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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

LATINOS AND AURORA'S DOWNTOWN REVIVAL

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Aurora is the second largest city in Illinois with a population of 176,413 (as of 2007). One of the most rapidly growing cities in the Chicago metropolitan area, Aurora experienced an impressive 77.2 percent population increase from 1990 to 2007. Aggressive annexation policies to the west helped add numerous housing subdivisions. Like many suburban communities, the city also saw a significant boost in its Latino population (see Table 1). In 2007 Aurora ranked seventh among all municipalities in the metropolitan area with the highest proportion of Latinos.

TABLE 1. POPULATION OF LATINOS IN AURORA

YEAR	NUMBER	PERCENT
1990	22,863	23.0
2000	46,557	32.6
2007	66,769	37.8

SOURCE: 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey

Aurora's population growth is due in part to larger demographic trends, and its recent developmental history is similar to that of many other medium-sized Midwest communities as they grapple with the impact of deindustrialization, globalization, and the Great Recession. Likewise, the role of the Latino community in Aurora's current development is fairly typical of the role Latinos play in other Midwestern communities as they go about the challenging business of re-inventing themselves (Longworth 2008). Thus, Aurora is one model/example of how Latinos, America's largest minority population, contribute to the economic and cultural transformation of many Midwestern communities.

In recent decades many cities across the United States have devoted considerable attention to refocusing economic development in their downtown areas through the promotion of leisure, tourism, and entertainment opportunities. Historically, Aurora benefited from its strategic location along the Fox River, which allowed the city to develop businesses and attract laborers as it evolved into a manufacturing center. But the recession of the 1970s had a considerable impact on the local economy, forcing many factories and businesses to shut down. Other changes exacerbated the recession's effects. For example, in the mid-1850s the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Company (which operated from 1849-1970) located its railcar factory and maintenance facilities within Aurora's borders. The facility closed

down in 1974, largely due to the development of the Eisenhower Expressway, which provided easy access from the western suburbs to the Loop by automobile (City of Aurora 2005a). Meanwhile, large suburban malls were springing up nearby, attracting many shoppers away from Aurora's downtown, further dilapidating its condition. During the late 1980s the Aurora City Council recognized that resurrecting its core was vital if the community was to rebound from its economic decline. Three redevelopment plans were initially pursued. Two of those focused on converting visibly abandoned structures into usable spaces that could attract visitors to the area. A new ordinance encouraged light manufacturing that integrated residential occupancies above first floor uses. The intent of the council's policy agenda was to create a new downtown district with increased pedestrian traffic (Seigenthaler 1987).

The local government's third plan was to establish a Tax Increment Finance District (TIF) aimed at providing developers with financial assistance. Initiated in 1986, the TIF included programs for exterior restoration, interior rehabilitation, and architectural grants. The city maintained an ongoing commitment to visually enhancing its downtown by expending considerable funds on streetscape beautification programs and related infrastructural improvements. Downtown Alive!, an intense program of festivals, outdoor street performances, and seasonal entertainment venues, continues to expand. However, many credit Aurora's revival to riverboat gambling: with support from the leadership of the Aurora Civic Center Authority, a casino established itself in the Fox River adjoining downtown in 1993. Hollywood Casino, the largest employer in downtown Aurora with more than 1,500 employees, generates \$13.6 million in local tax revenue (City of Aurora 2005b).

Downtown historic preservation has also received special attention. The Paramount Arts Center underwent a \$5.6 million update as part of a TIF designation (Roth-Fischer 2005). Façade-restoration of existing historic structures and concern with the architectural detail of new developments has gained extensive support. Between 1999 and 2004 more than 500 projects came under review, and 60 building owners took advantage of special finance opportunities provided by the city to aid in the rehabilitation of the city center. The commercial value of building permits issued in the area during that period surpassed the \$50 million mark. In 2003 the first Downtown Heritage Tour and Cell-Phone Guided Walking Tour officially began marketing the history of downtown Aurora to tourists. That same year the Midwest Literary Festival was introduced, and the Blues on the Fox and Rock on the Fox have proved popular events, drawing thousands to downtown (City of Aurora 2004). Parades and children's activities, musicals and theater

productions, outdoor performances, a popular Farmers Market, and street vendors are part of the strategy to use Aurora's developing downtown identity as a magnet to attract visitors and entice businesses. Specialty restaurants and formal gathering

the majority of foreign-born Latinos in the suburbs can be found working in food service/food preparation (cooks), construction, and gardening and grounds keeping. Latinas in the suburbs typically work as maids, cooks, waitresses, and in customer service occupations.

TABLE 2. OCCUPATIONS FOR THE LATINO CIVILIAN EMPLOYED POPULATION 16 YEARS AND OVER

AURORA, IL	NUMBER	...	PERCENT	...
	2000	2006-2008	2000	2006-2008
MANAGEMENT, PROFESSIONAL, AND RELATED OCCUPATIONS	1,874	3,202	10.1%	11.0%
SERVICE	3,102	5,301	16.7%	18.2%
SALES AND OFFICE	3,169	5,933	17.0%	20.4%
FARMING, FISHING, AND FORESTRY	186	0	1.0%	0.0%
CONSTRUCTION, EXTRACTION, MAINTENANCE, AND REPAIR	2,020	3,626	10.9%	12.5%
PRODUCTION, TRANSPORTATION, AND MATERIAL MOVING	8,253	10,997	44.4%	37.8%
TOTAL	18,604	29,059	100.0%	100.0%

SOURCE: 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey

spaces, such as the Millennium Plaza, Rotary Park, Tivoli Plaza, and the Sesquicentennial Park, have helped to encourage a housing development program that is expected to further solidify the city's core. For example, the newly constructed River Street Plaza lifestyles condominiums are a popular housing option in the downtown area. Occupied in 2007 and 2008, this 5.6-acre mixed-use redevelopment provides 200 new units and more than 80,000 square feet of space. It includes cafes with upscale and casual dining along the riverfront.

Aurora's strategic direction has centered on the belief that visitors will be attracted to its downtown area to work, live, and play. Remaking the city in this manner has also resulted in opportunities for a Latino labor force that has historically been connected to the sort of employment that this sector typically generates. Latinos in Chicagoland (US-born males in particular) are under-represented in professional, technical, executive, and higher level administrative jobs. This does not speak well for Latinos when it comes to income and attaining the American dream of a comfortable middle-class life style. Yet there is a peculiar up-side to this situation. The Latino labor force is extremely flexible. Latino workers are, to use a baseball metaphor, the utility infielders for a significant portion of our labor force. If given the chance, there is no job they are unwilling to tackle. You want it done, they'll do it. Until recently this accounted for high Latino employment rates.

For the most part Latinos hold skilled blue-collar and service jobs. For example,

In Aurora the number of Latinos working in food-preparation and food-service occupations increased from 1,204 in 2000 to 2,109 in 2008, and those employed in building and grounds from 1,411 to 2,213. Table 2 shows the general occupational distribution of Latinos during those years.

The Latino population in east Aurora is quite segregated. In 2008 about 82.6 percent of School District 131 was comprised of Latino students, ranking it third highest of all school districts in the Chicago metropolitan area. The 16-school, 13,116-student district has a 75 percent graduation rate (State of Illinois average: 86.5 percent), with 98.4 percent of students coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This does not promise well for Latino residents' prospects for upward mobility.

The service economy, unlike the industrial economy, is two tiered. Highly skilled and well-educated workers dominate the top tier,

TABLE 3. MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME IN AURORA, ILLINOIS (IN 2008 DOLLARS)

	1980	2000	2006-2008
WHITE NON-LATINO	\$60,923	\$80,030	\$77,521
BLACK	\$48,967	\$53,491	\$40,869
ASIAN	\$61,650	\$92,553	\$94,098
LATINO	\$58,837	\$56,824	\$46,645

SOURCE: 1980 AND 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey

while low-skilled, low-education workers dominate the bottom tier, resulting in what some analysts refer to as an hourglass economy that produces a caste-like system of social stratification. The real-world economic consequences for Latinos and African Americans can be seen in Table 3. Although the 2007 Latino per-capita income in Aurora (\$14,924) was slightly above that of Chicago's Latino residents (\$14,231), the median household income (in constant dollars) of Aurora's Latinos is dramatically below that of Asians and non-Latino whites; approximately 60 percent that of whites and 50 percent that of Asians.

This situation is exacerbated by the arrival of hard times. A simple case in point: Unemployment in Aurora in November of 2008 was 6.6 percent. By November of 2009 it had grown to 10.8 percent and, as we know, unemployment rates for minorities tend to be disproportionately higher than for non-minorities. It is no wonder, then, that low household income, coupled with the hard economic times of the past few years, has resulted in a domino-like sequence of high unemployment and housing foreclosures. A review of foreclosures in the Chicago metropolitan area (see Table 4) reveals that communities with high percentages of Latino residents have

been negatively and disproportionately affected by the recent housing crisis. Aurora ranks fourth highest on that list.

Aurora's recent focus on reviving the downtown area with an emphasis on leisure and entertainment is changing the city in a manner typical among older suburban former industrial nodes. It has meant a considerable increase in low-paying and seasonal jobs, a labor demand that across the United States is often filled by Latinos. The new approach to downtown revitalization offers Latinos the opportunity for homeownership and a chance for a better life, but there is a down side.

Latinos in Aurora will remain an integral part of the city and will continue to shape its cultural, political, and economic future. At the same time, unless traditional paths to social advancement, like education, are pursued, this group is likely to remain vulnerable to the negative consequences of cyclical economic trends and related structural shifts. The challenge, unanswered by any other city or municipality in the country, remains: how to move Latinos from their marginalized

educational and economic status into the American mainstream. Unfortunately, the traditional one-word answer, "education," does not do justice to the complexity of how to make that process work.

**TABLE 4. NUMBER OF FORECLOSURES PER 1,000, 2007
TEN HIGHEST MUNICIPALITIES AND TEN LOWEST MUNICIPALITIES**

TEN HIGHEST MUNICIPALITIES FORECLOSURES PER 1,000			PERCENT LATINO
CICERO	5.15	[9 TH]	83.8
WAUKEGAN	5.27	[8 TH]	52.7
BERWYN	5.99	[7 TH]	52.7
CARPENTERSVILLE	7.51	[2 ND]	49.2
ROUND LAKE BEACH	8.60	[1 ST]	45.0
ELGIN	6.02	[5 TH]	41.5
AURORA	6.07	[4 TH]	37.8
ADDISON	4.02	[10 TH]	36.4
HANOVER PARK	6.01	[6 TH]	32.3
STREAMWOOD	7.03	[3 TH]	30.9
TEN LOWEST MUNICIPALITIES			
ARLINGTON HEIGHTS	1.96		5.1
GENEVA	2.21		4.9
LISLE	2.17		4.7
WHEATON	1.57		4.5
DOWNERS GROVE	1.79		4.2
GLENVIEW	1.78		4.2
LIBERTYVILLE	1.47		4.1
BUFFALO GROVE	2.24		3.9
NORTHBROOK	2.10		1.8
WILMETTE	0.45		1.1

SOURCE: Woodstock Institute

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