

Latino People in North Carolina ^[1]

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by Alan K. Lamm, 2006; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, May 2023



Venezuelan dancers perform at the 2005 Fiesta del Pueblo, an annual festival celebrating Latino culture in North Carolina. Photograph courtesy of El Pueblo, Inc.

Latino people, also referred to as Latinos or Hispanics, lived in North Carolina in relatively small numbers until the 1970s, when many people of Mexican ^[2] and Central American descent began coming to states in the South like Florida, Georgia and North Carolina in search of employment like seasonal farm work. By the end of the twentieth century, Latinos had become the fastest growing minority group ^[3] in the state, their numbers increasing by 35 percent annually. Overall, the number of Latino people in North Carolina rose from 76,726 in 1990 to 1,118,596 in 2020 (according to the 2020 Census ^[4]). The increased presence of Latino people in North Carolina is also accompanied by increasing Latino political, cultural, and economic influence in the state.

Most Latino people began arriving in North Carolina after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act ^[5]. This act expanded immigration to the U.S. by increasing the number of immigrants allowed annually from countries beyond Western Europe. During this surge of immigration, some Latinos came to North Carolina directly from Mexico and Central America, but most arrived from California, Texas, Florida, or New York. In 2019, about 61 percent ^[6] of Latino people in North Carolina were born in the United States, Puerto Rico, or other U.S. territories. Since 2020, Latinos in North Carolina have trended younger than other non-Latino populations in the state, with 35 percent under the age of 18, compared with 20 percent for other North Carolinians. As of 2021, about 14 percent of Latinos in the state were between the ages of 18 and 35. In 2021, about one-fifth of the Latino population in North Carolina were under the age of nine. By 2021, 43 percent of the state's Latinos had a high school diploma or higher, and according to 2021 census data, about one-third of Latino people surveyed in North Carolina were enrolled in some type of school (ranging from preschool to graduate school).

By the 1990s, Latino people in North Carolina began to branch out into fields of work other than farming. Many found jobs and settled along the state's urbanized I-85 corridor in Mecklenburg ^[7], Forsyth ^[8], Guilford ^[9], Durham ^[10], Wake ^[11] counties. Wake and Mecklenburg Counties alone compromised half of North Carolina's Latino population in 2020. Other Latinos settled in and around military bases such as Fort Bragg ^[12] and Camp Lejeune ^[13] or in smaller farming communities (like those in Pender and Duplin counties) in the eastern part of the state. Latino workers were concentrated in agricultural, military, and service industries, including food and hotel service, construction, landscaping, and livestock slaughterhouses during the 1990s. By the early 2000s, a growing Latino middle class developed, with a more widely diversified place in the state's workforce and economy. This trend has continued into the 2020s. By 2021, about one third of Latino people surveyed claimed that their yearly household income for 2020-2021 was between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Groups such as Student Action with Farmworkers ^[14], based in Durham ^[10], have been important allies for Latinos as they grapple with problems of health and safety, educational barriers, immigration policies, and discrimination in the workplace. The organization El Centro Hispano is also the largest Latino-led organization in the state and works to support Latino people across North Carolina. Community coalitions ^[15] to support Latino people are also common in places like Guilford or Mecklenburg counties. Latino workers have also found themselves at the center of labor struggles, most notably perhaps a group of Guatemalan poultry workers at Morganton's Case Farms ^[16], who went on strike in 1995, seeking improved work conditions. Conditions remain hazardous, however, as Latino people are injured and killed at higher rates in their occupations than other groups. Between October 2021 and July 2022, 45 people were killed while at work in North Carolina. Despite comprising only 10 percent of North Carolina's population, 40 percent of the deaths ^[17] were Latino people.

As the number of Latino people in North Carolina has risen, their political impact has grown as well. In 2000, there were 52,300 North Carolina Latinos who were U.S. citizens of voting age. By 2020, that number had risen to about 338,000. As a result, the state's political parties have become more interested in Latino people, as evidenced by the formation of groups such as Hispanic Democrats of North Carolina ^[18]. Congressman Bob Etheridge ^[19] was among the first elected representatives to create a Latino advisory committee to learn more about the needs of his Latino constituents. In May 2002

the state Board of Elections approved permitting counties to print voter registration forms in Spanish. Most recently, 25 percent of eligible Latino voters in North Carolina voted in the 2022 midterm elections.

Several Spanish-language radio stations began operations in North Carolina in the 1990s, and by 2020 several Spanish-language newspapers and magazines were being published in the state as well, including notable ones like *Que Pasa* and *La Noticia*. In addition, Latino-run grocery stores, video stores, nightclubs, and other businesses continue to multiply. Regional Mexican and Central American restaurants and [foodways](#) [20] are also increasingly evident in the state, as they are elsewhere in the Southeast and the nation. Government and nonprofit organizations are increasingly producing bilingual materials to serve the state's Spanish-speaking population. Numerous Latino associations and provider groups have emerged across the state. [El Pueblo, Inc.](#) [21], a [Raleigh](#) [22]-based nonprofit, has been a leader in this area, offering statewide advocacy and promoting Latino cultural traditions through such events as [La Fiesta del Pueblo](#) [23], an annual festival held at the North Carolina State Fairgrounds and boasting some 60,000 attendees each year. Other service groups include the Hispanic/Latino Resource Center in Durham, the Latin American Association of North Carolina in Raleigh, and the [Latin American Coalition](#) [24] in [Charlotte](#) [25]. The Hispanic Federation, a Latino action group that focuses on meeting the needs of Latino people in the United States, also has a [headquarters](#) [26] in Charlotte.

Churches have sought to reach out to the growing Hispanic community as well. Because a significant number of Latinos have come to North Carolina as active members of the Roman Catholic Church, Catholic charities and other organizations have been particularly prominent in these outreach efforts. The [Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina](#) [27] works to partner people in North Carolina with Latino/Hispanic ministries. Many Protestant denominations also sponsor aid organizations for Latinos and offer Spanish-language worship services.

In an effort to improve service to the state's Latino population, [Governor James B. Hunt](#) [28] Jr. signed [Executive Order 136](#) [29] in June 1998. The order created North Carolina's Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, the [Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs](#) [30], and the position of director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs. Hunt appointed [H. Nolo Martinez](#) [31] as its first director. The director's job is to assist and coordinate various state programs intended to meet the needs of the Latino people in North Carolina. Some of these state efforts include Migrant Health Programs, Interpreter Training, Cultural Diversity Training, Bilingual Materials, Project Esperanza (which works with battered Latina women), [Immigrants Legal Assistance Project](#) [32], Legal Services of North Carolina, and Migrant Unit. As of 2021, the Advisory Council is still a part of North Carolina's state government. It is made up of 29 members, 12 of whom are allowed to vote. Most of the members are representatives of various state departments, like the Department of Health and Human Safety, or the Department of Transportation. The council's mission is to advise the governor on issues affecting the Latino community in the state, provide a forum for discussion, and promote state efforts to improve relations between Latino people and other North Carolinians. The council is divided into seven working committees that focus on issues in the areas of education, health and human resources, workers' rights, immigration, documentation and licensing, political involvement, and crime control and public safety.

For Educators:

[What it means to be Latino in North Carolina](#) [33] from New Roots: Voices from Carolina del Norte. Latino Migration Project, Southern Oral History Program, UNC University Libraries

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