

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Perspectives on the Latino Population  
in Sussex County, Delaware*



*Perspectives on the Latino Population in Sussex County, Delaware*, conducted by Dr. Jennifer Fuqua and Dr. April Veness of the University of Delaware, was made possible by a grant from CFLeads to the DCF. The study was completed in collaboration with Dr. Christine Cannon, executive director of the Arsht-Cannon Fund at the DCF; La Colectiva de Delaware; La Esperanza; and many other partners. We are particularly grateful to the people who shared their stories and insights.

## Acknowledgments

**Dr. Jennifer Fuqua,**  
University of Delaware

**Dr. April Veness,**  
University of Delaware



Photos by  
**Dave Chambers**  
and **Beto Santana**

## **Why Perspectives on the Latino Population in Sussex County, Delaware Matters**

### *A Message from the President & CEO*

A community is strongest when all of its people have the opportunity to thrive.

In Delaware, an exciting segment of our community—the Latino population of Sussex County—has been growing stronger over the past 30 years. We at the Delaware Community Foundation thought it was time to get to know these not-so-new neighbors a little better.

That's why we commissioned *Perspectives on the Latino Population in Sussex County, Delaware*. This report, made possible by the collaboration of many partners, aims to shine a light on the Latino communities in Sussex County, highlighting their complexities and contributions, and the opportunities for us to leverage and enhance their successes.

Over the past 30 years, Sussex County's Latino population has grown by more than 1,200 percent. *Perspectives* explores who these newcomers are: Where did they move from? What caused them to upend their lives to come to Delaware? What do they value? What do they aspire to for their children?

*Perspectives* is also a study of the assets Latino immigrants offer to Delaware. Besides enriching our culture with their traditional music and food, Latino immigrants in Sussex County are running small businesses, paying taxes, starting sports leagues, going to church, buying houses and otherwise pursuing the American Dream.

Their commitment to community makes life better for all of us. How can we maximize the impact of their efforts to everyone's benefit?

Finally, *Perspectives* examines some of the ways in which we can support and further strengthen these important communities. They face the same challenges we all do, as well as obstacles related to language, immigration status, unfamiliar systems and more.

These are communities of hard-working people, and anything we do to help them thrive ... well, it helps all of us thrive, too.

No single entity can leverage the assets and address the challenges of Sussex County's Latino communities. It will require many partners working together, collaboratively and strategically.

We at the DCF hope that *Perspectives* will serve in two ways: First, as a catalyst to spark conversations and new partnerships, and second, as a source of information and knowledge to help maximize the impact of the resulting efforts.

Thank you for sharing our passion for Delaware communities, including the Latino communities of Sussex County.



Stuart Comstock-Gay,  
President & CEO



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers: *Dr. Jennifer Fuqua and Dr. April Veness*

The thriving Latino population in Sussex County strengthens the entire community, and its success increases quality of life for all people in Delaware.

The Delaware Community Foundation commissioned *Perspectives on the Latino Population in Sussex County, Delaware* to serve as a resource for nonprofit organizations, funders, community leaders and others striving to engage and advance this important segment of the community.

The goal of this work is to build our knowledge of:

1. The significant demographic patterns and diversity within the Latino population in Sussex County.
2. The assets the Latino population brings to Sussex County, particularly in skills, diverse perspectives and other resources.
3. The community's identity, values and approach to leadership/civic engagement, to facilitate engaging it to develop, implement and lead projects and programs.
4. The availability of critical resources, services and opportunities to further strengthen the community.

Material for the executive summary is from a longer two-part report. In Part 1, data from various sources are woven to narrate when and why Latinos settled in Sussex County. It outlines their origins, what distinguishes one group of Latinos from another, and how different factors shape the experiences of subpopulations.

In Part 2, the story narrows to pay closer attention to the current situation for Latinos in Sussex County and the roles that service providers and policymakers can take to address unmet needs.

Data collected for this report are from multiple sources at the national, state and local level. This study used newspaper accounts,

research reports, theses, census data and comments from 15 study participants. The report can be accessed at [delcf.org/sussex-latinos](http://delcf.org/sussex-latinos). The longer report, which includes cited sources, maps, tables and photos, details the methods used to sample and analyze information.



No one perspective or story represents all Latinos in Sussex County. Multiple perspectives and stories exist, and this study reveals only some of them. Different views exist about the correct way to identify the people described. The term Latino is used in this study. The U.S. Census uses the term Hispanic. Academics use Latinx. Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean people may avoid those labels. Puerto Ricans, by virtue of their U.S. citizenship, are variously included and excluded in data about Latinos. This study embodies a mindfulness of multiple perspectives and the identity politics of naming and norming the Latino population. We have done our best to accurately represent the lives of the subgroups of Latinos living in Sussex County.

## Change comes to Sussex County

In the decades before noticeable numbers of Latinos arrived in Sussex County, change was altering landscapes and life along the coast. By 1990, development from tourism and the arrival of out-of-state retirees alarmed some longtime residents. From traffic jams to escalating house prices, coastal life was not what it “used to be.”

Central and western Sussex County also experienced changes in those decades. Traditional farming was giving way to industrialized agro-processing. An increased need for labor in poultry plants was encouraging a new group of settlers in Sussex County. These job-seekers were unlike the well-off retirees from the metropolitan mid-Atlantic who had time on their hands. Many were lower-income young adults who left villages in Guatemala and Mexico to work with their hands. Only a few Latino newcomers were higher-income professionals who left Puerto Rico, other parts of the United States, and cities and towns across Latin America.

Like the settlers along the coast, these Spanish-speaking newcomers generated curiosity, suspicion and a halting welcome. Some locals were upset by changes occurring inland – changes longtime residents could not foresee or forestall. Latino newcomers were the reason that aged housing looked a little sadder when filled with folks who didn’t speak English. Some locals complained these newcomers needed services and did not know the rules of the road. Not mentioned were the many Latino contributions: they were accepting jobs others did not want; they were starting families, sending children to school, going to church; they were opening businesses, buying houses and paying taxes; they were investing in Sussex County. They were trying to be good neighbors.

A push-pull explains why people leave home to re-create their lives in a distant town, different state or foreign country. Economic opportunity in agriculture continues to attract Latinos to Sussex County. Latinos also are finding jobs in construction, landscaping, housekeeping, retail, health and social services. They arrive in Sussex County for other reasons. The chance to work, save money and build a better future – for themselves and their family – is part of the pull.

A chance to rewrite their story is part of the pull and the push. The reasons for leaving home can be obvious. This is true for immigrants from areas torn by poverty, hunger or fear due to gang and domestic violence. Survival of self and family – by taking chances, sacrificing and moving – pushes families from their homelands.

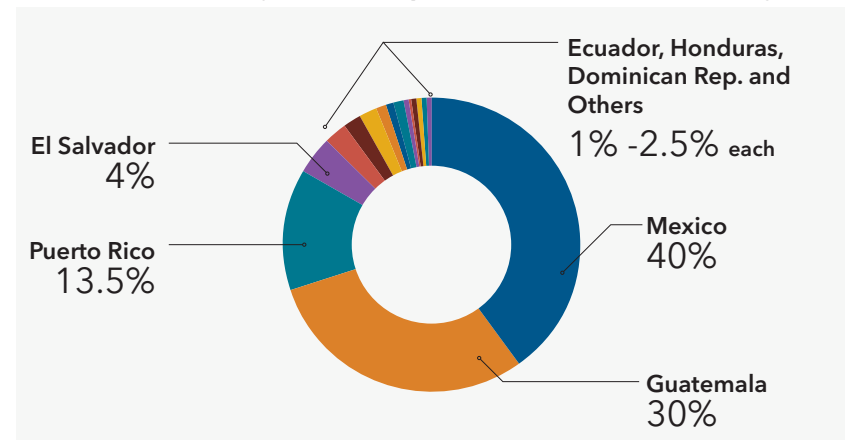
Diversity in Sussex County today is measurable by increased ethnic/racial diversity. It also can be measured in increased socioeconomic, demographic and political diversity. Change strains traditions and traditional ways of understanding the world. Accepting change often requires a deeper understanding of what is happening around you and the larger worldview.

## Key findings

### 1. Diversity: Differences in the Latino population

According to 2017 census estimates, 19,860 Latinos live in Sussex County. Most Latinos (94.5 percent) are from the region that includes Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Their differences revolve around four key areas.

Sussex County Latino Population: Countries of Origin



### **National origin**

Mexicans make up 40 percent of the total population of Latinos in Sussex County. Guatemalans make up 30 percent, and Puerto Ricans make up 13.5 percent. All other Central American and Caribbean countries comprised 11 percent of the Latinos in Sussex County as of 2017. Nearly three-quarters of the Latino population speak Spanish or Spanish Creole at home, and about half are foreign-born. Members of the same nationality tend to live in census tracts with other co-nationals. This creates Guatemalan spaces (the Kimmeytown area in Georgetown) or Salvadoran (a census tract near Lewes). Mexicans are more broadly distributed across the county, but tend to live along the Route 13 and 113 corridors. Although the Latino population may share the Spanish language, it varies by ethnicity, race and culture.

### **Immigration status**

Whether a person is authorized to live in the United States reveals an important distinction. Immigration status has many forms, each with specific rights and privileges. Immigration status is fluid: A person may experience different immigration statuses over time. Differences in status mean that some people have privileges that others do not.

Based on data from the Migration Policy Institute, Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants make up slightly more than half of the people with unauthorized status in Delaware. It's reasonable to assume that a sizable subgroup of unauthorized immigrants lives in Sussex County in a state of insecurity. Immigration insecurity harms people, families and the larger community. Fear is a real deterrent to public engagement. The threat of detention, deportation, lost wages and family disruption shapes how unauthorized people live their lives. Several study participants said that distrust can erode a person's confidence. Immigrants may avoid health and support services because they fear exposure. Fear based on immigration status also hinders social mobility and economic improvement.

### **Socioeconomic position**

Background, education, income, employment and housing distinguish the Sussex County Latino population. Immigrants have different ranks in the class system in their home countries and the United States. Latinos who suffered bias in their home countries because of skin color, language and culture often carry scars of that oppression. Those include illiteracy, poverty, lack of skills, distrust of outsiders and poor physical and mental health.

Based on 2011-2015 census data, 20 percent of the adult Latinos in this countywide estimate never attended school or left school by fourth grade. Almost half were Guatemalan (48 percent) and more than a quarter were Mexican (28 percent). About 80 percent of all Sussex County Latinos have incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty line. The exception are Latinos living along the coast. They have average incomes at and well above the federal poverty line for a family of four (\$25,201). Unauthorized status adds insecurity that further hampers social mobility.

*In 2018, Latinos in Sussex County contributed nearly \$50 million in federal and state income taxes.*

Immigrants are better positioned for success in the United States if their class was privileged in their home country. However, those with higher status may still experience problems based on immigration status, English skills, education and job credentials in the United States. Puerto Ricans in Sussex County do not have immigration issues, may have lived in the United States their entire lives, and have more secure footing. Puerto Ricans are better educated than other Latino groups. Taking a long view, Latinos in Sussex County are better off financially than they were at the start of this decade. In 2018, they contributed nearly \$50 million in federal and state income taxes.

### Integration process

The first Latino immigrants in Sussex County could not benefit from the services that now assist newcomers. They could not get support from Latinos involved in social networks, religious institutions and businesses. Today, however, those same immigrants have the advantage of years of experience. Their better English, knowledge to navigate the U.S. system and awareness of hurdles give them wisdom and seniority. They are more likely to have a strong sense of place and self-sufficiency. This is especially true if they have lived or worked closely with other Latinos and people they trust. They prosper if they have documentation and have bought a home. If no forces such as unemployment deter them, they may feel ready to take on leadership positions.

### 2. Accomplishments: Perspectives on success

Feelings of accomplishment and definitions of success are culturally and socially prescribed. It is possible to identify important events in the lives of Latinos and their families. Milestones include buying a car, buying a house, learning English, watching children succeed and finding a better job.

People who began from a low status may have different hopes and measures of success than people from higher status. This affects the priorities established by individuals and families. Living in the United States, meeting family needs and enjoying family and friends may fulfill a dream. From this view, it's less important to complete one's education or take on a leadership role beyond one's family. It may be more important for some first-generation immigrants to invest in their native hometowns. Data from Latinos in a 2018 national survey by the Pew Research Center echo what we learned in Sussex County. More than half of the respondents said being a good parent and providing for one's family was extremely important. In the study, less than a quarter of the respondents said having a successful career was extremely important.



### 3. Contributions and satisfaction with life in Sussex County

Participants in the study offered many answers about the contributions of Latinos to Sussex County. They contribute to the local, state and federal tax base. They work hard and labor at jobs that others do not wish to do. They create and expand businesses that fuel economic growth, often taking chances that others might avoid. They add to the cultural diversity of Sussex County with their language, food and activities. They bring youth and labor to a county where the number of people over age 55 is steadily rising. In contrast to a median age of 51.5 years for whites, the median age for Latinos is 24.8 years. Latinos bring and reinforce values long treasured by Sussex County residents. Those are faith, strong families, a solid work ethic, sacrifice, resilience



and a sense of social justice. “They have a really big heart. They help each other,” said one study participant. Seventy-two percent of Latino parents in a 2018 poll said they thought their children would do as well as or better than they did. They are content with their lives in the United States and Sussex County. But not fully. As one study participant said, Latinos may say that “They made it, they are happy. But they are always looking for ... the next thing ... Where are my children going to go study? What’s the next house I’m going to get that is bigger than this one?” This suggests that the agenda of the “American dream” is alive and well for some Sussex County Latinos.

#### 4. Rise in leadership

Study participants’ perceptions about leading and leadership varied widely. Leadership in Sussex Latino communities is not very different from other ethnic groups. Latino leaders are found in the public domain—nonprofits, businesses, churches and soccer leagues. Latino leaders are found in the private domain – informal networks and the home/family. Many study participants agreed that Latinos are underrepresented in traditional leadership roles in government and schools. Many groups whose mission is to help primarily low-income Latinos employ Latino and bilingual staff. As one study participant said, “The families that came here in the ‘90s now have children who are young adults, and they are integrated into the fabric of the community, they are professionals.” A professional class of authorized, educated bilingual Latinos has stepped into leadership roles in these groups. As demand for bi- and multilingualism grows, a need for these leaders will likely grow.

Study participants believe Latino leaders are found in trusted informal, private or family networks. These networks are not traditionally viewed as leadership outlets among non-Latinos. Examples include people who serve as guides helping newcomers navigate U.S. systems. This advocacy work isn’t necessarily in public view. It exists behind the scenes and is offered personally. “A lot of the help ... happens behind closed doors ... ”

Many study participants agreed that while fathers often head the family and work to earn income, mothers lead day-to-day activities to ensure that obligations with schools and service providers are met. Children and youth are likely to take on roles to support their parents (translation, for example), but they are also more likely to assume leadership roles outside the home. Exposure to U.S. culture through school and acquiring language skills seems to build the confidence needed to take the initiative.

#### Important moments and opportunities

The Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration uses a framework that establishes three core areas of asset development that can be applied to anyone and are essential to stability and integration for new immigrants:

- Personal or human assets, such as education, skills, health, citizenship and second-language proficiency
- Financial assets, such as stable income, bank accounts, credit and insurance
- Social and cultural assets, such as locally owned businesses, social networks and civic engagement. These offer immigrants the knowledge, skills and resources to navigate across borders and obstacles.





Latinos in Sussex County have many of the assets that enable them to take chances, expand their sense of self-sufficiency and feel like a valued part of the community. One study participant said, "You have to look at how creative, how just tenacious and resilient and adaptable the people are. Some have come with backgrounds of not having an education, of having no experiences ... [and] have opened restaurants, have opened stores, have opened businesses, have found ways to make life possible for them here."

Study participants noted several critical areas of need for Sussex County Latinos. These include navigating health and social service

systems, family literacy and language skills; support for programs that promote college and career advancement; support for trauma victims; and low-cost or pro bono legal services. One study participant observed how needs change, depending on how long families have been in Sussex County. For example, as generations age and adjust to life in Sussex County, concerns have shifted from needing health, legal and social services to needing greater access to education, or help with how to get a child into college. Knowing about the challenges in these important moments in the lives of Latino families helps service providers address their needs and build community and quality of life in Sussex County overall.

### Important moments for finding nonprofit and pro bono services



### **Legal counsel**

Immigration status plays a role in all key aspects of life in the United States for Sussex County Latinos. Navigating the path to permanent residency and overcoming obstacles requires legal assistance. As one study participant observed: "In Delaware, we don't have enough programs that incentivize ... attorneys to take on pro bono cases. I also don't think that we have anything that's really connecting people with those resources, like attorneys that can give them good counsel, that can give them good advice, that can help them process their paperwork, or represent them in court."

### **Family literacy and English language skills**

Family literacy is vital to accessing health and social services and dealing with schools and employers. Basic literacy skills in adults may be one of the most pressing needs among the most vulnerable families. For immigrant parents, language skills are important to acquire assets. It's also necessary to communicate with schools about their children. As one study participant stated, "... For the most part, a lot of parents, especially Latino parents, want their kids to be well-educated. But I think it becomes hard when they can't communicate with the schools or communicate with the teachers."

A newly arrived immigrant family experiences a steep learning curve when its first child enrolls in a U.S. school. The family is expected to read forms, talk with teachers, attend meetings and help with homework. Some Latino immigrants who want to attend English classes are thwarted by class locations and availability.

### **Health and social services**

Study participants noted several factors affecting health and social services for Sussex County Latinos. These include limited bilingual or translation services, staffing shortages and lack of transportation. Many immigrants with insecure statuses have jobs that pay in cash with no health benefits or proof of employment. As one study participant put it, they have "no ... form ... to get that medical insurance." Another participant noted, "With these waves of

newcomers, we also have an outreach department that tries to go into different communities and to different events and follows up with case management."

### **Financial services**

For the most vulnerable, building financial assets is an extremely challenging endeavor. Pooling resources, living over-occupancy and working multiple jobs are common practices. Immigrants with insecure status are prey to predatory lending and high interest rates because they have no credit history. Paltry personal assets such as low language skills and education can be barriers to building financial assets. As one study participant related, "... [in] the beginning, it is the language, and to get a car – it's hard in the beginning ... unless they have money, it's impossible to get cars, insurance and all that."

Immigrants need to develop skills to access financial tools. A business owner and study participant described what it was like for him, as an immigrant, to obtain financing for the first time, "They don't have [an] idea ... when to prepare a plan, a business plan to go to the bank and lend the money. Like me in the beginning when I went to ask [for] a line of credit at the bank, they ask me for business plan. I mean a business plan! And, at that time, I asked, 'What is that for?'" Some progress has been seen as financial institutions are increasingly finding ways to serve Latinos, and some have hired Spanish-speaking staff.

### **Engaging with faith-based communities**

Faith-based communities are important for Latinos in Sussex County. They offer places where families experience connection, social networks and civic participation. As one participant said, "[W]ho are the leaders in the Hispanic population? I kept on thinking of the church. I think these are my leaders." Latino-serving churches and their congregants are located across the county. More than 50 churches are in Georgetown, Seaford and Selbyville, areas with a need for family literacy and education. Churches and congregations, religious and cultural events are areas to gather.

*"To fully progress, I think we need members of our own community to be able to stand up for us and advocate for us, but be also knowledgeable and have that expertise to do so."*

### **Connecting with educational institutions**

The first contact many immigrant families have with the school system is when the first child is enrolled. This is a key moment to engage with those parents. Latino families value education, and public schools must accommodate them.

When Latino youth and adults connect with institutions of higher education are critical moments. Study participants stressed the need to establish a college-going culture, to promote personal success and success for the community. As one study participant said, "... To fully progress, I think we need members of our own community to be able to stand up for us and advocate for us, but be also knowledgeable and have that expertise to do so ... We need members of our own community to be able to engage with those parents."

### **Housing security**

Many newly arrived Latinos begin as renters. Depending on their budget, they may contribute to the cost of housing as a boarder with family or friends. Later they may rent a place on their own or buy a home. While rental conditions may not be ideal, as one study participant said, "They were homes that afforded them running water, sanitary facilities and ... a roof over the head. ...Some of the conditions I've seen aren't probably the best, but it was better from what they left." Building savings and good credit is essential for families to join the affordable housing market.

## **Conclusion**

This study of the Latino population in Sussex County, Delaware, describes historical and current conditions. It outlines Latino settlement and highlights the diversity of the Latino population. It discusses Latino accomplishments and contributions. It looks at continued needs and shows how insecure immigration status affects individuals, their families and the larger community. Opportunities for asset building, especially for new Latino immigrants and their families, are addressed.

Nonprofit, private and public institutions play an important role in Sussex County. Beyond the creation of services and materials, a need exists for qualified multilingual Latinos in key positions and sufficient, sustainable funding. While it is important to establish programs for Latinos, it is equally important that service providers stay connected. They need to share information, best practices and service referrals. Providers should also recognize that status differences in the Latino community shape needs, feelings of trust, notions of success, dealings with others and leadership development.

Advocacy at the local, state and federal level is needed to build assets for immigrants and push for reform that could ease the insecurity felt by newcomers without authorization. The uncertainty of the current political environment creates confusion, fear and distrust. That situation contributes to even greater vulnerability for Latinos and their families.

**For a copy of the executive summary and full study, visit [delcf.org/sussex-latinos](http://delcf.org/sussex-latinos).**



# DCCF

For more information about the Delaware Community Foundation, contact us at [info@delcf.org](mailto:info@delcf.org) or **302.571.8004**.

