The Challenges Latino Migrants Face

in Accessing Resources in Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i

Emilia Lubet

This research study explores the challenges Latino migrants who work in the agriculture coffee fields of Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i face in accessing resources (e.g., affordable health care, housing, etc). In-person interviews in Kailua-Kona were conducted with nine Latino migrants—clients of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa William S. Richardson Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic—to understand their challenges in establishing their new life in Hawai‘i. Additional interviews were conducted with four community members and seven organizations to determine community efforts to assist migrants. This research discovered an established resource system in Kailua-Kona with beneficial community efforts in place. However, the Latino community still faces language barriers and uncertainty with accessing non-profit agencies, making the adjustment to Hawai‘i difficult. Language barriers exist for migrants when they need to access resources to help them situate themselves in their new home. Resources become inaccessible to the Latino community when organizations do not have materials in Spanish, personnel assisting in filling forms, or outreach information to the community. Taking all of this into consideration, this study has found that it is beneficial for organizations to hold in-person outreach events to build trust with the community. Equally important, this study highlights the need to hire Spanish interpreters and translate materials such as brochures, forms, and flyers. The findings in the study suggest that these efforts will continue improving the existing support for Latino communities. Furthermore, acquiring more state funding for non-profit organizations responsible for supporting the migrant community will expand the accessibility of these resources.

1. Introduction

Migration to a new country brings both challenges and opportunities for a better life. Migrant communities face uncertainty about whom to trust and how to seek support. In this transition, migrants must learn to navigate systems: finding health care, education, legal services, transportation, food, employment, etc.- all essential resources needed to make a new location a permanent home. Navigating this new reality is exacerbated by language barriers, which make it difficult for migrants to feel confident in a new home. This research study examines the challenges Latino migrants face in establishing their new life in Kailua-Kona, and seeks to raise awareness of the ongoing struggle for Latinos in Hawai‘i Migrants in Hawai‘i are at a pivotal stage in their new life to create new opportunities. Various organizations are responsible for building families’ confidence and, eventually, making them feel empowered to navigate the systems independently.

This research project has allowed me to connect with my Latino heritage and learn more about my mom's immigration story. This research is important to raise awareness of the Latino community's ongoing struggle in Hawai‘i and to continue sharing their narratives. Equally important, this research project has allowed organizations to network with one another and the Latino community to connect with services in the final presentation event I hosted with Hawai‘i Island Community Health Center in Kailua-Kona

Horizons, Vol. 9, 2024, pp. 49–54

2. Background

2.1 History of Latino Migration in Hawai‘ i

The history of Latino migration in Hawai‘i consists of "four pivotal moments": the "Mexicans in the 1830s, Puerto Ricans in the early 1900s, Mexicans and Central Americans in the 1990s, and Mexicans and Central Americans in the early 2000s" (Guevarra, 2023, p. 5). The word for cowboys in Native Hawaiian is "paniolo," and comes from Hawaiians "hearing the word espaniol [sic] constantly" (Guevarra, 2023, p. 52). The first Mexican cowboys were Californian Indians and Mexican Mestizos of indigenous descent and were brought to Hawai‘i Island by King Kamehameha III in 1832 (Guevarra, 2023). The vaqueros left their imprint in Hawai‘i with their farming techniques but also aspects of their culture, such as music (e.g., guitar), leather making, and vaquero attire (Guevarra, 2023, p. 54).

Following in the 1900s, Puerto Ricans and later in the 1990s Mexican laborers were recruited to work in the different Hawaiian agriculture plantations (Guevarra, 2018). Guevarra suggests this migration "was vital to the continuing legacy of specific industries in Hawai‘i," such as sugar cane, Kona coffee, pineapple, etc. (Guevarra, 2023, p. 5). In previously published studies about migrants in Hawai‘i the Latino migrant agriculture communities are undercounted in census data collection (Batalova, et al., 2013). As of 2023, the Hispanics or Latinos comprised 11.1% of the total Hawai‘i population of 1,435,138 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

2.2 Deportation Latino Migrants Face After Their Contributions to the Coffee Industry

The intensification of immigration policies under the Trump presidency (2016-2020) has caused fear and anxiety for the Latino community in Hawai‘i. For example, Andres Magaña Ortiz, who immigrated from México and is the father of three United States citizens, was deported in 2017 after being in the U.S. for more than 30 years (Guevarra, 2023). After ten years of picking coffee in Kailua-Kona, he saved enough money and bought "six acres of farmland in Hōlualoa," naming his farm "El Molinito" (Guevarra, 2023, p. 1). As a coffee farm owner, Andres Magaña Ortiz "contributed to the social and economic prosperity of Hawai‘i's Kona coffee industry" (Guevarra, 2023, p. 3). However, under the Trump administration, as with many other migrant workers, "Homeland Security ordered Magaña Ortiz to leave in March 2017" (Guevarra, 2023, p. 2). This meant leaving his children and family in Hawai‘i, not knowing when they would be reunited. This example is only one story of Latino migrants who have successfully navigated the systems, but are still uncertain about their futures in Hawai‘i .

2.3 Unforeseen Circumstance: Lāhaina Maui Wildfire Impacting the Latino Community

Unforeseen circumstances cause a lot of complications for the Latino community. For example, the Lāhaina Maui wildfire in August 2023 intensified the challenges the Latino community face. Kevin Block, Maui's immigration attorney, estimated that the immigrant community (many being Latinos) made up 30% of the total 4,500 displaced Lāhaina residents of Maui County (Farfan, 2023). The community lost their jobs, housing, and legal documents (Valera, 2023). Although it did take time, the San Francisco Mexican Consulate did assist in replacing around 200 documents for the Mexican community in Maui (Farfan, 2023). However, accessing other support systems can bring anxiety depending on one's legal status and fear of deportation. Even after the Latino community has created a new life on the Hawaiian islands, unforeseen events can put them at risk of losing everything or not receiving the full potential of available support and resources.

2.4 Migrant Invisibility in Hawai‘i

According to Monisha Das Gupta (2015), the Latino migrant group has experienced both invisibility and visibility. Mexicans can "blend" with other ethnic groups, such as Filipinos, Portuguese, and Pacific Islanders, almost passing for one another (Das Gupta, 2015, p. 43). However, this "blending" means the Mexican population is not able to create a strong Spanish-speaking community in Hawai‘i, a circumstance which has "reinforced their sense of isolation and powerlessness" (Das Gupta, 2015, p. 43). Furthermore, although Latinos have contributed since the 1830s with farming practices and labor on plantations, "their near invisibility on the island has made them seem more like newcomers than long-term residents" (Guevarra, 2018, p. 155).

3. Methods

This study collected qualitative data by in-person interviews with three distinct groups to understand Latino migration in Hawai‘i: Latino migrants themselves, community members, and organizations. The University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM), William S. Richardon Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic (RILC) expressed the need for this research as their Latino clients have faced challenges navigating systems in Kailua-Kona. Therefore, with this research the Latino clients would have the opportunity to share their stories, contributing to the expansion of Latinos' personal narratives of their experiences migrating to Hawai‘i and establishing their new life (Guevarra, 2023). Ultimately, this research study hopes to inform the greater Hawai‘i community of what areas can be improved to better support the Latino community.

Four research trips (June 3, September 16, November 3-4, 2023 and February 3, 2024) to Kailua-Kona (Literary Center, Family Support Hawai'i, Immigration Information Specialist Hawai'i , Neighborhood Place of Kona, William S. Richardson Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic, and A.L.O.H.A. Latinos Hawai'i Association) were made to complete all interviews. All travel was alongside RILC at UHM. The final sample size included nine interviews with Latino migrants, four community members (three English Language Learners from public schools and on Reverend from a local church), and seven organizational employees (Hawai'i Island Community Health Center, Kona Literacy Center, Family Support Hawai'i, Immigration Information Specialist Hawai'i, Neighborhood Place of Kona, William S. Richardson Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic, and A.L.O.H.A. Latinos Hawai'i Association).

3.1 Researcher Role

The researcher is a Latino-identifying undergraduate student graduating with a BA in Spanish. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all consent forms, recruitment material, interview questions, and protocols. Interviews were conducted in Spanish with Latino migrants. The IRB protocol was modified for the participants' benefit and due to travel constraints, added Zoom interviews. Interviews were transcribed, translated, and analyzed.

3.2 Materials and Resources

The Undergraduate Research Opportunity Project (UROP) grant funded all travel expenses. This funding included airfare travel, a rental car for transportation, food, an iPad for audio recording, and nine $50 gift cards that were given as compensation for Latinos' participation in research interviews.

3.3 Recruitment of Participants

Latino Migrants. Participants of the study were current clients of the RILC at UHM, working in the coffee industry in Kailua-Kona. This study included families an individual workers. All participants were above the age of 18 and had migrate to Kailua-Kona within the last few years. Recruitment for Latino migrants was oral. Out of the nine Latino migrant interviews, only six were audio recorded; however, notes were taken for all interviews.

3.4 Research Ethics Statement

The audio recordings were recorded with permission on an encrypted iPad with the automatic iCloud setting turned off to protect the participants' privacy. The audio recordings on the iPad were transferred to a USB drive and stored in a locked office. All information gathered on the iPad and USB drive was deleted after completion. The names of all Latino participants interviewed were provided aliases. None of the aliases used coincided with present clients of the RILC at UHM.

3.5 Interview Protocol

Interviews with Latino migrants were conducted at the Immaculate Conception Church in Hōlualoa, Kailua-Kona. This interview space allowed for a private and convenient location for the study participants because they had an appointment with the RILC at UHM beforehand at the same location. Interviews with community members and organizations were conducted at Immaculate Conception Church, coffee shops, and participants' homes. Two organizational interviews were conducted on Zoom.

Interviews to all three groups answered 10-20 questions, averaging 30-45 minutes, including the time to read and sign the consent form and fill out a Covid-19 health questionnaire. All participants were given a paper copy of the consent form to keep for their records.

3.6 Interview Question Design

The researcher designed questions for the Latino migrants that focused on describing the challenges and experiences they have faced in accessing necessary resources in Hawai'i. After the first interview trip, the researcher discovered that the originally approved questions were confusing for the participants. In order to make interviews more effective, the researcher modified the questions into more comprehensible categories. This updated question protocol allowed for more fluid conversations and a deeper understanding of migrants' situations. Four interviews were conducted using the original questions and five interviews were conducted using the updated questions. The new protocol also included the researcher sharing their cultural heritage to build trust with the community.

4. Results

4.1 Latino Migrants

La salud- Health Care. In interviews, most Latino participants were familiar with the healthcare systems. However, Flor, like other participants, mentioned that accessing health care was difficult for her:

> Sí, a veces se me hace dificil por. Porque no tenemos en qué movernos o porque nos cuesta bastante por el inglés.
> *Yes, sometimes I find it difficult because we don't have a way to move around or because it's challenging because of the English.*

Participants shared the factors they must consider before accessing health care: medical expenses, taking time off work to attend appointments, and finding transportation. These considerations can turn into obstacles preventing the community from accessing health care. Additionally, medical appointments can be intimidating if all the forms and medical personnel only speak English.

La comida- Food. The Latino participants in the study found food prices to be high in Hawai'i. The Latino participants Enrique, Flor, Arminda, and Guadalupe all shop at various stores in Kailua-Kona, including Walmart, KTA, Costco, Sac N Save, and local inexpensive grocery stores. None of the participants in the research study received free food or assistance purchasing food from organizations in Kailua-Kona. Participant Lucinda shared her experience:

> La verdad nunca he buscado lugares asi que den comida gratis.
> *The truth is I've never really looked for places that give free food.*

La educación- Education.

Children. Six of the nine Latino participants had children and enrolled them in the school system in Kailua-Kona. In interviews, Latino participants spoke about enrollment, transportation, communicating with teachers, and whether their children felt comfortable in school settings. Parents/guardians are required to fill out forms during the enrollment of their children in school. Latino migrants had to find a way to translate the forms if school staff was not present. Participant Arminda shared the following:

> Busqué a una persona que hablara un poco de inglés y él me ayudó porque tenía que rellenar muchos papeles.
> *I had to look for a person who spoke a bit of English, and he helped me because I had to fill out a lot of papers.*

The parent/guardian and teachers communicate in Spanish, but when no bilingual speaker is available, the school communicates using a translator.

The children of the participants who have recently immigrated have trouble understanding the material as it is taught in English, a new language for them. When there is no one to translate or explain things to them in Spanish, they face challenges. Flor expressed the challenges her children face:

> A veces se encuentran personal, a veces no, les toca batallar.
> *Sometimes, they can find people, but sometimes, they have to fend for themselves.*

Adults (Participants). In the research interview, Latino participants were asked if they knew English. All participants expressed that they did not know English but were interested in learning. Participant Leticia would like to learn English to stand up for herself. However, participants expressed that an obstacle to learning English is having no spare time to attend classes with their busy work schedule. Additionally, six out of nine of the Latino participants are functionally illiterate in their native language. They require assistance filling out forms that have been translated into Spanish. Participant Guadalupe, like others, shared:

> Leer lo entiendo bastante, lo único que yo no puedo hacer es escribir [en español].
> *I can read quite well, but the one thing that I can't do is write [in Spanish].*

El transporte- Transportation. The main mode of transportation for the participants is driving. They use this mode of transportation to get to work, drop their children off at school, and to go to the grocery store. If they are unable to drive, they will catch rides to work from friends. Participants expressed the need to arrange to drop their children off at school before work; if not, children would have to walk home from school due to the inaccessibility of public transportation in Kailua-Kona. The walking and driving distances shared in interviews ranged from five minutes to twenty minutes from their homes to school.

El trabajo- Work. Latino participants expressed an easier time finding jobs in Hawai'i due to the need for agricultural workers and their expertise in the industries on the island. Arminda shared:

> Allá en Honduras eso hacía, piscar café, entonces por eso para nosotros es más fácil aquí la pizca de café.
> *Over there in Honduras, that's what I did, pick coffee, so for us it's easy to pick coffee here.*

Latino participants work eight hours a day, Monday through Saturday. When it is not coffee season in Hawai'i, participants look for other employment opportunities, such as cleaning houses, hotel cleaning, or landscaping.

La vivienda- Housing. Latino participants find housing through word-of-mouth, relatives, employers, and friends. Being new to Kailua-Kona makes the initial search for housing challenging if there are no existing family or friend connections. Where Latinos live can be a far commute to their workplace. Both participants, Arminda and Guadalupe, must travel one hour from their homes to work. Additionally, Latino participants find the rent prices to be expensive, and there are not enough affordable housing options in Kailua-Kona. Participant Flor shared her experience:

> ¿Encontrar otro lugar más cómodo? No, es raro y cuesta encontrar. Uno le busca y le batalla y no sale.
> *Find a more comfortable place? No, it's really rare and it takes a lot to find one, you keep on looking, you struggle, but nothing turns up.*

La comunidad latina- Latino Community. Research questions about the Latino community in Hawai'i brought up emotions for some participants. Participants did not live in Latino neighborhoods. Flor explained that the houses where she lived were spread apart. She explained that she had minimal interaction with neighbors:

No aquí todo es distanciado.
No, everything here is distant.

Some Latinos participants miss their respective home countries, but some do not for reasons the researcher did not inquire about. Participant Leticia continues cooking traditional meals such as tamales, marisco y pepian from Guatemala. Enrique plays soccer with friends in the park. Additionally, Arminda shared that picking coffee reminds her of Honduras.

Participants share mixed opinions about the Latino community being a support system in Kailua-Kona. Arminda responded to this issue in the following fashion:

Aquí no, nadie se ayuda.
Here no, no one helps each other.

However, other participants did feel the support of the Latino community. Lucinda shared the following:

Hay muchos latinos.
There are a lot of Latinos.

As a follow-up question, the researcher asked Lucinda if it was easy for her to communicate and connect with her Latino community in Hawai'i. Lucinda shared:

Sí, digamos que sí pero más no cuesta comunicarnos con los de aquí [Estados Unidos].
Yes, you could say so, but it's a challenge to be able to communicate with the people from here [United States].

When the researcher asked what improvements could be made for participants to feel more supported in Hawai'i by organizations and their wider Latino community, some feelings and ideas participants shared included:

Arminda: Reunirse uno, poderse apoyar los unos a los otros.
Gatherings. Being able to support one another.
Lucinda: Pienso que podría ser personas que ayudan a traducir.
I think that having someone who can help do translations.
Enrique: Más reuniones, más eventos.
More gatherings, more events.

El internet- Internet. The Latino participants in the research did not own a computer. They relied on accessing information on their phones, which had been programmed into Spanish for them to understand. However, even using phones for translation can become difficult for Latino participants. Lucinda shared the following:

Hay personas que ni pueden usar el traductor del teléfono y les cuesta bastante.
Some people can not use the phone translator, it's challenging for them.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Need for Language Assistance in Agencies.

Throughout this research study, it has been clear that there is an undeniable need for language services to make existing resources accessible to the Latino community. Research findings show that participants encounter language barriers when accessing health care and food services, filling out school forms, and with feeling a sense of community in Hawai'i. Therefore, organizations and community members must work together to outreach their services. Making materials- such as forms, flyers, and brochures- accessible in Spanish, and have translators or Spanish personnel to assist.

5.2 Increase In-Person Events and Outreach.

Organization's outreaching their information is beneficial because recent migrants are interested in learning how to access the resources in Kailua-Kona. As participants Arminda and Enrique shared, having more group events and connecting with the wider Latino community would help them feel more community support and in turn help them establish their new life in Hawai'i. The Latino community needs more certainty about which organizations can assist them in Kailua-Kona. For example, most of the Latino participants did not know about the Food Basket, Hawai'i or WIC/SNAP program options. However, if there were more in-person outreach for these organizations' services, the wider Latino community would be able to reduce food costs for their families.

In research interviews with employees from Hawai'i Island Community Health Center, they mentioned that going to farms or through church communication helps build trust with the community and organizations. After the initial outreach, it is beneficial to hold an in-person event where organizations can share their services and help with enrollment on the same day. The church and other organizations in Kailua-Kona should continue holding "Know Your RIghts" workshops to inform the wider community of accurate immigration information,k as there can be misinformation about immigration issues and laws. The Latino community feels even more isolated and unsure of who to trust, making it important to inform the community of their rights and teach them how to advocate for themselves through these workshops or similar events. In interviews, Latino participants have expressed that they did no feel support from their own community. Furthermore, an in-person event such as Latino family night hosted by Kailua-Kona public schools would help bring the Latino community closer by allowing them to connect with each other at an outreach event.

5.3 Latino Voice to Advocate and Represent the Wider Migrant Community.

With the limited availability of Spanish speakers working in the different agencies in Kailua-Kona, the translation responsibility falls onto a limited number of people. The translation responsibility could be balanced by training more Spanish speakers in these organization, hiring more interpreters, or using online translation resources. The new A.L.O.H.A. (advocating, leading, outreach, helping, assisting) Latinos Hawai'i Association will greatly impact the Latino community in Kailua-Kona by connecting Latinos directly with resources beneficial to them, maintaining personal connections, building trust and security for the Latino community to feel confident in their new life. Both the association's president and his wife mentioned the importance of Latinos breaking the cycle of feeling unsupported, lacking economic opportunities, feeling unsafe in their home country, and not having role models. The hope is that with the support of A.L.O.H.A. Latinos Hawai'i Association, the cycle can be broken.

5.4 Encouraging Taking ESL Classes.

Even though the Spanish translation of material is important, migrants should ultimately be encouraged to take English classes to help them confidently navigate different resources in Kailua-Kona on their own. The Latino community has expressed interest in learning English to feel fully comfortable in their news life, however, learning a second language can be intimidating and time consuming. Given that the Kona Literacy Center offers free English classes online, these classes can be accessed at home. However, the researcher found that most Latinos didn't know about this redsource and didn't have a computer. Federally funded programs could help families obtain computers for their homes to make these English classes more accessible. Additionally, initial assistance is necessary to teach the Latino community how to use Zoom.

5.5 The Community Efforts That Have Been Beneficial for Latinos.

The Kailua-Kona community has already begun finding innovative ways to make their material audio accessible to the Latino community. ELL coordinator at Holualoa Elementary School shared that their school uses the Seesaw application to make students' homework Spanish audio accessible. The assistant teacher translates the students' homework from English to Spanish and then uses the Seesaw application to record a Spanish audio of the assignment. The recording is accessed by students through a QR code printed on the homework. The Seesaw application is an excellent example for other organizations in Kailua-Kona to make information accessible to the Latino community.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Breaking the Cycle.

Many in the Latino community migrate to Hawai'i for new opportunities. As the research has shown, they are bound to face challenges upon arrival. The strong-willed Latino community in Kailua-Kona has worked hard to achieve a better future for themselves and their families. They are slowly breaking the cycle of not feeling supported or lacking in economic opportunities. Establishing materials in Spanish, hiring Spanish personnel, and outreach events will only improve the support they receive and help break further cycles. The State of Hawai'i should support these new non-profit organizations for migrants both financially and institutionally to provide the initial support to get the migrant community off their feet, especially given their contributions to life in Hawai'i. Eventually, with support from these organizations, Latino migrants will have greater confidence in accessing the many systems in Hawai'i.

Works Cited

Batalova, J., Das Gupta, M., & Haglund, S. P. (2013). Newcomers to the Aloha State: Challenges and prospects for Mexicans in Hawai'i. migrationpolicy.Org. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/newcomers-aloha-state-challenges-and-prospects-mexicans-hawaii

Das Gupta, M. (2015). Shadowed lives: Invisibility and visibility of Mexicans in Hawai'i. In Transpacific Americas (pp. 68–89). Routledge. https://www-taylorfrancis-com.eres.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315684383-4/shadowed-lives-monisha-das-gupta

Farfan, I. (2023). Maui's Latino community contends with destruction, grief and immigration fears after fires. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/mauis-latino-community-devastated-wildfires-rcna101256

Guevarra, R.P. (2023). *Aloha Compadre: Latinxs in Hawai'i. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.*

Guevarra , R. P. (2018). *"Latino Threat in the 808?"* Mexican migration and the politics of race in Hawai'i. In Fojas, C., Guevarra R. P., & Sharma, N. T. (Eds.), *Beyond ethnicity: new politics of race in Hawai i.* (pp. 155–179). University of Hawai'i Press.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). Quick Facts Hawai'i. United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/HI/RHI725222

Valera, M. (2023). Lahaina's large immigrant community is facing a unique struggle in the fire's aftermath. Honolulu Civil Beat. https://www.civilbeat.org/2023/08/lahainas-large-immigrant-community-is-facing-a-unique-struggle-in-the-fires-aftermath/