self-evident. Although it is not a case study per se, Elizabeth Grieco and Brian Ray’s *Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Force* (2004), a “spotlight” published by the Migration Policy Institute, offers a focused overview of the topic indicated in its title. The spotlight offers a good starting point for gaining a more specific understanding of the topic, and it highlights several figures and statistics which are key to further in-depth exploration of the topic, such as the fact that at the time the study was published, over half of all Mexican immigrants employed in the U.S. labor force worked in just two occupations. “Of the 4.4 million

employed Mexican immigrants, 1.3 million or 29 percent worked in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, while 1.1 million or 25 percent worked in service occupations,” Grieco and Ray note.

Less general is Enrico A. Marcelli’s essay, “The Institution of Unauthorized Residency Status, Neighborhood Context, and Mexican Immigrant Earnings in Los Angeles County” (2004), containing the results of a case study of workers in Los Angeles County in the year 2001 which examines “whether and how” unauthorized residency status among Mexican-born workers impacts hourly earnings relative to authorized resident workers. Determining that unauthorized Mexican immigrant males earn approximately 34 percent less than authorized workers, Marcelli concludes that “this gap emanates from social forces (such as employer discrimination, public attitudes toward unauthorized immigrants and the work they do, and migrant job networks) rather than unobserved individual characteristics (such as the quality of one’s education or attitudinal constitution)...it is the nature of the demand for the jobs most frequently occupied by unauthorized Mexican immigrants rather than the workers themselves that has led to these jobs having both low pay and low status” (Marcelli 2004: 322-323). Thus, the study is valuable for those who wish to understand why undocumented Mexican immigrants are perpetually concentrated in low pay, low status jobs.

A similar study by Niles Hansen and Gilberto Cardenas, entitled “Immigrant and Native Ethnic Enterprises in Mexican American Neighborhoods: Differing Perceptions of Mexican Immigrant Workers” (1988), uses sample data collected by the authors from businesses in Mexican neighborhoods in Texas and California, both in border areas and non-border locations, to analyze how perceptions of the economic roles of Mexican immigrant workers differ among native ethnic, immigrant ethnic, and non-ethnic employers. The study is useful and unique

because it examines attitudes among employers, revealing that the three employer groups considered in the study indicate a generally favorable view of the economic contributions of Mexican immigrant workers, especially in non-border areas. However, the authors find that immigrant ethnic employers are more likely to hire Mexicans (both legal and undocumented) and depend on them as consumers than native-born ethnic and non-ethnic employers. When giving primary reason for employing Mexican immigrants, employers most often cite that the fact that Mexicans will work for lower wages than other workers, but they also cited reasons such as Mexicans being better workers and not being able to find anyone else to do the job.

Intrigued by the theory that self-employed immigrants earn high incomes than other immigrant workers (addressed in part in the aforementioned “The Second Generation and Self-Employment”), David Spener and Frank D. Bean in their essay “Self-Employment Concentration and Earnings Among Mexican Immigrants in the U.S.” (1999) examine whether immigrants who are not self-employed derive any income benefit from the activities of immigrants in their communities who have gone into business for themselves (Spener and Bean 1999: 1021). The authors use census data from sixty U.S. metropolitan areas to examine “how the relative size of the local ethnic market conditions [and] the extent to which interurban variation in the self-employment rate of Mexican immigrants will influence the incomes of Mexican immigrants who are not self-employed.” Interestingly, Spener and Bean found that in cities with smaller ethnic markets, higher rates of self-employment are correlated with lower earnings by Mexican immigrants. In cities with larger ethnic markets, however, the authors found that higher rates of self-employment corresponded to small increases in wages among Mexican immigrants.

One of the few studies that focuses specifically on Mexican immigrant women in the U.S. economy, “Determinants of Employment of Recently Arrived Mexican Immigrant Wives” by

Clyde S. Greenlees and Rogelio Saenz (1999), examines employment among married Mexican immigrant women who immigrated to the United States in the 1980s. Considering human capital, family household resources, the structure of area labor markets, and the conditions that describe the local labor environment, the authors develop and test several hypotheses. Among their findings is one that is particularly relevant to this literature review for its sector-specific conclusions. The authors, examining why demand for workers in the U.S. manufacturing sector has declined while demand for workers in the service sector has increased, found that low-paying entry-level positions in the service sector which were being shunned by native workers (possibly because of higher paying jobs in the declining manufacturing sector), created opportunities for immigrant women to enter the service industry work force (Greenlees and Saenz 1999: 354). However, the essay offers few predictions for the future. Also valuable for the sector-specific conclusions it offers is W.K. Barger and Ernesto M. Reza's *The Farm Labor Movement in the Midwest* (1994), which examines the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, "a social reform movement of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the Midwest" (Barger and Reza 1994: xiv). By analyzing this particular movement, the study offers an important portrait of the social change and adaptation of immigrant workers within a specific sector of the economy.

Finally, while it doesn't technically fit under this particular heading because it neither specifically examines Mexican immigrants nor is it a case study, "The Integration of Immigrants in the Work Place" (2006), published by the Institute for Work and Economy, is nevertheless important to include in any review of literature having to do with immigrants in the U.S. economy, and it also makes sense that we consider it last. The study is important because as opposed to only observing existing trends, it instead seeks to "help human resources professionals, community activists, educators, labor activists, and professionals in the public

workforce system seek and develop solutions to real-life challenges of integrating immigrants in the workplace” and “illuminate policies, practices and processes that lead to the successful integration of immigrant workers” (“The Integration of Immigrants...” 2006: 2). The study outlines an integration strategy for more effective integration of immigrants into U.S. labor markets through public and private policies and practices, highlighting seven main lessons that must resonate with employers, workers and the community and offering ideas for action in order to implement change at federal, state, and local levels as well as in business and education.

While the seven lessons enumerated in the study cannot be adequately summed up in a literature review of this length, the bottom line of the study can be summed up in the following excerpt from the work’s introduction: “Immigrants are a significant part of a rapidly growing number of labor markets. Their integration needs to be a major component of an area’s workforce strategy, whether it is aimed immediately at high wage – high skill labor or initially at lower skilled workers that are afforded opportunities to pursue career pathways leading to high skill jobs.

Although large-scale national and regional initiatives can help bridge this gap, the bulk of work must be done locally through consortia of community organizations, educational and training institutions, businesses, union, ethnic-serving organizations, government policy makers and research institutions” (2-3).

4. Shortcomings in the Literature and Directions for Future Study:

In considering the majority of the literature reviewed in this paper, three main shortcomings emerge in the available research. These shortcomings have to do with the geographical limitations of the studies, their whole-of-economy or uni-sector approach to examining immigrant participation in the economy, and most obviously, the time in which they were written and the age of the data that they rely on to draw their conclusions.

Of the studies which did not consider nation-wide data and chose instead to focus on geographically specific data, the reader will note that New York and Los Angeles in particular were the most studied, while other works consider other large cities. With the notable exception of Barger and Reza's *The Farm Labor Movement in the Midwest*, all the studies examined here fail to consider any area of the nation outside of major coastal and border cities. This is an important shortcoming because rural areas in the country's interior, particularly in the Southeast and Midwest, are today host to some of the nation's fastest-growing populations of Mexican immigrants. Because these areas lack historical experience with large immigration flows, the participation of Mexican immigrants in the local economies of these regions is an area rich for potential study and promises to yield new and interesting trends and insights.

Furthermore, no studies reviewed here, with the exception of Roger Waldinger's "From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City" really go to great lengths to offer in-depth comparisons of Mexican immigrant participation in more than one particular geographical region of the U.S. That is to say, while many of the studies consider overall country-wide figures and statistics, few of them offer regional comparisons of immigrant participation in the labor force. This is a significant gap in the literature, because it means that those interested in regional characteristics of immigrant participation in the economy must rely on raw survey data or what basically amounts region-by-region stereotypes regarding prominent industries and their employment of immigrants (examples of such stereotypes being "in the Mid-West, Mexican immigrants dominate the meatpacking industry" or "in rural California, Mexican immigrants work in agriculture," etc.). Studies that applied the same set of questions to two or more distinct regions would be of much use to the body of literature on immigrants and their participation in the U.S. workforce.

Along these same lines, the literature tends to consider the economy in one of two ways: a whole-of-economy macro scale which considers the overall participation of Mexican immigrants in all sectors and aspects of the economy, or a uni-sector approach which considers the participation of Mexican immigrants in one particular sector of the economy (agriculture, service industry, etc.). Once again, with the exception of Roger Waldinger's "From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City," which compares and contrasts Mexican immigrant participation in both the garment and the production and the service sector through the garment and hotel industry. More studies of this nature, which compare the participation of Mexican immigrants in two or more distinct sectors of the economy, would be useful not only to offer illuminations on the nature of immigrant work in different sectors of the workforce, but also to discover if there what sort of mobility between different economic sectors, which sectors tend to offer higher rates of naturalization for immigrant workers, and which offer immigrants the best chance at starting their own business. More studies of this nature would add considerable depth to our understanding of the specific dynamics of immigrant participation in the U.S. economy.

This brings us to the third and most obvious shortcoming, which is the fact that almost all of the literature examined here draws its research from data and field work collected in the early to mid 90's or at best, the first few years of this decade. Thus, many of the conclusions about Mexican immigrant participation in the U.S. economy offered by these studies is rapidly becoming outdated. Obviously, as universities, research institutes, and other academics and scholars continue to study Mexican participation in the U.S. economy in a more current context, literature will be added to the field, but because of the divisive and politicized nature of today's immigration debate, I fear that studies of this type could be slower in their conception and

release. But detailed information on Mexican immigrants in the U.S. economy will be more important in the coming years as more parts of the U.S. come in contact with Mexican immigrants, as the country heads towards electing a new president and instituting new economic and immigration policies, and as more people and labor markets in more parts of the country come into contact with Mexican immigrants. We can only hope that researchers will continue to be interested in immigrant issues and that quality up-to-date literature will be available to help the United States, its citizens, and its prospective citizens understand the future challenges and rewards that immigration is sure to offer.

PART II: LITERATURE EXAMINING THE WASHINGTON, D.C. REGION

In-depth information focusing on Mexican immigrant participation in the Washington, D.C. area is quite limited, especially compared with the relative wealth of information that is available on Mexican populations in major cities and along the border. Unlike the previous section, the literature reviewed in this section generally tends toward being quantitative not qualitative; that is to say that instead of offering conclusions or describing characteristics and dynamics of immigrant participation in the region's workforce, the majority of the sources in this section tend to simply offer raw demographic and economic statistics. Raw information of this type is of great use for anyone willing to critically analyze and compare data as part of a research project, but several sources are also included which expand upon survey data of this sort to offer conclusions and regional characteristics for those who are less inclined to draw their own conclusions from examining data. Thus, while this second part of the literature review will discuss both types of sources and their utility, it will not discuss all data in depth, nor will it exhaustively list all the potentially relevant data that could be found in the reviewed sources. This would be done in a research paper or a topic-specific study, not a review of the literature.

However, some specific examples of useful data will be offered for the reader to gain a general idea of the type of data included in the discussed works.

The first section of Part II will consider independent studies that examine the DC area and its immigrant population. Various non-profits have published studies that offer a snapshot of immigrants in the District of Colombia and surrounding areas, but these studies do not tend to offer separate information on Mexican immigrants, nor do they tend to offer specifics on immigrant participation in the DC region workforce. The second section will discuss raw survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Census Bureau tends to be the most useful and is the easiest place to find city and region specific demographic and economic data and offers general city and region characteristics as well as information specific to Mexicans and their workforce participation. The third section discusses miscellaneous (non-Census) region-specific survey data and is followed by a brief section on shortcomings in the regional literature. It should also be noted that since all of these sources are available online, footnotes have been provided with links to websites and .pdf publications of all discussed works. In the second and third sections, in-text parenthetical citations have been abandoned to offer direct links by footnotes to the online table or graph with the discussed information. As they are not study-length works, the data cited in these two sections are thus not included on the works cited page as they are simply graphs and tables.

1. Independent Studies

The Urban Institute, a nonpartisan non-profit think tank which is based in Washington and dedicated to economic and social policy research, published in 2006 a report entitled “Civic Contributions: Taxes Paid by Immigrants in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area.” The study, while it does not detail the participation of Mexican immigrants in the DC workforce, is

nevertheless valuable not only because it is one of the few non raw-data sources available about Washington area immigrants, but also because it offers an excellent overall portrait of DC's immigrant population, providing an important starting point for a more specified study of the region's Mexican immigrants. States the report: "Immigrants in the Washington area come from more diverse countries of origin than is the case nationally, and a relatively high share come from origins with above average incomes. Whether higher or lower skilled, immigrants contribute strongly to the region's economy, purchasing power, and tax base" (Capps et. al. 2006: 5).¹ Based on Census 2000 data, the Urban Institute finds that despite having lower incomes than native-born households, immigrants in the DC area pay nearly the same share in income taxes and higher-educated immigrants actually pay more than natives on average. More specifically, the study finds that area immigrant households in 1999-2000 had a total income of \$29.5 billion in taxes, representing 19% of the region's total household income and 18% of all taxes paid. This, adds the Urban Institute, is an underestimate because the immigrant population in the DC region has grown from 850,000 to at least 1.2 million since 1999-2000 (Capps et. al. 2006: 5).

A 2006 report published jointly by the Pew Research Center and the Pew Hispanic Center, "America's Immigration Quandary," surveys the concerns of residents living in America's top 10 immigrant destination cities, one of which is Washington, DC. Thus, the study is extremely useful for understanding the dynamics of the immigration debate in the District of Colombia. Concerning demographics, the study notes that between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population grew by almost 70%. The number of people who speak Spanish grew by

¹ Civic Contributions: Taxes Paid by Immigrants in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area:
http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411338_civic_contributions.pdf

95%...” (“America’s...” 2006: 46).² The survey finds that Washington, when compared to the other cities it analyses (...), has a generally welcoming view of immigrants. 54% of those district residents surveyed said that immigrants strengthen the country with their hard work and 54% supported the idea of government-sponsored centers for day laborers (an issue that the survey notes has divided communities in the surrounding areas in Virginia and Maryland). Negative views of immigrants by Washingtonians are far less prevalent than in other cities with only 21% viewing immigration as a big local problem and a large majority believe that illegal immigrants should be either allowed to stay in the US permanently (37%) or granted temporary worker status (28%) (“America’s...” 2006: 47).

The Brookings Institute is another independent non-profit organization that has done substantial work on Washington area immigrants. Audrey Singer, a demographer and Senior Immigration Fellow at the Institute, is responsible for authoring and co-authoring several Brookings reports on Washington, DC as part of the Institute’s Metropolitan Policy Program. Most important and relevant to the DC area are two studies, one published in 2001 entitled “The World in a Zip Code: Greater Washington, DC as a New Region of Immigration,” the other published in 2003 and entitled “At Home in the Nation’s Capital: Immigrant Trends in Metropolitan Washington.” Both studies found DC joining the ranks of the country’s major immigrant destinations, but noted, as did the Urban Institute, that the area is unique because its immigrants come from highly diverse countries of origin with no one group dominating. The studies also include some data specific to Mexican immigrants: the 2001 study, analyzing U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services data that for the years 1990-1998, found that 3,004 or 1.3% of the DC region’s foreign born population was born in Mexico, making it the 21st most

² “America’s Immigration Quandary,” PEW Research Center: <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/274.pdf>

popular country of origin among the DC area foreign-born (Singer et. al. 2001: 4).³ The 2003 study, on the other hand, found from analyzing census data that in 2000 Mexico was the 5th highest ranked country of birth among the area's foreign born with 32,391 or 3.9% of the region's foreign born population (Singer 2003: 5).⁴ This indicates a large growth in Mexican foreign born immigrants in DC from 1990 to 2000. Although the findings are too in-depth to discuss in brief as part of this literature review, both Brookings Institute studies offer detailed information invaluable to anyone wishing to gain specific in-depth information on the area's immigrant make up. Not only do the studies offer specific data on the foreign born by country and zip code, but the studies also offer information on the distribution, language capabilities, economic well being, and education of the area's foreign born.

2. Census Data

Many of the above studies drew their conclusions about immigrants in the DC region from data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, and for good reason: for raw region-specific statistics, the Census Bureau undoubtedly offers the best source of information on demographics as well a wealth of economic and employment statistics. The Census Bureau website allows users to browse the results of the decennial Census, offering information that is either nation-wide, county, city, or zip code specific. In this case, the survey offers info on the District of Colombia and also allows us to find statistics for surrounding counties and cities in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia that are vital in putting together a foundational portrait of the DC region and its Mexican population. Data for the 2000 Census for example, found that of the District of Colombia's 572,059 total population, 44,953 were of Hispanic or Latino origin (7.9%

³ "The World in a Zip Code: Greater Washington, DC as a New Region of Immigration," The Brookings Institute: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2001/04_washington_dc_singer/immigration.pdf

⁴ "At Home in the Nation's Capital: Immigrant Trends in Metropolitan Washington," The Brookings Institute: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2003/06washington_singer/immigration.pdf

of the total population),⁵ and 5,098 were of Mexican origin (0.9% of the total population).⁶ For the Washington DC Metropolitan Statistical Area, the total population was 4,923,153, and the Hispanic or Latino population was 432,003.⁷

The Census 2000 survey did not offer specific Metropolitan-wide data on Mexicans; however for the District of Colombia it offers further in-depth information on the Mexican population and offers social characteristics, economic characteristics, and housing characteristics. An example of 2000 data on the District of Colombia's Mexican population that is of particular interest to the topic under consideration in this literature review are the following statistics: foreign born population (2,078), participation in labor force by those 16 years and over (2,736), median household income (\$41,343), median family income (43,250), per capita income (23,012), families below poverty level (116), and individuals below poverty level (945).⁸ A useful discussion of these statistics would compare them against the same numbers for District's total population and total Hispanic or Latino population.

It is important to note that information collected by the Census Bureau extends far beyond the decennial data with which it is most often associated, and includes a variety of economic, education, housing, and employment surveys intermittently released between decennial surveys. These surveys, like the decennial Census data, also offer user the ability to

⁵ District of Colombia, Census 2000 Race and Hispanic or Latino: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_bm=n&_lang=en&mt_name=DEC_2000_PL_U_GCTPL_ST2&format=ST-2&_box_head_nbr=GCT-PL&ds_name=DEC_2000_PL_U&geo_id=04000US11

⁶ District of Colombia, Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights, Mexican: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFIteratedFacts?_event=Search&geo_id=01000US&_geoContext=01000US&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=04000US11&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=geoSelect&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_submenuId=factsheet2&ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=401&qtr_name=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1010®=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1010%3A401&_keyword=&_industry=

⁷ Washington, DC Metropolitan Statistical Area, Census 2000 Hispanic or Latino by Race: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_bm=y&-context=dt&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U-&CONTEXT=dt&-mt_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U_P008&-tree_id=4001&-redoLog=false&-all_geo_types=N&-geo_id=38500US88728840&-search_results=40000US92242&-format=&-_lang=en

⁸ District of Colombia, Census 2000 Demographic Profile Highlights, Mexican (see footnote 1).

narrow results to the District of Colombia and surrounding counties in Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. Of extreme utility is data gathered for the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), which is used to gather more up-to-date information when the decennial survey becomes out of date, providing data to communities on a yearly basis as opposed to once every ten years. The 2006 ACS data offers data individually for state, county, city, zip code, or data can be combined to offer a portrait of a particular Metropolitan Statistical Area. ACS data on the Washington Metropolitan Statistical Area (which includes surrounding areas in Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia) goes even more in-depth than the 2000 data, offering information on the Mexican population that is particularly relevant to this literature review, such as indications of Mexican's employment in different occupations, industries, employment classes, and detailed information on their earnings.⁹

Other census surveys offer specific regional economic data which despite not distinguishing between immigrants, Hispanics, or Mexicans, is nevertheless useful to gain an overall understanding of the economic characteristics of DC and the surrounding areas. One such census survey is helpful precisely because it contains both demographic and economic data. The 2002 Survey of Business Owners offers economy-wide estimates for DC business ownership by Hispanic or Latino origin, finding while that of a total 47,172 firms employ 366,815 people with an annual payroll of \$17,926,410 thousand, firms with Hispanic or Latino ownership numbered 2,169 and employed 3,936 people with an annual payroll of \$131,866 thousand.¹⁰

⁹ Selected Population Profile in the United States, Washington Statistical Area, 2006 American Community Survey: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201:401;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201PR:401;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201T:401;ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201TPR:401&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0201TPR&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-tree_id=306&-geo_id=31000US47900&-search_results=01000US&-format=&-lang=en

¹⁰ 2002 Survey of Business Owners, Estimates of Business Ownership by Gender, Hispanic or Latino Origin, Washington, DC, US Census Bureau: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IBQTable?_bm=y&-ds_name=SB0200A1&-ib_type=NAICS2002&-NAICS2002=00&-geo_id=04000US11&-industry=00

Another useful survey, which again does not offer distinctions for Mexican immigrants, is the Annual Survey of Manufactures, offering information on numbers of employees, annual payroll, average production workers, hours worked, and total value of materials, shipments, capital, etc.¹¹

3. Miscellaneous Region-Specific Data

Like the works discussed in the “Independent Studies” portion of Part II, the few miscellaneous resources discussed under this section also tend to draw information from census data, offering different interpretations and formats for viewing immigrant-specific portions of various census surveys. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI), for example, offers a state-specific “data tool” drawing on and interpreting the Census Bureau’s 2005 and 2006 ASC data. The fact sheet for Washington DC offers the reader condensed District-specific findings on demographic and social, language and education, workforce, and income and poverty characteristics. The fact sheet offers handy rankings in several categories, comparing the characteristics of DC’s foreign-born population with the nation’s 51 other states and also contrasts state the DC numbers with national figures. With specific regards to immigrant participation in the District’s economy, MPI’s workforce fact sheet is the most relevant, offering important ACS numbers such as that 70.3 percent of the District’s foreign-born workers are non-citizens.¹² The workforce fact sheet also indicates the top three occupations and industries of foreign-born workers. The fact sheets in all categories include a text discussion of the findings as well offering tables and graphs.

Arlington Economic Development, a department of the Arlington, Virginia County Government, compiles demographic data and other statistics on Arlington and the greater DC

¹¹ 2006 Annual Survey of Manufactures, Washington DC, U.S. Census Bureau:
http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IBQTable?_bm=y&-ds_name=AM0631AS101&-geo_id=04000US11&-geo_id=04000US24&-geo_id=04000US51&-search_results=01000US&-lang=en

¹² Migration Policy Institute Data Hub, Workforce Fact Sheet, Washington, DC:
<http://www.migrationinformation.org/datahub/state3.cfm?ID=DC>

area from a variety of sources. Arlington County is the only county or city government that was found to offer such information on their official website. Among other things, their website links to statistical information on: populations and households, workforce demographics, labor force, income, employment characteristics, employers, and regional trends. The site provides valuable region, county, and city-specific data. For example, for the city of Arlington, the site provides links to data compiled by the Virginia Employment Commission such as: a comparison of average employment, weekly wage, and number of establishments by industry in the city of Arlington;¹³ an industry-by-industry portrait of business employment, payroll, and establishments by employee size class;¹⁴ and total full-time and part-time employment by industry.¹⁵ The site also includes links to information to immigrants and DC area economy, for example, according to Woods & Poole Economics, Inc. estimates that the Hispanic population of the greater Washington region (DC, VA, MD, WV) in 2005 was 303.2 thousand, nearly triple what it was in 1990, and is projected to reach 807 thousand by the year 2030 (Woods & Poole: 2006).¹⁶

4. Shortcomings in the Region-Specific Literature

With regards to the specific focus of this literature review, that is *The Participation of Mexican Immigrants in the U.S. Workforce and in the Washington, D.C. region*, the shortcomings in the regional literature are quite obvious. As the reader can see, any specific conclusions about Mexican participation in the Washington DC region must be discerned by connecting the dots between various census surveys and other available data. That is to say, that

¹³ Covered Employment, Wages and Establishments, 2001 and 2005, Virginia Employment Commission: http://www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/statistics/_27.pdf

¹⁴ Business Employment, Payroll and Establishments by Size Class, 2004 Arlington, Virginia, US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, Country Business Patterns – 2004. http://www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/statistics/_28.pdf

¹⁵ Total Full-Time and Part-Time Employment by Industry, 2001-2004 Arlington, Virginia, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Regional Accounts: http://www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/statistics/_29.pdf

¹⁶ Regional Demographic Summary, 1970-2030, Woods & Poole Economics, Inc. 2006 http://www.arlingtonvirginiausa.com/statistics/_01.pdf

no academics, scholars or independent non-profit organizations have offered any studies whatsoever of Mexican immigrants and their participation in the regional DC economy. As we can see from reading the above sections, various studies have addressed certain aspects that are relevant to the topic, but none have been narrowly focused enough to examine the participation of this particular group in any aspect of the regional workforce overall or with regards to a specific sector. Thus, with regards to the topic of this literature review, the overarching shortcoming in the region-specific literature is the failure to specifically examine Mexican immigrants and their participation in the workforce of the Washington, DC region.

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*The Most Visible Few: Examining the Immigrant Day Labor Debate and its Impact in the
District of Colombia*

To see the divisive nature of the current debate over immigration in the United States, often times one need look no farther than a nearby street corner. There is perhaps nowhere, with the exception of along the US/Mexico border, where the effects of temporary labor migration are more visible and more public. Immigrant day laborers regularly congregate in public, often in large numbers, gathering in front of local businesses or close to major streets and roads to solicit temporary work, making them far more visible than the large number of immigrant workers that are employed in various other sectors of the US economy. The fact that most day laborers are assumed to be illegal immigrants means that the locations where they tend to gather have also become flash points for protest. In fact, all across the nation many of the locations where immigrants gather each morning have become the site of demonstrations, protests, and rallies drawing anti-illegal immigrant groups, immigrant advocacy groups, civil rights activists, local law enforcement, and ordinary concerned citizens. In effect, the debate over the presence of immigrant day laborers has, in many cases, become a microcosm of the national debate over immigration.

The high visibility day labor and the problems associated with it have led to a disproportionate degree of debate over the issue. Estimates indicate that day laborers represent a miniscule 0.05 percent of the total labor force in the country and only about two percent of the population of undocumented male workers in the United States (Gonzalez 2007: 6). However, impassioned debates over the presence of immigrant day laborers in communities and

neighborhoods across the country and the passage of local legislation directed towards day laborers are indicative not of the size of the problem, but rather of a population that is struggling to come to terms with the most immediate manifestation of the much larger phenomenon of temporary labor migration. To many, the presence of immigrant day laborers on their street corners makes the issue of illegal immigration “hit home” and can lead community members to become involved in the debate over immigration on a personal, rather than political, level. It is also no coincidence that outrage over immigrant day labor has risen in recent years as the debate over illegal immigration has grown increasingly more divisive. The communities dealing with the issue have also grown in number as immigrant workers increasingly migrate to non-traditional destinations with little previous experience in dealing with large foreign-born populations.

The debate over immigrant day laborers in the District of Colombia offers a perfect example of a community struggling to come to terms with some of its most visible immigrant workers. In Washington, as in many communities, stakeholders unhappy with the status quo are divided on whether day laborers should be punished through measures such as the enactment of anti-solicitation ordinances or protected through measures such the creation of day labor worker centers. A key determinant of which measures will ultimately be adopted to deal with the presence of day laborers is the agency of local anti-immigrant groups and immigrant advocacy groups. By examining the recent debate over the establishment of a proposed day labor worker center in Northeast DC and comparing it with the functioning of an already existing center in Gaithersburg, Maryland, it will be shown that issues of organization, visibility, and message delivery are essential in the efforts of such groups to influence the local debate.

This paper is divided into two parts, the first of which examines the general characteristics of the debate over immigrant day laborers and the principal actors involved in it. Part I will also provide a brief look at the measures that are most often proposed to dealing with the presence of day laborers at the local level. Having established the characteristics of the debate and its most commonly touted proposals for solution, Part II will consist of an in-depth case study of the debate over the presence of immigrant day laborers in Washington, DC. The case study will examine the rise in community tensions over an informal day laborer hiring site in Northeastern part of the city and the ensuing debate over establishing a publicly funded worker center. The case study will also offer a portrait of the informal site in DC and compare it with that of a formalized temporary worker center established in a Maryland suburb. Finally, the study will examine the ongoing efforts of local anti-immigrant groups and immigrant and labor rights activists in the District. A conclusion will offer prospects for the future.

PART ONE: CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMIGRANT DAY LABOR

While immigrant day labor has many distinct characteristics that may seem easily identifiable, it is by nature less well defined than formal sectors of the economy, making it harder to reach a coherent understanding the dynamics that make it such a contentious issue of debate. Several case studies have endeavored to examine day labor within a certain locality or geographic areas and while many offer illuminating and useful conclusions, their area specificity prevents them from providing a national portrait of the general characteristics of immigrant day labor. The most complete national data that is available on day laborers comes from the 2006 National Day Labor Study (NDLS) by Valenzuela, et al. which was the first study to offer a profile of day labor at the national level. Based on a survey of 2,660 day laborers randomly selected from 139 municipalities in 20 states and the District of Colombia, the authors estimate

that “on any given day, approximately 117,600 workers are either looking for day-labor jobs or working as day laborers.” Seventy nine percent of hiring sites were found to be informal and mostly located near residential neighborhoods, with 24 percent of those sites involving workers standing in front of businesses, 22 percent in front of home improvement stores, 10 percent at gas stations, and 8 percent on busy streets. The study other 21 percent of day laborers sought work at established day labor worker centers (Valenzuela, et al. 2006: i-ii).

This part of the paper seeks to establish some of the general characteristics of the debate over immigrant day labor. This will be done by first offering a brief examination of the stakeholders most commonly involved in the debate and the ways in which they relate to each other. Second, the measures most commonly suggested to deal with the presence of day laborers will be discussed. Having established the general characteristics of the debate, Part II will examine the day labor debate in specific context to the case of Washington, DC.

The Debate and Its Actors

The polemical debate over the presence of immigrant day labor local communities primarily concerns five main stakeholders: The day laborers themselves, their employers, the local citizenry, community organizations and interest groups, and the local government.

1. Day Laborers

Much of what we know about day laborers is based on assumptions, news media, or personal experience. When asked to determine what is known about the day laborer workforce based on existing information, The General Accounting Office (GAO) of the US Congress, found that “little is actually known about these workers or their working conditions.” The resulting 2002 Report by the GAO indicated that “day laborers are generally young Hispanic men with limited educational skills and significant language barriers, with some portion also

being undocumented” (2). The findings from the NDLS conducted four years later confirmed this, finding that the immigrants surveyed were predominantly immigrant and Latino, and three quarters of them were undocumented. In geographic terms, 59 percent were from Mexico, 28 percent from countries in Central America, and seven percent were actually born in the US (Valenzuela, et al. 2006: i).

The study found that day laborers search for work constantly, with 70 percent of workers searching for work five or more days a week, and most workers (83 percent) relying on day labor jobs as their only source of income. The study’s findings also confirmed assumptions about the temporality of day labor work, finding that “three-quarters (74 percent) of day laborers have worked in this market for less than three years, suggesting that many make the transition into jobs in other sectors of the economy” (Valenzuela, et al. 2006: ii). Whether or not these transitions indicate any upward mobility is unclear. Results from the NDLS also found that while day laborers are often thought of as generally being transient single young men (a stereotype that contributes to their perceived unruliness), this is often not the case. Supporting family is important motivation for many day-laborers and survey results indicate that 36 percent of those surveyed were married while 7 percent reported living with a partner. 63 percent of day laborers reported have children and, perhaps surprisingly, the study found that 38 percent of the children of day laborers are actually U.S. citizens. (Valenzuela, et al. 2006: ii).

Perhaps most important to this paper’s topic of study, the NDLS found that while day laborers are often viewed as an outside nuisance to local communities, a great number of workers were in fact quite active members of their community. “Half (52 percent) of all day laborers attend church regularly, one-fifth (22 percent) are involved in sports clubs and one-quarter (26 percent) participate in community worker centers” (Valenzuela, et al. 2006: iii). This fact holds

two potentially important implications. First, it negates many of the claims, discussed in later sections, of anti-immigrant groups which assert that the presence of day laborers unravels the fabric of local communities and secondly, it indicates that day laborers who are active members of their communities have a better venue from which to potentially influence local debate. But despite community involvement, day laborers continue to be viewed with antagonism by the local citizenry, various anti-immigrant community organizations and interest groups, and many involved in local governments. One of the few groups that does not seem to complain about the presence of day laborers, however, is (naturally) those who hire them.

2. Employers

Only a few basic characteristics about employers have been established through research. The NDLS found that 49 of those who employ day laborers are homeowners and renters who are looking for temporary help on household projects. The other main employers, employing 43 percent of those surveyed, are contractors for jobs in construction and landscaping. The remaining percentages were employed by companies (6%) and other day laborers (1%). It was also found that employers repeatedly hired more than two-thirds of the day laborers they came in contact with, suggesting general satisfaction by employers and willingness to work by laborers (Valenzuela et al. 2006: 9).

Contributing to this overall lack of information, employers of day laborers generally operate independently and even less information is available about them than that which is available on day laborers. Employers are hard to identify especially when hiring day laborers at informal sites and even if they are identified, they are often reluctant to give out much information since they often knowingly hiring workers that may be illegal. In case studies examining immigrant day laborers, little attention is often paid to employers. While they

complete the essential “demand” portion of the equation that brings day laborers to street corners and worker centers, employers are generally not seen as being an influential or cohesive force in the debate over day labor, although anti-immigrant groups sometimes engage in intimidation tactics of monitoring informal hiring sites and recording license plate numbers of employers.

3. Local Citizenry

Local citizenry often plays the most important role in determining the nature of the debate in a given community. Indeed, it is often the citizens of a community that pressure other actors, such as community organizations and interest groups and local government, to respond to immigrant day laborers. It should be noted that this paper makes a distinction between the unorganized citizenry as a whole, discussed in this section, and community organizations and interest groups organized around a certain cause relating to day labor or other issues affected by it, which are discussed in the following section.

While no real research has been done to uncover sentiment in different localities across the nation towards day laborers, a 2006 report published jointly by the Pew Research Center and the Pew Hispanic Center, “America’s Immigration Quandary,” surveys the concerns of residents living in America’s top 10 immigrant destination cities. While it includes no information specifically regarding immigrant day laborers, it is useful for gauging overall attitudes about immigrants in the American cities most affected by their presence and finds that Americans view immigrants with “a mix of admiration and concern.” The study reveals that impressions of Latin American immigrants have actually improved over the past decade, and that long-held views of Latino immigrants as being hard-working and having strong family values are even stronger now (28). Antagonistic feelings towards immigrants were also revealed in findings such as the fact that “[a] small but significant minority of the public (16%) say they or a family

member has either lost a job or not gotten a job because the employer hired an immigrant instead. And this experience is strongly associated with negative views of immigrants and broad support for decreasing legal immigration” (32).

Another important trend uncovered by the PEW study is that 62% (versus 39% in 1997) of those surveyed say they have many or some recent immigrants in their area (31). As more Americans come into contact with recent immigrants, it can be assumed that the number of new communities struggling to deal with the issue of day labor is also growing. The fact that the local citizenry often sees and feels the presence of day laborers long before other stakeholders take notice may contribute to the feelings of frustration with organizational and governmental inaction that will be explored further in Part II. It is important to note that the frustration by local citizenry is often at the source of actions undertaken by the remaining two actors, as anti-immigrant community organizations and interest groups often craft their message to resonate with the frustrated citizenry and local governments often craft their policies to respond to citizen concerns.

4. Community Organizations and Interest Groups

Community organizations and interest groups that respond to the presence of day laborers are many and their formation can be generally characterized in two ways. The first are groups that are organically formed by groups of concerned citizens specifically in response to the presence of day laborers. Such groups may take the form of neighborhood coalitions formed in protest to the presence of day laborers or solidarity with the workers. While limited research has been done to chronicle the formation of such groups, news stories and, to a lesser extent, academic case studies have documented the creation and influence of such groups in local neighborhoods and communities, such as in San Diego’s North County where “anti-illegal

immigration groups, such as the San Diego Minutemen and others, have formed in large part to protest... day labor sites” (Sifuentes 2007). The second type are community organizations and interest groups that are pre-existing, but adopt a certain cause or interest on a particular side of the debate over day laborers or a particular aspect of an issue that is affected by day labor. Examples may include local immigrant advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, or church groups that may offer training programs to immigrant workers or may help to staff worker centers in an effort to ensure protection of day laborer rights.

Unlike the three stakeholders thus far discussed, community organizations and interest groups often have the organizational power to provide services, lobby local government, picket day labor sites, garner media attention, pressure policy makers, raise funds, and accomplish other means to attain their desired outcome relating to day labor. These organizations and groups are usually allied with pro-immigrant causes in support of worker rights and better treatment for day laborers on one hand and anti-illegal immigrant causes on the other hand which usually base their argument on the rule of law, defense of American jobs, and ridding the streets of unruly day. Local organizations and groups may be offshoots of larger bodies that function at the state or national level under a broader agenda, but which choose to join a particular side of the day labor debate based on their anti-immigrant or immigrant advocacy leanings. Examples include local chapters of The Minutemen Civil Defense Corps which often picket or monitor sites where day laborers congregate to discourage the hiring of workers (Leahy 2006), and on the other side of the debate, the choice made by the AFL-CIO in 2006 to work with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network to improve wages and working conditions for day laborers (Brulliard 2006). The actions of community organizations and interest groups with specific regard to the debate over day laborers in Washington, DC will be discussed in Part II.

5. Local Government

The local government, including mayors, city council members, ward representatives, police officers, etc. is usually at the center all debate over immigrant day labor. Pressures take measures to deal with the presence of immigrant day laborers usually comes from the vocal expression of concerns by local citizenry or by the actions and lobbying of community organizations and interest groups. Local governments also play an important role in maintaining order when conflicts, rallies, and picketing occur where immigrant day laborers congregate, be it a street corner or a particularly controversial worker center. But most importantly, the local government is most often the be all and end all of the debate over immigrant day labor, since the power to enact the various measures sought by different stakeholders ultimately lies with the government. The measures most commonly suggested to deal with the presence of day laborers, in which government enactment and participation is an essential element, are discussed in the following section.

What to Do?

With all stakeholders (besides employers) seemingly unsatisfied with the status quo, agreement appears to exist on at least one level: “something must be done” about immigrant day labor. Despite the wide variety of concerns related to the issue, two measures have most commonly emerged to offer a “solution” to the “problem” presented by immigrant day laborers. The first option, most commonly advanced by those with a mind towards punishing day laborers, is to draft and pass local ordinances that make it more difficult for them to solicit work. The second option, advanced by those that wish to protect the labor rights of immigrant day laborers, is the construction of workers centers where day laborers come to get matched up with employers and often have a number of services available to them. As is made obvious by the

continuing polemic nature of local debates over immigrant day laborers nation-wide, neither the status quo nor either of these two solutions seems satisfy.

Passing anti-immigrant legislation at the state and local level has become more prevalent in recent years, especially after continued failures by the US Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform. Findings by the Migration Policy Institute (2008) indicate that in 2007, 157 pieces of immigration related legislation were passed into law at the state level, and in recent years over 100 local governments have enacted immigration related ordinances. Legislation that is expressly directed towards immigrant day laborers most often takes the form of anti-solicitation ordinances, which are aimed making it illegal for day laborers to congregate on street corners or in other public areas to wait for work. These ordinances have come under fire from immigrants and immigrant-advocates for being racially motivated and specifically targeting Latino immigrants. At least three anti-solicitation ordinances have been struck down by federal district courts on the grounds that they violate free speech. In fact, every anti-solicitation ordinance that has thus far been challenged in district court has had its implementation enjoined on First Amendment grounds, based on failure by local governments to offer those target by the law an alternative way to solicit work (Rodriguez et al. 2008: 41).

The creation of workers centers, a main feature in the Washington, DC day labor debate to be discussed in Part II, is most often advanced by immigrant rights and worker's rights advocacy groups, as well as other non-profit organizations, church groups, and other community members and local government officials with a mind towards service provision and formalization of the disorganized day-labor hiring process. Findings from the National Day Labor Survey indicate that there are "at least 63 day labor worker centers operating in 17 states, as well as another 15 community-based organizations that work closely with day laborers who seek work at

informal hiring sites” (Valenzuela et al. 2006: 23). If established, funding usually comes from the local or state government or from funding secured from outside groups interested in promoting the rights of immigrant workers. Proposed workers centers often become a topic of intense community debate, and once established they often become the site of protest for anti-immigrant groups who insist that they act as a magnet for illegal immigrants. Evidence also shows that day laborers themselves are often divided as to whether or not these centers really offer the best solution for them, and many day laborers often continue to seek employment at informal hiring sites even after the establishment of workers centers.

The viability of day labor worker centers is hard to judge, as the success or failure of a center can be tied to a variety of different circumstances unique to the locality in which they are established. Based on its findings, the authors of the NDLS assert that the top policy priority relating to day labor is “safeguarding, improving and enforcing labor standards in the day-labor market.” Since worker centers “intervene effectively in the day labor market,” Valenzuela, et al. assert that they “have emerged as the most comprehensive response to the workplace abuses that day laborers endure as well as to address community tensions that have arisen as a result of workers gathering near residential areas” (Valenzuela et al. 2006: 23). On the other hand, groups that are devoted to curbing illegal immigration, such as The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), make the oft-repeated argument that day labor worker centers serve to promote illegal immigration:

A day labor hiring center that makes no distinction between legal and illegal workers sends a message to illegal workers that our society does not care whether a worker is legally in the country or is in violation of our immigration law. It also invites other illegal aliens to come and take advantage of the inviting environment (“How Day Laborer Hiring Sites Promote Illegal Immigration” 2002).

Evidence from the NDLS, however, seems to refute the notion of worker centers as magnets for illegal immigrants, as the survey found that 83 percent of day laborers learned of worker centers after migrating to the U.S (Valenzuela et al. 2006: 23). Little evidence exists as to whether or not immigrant day laborers, once in the United States, may gravitate towards certain localities based on the existence of workers centers.

However, skepticism of the effectiveness of workers centers does not always come from anti-immigrant groups. The Day Labor Research Institute, a research project at UCLA that was started to examine why large numbers of day laborers refused to participate in day laborer programs, found that:

A not-so-small fortune has been spent on solutions, with little success in most cases: police enforcement alone yields few good results, and when day labor centers are established, day laborers continue to congregate in large numbers on the streets surrounding the day labor centers. New problems are often created, including new crowds of homeless and substance abusers loitering near the center after hours, and large numbers of day laborers drawn from other areas to the streets surrounding the centers (“Comparing Solutions” 2004: 4)

These findings seem to indicate that perhaps new measures need to be sought in order to most effectively deal with the presence of immigrant day laborers. But as will be shown in Part II, the ability of the various stakeholders described here to capture media attention and craft a message that resonates with the local consciousness can greatly influence the policy measures adopted by local government. In each locality where day laborers present a perceived community problem, the local dynamics of the debate must be understood before discussing future prospects for models that more effectively address the presence of day laborers. Part II will offer an in-depth case study of the day labor debate in Washington, DC, providing a portrait of how the above characteristics played in the nation’s capital.

PART II: THE DAY LABOR DEBATE IN WASHINGTON, DC

Much like in many other parts of the country, the heated debate over immigrant day laborers in the District of Colombia largely revolves around what to do about the presence of large groups of day laborers that gather daily to solicit work in front of a local home improvement store. The conflict in DC has evolved to the point where it now largely centers around the proposition to establish a worker's center. Defend DC, the District's main anti-illegal immigration activist group lists as its principal objective to "stop the establishment of day labor centers in the District" ("Information Packet" 2007). Opposition to the center seemed to coalesce as soon the plan to create it was proposed by DC Councilmember Harry Thomas, who represents Washington DC's Ward 5 – home to the informal Home Depot hiring site where hundreds of day laborers from the city and areas surrounding the Northeast part of the district come to solicit work. This part of the paper will examine the coverage of the local debate over the establishment of a worker's center in local print media before comparing the functioning of the informal Home Depot hiring site with that of an already established worker's center in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Finally a comparison of the opposition and advocacy groups involved in the day labor debate in DC, will demonstrate how issues of organization, visibility, and message delivery are essential in the success or demise of proposed worker's centers.

A Brief Chronology of Events

A look at how the debate over the proposed center was covered by local news media provides revealing insights into the center's initial presentation and ultimate demise. In March of 2007, *The Washington Post* reported that Councilmember Thomas, responding to recent clashes between residents and day laborers, had begun to ask Home Depot and surrounding businesses to help establish a "multicultural training center" through a public-private partnership to "connect contractors, training, jobs and worker-readiness programs open to the overall

community.” While Councilmember Thomas’s plan made little mention of illegal immigration or immigrant day laborers, it was obvious that the center was being advanced in order to “ease growing tension between neighbors and day laborers who congregate there” (Woodlee 2007a). After a months of continuing dialogue about the center between city agencies, community members, businesses, and property owners, a June 17th headline in the Washington Post declared that “As Plan for D.C. Day-Laborer Center Idles, Anger Over Workers Grows” (Woodlee 2007b).

Then, in September a slew of bad press surfaced relating to the proposed center. DefendDC organized a demonstration of about two dozen people who gathered outside a DC Zoning Commission meeting on September 13th to protest the proposed center (Emerling 2007a). On September 20th, *The Washington Times* ran an editorial declaring that “The good folks of Brentwood have made it clear to D.C. Council member Harry Thomas Jr. that they do not want a day-laborer center...They have made it clear that they are outraged by Mr. Thomas’ plan to set aside \$500 in taxpayer funds to implement the project” (Knott 2007). On the same day the newspaper reported a violent clash “among a group of Hispanic men” that occurred near the Home Depot site (Emerling 2007b). Raymond Chandler, the advisory neighborhood commissioner for the neighborhoods surrounding the informal hiring site, connected the violence with the proposed center, saying: “If we have them hanging out now, bringing a criminal element to our community, what are we going to do – allow them to have a meeting place?” (Emerling 2007b). Then, on September 29th, the *Times* ran another editorial critical of Councilmember Thomas’s plan, asserting that “[j]ob placement is not a function of government, and expecting any municipal government to efficiently develop and manage such a system is wishful thinking,” and calling the Home Depot site “a perfect setting for loitering and trespassing, public urination

and drinking, haranguing and other crimes – including violence” (“Getting D.C. labor ready” 2007).

Finally, a *Washington Times* headline on November 9th announced “Day-labor center in NE on hold,” finding that plans to create the center “appear to be at a halt as officials struggle to find a property to house the site and community opposition to the center grows” (Emerling 2007c). Emboldened, two dozen protesters again organized by DefendDC, demonstrated at the near the Home Depot Hiring site on December 15th, asking authorities to disperse of the day laborers. This time, however, the *Times* reported that about 15 counter-demonstrators showed up to support the day laborers. The article described one day laborer, president of the “ad-hoc” Washington DC Workers Union Abildo Hernandez, as “bewildered at the situation,” quoting him as saying: “We are just here to look for work. We must support our families.” Indeed, many of the day laborers such as Hernandez that gather on a regular basis to seek employment at the informal Home Depot hiring site seem to be equally bewildered at the opposition to their presence, but their complaints and concerns extent far beyond the debate over the creation of a worker’s center, as will be shown in the following section.

Informal Hiring Sites: The Home Depot Parking Lot

A series of informal interviews and conversations with immigrant day laborers at the Home Depot parking lot conducted in April of 2008, when paired with other data relating to day laborers, serve to offer an intimate portrait of the location that has been the flash point around which the events chronicled in the previous section centered. Informal conversations and interviews were held with several immigrant day laborers, and while no effort was made to conduct survey research or question a representative cross-section of the day laborers gathered at the site, the interviewees expressed information that is line with the regional and nation-wide

characteristics and trends discussed under Part I. When asked about the ethnic makeup of the day laborers that frequented the site, respondents indicated that the majority of the day laborers were Mexican or Central Americans primarily from Guatemala and El Salvador. Indeed, a 2004 survey of Washington, DC area immigrants found that 94 percent of day laborers were Latino, with 67 percent from Central America, 14 percent from Mexico, and 12 percent from South America. The same survey revealed that DC area day laborers range in age from 15 to 89 years, the average age being 35 (Valenzuela et al 2005: 5). One day laborer from the state of Durango in Mexico, more or less correctly estimated that at age 42 he was about in the middle of the spectrum. “There are workers here much older than me. There are men that come here looking for work that are in their sixties. And there are also kids as young as 14 or 15 years old” (Anonymous 2008a, author interview)

Among the first topic in conversation with day laborers was a universal frustration with the lack of jobs. When asked if there was much work, a group of 6 young Guatemalan men sitting on the asphalt in the early afternoon sun responded with a chorus of “no.” In conversation, many in the group verbally expressed their feeling that “there’s no work,” and “it’s very difficult” and those that did not speak frequently nodded in approval. Rather than blaming anti-immigrant sentiment for the lack of work most immigrants seemed to agree that economic slowdown was rearing its ugly head. One man, known to his friends as “Shorty,” came to the United States over 4 years ago from Guatemala under a one year visa, which he overstayed. He has been working as a day laborer in the Washington area ever since, and complains that there is much less work now than there was in the past (Shorty 2008, author interview). Shorty and other day laborers seemed to be acutely aware of worsening economy of the United States and even alluded to the collapsing housing market, referencing the slow-down in the regional economy

and the overall macroeconomic recession. When a small group of day laborers was asked when the usual rate of day labor employment had noticeably started to drop, they discussed the matter briefly and then decided upon November of 2007. One man chimed in to assert that “really, things have been getting worse for over two years now. There used to be a lot more work” (conversation 2008, participant observation).

Research suggests that evidence of such feelings among immigrants are more than anecdotal. A national survey of Mexican and Central American immigrants in the US, commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2007, found that 43 percent of Mexican immigrants said they were working fewer hours now than a year ago while 31 percent said more and 26 percent estimated to be working the same. Among Central American immigrants 43 percent also said they were working fewer hours, while 28 percent said they were working more and 29 percent said they were working the same. Offering an even starker figure, the survey found that 82 percent of Mexicans and 84 percent of Central Americans claimed that it more difficult to obtain a good-paying job than a year ago (Bendixen 2008).

Other indicators offer evidence that the day laborer’s more recent concerns about a drop jobs are well-founded. In January of 2008, the Mexican government released statistics indicating a sudden drop in the flow of remittances sent home by Mexican immigrants. To explain the sudden drop-off in growth of remittances, the Mexican central bank faulted the worsening economy of the US and the continuing crackdown on illegal immigration (Malkin 2008). The Washington Post ran an article declaring that “[t]he effects of the subprime mortgage crisis and the downturn in the U.S. economy have cascaded into Mexico, causing a sudden, precipitous drop in the flow of money sent home by Mexican immigrants...Other parts of the region, including El Salvador and Guatemala, are bracing for similar declines, but for now they are

holding steady or seeing small gains.” While this article reported that “[e]conomists believe Central American nations are faring a bit better than Mexico because their migrants are concentrated in areas such as Washington and the Maryland suburbs, which have withstood the foreclosure crisis better than places such as Los Angeles and California's San Joaquin Valley” (Roig-Franzia 2008), the Central American day laborers that gather every day at Home Depot expressed no conception of comparatively ‘faring better’ based on their geographic location within the country.

The assertion that “illegal immigration responds to economics more quickly than does legal immigration” (Hanson 2007: 12) could be partially responsible for why day laborers so acutely feel the signs of worsening economy. When discussing the disappointing economy of the Washington region and of the US in general, Shorty expressed a certain degree of resentment as he noted that “I lived better in my country than I do here.” He went further, saying that:

In Guatemala they tell you lies. They tell you that life is better in the United States and that there are plenty of jobs and lots of money to be made, but it is better at home. Here you have to pay rent and electricity and in Guatemala you don't have to pay this, you have your own property and your own little crops and you can live happily there. I ate tortillas and beans every day there, but at least I ate (Shorty 2008, author interview).

Indeed, findings by Valenzuela and Gonzales indicate that 52% of the day laborers in the Washington, DC region came because they heard there were better job opportunities here (9). But after 4 years working in and around DC, Shorty felt lied to and indicated that if things did not improve for him, he was likely to return home to Guatemala. When asked if many of the other day laborers he knew were also considering returning home, he replied that “A lot of us want to go back. But to get back you need money” (Shorty 2008, author interview).

Benjamin, a day laborer from Guatemala who is involved with the fledgling DC Union de Trabajadores (further discussed in a later section), expressed another concern shared by many of

the Home Depot day laborers: “There is a lot of discrimination. People here don’t value our work.” This statement was met with universal signs of agreement by the workers surrounding Benjamin during the interview. “There isn’t this kind of discrimination at home,” he concludes (Benjamin 2008, author interview). The IDB survey found that 83 percent of Mexican migrants and 79 percent of Central American migrants felt that discrimination against Latin American immigrants in the United States is growing. When asked to identify “the biggest problem currently for you and you family in the United States,” 30 percent of Mexican respondents and 34 percent of Central American respondents cited “discrimination against immigrants.” The other main problems were cited as low salaries (24% of Mexicans and 20% of Central Americans), increased cost of living (17% Mexicans, 13%, Central Americans), lack of jobs (12% Mexicans, 18% Central Americans), and lack of access to affordable healthcare (12% Mexicans, 9% of Central Americans) (Bendixen 2007).

The workers at the informal Home Depot hiring site made little mention of the proposed worker’s center, other than the fact that they had heard of it. Foremost among their concerns was the lack of work and the frequency with which several day laborers fell victim to employers failing to pay promised wages. Benjamin, himself a victim of wage theft, asserted that “this has happened to a majority of all of us who look for work here” (Benjamin 2008, author interview). Indeed, studies show that more than half (58%) of all day laborers in the Washington D.C. region have experienced at least one instance of non-payment or a bad check from an employer (Valenzuela et al. 2005: 1). While day laborers acknowledged the community opposition to their presence, they seemed much more concerned about obtaining work and pay. Many workers implicitly acknowledged the importance of visibility when chalking up neighborhood anti-immigrant sentiment to the actions of the few drunks and thieves that hung around and had little

affiliation with those who showed up every day looking for work. Several day laborers also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of organization that existed in the parking lot, and when asked about the worker centers in neighboring Maryland communities, they spoke of them as far-off locations unrelated to realities they faced day-to-day in the parking lot.

Formal Hiring Sites: The Gaithersburg, Maryland Worker Center

The state of Maryland has established a total of four day labor worker centers in areas surrounding Washington DC and Baltimore and has plans to open more. All centers are operated by CASA, a statewide community organization established in 1985 that has become a powerful immigrant advocacy group. CASA worker centers have been created in partnerships with city, county, and state government with additional funding coming from grants and donations. CASA lauds its worker centers as “a successful model of addressing the needs of employers and day laborers... [which] provide employment placement services combined with ESOL classes, vocational training, legal services, and community organizing to help workers achieve economic self-sufficiency” (“Workers Centers” 2008).

The Gaithersburg Center for Employment and Training, established in Gaithersburg, Maryland in 2007 provides an interesting point of comparison for the informal hiring site at Home Depot in Washington and the “on-hold” proposal to construct a center there. While tensions in Gaithersburg were perhaps not as high as those in Washington, the proposal to create the workers center was met with considerable opposition. A group dedicated to stopping illegal immigration in the state, Help Save Maryland, formed in early 2007 with opposition to the establishment of the center as the first issue on their agenda. Also, some members of the community voiced opposition to the center and complained that their input was neither sought nor considered in the planning process (Brachfeld and Montes 2007). Even some members of

local government were against the establishment of the center, including Gaithersburg City Councilman Henry Marraffa who was quoted in *The Voice of America*, voicing the oft-used refrain that: “when you have a labor center, you have a number of people hanging around who are here [in the United States] illegally. I think the labor center has created a 'destination spot.' And [as a result] we have more illegal immigrants coming to our area" (Young 2007).

Nonetheless, the Gaithersburg hiring site opened in April of 2007 with little additional fanfare.

Perhaps the main reason that opposition to the proposed workers center never took hold the way it would a few months later in the nearby District of Colombia was because of CASA's well established model for planning, opening, and staffing the new center. CASA's long history and established reputation in the state meant that, while the Gaithersburg center was not created without incident, the proposal for its creation was perhaps less of a rarity for Maryland residents. Also, CASA's past work meant that they were a known commodity to local community organizations, interest groups, local government, and news media. CASA provided a coherent and singular voice for the establishment of a day laborer center, one recognized by the most important stakeholders in the area and most importantly, CASA was able to deliver an effective and unified message, one that had been continually fine-tuned since 1985.

CASA's organizational strength not only paved the way towards a quick establishment of the center, but it also meant that the center could quickly begin functioning based on an already established model, one that had already been more or less successful in engaging immigrant day laborers and employers in nearby areas. According to this model, the only fees paid by workers seeking work at the center is 10 dollars for an identification card. There is a set minimum wage of 10 dollars per hour, with a guarantee of receiving four hours (40 dollars) of pay for each job and for jobs that require special skills, such as plumbing and electrical work, the rate is 15

dollars per hour. The workers are placed on a rotating list that is drafted at the beginning of each week and their place on the list is determined by a number of factors including arrival time, the last time they worked, and their performance of housekeeping duties around the center. While they wait for employment, the center provides the workers with shelter, bathrooms, coffee, as well as classes covering English language, health issues, labor rights, and immigration law.

Francisco Garavito, the Senior Manager of CASA's Gaithersburg center, believes that the day laborer center is a good solution. Garavito guesses that about 40 day laborers come to the center on a daily basis. Records kept by Garavito indicate that in 2007, from the time that the center opened its doors in April, 319 men and 49 women have come to the center seeking work a total of 9,154 times. The total number of jobs received by these workers, he calculates, was 4,627. The contract that each employer fills out to request workers at the center consists of little more than a name, address, phone number, and number of workers requested. Employers are asked to fill out an short evaluation of their workers at the end of each job, and Garavito indicates that about 97% of the worker evaluations he receives are excellent. By the end of 2008, Garavito hopes to obtain a 25 percent increase in the number of jobs received by the center's workers (Garavito 2008, author interview).

Mario E. Quiroz-Servellón, Communications Specialist for CASA, argues that the existence of a more organized center where potential employers must come to hire temporary work creates a deterrent against employers who would potentially to take advantage of the informal contracting of day laborers at the street corner. The argument put forth by organizations such as Federation for American Immigration Reform, Help Save Maryland, and DefendDC, that day labor centers encourage illegal immigration, is a notion that Quiroz-Servellón disputes. "No one is here because they want to be" he asserts, adding that the immigrants would not chose to

remain working as temporary day laborers if they had the opportunity to work in a more long term full-time or part-time job. The workers at CASA's centers, he claims, tend to be out of work or between jobs (Quiroz-Servellón 2008, author interview).

Quiroz-Servellón makes the case for the establishment of day labor centers by arguing that "when immigrants are left to gather on the street, there are no rules." He asserts that those things that are most often negatively associated with informal day labor sites, such as the buildup of trash, workers relieving themselves in public, disorganized crowding around vehicles, blatant drug and alcohol use, and an overall rowdy atmosphere, is due to the lack of rules and organization that exists at informal hiring sites. Quiroz-Servellón offers a metaphor of kids playing soccer in the street vs. on a field. He asserts that the kids, like day laborers "will be out there playing soccer in the street there no matter what," but with the presence of the CASA worker center, he claims that "not only are they playing in field, but they are playing in an organized league" (Quiroz-Servellón 2008, author interview).

Juan Orozco, an immigrant from Bolivia, has been a day laborer both on the street and at the Gaithersburg worker center. He complains about the disorganization of the hiring process that existed on the street corner, asserting that "the one who runs the fastest and is most energetic always gets the job," and suggesting that this led to a lack of unity among the workers creates situations where they are not matched with jobs based on their skills. Orozco feels that the hiring process at the center is "good for the client and good for us. We make the organization and we make the rules." Orozco, like the day laborers at the informal Home Depot hiring site in Northeast DC, complained of the insecurity of pay that existed at informal sites. He noted that finding work through the Gaithersburg center meant that many day laborers including himself were assisted by CASA when matched up with an employer who failed to pay wages, which

used its organizational powers to pursue the employers to secure the money owed to the workers. Orozco also expressed that he has gained skills and knowledge from the training services offered at the Gaithersburg center, adding that he also has a better understanding of his rights as a worker (Orozco 2008, author interview).

However, as indicated in Part I, worker centers are not successful in all aspects. While Juan Orozco's experience speaks to CASA's organizational prowess, not all day laborers who come to the center are happy with the results. During a site visit to the Gaithersburg center on March 19th, 2008, a group of workers gathered in the parking lot outside the center seemed aloof and estranged from the goings-on inside. In conversation, one day laborer from Guanajuato, Mexico expressed his frustration with a crack-down by local police against loitering, which forced day laborers to stay off the street corners and seek work at the center. "I get more money on the street corner," he complained, "and more often too." He also complained about the political undertones of CASA's work, indicating his perception that the organization asked for political support from the workers in exchange for the services provided at the center. The frustrated *guanajuatense* even went so far as to refer to workers as "enslaved" (Anonymous 2008b, author interview).

Other studies of immigrant day laborers have offered evidence of similar feelings among day laborers in other cities. In her study of immigrant day laborers in San Francisco, Gretchen Purser (2005) observed that: "The creation of a service-oriented workers' center (or day labor hiring hall) can have the perverse effect of serving as the perfect foil against which the curbside day laborers define themselves" (19). As suggested by Purser, the existence of organized workers centers hampers the ability of day laborers to actively market themselves to potential employers, infringing on the entrepreneurial nature of their soliciting of work at informal hiring

sites. More research is clearly needed to gage the effectiveness and political viability of day labor worker centers, and their failure to engage the enterprising nature of many day laborers merits studied inquiry. It remains obvious, however, that the ability of worker centers to appease the citizenry, community organizations and interest groups, and local government, are largely based on the effectiveness of their organization and perhaps to a lesser extent, their ability limit the visibility of day laborers. The following section will examine the actions of immigrant opponents and advocates in the DC area, comparing the principal groups that oppose the creation of a workers center with those that advocate for its creation. Special attention will be paid to the organization of these groups and their ability to connect with local stakeholders in the debate over the creation of a workers center in Northeast Washington.

Opponents and Advocates

Anti-Immigrant Groups

As previously mentioned, the main anti-immigrant group active within the District of Colombia is DefendDC. While much opposition to the creation of a worker center in Northeast DC came from community members and residents of neighborhoods immediately surrounding the Home Depot hiring site, DefendDC and played a prominent role in fanning the flames of their discontent. DefendDC's highly visible complaints and protests helped galvanize their cause in the community, and the group seems to have been able to effectively to deliver a message that ordinary concerned citizens could connect with, whether or not they agreed with the tactics and ideology of the group. While the organization of DefendDC pales in comparison to that of CASA, its ability gain visibility and effectively communicate its message have made the group a powerful actor in the local struggle to establish a worker center in Brentwood.

Evidence seems to suggest that the strength and influence of groups such as DefendDC seems to be growing in the area. An April 2007 press release carried on judicialwatch.org announced that “[t]en grass-roots, citizens’ organizations, representing thousands of concerned citizens across the Washington, DC metropolitan region, have joined today to form the ‘Capital Area Alliance against Illegal Immigration’” (“Capital Area Alliance...” 2008). The Alliance is made up of groups such as DefendDC and Help Save Maryland, and also includes nationally organized groups such as American Border Patrol, American Council for Immigration Reform, and the Virginia and Maryland chapters of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps. The Alliance’s mission is “to promote a united strategy of education, outreach and advocacy to end political and legislative support for illegal immigration in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC,” and the first item listed on their bulleted agenda is the stopping of planned day laborer centers.

While there is little doubt about the anti-immigrant agenda of DefendDC, the group seems to have been able to deliver a message that is free from some of the more radical and xenophobic tendencies of groups such as the Minutemen. Chief among their grievances are complaints that are likely to resonate with area residents without making overtures to intolerant tendencies that may not be shared by DC communities that are culturally varied in comparison with many of the nation’s other new destination areas for recent immigrants. An “information packet” put together by Defend DC begins by stating:

The DC Government is considering construction of a day labor site near the entrance of the Home Depot [*sic*] on Rhode Island Ave. NE. Already \$500,000 has been set aside for preliminary work. They want to use your tax dollars to violate federal law and destroy the hopes and opportunities of young workers in the District (“Information Packet” 2008).

While the packet includes blatantly anti-immigrant rhetoric such as “Illegal aliens are incompatible with decent neighborhoods,” it also emphasizes issues connected with the presence

of day laborers that are likely to be of concern to non-immigrant community members such as depressed wages, the displacement of local workers, declining property values, the importance of the rule of law, and the fact that government and privately-operated employment centers and training programs already exist offering services to DC residents (“Information Packet” 2008: 3).

Part of DefendDC’s strength in spearheading opposition to the center can likely be attributed to their ability to capture media attention and forcefully voice concerns shared by many community residents. The group’s leader, William Buchanan, no doubt expressed a point of view likely shared by many community residents when he expressed his opinion to *The Washington Post* that “[y]ou don’t build a center to match people who are not supposed to work with people who are not supposed to hire them” (Emerling 2007c). DefendDC’s organization of local protests and their presence in the news media likely served to provide a more visible representation of the concerns shared by many community residents who may be alarmed by the presence disorderly informal day-laborer hiring site in their neighborhood, but would be otherwise unlikely to forcefully oppose the creation of the center or directly participate in actions organized by anti-immigrant groups. DefendDC’s ability to deliver an effective message is evidenced by...In discussing the “on-hold” status of the proposed worker center, Vicky Leonard-Chambers, a Policy Analyst specializing in communications and economic development for the center’s initial advocate, Councilman Harry Thomas, Jr., implicitly acknowledges the effectiveness of DefendDC’s message delivery by stating that “The residents were totally opposed to the concept of a center that, as they saw it, would have provided services to illegals” (Leonard-Chambers 2008, author interview).

Immigrant Advocates

The ability of DefendDC to come up with an action plan and create a coalition opposed to the establishment of the worker center stands in contrast to the less successful endeavors of Help Save Maryland to oppose the establishment of the CASA worker center Gaithersburg. But the success in preventing the establishment of a worker center in Northeast DC perhaps has less to do with the organizational strength of DefendDC than it has to do with the lack unified effort on the part of DC area immigrant advocacy groups to effectively support the plan and advocate for the proposal. Washington, DC lacks a single immigrant advocacy organization comparable to CASA in its length of existence, clarity of mission, development of community rapport, or ability to secure funding. There are, however, a variety of organizations and interest groups in the District which have tried to coalesce in support of the center.

Mackenzie Baris, lead organizer for DC Jobs With Justice, an organization devoted to advancing worker's rights, has been active in the ongoing campaign to help organize the day laborers that gather at informal Home Depot hiring site. In an interview with the author, Baris acknowledged the organizational disadvantage faced by local immigrant advocacy groups, referring to their recent efforts to become involved in the debate as "just getting organized." She estimates that there are around 16 organizations currently involved in a "loose effort" to create a coalition supporting the rights of immigrant day laborers and the creation of a workers center. Baris identifies crafting effective messages for the media as one of the central challenge to the effort, adding that such messages must capture the public imagination in the same way that groups such as the Minutemen and Defend DC have been able to. She identifies three levels of outreach as critical to the efforts success: obtaining political support from those in local government such as the Mayor and City Council members, reaching out to institutions that care

about access to work and making them stakeholders in the debate, and engaging in grassroots dialogue with community. Baris cites this last level of outreach as the most difficult. “The challenge is how to reach people that are not already polarized about the issue,” she says, adding that when community members are found that are supportive of the rights of day laborers, advocacy groups must think about ways to make them more visible (Baris 2008, author interview).

Sarahi Uribe, the Outreach Coordinator for the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, is also involved in the effort to create a coalition of organizations supporting the establishment of a day laborer center. She feels that the effort to foster support for the center has been affected by the absence of organization and leadership such as that which is offered by CASA in neighboring Maryland. “It’s great that there are so many organizations involved in the effort,” she says, “but at one point, one of the organizations needs to start really moving forward” (Uribe 2008, author interview). Not only have advocacy organizations have struggled to create an effective coalition of groups supporting the establishment of a workers center in DC, but they have also struggled to engage area day laborers in their efforts.

The aforementioned DC Union de Trabajadores (DC Worker’s Union) is an ad hoc organization of day laborers supported by various DC organizations supporting the worker and immigrant rights that has sought to place itself at the center of an emerging coalition to support the creation of a worker center. But because of difficulty in outreach, the unpredictable nature of day laborers schedules, and the lack of transportation of many day laborers, the DC Workers Union has seemingly found it difficult to engage day laborers in their organizing efforts. At one of the Union’s meetings on April 23rd, 2007, day laborers were outnumbered by volunteers from various the various local advocacy organizations supporting the creation of a worker’s center. In

Uribe's opinion, however, this is not indicative of lack of support for the creation of a worker's center. Uribe, who visits the informal Home Depot hiring site three days a week to offer labor rights training to the day laborers who gather there, asserts that "there is defiantly support for the center among the workers." She estimates that "The biggest disagreement is over how to regulate employment at the center, because right now, everyone is in it for themselves" (Uribe 2008, author interview). Uribe's observation once again emphasizes the need for proposed and existing workers centers to find a way to engage the entrepreneurial spirit of day laborers.

In Washington, DC the absence of a long established, well organized, well funded, and media savvy organization with strong connections to local government, community residents, area day laborers, and other advocacy organizations stands in stark contrast to the existence of CASA in Maryland. The void left by this absence has left a variety of DC area advocacy organizations struggling to form a coalition supporting the labor rights of immigrant day laborers and the creation of a workers center to replace the informal Home Depot hiring site. Taking advantage of the lack organization and coherent message delivery, anti-immigrant organizations such as DefendDC have been able to coalesce opposition to the worker's center proposed by Councilman Harry Thomas Jr. in early 2007. Thus, the one hundred or so day laborers that regularly gather in the Home Depot parking lot on Rhode Island and Brentwood in Northeast Washington, DC remain highly visible, and actors on all sides of the debate continue to struggle to come to terms with their presence in the community.

Conclusion: Prospects for the Future

To find effective ways to address the presence of immigrant day laborers, a foremost necessity will be conducting further research to provide more information about the nature of the day labor market and the dynamics of the debate over the presence immigrant day laborers. The

efforts by local government and community organizations to effectively address the debate over day laborers could also be greatly aided by the development of more effective systems of evaluation to examine the failures and successes of previous efforts at addressing the issue. By examining the enactment of anti-solicitation ordinances and the proposition and implementation of day labor worker centers, local government and community organizations could examine the role played by organization, visibility and message delivery in the failure or success of such measures. The ability of groups such as CASA to develop effective models to establish functioning worker centers in Maryland despite a somewhat hostile local climate show the importance of organization. On the other hand, the ability of anti-immigrant groups such as DefendDC to counter the loosely organized effort to establish a workers center in DC evidence the importance of visibility and effective message delivery.

But, as has been shown through the course of this paper, local government and community organizations and interest groups are not the only actors with the power to influence the debate over the presence over immigrant day laborers. Pedro Santana, a 60 year old day laborer from Mexico City seeking work at the Gaithersburg worker center, insists that solving the problem of anti-immigrant sentiment must start with efforts by immigrants themselves:

We have to create confidence. We have created this situation [of anti-immigrant sentiment] by falsifying things, by hanging out in gangs, by being involved in drugs. We are all paying for the actions of the few who misbehave, but we must all act like civilized human beings. It isn't difficult but it's going to cost us something. We must show discipline, show that we like to work, that we are constant, disciplined, and accommodating or else we will lose confidence. And if we don't remedy this, we will only experience more discrimination. We must fight to win back confidence (Santana 2008, author interview).

With this assertion, Santana is implicitly acknowledging the issue visibility and its importance in establishing the image of immigrant day laborers held by community members. The changes

mentioned by Santana are not be possible through policy initiatives, but rather, must come from the immigrant community itself. However, as has been shown in this paper's examination of the debate over immigrant day labor and its impact in the District of Colombia, perceptions of immigrants can be profoundly shaped by news media, local politics, and the actions of community organizations and interest groups.

It is encouraging then, to know that the aforementioned PEW survey of residents in America's top 10 immigrant destination cities found that "Washington stands out for its generally welcoming view of immigrants." The survey indicated that "only about only one-in-five (21%) Washingtonians view immigration as a very big local problem," and furthermore "More than half (54%) say the growing number of newcomers to the U.S. strengthens society in general, and most think that immigrants strengthen the country through hard work (56%)" ("America's Immigration Quandary" 2004: 42). While the debate over immigration has grown more divisive since the survey's publication in 2004, the PEW findings still offer encouragement, and underscore to an even greater degree the inability of immigrant advocacy organizations in DC to effectively organize and communicate a message that resonates with a community already pre-disposed to a more favorable view of immigrants. Offering even more evidence of the ineffectual advocacy support for the creation of a worker center and of the effective message delivery of groups such as DefendDC, the PEW study surprisingly found that a majority (54%) of those living in the metropolitan DC area actually support "government-sponsored centers for day laborers" ("America's Immigration Quandary" 2004: 42).

For better or for worse, it is apparent that it is not the overall size of the immigrant day laborer population (a miniscule 0.05 percent of the country's total labor force) that is of principal concern, but rather, it is their visibility. This paper has shown that in communities struggling to

come to terms with the presence of immigrant day laborers, the most important indicator of whether or not measures aimed at punishment or protection will fail or succeed is the ability of opponents and advocates to create messages that resonate with local stakeholders. This can be seen by comparing the debates over the establishment of day labor worker centers in Maryland, where advocacy by the well organized CASA succeeded in opening a proposed center in Gaithersburg despite community opposition, and in Washington, DC, where the absence of a well organized coalition of immigrant advocacy groups able to counter the effective message delivery of the anti-immigrant group DefendDC led to the proposed center being placed “on hold.” Thus, the challenge for local policy makers, who at the end of the day will ultimately be responsible for enacting measures addressing the debate, is to find ways to create an image of order as more communities like those in Washington, DC struggle to come to terms with presence of immigrant day laborers - the most visible few.

List of Informal Interviews and Conversations

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